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Anarchism in Bulgaria

Ryan Robert Mitchell

2009

Although utopian socialism had always been a part of the Bulgarian national liberation movement, the tradition of anarchism was first introduced to the country in the late 1880s, primarily from students exposed to radical streams of thought within the Russian university system. In 1892, the first anarchist reading groups in Bulgaria were formed in the city of Rousse, devoted to the study of the works of Bakunin and Kropotkin. Anarchism would largely remain an academic or literary pursuit until revolutionaries adopted it in earnest at the turn of the century.

In 1898, an anarchist terrorist organization called the Gemidzhii Circle (but also known as the Boatmen of Thessaloniki or the Salonica Dynamiters) formed in the Macedonian city of Thessaloniki. Although the group engaged in several minor terrorist acts against the Ottoman authorities, it is most infamous for the bombing campaign of April 28, 1903, when it bombed over two dozen sites ranging from a French steamboat to a tobacco shop. The intention of the bombings was to alert the other European powers to the plight of Macedonians in the Ottoman empire, but the ill-thought-out campaign resulted

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only in further repression of the Macedonian Slavs within Thessaloniki.

Although there had been an attempt to unite the country's anarchists in 1909 to coincide with the international anarchist congress, the movement was too underdeveloped to arrive at any organization that could encompass the scene on a national scale. Up to this point, the Bulgarian anarchists had been dispersed across a multitude of movements in the country, including peasant cooperatives, the radical trade unionist movement, nihilist artists and intelligentsia, militant combat cells, and volunteer soldiers with the national liberation movement in Macedonia/Thrace. There would be another ten years and a series of crises in the Balkans and Europe before any nationwide Bulgarian anarchist federation could form.

In September 1919, delegates from these diverse movements met in Sofia and agreed to form the Federation of Anarchist Communists in Bulgaria (FACB) in an effort to give guidance to and coordinate anarchist actions across the country. A significant Bulgarian anarchist figure from this period was Gueorgui Cheitanov (1896–1925), a charismatic orator and seasoned guerilla fighter and strategist. Well traveled throughout anarchist circles in Europe, Cheitanov was involved in anarchist publishing in Bulgaria, including the banned *Khliab I Svoboda (Bread and Freedom)*, which acted as the organ for the Bulgarian anarchists, and the FACB's theoretical journal, *Free Society*.

In March 1923, the new Bulgarian republic signed a treaty with the recently formed Kingdom of Yugoslavia that recognized new borders and called for an end to territorial claims. Part of this treaty also involved the joint agreement to suppress all radical groups – especially the Vatrashna Makedonska Revoliucionna Organizacia (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization, or VMRO), which had been active in both countries. The FACB rallied other anarchist organizations and held an emergency meeting on March 26 in the city of Yambol

to protest these new suppressions and the government's plan to disarm the people. The military gave the assembled group only one warning before opening fire on the crowd. Some of those who were arrested at the site were brought back to the army barracks and executed the following day. All told, in just two days some 26 anarchists were murdered by the government in Yambol. At least another three anarchists were murdered, and many more arrested, in the weeks following the Yambol massacre.

On June 9, 1923, a coup d'état, initiated by the military and supported by the Bulgarian monarchy, overthrew the government and installed a right-wing regime. Despite spontaneous uprisings by the peasants in both the north and south of Bulgaria, the agrarians, non-party communists, and depleted anarchist forces were the only groups to immediately resist the coup. The Bulgarian Communist Party, on the other hand, sat out the uprising, believing it to be a squabble between the "urban and rural" bourgeoisie. Along with peasant support, the anarchists were able to temporarily hold towns such as Kili-farevo and Drenovo, but due to lack of concerted organization across the country the June uprisings dissipated within a week.

The Bulgarian Communist Party, under pressure from Moscow and the Comintern, became involved in insurgency after mass arrests of communists and leftist activists across the country. It planned a countrywide uprising with the other opposition organizations for the night of September 22. The anarchists were again involved in the coordination of peasant militias, seeing in the tactic of a popular uprising the best method of resisting the military.

Although resistance by anti-government forces was both fierce and better organized than the spontaneous June uprising, the September uprising failed largely due to a lack of support in the capital Sofia and urban centers. Reprisals after the uprising were harsh, and the government went on yet another hunt for revolutionary leftists and anarchists.

It is estimated that 1,500–2,500 opposition members were murdered in the white terror campaign in the months that followed the two insurrections, with Cheitanov and his lover Mariola Sirakova (1904–25) among the victims. In the course of a roundup of enemies of the state, on June 2, 1925, the two were ambushed by the authorities and shot along with 12 other prisoners at the Belovo railway station.

Despite having survived persecution under the Ottomans, a succession of hostile native governments, and organized partisan resistance against the fascist regime during World War II, Bulgarian anarchists faced their greatest difficulties under the regime of their former allies, the Bulgarian Communist Party. When the Soviets took power in 1946 the Bulgarian anarchists were officially banned as an organization and it is estimated that over a thousand Bulgarian anarchists were sent to the gulags for political reeducation.

When Bulgaria gained its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, a diverse set of anarchist organizations quickly established themselves throughout the country. One of the oldest post-independence anarchist organizations is the Federation of Anarchist Bulgarians, which has since been active around anti-European Union and globalization activism. Both Indymedia and Food Not Bombs have also opened chapters in Bulgaria.

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