BULGARIA'S TIME BIND: The Search for Democracy and a Viable Legacy

Joel Halpern
Barbara Kerewsky-Halpern
BULGARIA'S TIME BIND: THE SEARCH FOR DEMOCRACY AND A VIABLE HERITAGE
by Joel Martin Halpern and Barbara Kerewsky-Halpern

With the possible exception of Albania, Bulgaria is the East European country that has received least attention from the western media. This situation has a certain logic. For 45 years, Bulgaria existed in the shadow of the USSR, more closely tied to its giant neighbor culturally, economically, socially, and politically than any other country in Eastern Europe. And until recently, the absolute loyalty to Moscow of Bulgaria's Communist Party was unquestioned.

In 1975, the authors of this report spent half a year in Bulgaria as guest scientists under an exchange agreement between the US and Bulgarian Academies of Sciences. A small incident during that visit vividly illustrates the political atmosphere of the period. Frustrated by restrictions and isolation imposed by party bureaucrats, we asked an official scientific contact why, since banners and posters everywhere proclaimed "Bulgarian-Soviet Friendship Forever," Bulgaria did not become a republic within the USSR. His reply was simple: "They haven't asked."

Today, some 15 years later, one of the accusations of treason leveled against discredited former long-time premier Todor Zhivkov is that he was planning just such an action to incorporate Bulgaria within the Soviet Union. The faded, tattered posters can still be seen in rural areas, a remnant of that gloomy past.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BULGARIAN EXPERIENCE

Bulgaria merits more attention than it usually is given in the west because it can help us to comprehend the economic, political, social, and ecological consequences of the full application of a Soviet system of communist power and ideology during the course of almost half a century. These consequences can be observed in a relatively small, well-defined arena, since the land area of Bulgaria is only 42,823 square miles and its population under nine million. The dramatic developments of 1989 and 1990 also provide glimpses into the resilience of the human spirit. Here was a small nation, widely regarded as the most repressed within the Eastern bloc, whose recent rallies and demonstrations provided evidence of the potential for free expression in a seemingly cowed, dispirited people. This is even more notable because in many respects the Bulgarians seem to have willingly acquiesced to domination by the Soviets. That situation evolved, in part, due to Bulgaria's strong fraternal ties to Russia.

The close postwar relations between Bulgaria and the USSR derive from linguistic and religious factors as well as from geography and history. Linguistic kinship is reinforced by a shared Orthodox faith. The Bulgarian Orthodox Church, as with other Orthodox churches, has its own panoply of patriarchs. Saints Cyril and Methodius, for example, played key roles in the founding of Orthodox Christianity and are significant figures in Bulgarian national identity.

Bulgaria is also a Balkan country, with important historic links to Greece, both having experienced subjugation within the Ottoman Empire. Until the late 19th Century, the Bulgarian church was dominated by the Central Church of Constantinople.

Shortly after this report was completed, Socialist (Communist) Prime Minister Lukanov was forced to resign. This followed two weeks of peaceful mass protests, culminating as Bulgaria's largest labor organization, the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions, joined a four-day strike involving one million workers and paralyzing the country. These actions now further restrict Socialist Party power. New elections are scheduled for May 1991.

Dr. Joel Martin Halpern is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. He has been conducting field research in Serbia and Bulgaria for many decades. Dr. Barbara Kerewsky-Halpern is a clinical medical anthropologist. Current research in Bulgaria relates to the emergence of disease clusters resulting from environmental pollution. Co-authors of A Serbian Village in Historical Perspective, the Halperns spent the summer of 1990 in Bulgaria.
inated by the Greek ecclesiastical hierarchy, not the Russian. Bulgarian efforts to achieve political autonomy in the 19th Century thus relate not only to a fight for liberation from Turkish control, but also to the struggle for cultural autonomy from Greek hegemony. With the progressive breakup of the Ottoman Empire, it was the Russians upon whom the Bulgarians looked as liberators. An imposing statue of Alexander II, the "Czar Liberator," holding in his hand the declaration of war against Turkey, dominates the square in front of the National Assembly. It is vivid testimony to Bulgarian gratitude to the Russians for the achievement of independence from Ottoman (and Greek) domination in 1878.

Prior to World War II, Bulgaria was overwhelmingly a peasant country, but its socialist party is one of the oldest in Europe. The communist government established after World War II, while based on the power of the Red Army, was able to build on substantial local historical roots.

Street of Symbols

A summer 1990 walk along the yellow brick paving of Sofia's Ruski Boulevard (the name itself is significant), from National Assembly Square through to Ninth of September Square to Lenin Square was the patron saint of the Czar Liberator. It too was built prior to World War I at the request of the Russian Officers' Club is a small Russian Orthodox Church of St. Nicholas, cobbled square leads into a street lined with low 19th Century circular square lines into a street lined with low 19th Century Independence, and intellectual freedom.

Starting from the equestrian statue of the Russian Czar, the circular square lines into a street lined with low 19th Century buildings reminiscent of older streets in Leningrad. Past the Army Officers' Club is a small Russian Orthodox Church of St. Nicholas, built prior to World War I at the request of the Russian Ambassador, who did not wish to worship in the "schismatic" Bulgarian church. Nearby, and set in its own cobbled square, is the massive Alexander Nevsky Cathedral of the Patriarchate. Nevsky was the patron saint of the Czar Liberator. It too was built in the pre-war period. In 1960, at the height of communist power, its dome was regilded with some 18 pounds of gold leaf.

In a park between the Patriarchate and the Boulevard is a sculpture group to heroes of the Workers' Liberation Struggle. Their bronze faces grimace in agony, like saintly martyrs consecrating a new faith. Back on Ruski Boulevard, glass display cases fronting on the street carry photos of newly elected representatives to the multiparty National Assembly, the individuals' identities color-keyed to party affiliation.

A small park, once carefully tended as an in-town rest area, is today the site of a busy flea market. In the first heady days of freer expression in 1989, it started as an open-air art gallery and has expanded to include tourist art, clothing, crafts, books, tapes, antiques — anything marketable — as well as gambling and snack vending. There are few visible controls. People crowd one another for merchandising space on the limited one-square-block area. "This is our little Montmartre," a vendor proudly observes.

The Architecture of the Communist Past

Ninth of September 1944 Square (named for the beginning of the postwar communist state), is planned public space, somewhat smaller than Moscow's Red Square but now as in the past designed for parades, reviews, and mass gatherings. The former Royal Palace, painted a pleasant soft green, houses a combined Art and Ethnographic Museum. Directly opposite this graceful structure is the stern, gray granite mausoleum of Georgi Dimitrov, founder of the modern Bulgarian Communist Party and head of the first post-World War II government. For decades, his remains were watched over by honor guards in formal dress uniforms from another era. In their feathered helmets, they changed guard by goose-stepping smartly to their quarters on an adjacent street. An official description states that, following the death of Dimitrov in Moscow in July 1949:

"The Mausoleum was built in six days and six nights... On either side of the door are figures of the great party militants — D. Blagoev, G. Kirkov, G. Dimitrov and V. Kolarov. (His) body was embalmed like those of Lenin and Stalin, by the Soviet expert professor B. I. Zbarskij."

After 41 years of embalmed immortality, in July 1990, following a summer of mass protests, Dimitrov's remains were secretly removed at night and given a formal burial by the still ruling Communist (renamed Socialist) Party government. Only a few days before, tours were being conducted in the interior of the tomb where, in subdued light, Dimitrov's body was on display. The furtive removal under the pressure of demonstrations was another acknowledgement of the loss of legitimacy. This was all the more remarkable because formerly hallowed territory overnight became accessible. Spectators sat on the guard rails; foreign and local photographers mounted the vacated mausoleum as a vantage point; bright pink graffiti appeared on one wall; and children played near the once forbidden entrance.

The distinctive brick paving of Ruski Boulevard, linking the National Assembly Square in front of a sitting parliament with the 9th of September Square flanked by the former Royal Palace and the former mausoleum, connects two points in time. The first represents actions oriented toward the future, while the latter is the locus of public manifestations for dealing with the past. The palace and the mausoleum testify to expired historical epochs.

Terminations of epochs have dramatic rituals of passage. Without them, people feel incomplete. The communal body politic needs purging before undertaking a new experience. For this reason, 9th of September Square was a focus of nearly constant activity during summer 1990.

Anchoring a corner of the Square and projecting overwhelming power is the disproportionately immense, stone Communist Party Headquarters. Its large red star mounted on a pole and illuminated
every night has been an inescapable beacon. This building is a fortress for monolithic communism, dwarfing the surrounding structures not unlike an imperial castle in a feudal society. Understandably, its massive presence with the ever-glowing red star high on its roof served as a continuing affront to pro-democracy demonstrators. Finally unable to abide it, in late summer of this year radicals set fire to it.

The building was completed only 35 years ago, in 1955; in concept and appearance it was built to endure for centuries. Like Dimitrov's tomb, it functioned less than half a century, considerably less than a human lifetime.

RITUALS OF POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION -- THE FUTURE

A legacy of the bourgeois past is the National Bank Building constructed just before World War II and thus representing a kind of neutral ground. A feature of the building is a flight of wide steps leading up to the main entrance. These have served as tiers of seats for silent vigils and demonstrations.

The evening of the day we returned to Sofia in 1990 marked the opening of the newly-elected National Assembly. Toward dusk, the usual time for strolling, the Square became filled with a seemingly spontaneous gathering of people of all ages. As they came together, they formed themselves into seated rows on the bank steps. Each person held a candle. When the steps were completely filled, new rows formed as people sat down directly on the bricks. Dusk grew into darkness. On signals from organizers, the candles were lit, and the large, orderly crowd streamed down Ruski Boulevard in the direction of the National Assembly chanting CDC, CDC, the Bulgarian initials of the Union of Democratic Forces.

Moving along in this illuminated pilgrimage of hope for the future, we approached the National Assembly just as ambassadorial limousines began to arrive. When the American ambassador's car entered the street, the crowd parted with a great cheer.

The Past

That candlelight procession toward the future had great hopefulness to it. Rituals of expiation of the past, on the other hand, had an element of shame and bitterness and of public catharsis. How does a people publicly shake off a troublesome burden, an outmoded ideology of the past? One day, a mechanical scapegoat appeared in front of the mausoleum. It was a cream-colored, battered, 30-year-old, Soviet auto with flattened tires. Upon this iron scapegoat were heaped the unwanted contents of homes and offices, the ideological detritus of the collective past accumulated over parts of five decades. Here were personal documents in the form of party membership cards and awards, books of speeches, and the collected works of party leaders. Included were not only materials originating in Bulgaria, but works of the founding fathers of communism -- Stalin, of course, and Lenin, Marx, and Engels. Bound volumes, pamphlets, and other documents were imaginatively and sometimes even artfully combined with more conventional forms of garbage, such as old auto parts, shoes, broken pieces of furniture, a discarded vacuum cleaner, all topped by a rotating display of worn toilet seats. These wooden ovals were used creatively to frame, by turns, portraits of Zhivkov and Dimitrov, as well as the Soviet "immortals."

For a while, the car was topped with a dead conifer festooned with discarded red party ribbons, mocking the communist New Year's Tree. A small boy stepped up and added his red Pioneer scarf. Adults applauded. A photograph seemed appropriate. In the course of focusing for shots of Dimitrov and Lenin framed in toilet seats, a young man approached and said, "Why do you want to preserve this? I want to spit on it!"

All summer, police and their vehicles were near the Square, but no one hauled away the collection of unloaded miseries. Occasionally, someone would bend down to examine a book or document and then throw it back on the pile. We thought it might be historically valuable to collect a few items for an American archive but never did. To take something away from this accretion would have been to interfere with the way an entire people wished to dispose of a despised past. It was necessary to respect the ways in which the Bulgarians were burying their dead, even if the putrifying corpses and whitening bones were books and photos. This was not a kind of Hitlerian book-burning, a futile attempt to banish unwanted ideas by incinerating them. Instead, here was a deeply angry but carefully measured discarding of a noxious burden.

The written works are no longer valued, even by the renamed Socialists. Had they ever been, we wondered? Emphasis was on a clean break with the past, not by immediately destroying it but by contemplating it, letting it linger, and then allowing it to pass away. It was a period of collective mourning for lost years, for lies, cruelties, and failures.
This ritual of rejection needs to be placed in perspective. The putting aside of communist ideology and its projection into a monolithic state in no way implies a turning away from Russian culture. Throughout Sofia, including on Ruski Boulevard, Soviet bookstores continue to do a brisk trade. Perhaps nowhere else in the world can Russian books be purchased so cheaply; Russian tourists frequently avail themselves of this opportunity. It is not primarily the prices which draw people; Bulgarians have a strong continuing desire for literary classics, well-produced art books, technical manuals, and other non-political works published in the Soviet Union.

Two Other Scenes in the Drama on the Square

The action on the Square was played out in two additional episodes. One was the ad hoc formation and re-formation of countless discussion groups, often near the festooned car. These began in the morning and were especially active toward late afternoon and evening. People of all ages and occupations seemed to relish the chance to confront those who still valued their past Communist Party associations. Another spot for such encounters was near the entrance to the Party Headquarters. Occasionally, chants would rise from the crowd, including this couplet of six-syllable lines:

I predi, i sega
BCP e Mafia!

In the past, as in the present,
The Bulgarian Socialist Party is Mafia!

Some speakers were highly articulate in their denunciations of past policies. It was as if their comments had been prepared for a long time. Others projected sheer rage. Those who were lesser public speakers felt comfortable joining in and adding their own details.

Two of the most popular debate topics were the previously banned themes of how the USSR exploited Bulgaria economically and the purported misdeeds of past and current (Socialist) Party leaders. There was a strong desire to vent pent-up anger on a suitable person present. The magnetic attraction to denounce a still-believing communist, very often a surviving bureaucrat from the now-despised privileged class, frequently proved irresistible. Sometimes it was older pensioners defending the system who were subjected to criticism. Frequently, younger people taunted them by inquiring about the amounts they received as pensions in supposed recognition for decades of past service. In the midst of one heated discussion, an elderly woman with dyed red hair stepped between verbal combatants and separated them with her hands. "People, people," she exclaimed, "I have something important to say. TSUM has just received a shipment of laundry detergent in three-kilo packages!" Reality continues to have its advocates.

The trauma of the past is manifested not only in anger at a discredited regime. This is too simple. As people age, it is hard to keep an edge to anger. Even acute feelings of frustration tend to transpose into feelings of helplessness or apathy. As recent events in Bulgaria demonstrate, however, feelings can be reawakened even if the disappointments of past decades can never be recouped. Stark injustices, such as political imprisonment and physical punishment and, less frequently in Bulgaria, the killing of close relatives, remain engraved on the mind. Affecting a far larger proportion of the Bulgarian population has been a sense of acute deprivation, a future denied either in an aborted career or in debased opportunities and living standards. A scholar recently retired from the Academy of Sciences remarked, with more resignation than bitterness, "Just think of it, eighteen years, eighteen years of waiting for a small, one or two bedroom apartment, and now our child is grown and we are old. Does it matter any more?"

CITY OF TRUTH

Next to the bank building is the archaeological Museum housed in the former Bujuk Dzamija, or Great Mosque, built in the 15th Century. It fronts on the Square. Another part faces a side street, opposite which is the rear wall of the courtyard of the former Hotel Balkan, now revamped as the Sheraton Sofia. Like the nearby Party Headquarters, this enormous structure was completed, along with the Central Universal Department Store (TSUM), in 1955, constituting a planned complex of communist urbanism. More interesting than the still-standing, towering granite statue of Lenin that dominates the head of this Square is the fact that the hotel courtyard happens to be a treasured archaeological site which includes the Church of St. George containing frescoes from the 12th to 15th Centuries and which, during Turkish times, in the 16th Century, was transformed into a mosque.

This side street, less than a block from the American Embassy, was the core of the "City of Truth," locus of the summer's peaceful demonstrations. Overhead banners proclaimed "Communist-free Zone." On a Bulgarian scale, what began to emerge was a seeming re-enactment of the 1989 activities in Tienanmen Square. The City of Truth started as a gathering place of students and intellectuals, with tents pegged out in the grouting between the bricks. As the tent city expanded and overflowed into 9th of September Square, a City of Truth street map was posted near the entrance to the Archaeology Museum, identifying the tents and stalls of participating factions.

In the heat of summer, it was like a political fair, an ongoing summer encampment. Representatives of diverse groups sat on camp stools or relaxed in their sleeping bags or lounged about in jeans and T-shirts. Some engaged in enthusiastic conversation with visitors. Lovers embraced. Others ate while some did housekeeping, sweeping up and collecting trash. Each tent had a table distributing flyers and selling alternative newspapers. Almost all had petitions inviting signatures. Daily satiric political cartoons were pinned to tent flaps. Mass-produced, plaster-of-Paris busts of Dimitrov were lobotomized and used as ashtrays or as vases for fresh flowers. A City of Truth logo made its appearance, highlighting sky-blue, the theme color of the protest movement. A much-discussed topic was that Bulgaria was not China and tanks would not come; nor would the police appear with water cannon to blast away the tent city.

Old Legitimacies Retreat and New Ones Emerge

If the old legitimacy is in retreat, the summer's activities in the City of Truth offered suggestions of potential new forces and the re-emergence of old ones. The most obvious of the latter was the presence of the "Popmobile," a tented van operated by the Orthodox Church. Daily, a priest conducted mass from the tailgate of the van complete with swinging censer wafting incense over the attentive crowd. Young men and women stepped forward to be baptised publicly.

Much in evidence were the tents of the Green Party and a host of professional associations. A student strike in June had helped raise consciousness and mobilize intellectuals and professionals. They were represented in wide variety. Included were historians, librarians, geologists, chemists, mathematicians, philosophers, and language and
handled himself well, the appeal of the monarchist party was
parties of the Union of Democratic Forces.
represented were writers' organizations and mainstream political
literature specialists. Each had signs identifying its association with
foreign signatures for Bulgaria to become the 51st American State.
the other end of Ruski Boulevard.
of the National Assembly which were going on simultaneously at
decidedly minor. A maverick booth had a petition with many
positions of political dominance. However, its vanguard activities
deposed Zhivkov, the recently resigned premier Mladenov, and the
Turkish minority appears for now to be assured.
remained the Turkish minority party, a 'Terrible Turk' glowering from a map
of Bulgaria. A representative of that party announced plans, not
educational display is an historical irony since Sofia is
recognized as the cradle of Slav civilization. Under the
communist government had as a principal claim to legitimacy
the presumed efficacy of its ideology and associated political system in
implementing national development. In fact, its failure in achieving
these goals and its indifference to environmental impacts have been
documented in great detail by the Greens - this despite long-time
communist propaganda about protecting the environment. Similar
problems are common to all modern and modernizing states, but
communist governments have been particularly vulnerable because they
have suppressed information and, until very recently, remediation was
not part of the planning process, which placed exclusive emphasis on
production goals with no concern for their means of achievement. It
was not possible, of course, to challenge state policies directly, especially
in the public media. As a result, there have not been any significant
open discussions of specific ecological crises, although there are
numerous indications of them, particularly in the appearance of marked
clusters of health problems.
For the past 45 years, Bulgarian environmental policy has been
primarily a political matter: the socialist transformation of nature was
the ruling ideology. Here one found the dominance of the notorious,
Stalin-favored biologists Michurin and Lysenko. In Bulgaria, the specific
consequences include air, soil, and water pollution, soil erosion, and
haphazard ordinary and dangerous waste disposal.

Urban Links with the Soil

In 1975, the authors experienced a somewhat dramatic affirmation of
this continuing reality. We were living on the outskirts of Sofia in a
neighborhood of small private homes, each with its own vegetable
garden and fruit trees. Following the let-up of a late spring hailstorm,
when people re-emerged from their houses, we heard sounds of
traditional lamenting. These resembled ritual mourning chants for the
dead and welled up spontaneously from women in the neighborhood.
They were grieving the loss of their strawberries and roses.
The communist government had as a principal claim to legitimacy
the presumed efficacy of its ideology and associated political system in
implementing national development. In fact, its failure in achieving
these goals and its indifference to environmental impacts have been
documented in great detail by the Greens — this despite long-time
communist propaganda about protecting the environment. Similar
problems are common to all modern and modernizing states, but
communist governments have been particularly vulnerable because they
have suppressed information and, until very recently, remediation was
not part of the planning process, which placed exclusive emphasis on
production goals with no concern for their means of achievement. It
was not possible, of course, to challenge state policies directly, especially
in the public media. As a result, there have not been any significant
open discussions of specific ecological crises, although there are
numerous indications of them, particularly in the appearance of marked
clusters of health problems.

Collectivization as Ecological Destruction

The consequences of agricultural collectivization in terms of social
dislocation and as a strategy for economic and political development
have been amply studied, but the ecological implications are only now
being questioned. Collectivization was designed as one of the key
means of building a new socialist society while eliminating the
pre-existing system of private land ownership. This not only altered
cultivation techniques of small holders, their associated family-household
structures, and their marketing patterns; it altered the very fields
themselves. Huge tracts of land were formed to be appropriate to large,
energy-intensive tractors which were used for deep plowing, changing
subsurface layers of the soil and affecting the patterns of drainage. Chemical fertilizers and pesticides were introduced.

THE ECOLOGICAL MOVEMENT AND THE NEW CONSSENSUS

The ecological movement does not seem likely to achieve a
position of political dominance. However, its vanguard activities
associated with documentation of environmental destruction and
health crises and its organized protests to stop undesirable projects have
found a sympathetic public. Organized as the Green Party, it
has played a key role in undermining the legitimacy of the old order,
since environmental problems are especially acute in Bulgaria.
Concern for nature has a long history in the country. Between the
world wars, Bulgaria's Peasant Party, like its counterparts in neighboring
countries, had great difficulty maintaining a grip on power. Nevertheless, forces on the right and left could never ignore the
continuing and dominant role of peasant proprietorship. Associated
with this political and economic situation was a strong emotional tie to
the land, a connection still powerful among those who have moved to
cities. Bulgarians also have long received international recognition for
and prided themselves on being gardeners and exporters of both raw
and processed flowers, fruit, and vegetable crops.

Collectivization as Ecological Destruction

The consequences of agricultural collectivization in terms of social
dislocation and as a strategy for economic and political development
have been amply studied, but the ecological implications are only now
being questioned. Collectivization was designed as one of the key
means of building a new socialist society while eliminating the
pre-existing system of private land ownership. This not only altered
cultivation techniques of small holders, their associated family-household
structures, and their marketing patterns; it altered the very fields
themselves. Huge tracts of land were formed to be appropriate to large,
energy-intensive tractors which were used for deep plowing, changing
subsurface layers of the soil and affecting the patterns of drainage. Chemical fertilizers and pesticides were introduced.

In the process of collectivization, old field boundaries were
deliberately plowed under, destroying plant and also animal life such as
birds and snakes which had exerted some degree of natural control over
agricultural pests. One might argue that this was part of an inevitable process of modernization and that there are many parallels with industrial agriculture in the US. But Bulgaria's was a monolithic political system; it lacked ways of exercising checks and balances, and so the impact of mistakes was magnified. Putting huge tractors in the fields gave the necessary illusion of control over nature. In 1990, when a soil scientist remarked that villagers felt that state agronomists had "burned" the land through the overuse of fertilizers, he was reporting a fundamental and vital sentiment.

As in the Soviet Union, private plots continued to exist in Bulgaria, mainly around rural homes, but these, although intensively utilized, involved a very small proportion of the arable land. The plots provided the basis for a limited free market in agricultural products, and the use of more traditional agricultural techniques did facilitate an ecological balance on this restricted area.

The monitoring of pollution has been hampered by a lack of appropriate instrumentation. There is relatively good data for chemical substances, but biological monitoring is not being done in a systematic manner, as with respect to the eutrophication of lakes. All rivers in Bulgaria, if not dead, are in a severely debased condition. Part of the problem derives from the excessive use of artificial fertilizers and pesticides which, through leaching and runoff, lead to the contamination of groundwater and rivers. Solid wastes are generally dumped directly into rivers. Even the waste treatment plant for Sofia does not have sufficient capacity to do a proper job. In addition, sewage plants can treat only organic products but not chemicals. Recycling of paper is not practiced and glass containers are saved and reused as a practical measure not related to ecological concerns.

Air Pollution

Smelters pose an important problem. Among the most critical is the one that processes lead in the Plain of Thrace near Plovdiv, Bulgaria's second largest city. Its location places it near some of the most fertile land in the country. Increased lead levels have already shown up in the blood tests of children in the area. Farmers from this region attempting to market produce have had their trucks stopped and contents tested. Currently, in the open markets in Sofia and Plovdiv, labels are required to show that food has been checked for contamination. Another lead and zinc smelter with serious problems is at Kardelj, an agricultural center in the Eastern Rhodope Mountains. Asbestos also is produced there.

Parallel problems of air pollution exist with respect to the iron works near Sofia, just six miles from the center of the capital. This plant has come to be regarded as a planning disaster. The original concept was that local iron ore could be used together with imported coking coal. That ore did not prove satisfactory, and now both coal and iron ore are imported from the USSR and Poland. At the very least, in the view of Bulgarian specialists, this plant should have been located on the Black Sea or the Danube, where less expensive barge transportation would have been available.

Other examples of pollution sources include the artificial fertilizer plant at Stara Zagora, with its serious sulfur dioxide emissions. Stara Zagora, once renowned for its mild climate and the prevalence of fig trees, almonds, pomegranates, and a preferred strain of hard wheat on its fertile soil, today experiences factory fumes which immunologists and neurologists believe are responsible for an array of illnesses which did not occur there earlier. In the industrialization town of Pernik, 25 miles west of Sofia, long the site of open-pit mines and blast furnaces, a large cement plant coats the community with layers of white powder. Near Varna on the Black Sea, the polyvinylchlorine plant at the Devnya petrochemical complex was the site of a severe explosion in 1986.

Scientists associated with the Green Party estimate that about half the population of Bulgaria breathes polluted air. Despite the problems cited above, the main source of pollution appears to be from faulty auto emissions. Half the cars in Bulgaria are in Sofia; all lack catalytic converters; lead-free petrol is not currently available. Thermal power stations also contribute to pollution since they use a low quality lignite, the only coal available in Bulgaria. Money is not available to upgrade current technology and make energy use more efficient. Much fuel is wasted. Another example of inefficient energy planning is extensive use of heavy machinery in the state agricultural sector.

A related consequence has been the beginning of the destruction of mountain ecosystems. Some trees have already been severely damaged by acid rain. In the Pirin Mountain National Park, some 30 per cent of the forests have been affected, with two-thirds to three-quarters of some sensitive species of spruce showing signs of damage. Other forest areas have been overcut to serve the needs of the furniture and paper industries. At Borovec near Samokov, and in the magnificent Rhodopes, tourism complexes for holidays and skiing are destroying once-pristine, irreplaceable forest resources.

The Failure of Nuclear Power

A major concern is the situation with respect to nuclear power. The reactor complex of Kozlodui on the Danube near the Romanian border has six reactors, four of 440 megawatts capacity and two of 1,000 megawatts. This station produces 40 per cent of the power for all Bulgaria. Some accidents have been reported, and it has been noted that radiation resulting from leaks in the cooling system has been registered 20 miles away. Scientists at the University of Sofia fear that the possibility of a Chernobyl-type disaster is significant, since these reactors are of similar design. Their construction is such that they cannot easily be reconfigured to comply with present safety standards. Those concerned within Bulgaria seem to agree that, given its key function for the country's power grid, it is not yet possible to close the plant, even though it was built in the 1960s with a supposed 30-year life expectancy.

The New York Times reported on October 30 that technicians at that plant closed down two of the five reactors because of unspecified operational problems. (German officials had already decided to close five reactors of the same design.) Prime Minister Lukanov was quoted as saying that the plant will be retired unless it meets internationally recognized safety standards.5

The implications for Bulgaria's struggling economy are ominous; inefficient use of energy has combined with a restriction in overall supply. To increase efficiency requires capital investment, but the enormous, inefficient infrastructure created on the Soviet model will make modernization most difficult.

Energy sources are increasingly problematic. Nuclear power is restricted. Lignite-fired plants are serious polluters. Oil-based generation will be restricted because beginning in 1991 purchases of Soviet petroleum will have to be paid in hard currency, which Bulgaria lacks. The essential problem is that over the past 45 years an industrial infrastructure was created on the Soviet model which is neither cost efficient nor safe. The idea of socialist modernization as an achievable, stable state of development has proved to be false.
Chernobyl and the Elite

While it seems likely that some of the pollution problems in Bulgaria are somewhat less severe than in Czechoslovakia and Poland, the psychological impact on the population is at least as great. This is because of Bulgaria's dominant peasant tradition without an indigenous historical nobility since the Ottoman conquest.

Political aspects of pollution problems are becoming apparent. At the time of Chernobyl, there was a delay in informing the population of the threat posed by the explosion. Bulgarian intellectuals report that members of the Central Committee and the Politbureau were having their food and water shipped from abroad. Expensive monitoring equipment is also said to have been brought in to check locally produced food grown especially for consumption by the political elite.

INTERNATIONAL ASPECTS

The Danube

Bulgaria's environmental problems are directly linked with those of her neighbors. In addition to air pollution from thermal plants outside the country and Romanian worries about the location of the Bulgarian nuclear plant, there have been reciprocal Bulgarian concerns. These relate to severe atmospheric pollution from the Romanian chemical plant across the Danube from Ruse, from which there have been chlorine emissions. Bulgarian ecologists suspect that that plant has been involved in the production of chemical weapons. The problems became acute in the early 1980s, with local people complaining of eye irritation and respiratory difficulties. Sizeable public protests began in 1987. At that time, the government referred to those who participated in demonstrations as criminals trying to undermine friendship with Romania. People wanted to move away from Ruse, but the Bulgarian authorities refused to allow those under age 60 to leave. Demands that the Romanians close that plant were met with corresponding requests that the Bulgarians stop construction of a second planned nuclear plant at Belene. This was done by the Bulgarians in early 1990.

The Black Sea

Polluted rivers flow into the Danube and then empty into the Black Sea. The Danube provides about three-quarters of all water flowing into the Sea. A Bulgarian ecologist has called it "a common sewage dump" for the three Balkan riparian countries, exacerbated by the flows from three rivers in the USSR, the Dneiper, Dneister, and Bug. Particular characteristics of the Black Sea affect the nature of the pollution threat.

This sea is relatively deep, down to 2,500 meters; water does not circulate freely, and below 250 meters there is an insignificant amount of life. The level of pollution has been rising as a result of sulfur dioxide dissolved in the polluted water converting to sulfuric acid. In some places this pollution has reached the surface; in other spots it occurs at some 100 meters. It is not clear if levels of contamination will continue to rise in elevation. If they do, fishing will continue to rise in elevation. If they do, fishing at some 100 meters. It is not clear if levels of contamination will continue to rise in elevation. If they do, fishing at some 100 meters. It is not clear if levels of contamination will continue to rise in elevation. If they do, fishing at some 100 meters. It is not clear if levels of contamination will continue to rise in elevation. If they do, fishing at some 100 meters. It is not clear if levels of contamination will continue to rise in elevation. If they do, fishing at some 100 meters. It is not clear if levels of contamination will continue to rise in elevation. If they do, fishing at some 100 meters. It is not clear if levels of contamination will continue to rise in elevation. If they do, fishing at some 100 meters. It is not clear if levels of contamination will continue to rise in elevation. If they do, fishing at some 100 meters. It is not clear if levels of contamination will continue to rise in elevation. If they do, fishing at some 100 meters. It is not clear if levels of contamination will continue to rise in elevation. If they do, fishing at some 100 meters. It is not clear if levels of contamination will continue to rise in elevation. If they do, fishing...

Country Profile: Bulgaria

- Land Area (sq. miles): 42,823
- Population (millions): 8.9
- Pop. Growth Rate (%): 0.1
- Life Expectancy (yrs.): 72
- Urban Population (%): 69
- Adult Literacy (%): 93
- Per Capita GNP ($): 6,800*
- Defense as % of GNP: 3.6
- Education as % of GNP: 4.4
- External Debt (billions $): 12

*BRecent economic data for Bulgaria are hard to obtain; this figure is a 1988 US Government estimate.

According to the International Monetary Fund, GNP growth slowed from 6.1% in 1973 to 1.2% in 1988. Agriculture's share of GNP has been falling, while industry's share has been rising; agriculture's share of national employment dropped from 54.5% in 1969 to 19.5% in 1988.

Ecology and Politics -- The Rila Project

It was not peasants and agricultural workers who started the ecology movement, initially known as Ekoglasnost, but intellectuals and students. When it began, in 1988, transformations were just beginning and this organization played a pioneering role in the process of democratization in Bulgaria. Initially, it was considered a dissident movement. A significant early victory was its stoppage of the Rila Mesta project involving the building of dams in the area of the watershed of the Rila Mountains. This area contains a famous monastery and is the site of an undeveloped lake surrounded by one of the oldest forests in Europe. Set in a locale where mountains rise to some 9,000 feet, the monastery is located 75 miles from Sofia at an altitude of 3,760 feet. It is revered as one of the principal spiritual sites of Bulgarian culture.

Objectives of the project were to produce hydroelectric power and increase the water supply for Sofia. Concern was for damage to the forests and potential destruction of a fragile ecosystem. To many it seemed an example of blind imitation of the Soviet development model. Ekoglasnost organized a petition drive and some 11,000 signatures were obtained. They also used the occasion of an International Ecological Forum held in Sofia at that time to publicize their drive to ban the project. On October 26, 1989, the government decided to crack down on this effort and some students were beaten by the police and arrested.

On November 3, permission was granted by the government for the petition to be presented to the then-sitting National Assembly (this happened a week before Zhivkov was forced to resign in disgrace). Subsequently, the project was aborted despite the fact that some preliminary work had already begun: there was piping on the site, and some cutting of the forest had been started.
The Emergence of Political Parties

The Rila protest was notable for the fact that it involved the first mass demonstration in front of the National Assembly on the day the petition was to be presented. This demonstration involved many thousands of people and proved to be the forerunner of much larger demonstrations to follow. Its leader was Petar Beron, a zoologist and director of the National History Museum. It was a rally for democracy and freedom of thought and action, as well as for the specific aims of the ecological movement. Shortly thereafter, the Green Party emerged as a separate political organization, while Ekoglasnost continued as a broad umbrella group.

The following month, the Union of Democratic Forces (CDC) was founded, with Beron as leader. This coalition came to include most of the key opposition groups. Included among them were the independent trade union Podkrepa, Ekoglasnost, and, subsequently, the Green Party and the Bulgarian Social-Democratic Party. Also involved is the so-called Bulgarian Agrarian National Union — the Nikola Petkov opposition group named after the leader of the Bulgarian Peasant Party executed in 1947 — separate from the official agrarian union of the same name that was a long-time coalition associate of the communists.

Not part of the CDC are, among others, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, representing the Turkish ethnic minority; the official agrarian party; and the right-wing Bulgarian National Democratic Party, which has opposed the aims of the Turkish minority.

On June 10 and 17, 1990, the first free and freely contested elections since World War II were held. They resulted in a victory for the Bulgarian Socialist Party, which polled 47 per cent of the vote. The Union of Democratic Forces achieved 36 per cent. The Bulgarian National Democratic Party — part of the conservative opposition bloc — and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms gained eight and six per cent, respectively. The Socialists (former Communist Party) ran strongest in the conservative rural areas. The supervising Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe reported that, although the elections "were marred by instances of irregularities and intimidation, the Bulgarian parties have accepted the results. . . . In the words of one opposition leader, the elections were 'free and democratic, but not completely fair'."

This represents a very mild interpretation of the feelings of the opposition, especially in Sofia. Claims were made that communist officials in rural areas threatened local people with loss of pensions and benefits if they did not vote socialist. The University of Sofia was shut down by a student strike which lasted through July 6 and led directly to the formation of the City of Truth. After the Assembly was convened, the former dissident philosopher Zhelyu Zhelev was elected President, and the Socialist (Communist) Andrei Lukanov became Prime Minister. The National Assembly as then constituted included the Minister of Defense who attended sessions in uniform, a Bishop of the Orthodox Church garbed in his ecclesiastical robes, and a pony-tailed rock star known for his composition "I am an Honest Man."

**ECONOMIC FAILURE AND A HERITAGE OF ECONOMIC RIGHTS**

Concurrent with increasing political freedom there has developed a growing economic crisis. Part of the problem is tied to Bulgaria's mounting international debt, now some $12 billion, but sporadic shortages in stores seem to relate more to the gradual disintegration of a command economy than it does to any intrinsic shortage of foods. While in some respects parallel to that in the USSR, the Bulgarian situation is qualitatively different. Historically, Bulgaria has been an exporter of agricultural products. The current problem seems to be linked more to distribution and to hoarding than to the lack of product. As one Bulgarian planner noted, "We don't eat half of what we buy. It spoils and we throw it away."

Just as people are attempting — impatiently — to deal with a burdensome political past, they find it necessary also to stand in line for all manner of goods and services.

**Consumer Woes**

Economic stringencies in full effect by fall 1990 were foreshadowed on many fronts during the summer. First was the advent of opashki, long lines of shoppers, shopping bags in hand, passively queuing up for basic foodstuffs. During the season of plentiful tomatoes, melons, and peaches, men and women scurried back and forth to the large, unruly, open market along Kirkov Street (formerly the "Women's Market") buying as much as they could carry while maneuvering around delivery trucks that filled the narrow aisles between stalls. Nobody minded the trucks; they were the lifeline to the possibility of normal enjoyment of seasonal fresh produce and to the source of supply for routine canning for the winter.

Then came the gasoline crisis. An already inefficient transport and distribution system was hindered by lack of fuel, and uncounted tons of produce rotted on route to market centers. When the spoiled produce eventually reached the city, it was "remamaged" and bought up with fervor by people waiting in the familiar long lines. Often it was not known what treasure was to be obtained at the end of a line. A crate of German-made, small electric coils for boiling water appeared with an entrepreneur on 3rd of April Street, one day, and was snapped up as fast as the seller could handle customers. An electrical power conservation measure was to be in effect: during the cold months there was to be electricity for three hours in the morning and three hours in the late afternoon. Village and townspeople who have back-up arrangements for heating with wood will be least affected.

T-shirts, socks, children's clothes, and books were available without difficulty, although stock was erratic and unreliable. One day, TSUM's vast basement level gastrom, virtually empty of goods, was mobbed with would-be shoppers contemplating soggy plastic packets of salt, crushed boxes of mint or camomile tea, and outdated containers of strawberry-flavored farina for babies. Cubes of lard in wax paper arrived suddenly and were bought in quantity.

That was in July, in relatively good times. By autumn 1990, food basics, including cooking oil, sugar, and cheese, began to be rationed (e.g., 500 grams of cheese per person per month), as was gasoline and soap powder. Facial soap has become a luxury. Balanced nourishment, warmth, and cleanliness are being denied to urban populations.

For persons with access to foreign currency, the dollar store, Corecom, sometimes has coffee, chocolates, cosmetics, electrical appliances, camping gear. For most people, those who will best survive the 1990-91 winter will be small town and rural residents.

For visitors to villages, bountiful Bulgarian hospitality continues to appear in the form of home-produced fruit preserves, rakija distilled from grapes, masika (an anisette liquor similar to ouzo), and generous slices of goat cheese, home-made bread, and home-made salami flavored with garlic, peppers, and fat. Many village homes are relatively new, from the last two decades, and house multi-generational families where some adult members work the family plot or participate in the state
cooperative farm, while others are salaried. The more self-sufficient the household, the better it will cope with the kind of deprivations now facing urban residents.

Problems of a Transitional Economy and Economic Equality

Food is available from the countryside, and groups of autonomous individuals, not yet fully sanctioned by the state, are attempting to fill the distributional niche. For example, one group offers to supply meat at 20 per cent over market price. For payment in advance, home delivery is included. The actual implementation of this scheme is hindered by the lack of refrigerator trucks, acute shortage of gasoline, and electricity outages in the cities.

Even if economic conditions improve and new laws are passed, it is difficult to imagine that an efficient, fully competitive capitalist system will spring into being. For almost half a century, Bulgarians have lived under a hierarchical and paternalistic system in which others have made decisions and minimum benefits are guaranteed to all, regardless of the quality of their work.

Social Benefits

In keeping with communist precepts of economic democracy, social provisions have been notably generous. Maternity leave provides six months at full salary. Most recently, both parents are entitled to this leave, which for women begins 45 days prior to expected delivery. After six months, a further year and a half is given at the minimum wage. An extra unsalaried year also can be taken, but the employment position is assured and earns retirement credits.

Pro-natalist policy provides monthly allowances for children. These are parity specific; that is, there is a differentiation depending on birth order with the rate progressively increasing. Allowances continue until the child reaches age 16. Mothers with children below this age receive paid leaves of absence each month. For one child, the leave period is three days; for two or more children, it is five days. Eligibility for maternity benefits is also given in cases of adoption.

The normal age of retirement is 60 for men and 55 for women, with the assumption that there has been 25 years of employment for men and 20 years for women. There are exceptions for some occupations where high risk is involved, such as miners and military personnel. In those cases, ages are 55 for men and 50 for women. Normal retirement is at 55 per cent of salary, but it is graded so that the smaller the salary, the higher percentage received.

Medical care and education have been free. Apartments, although difficult to get, have been subsidized; rents have constituted a very small proportion of the family budget. More recently, it has been possible to buy apartments, and state loans have been available at interest rates of one or two per cent. Most Bulgarian organizations have had their own housing programs; not surprisingly, the military possess what are considered the best of those programs. For those who work for enterprises given high priority by the state, housing can be available in a year or two, while others may have to wait 15 years or more. As the economic situation in Bulgaria begins to change, there is the question of whether the government will be able to continue such generous programs, even considering that, at present, neither the quality of medical care nor the size and amenities of apartments is good.

EMERGENCE OF A NEW CIVIL LEGITIMACY

Most informed Bulgarian citizens seem to agree that the next few years will be very difficult, both with respect to managing the essential problems of daily life on an individual level and with respect to developing new political institutions and a degree of economic integration and development on the national level. Beyond these basics there is a need to take into account a state of mind fostered by many years of authoritarian and paternalistic rule. People must begin to do for themselves rather than await instructions from others with higher status.

There is a marked contrast in public and private demeanor. Bulgarians in their private lives assume and exercise initiative. On the job, and in public, people appear taciturn or rude and disinterested — a strategy which avoids taking responsibility or being singled out and perceived as different in any way. This is congruent with the dominant bureaucratic ethos.

Small examples provide suggestive insights. When a Bulgarian scientist visited Washington, he was given some documents and was asked if he would return the cooperation by sending corresponding Bulgarian publications. Upon his return home, he tried to do this. His own ministry in Sofia informed him that sending the reciprocal documents was not authorized. Frustrated, he attempted to send his own copies but was informed by his superior that working outside the system would put his career in jeopardy.

Many of these kinds of restrictions have been withdrawn. However, some flavor of the still-existing situation was experienced when we mailed Bulgarian publications to the Central Post Office. First, the materials were inspected by a uniformed customs officer. (It might be possible to convince the officer to pass on one or two small items, but anything beyond that requires an authorizing letter from the appropriate ministry.) Then the printed matter had to be carried to a clerk who verified permission and did the packing, affixing necessary customs stamps. A third window took care of weighing and postage.

It is hard to overlook the ideology that created this hierarchical system of cautions and permissions. Such barriers to free action and efficiency apply to all areas of life, from minor transactions in the post office to truly vital ones like obtaining an apartment. Guiding principles seem to be those of control, restriction of contacts, and, not so incidentally, of insuring employment for a supernumerary bureaucracy. If these processes are streamlined, where will superfluous workers find new jobs? And how efficiently can comfortably compartmentalized mindsets adjust to new circumstances?

At a slow pace, the system has been evolving in the direction of greater liberalization for several years. A final example will illustrate. When we resided in Sofia in 1975, our older children attended the English-language high school (there were separate schools for students specializing in French, German, and Russian, as well). At that time, all the English texts were printed in Bulgaria or the Soviet Union. The students had to wear uniforms, and the length and style of their hair was strictly regulated. In addition, they were required to attend courses in military preparedness, which included use of rifles and automatic weapons. These courses were taught by national military personnel. At specified times during the school year, students also participated in regulated work at local factories. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, most of these practices had been modified or abandoned. The main problem the schools faced then was altering the ideological part of the curriculum in social studies and history.

* * * * *
As with the other states of Eastern Europe that are demanding and newly experiencing free political expression and opportunities for democracy and market-oriented economics, for Bulgaria a new era is underway. One of most deeply rooted heritages of monolithic communist rule is the denial of validity to divergent viewpoints. Many non-communist Bulgarians are concerned that the increasingly politically aware public will not recognize opposing views as legitimate.

The beginnings have not been auspicious; former communists continue to wield power under the mantle of "socialism." And the economy is staggering under the dual weights of inefficiency and indebtedness. But political, economic, and social problems can be resolved if good will and determination combine in proper measure. Once a start has been made, serious attention can be paid to long-range ecological problems so that future options may not be foreclosed.

[November 1990]

NOTES

1. It is interesting to note that the Finns also have viewed Alexander II as a liberator – from Swedish domination – and have erected a memorial to him in Helsinki.