

## THE LITTLE KNOWN PARACHUTISTS OF 1953-1954 (FROM 2003-2004)

*Les Temps maudits* (No 19) carried a translation of a text dealing with a little-known instance of the struggle between a dictatorship and some anarchist comrades deeply involved in day-to-day trade union and social struggles [...] The incident recounted here has been censored (as ever) as it was an attempt - using the CIA - to wage a head-on campaign against “actually existing socialism”, namely the Communist Party that ruled Bulgaria (*Les Temps maudits*, No 20)

*Khristo Dimitrov Nestorov<sup>1</sup>, Miliou Ivanov<sup>2</sup>, Dontcho Karaivanov and Emiliana Karaivanova – these names were deliberately kept under wraps by the Bulgarian communists prior to 10 November 1989, because these four people were brave enough and determined enough to help organize a group in France, the first three of them going so far as to parachute into their homeland (Bulgaria) in order to wage armed struggle against the communists. Emiliana Karaivanova joined them inside Bulgaria. Unfortunately, they have been all but forgotten by their own comrades<sup>3</sup> who failed to mark the anniversary of their exploits. These lines – written ten years ago<sup>4</sup>, may still be of some value in Bulgaria and elsewhere.*

As I see it, it boils down to restoring a page of our history, on the basis of what few details are available<sup>5</sup>, hailing their heroics without necessarily sharing their aims.

### Questionable motivations

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<sup>1</sup> Born in Gabrovo on 3.3.1902 – died 23.3.1954. Born into a family of poor farm labourers. Known also as Bogdan, Itsa, Gantcho, etc. Himself a farmworker, he refused to do his military service and became an outlaw, taking part in an armed raid in Plovdiv in June 1923 and later in the September 1923 uprising. Arrested in Sofia in 1928 he served twelve years in prison for terrorist activity. Released in January 1940, by the following autumn he was the first partisan in the Kazanleuk area. As the leader of a gang of partisans he avoided needless losses, except on two occasions, when a communist refused to take his advice and out of the frying pan and into the fire, often got drunk, again refused to heed him and was killed by the police. On 9 September 1944, Khristo was sentenced to death – twice – by the communists and was arrested. In 1944 some Pavel Bania anarchists prevented him from being shot by members of the CP. In 1948, sensing that things were not looking too bright for anarchists, he left for Turkey. From there he travelled on to Naples, only to be arrested for trying to enter France illegally. He escaped and arrived in France in October 1950. There he worked as a farm labourer and street-sweeper and whatever work he could find. According to a biography, most likely by Ivan Rachev, in *V, Zachtita na Bezvlastiето* (In Defence of Anarchism), No 17, 1955, reprinted in *Iztok*, June 1979

<sup>2</sup> A native of the province of Kazanleuk, by the age of 15-16 he was arrested as an anarchist whilst training as a mechanic. Having become a partisan, he was arrested and tortured by the police. He moved away to Yugoslavia before crossing illegally into Austria and on to Germany and France: excluded from Germany he returned to France and was arrested there before eventually arriving in Paris.

<sup>3</sup> Note that these comrades do not get a mention in the study by the (in theory) historian Gueorgui Balkansky [Georgi Grigoriev/ Georgi Balkanski (1906-1996)] in his Bulgarian-language (*Outline*) *History of the Libertarian Movement in Bulgaria* (Paris, Nach Peut, 1980, 107 pp.) available in French translation as *Histoire du mouvement libertaire en Bulgarie (Esquisse)* (Groupe Fresnes-Antony, 1982, 119 pp.) Challenged by me at the Publico bookshop in Paris as to the basis on which he left certain militants out of his study, Balkansky's answer to me was that he only counted as anarchists those who had died whilst still loyal to the Organization!

<sup>4</sup> *Trudova Misseul* (published in the village of Samovodene), December 1994, p. 4

<sup>5</sup> Here we should salute the efforts of Nikola Tenzerkov, living as an émigré in France since 1970, to preserve the memory of this affair and these comrades, in the Bulgarian-language version of *Iztok*.

The Bulgarian émigré community, ultimately split into tsarists (barely distinguishable from fascists) and republicans and increasingly remote geographically speaking, stood no chance of acting other than through reliance upon international backers. The Bulgarian anarchist comrades, about forty of whom had taken part in the war in Spain in the ranks of the CNT, received support from libertarian networks in exposing the repression enforced by the marxist-leninists. Pamphlets in French and Spanish, as well as lots of articles kept libertarians and their sympathizers briefed about the prison situation and dictatorship in Bulgaria. But, unlike Francoist Spain, which was occasionally rattled by propaganda and attacks emanating from Spanish émigrés generally and from the anarcho-syndicalists in particular, Bulgaria, with its electrified, mined borders stretching from Turkey to Romania, looked to be beyond reach.

Even though the representatives of the Bulgarian movement decided against launching antifascist maquis groups in 1940, there were some anarchist comrades mixed in among the partisan units.

Whilst Bulgarian émigrés were divided by personality issues (as were most of the émigrés of every persuasion from every single country), Ivan Ratchev Ivanov<sup>6</sup> deserves credit for setting out his thinking in the New York-based Russian anarchist review Dyelo Truda-Probuzhdenye, almost certainly because he could not do so in the Bulgarian-language émigré press, and his purpose was to spark a dialogue that does not seem to have ensued.

In “Looking to the Future”, dated 1 September 1950, he noted that Bolshevism was so obscurantist that *the peoples of the people’s democracies in Bulgaria, Romania, etc., [...] pine not only for bourgeois democracy but also for fascism.* Bolshevism was therefore “*the Number One enemy*”. As a result, they could not sit on the fence in conflicts that pitted communists and anti-communists against each other in Korea, in the Balkans, in Germany and so on, without indirectly playing unto the hands of the CP. And the article closed with a denunciation of neutral comrades: “*We dare not imagine our being able – through contemplation and magic – to do something of service to ourselves and to humanity. We do not dare assume that something useful will come to pass, if we leave it to others to mislead us and order us about.*”

*Third World War*<sup>7</sup> opened with “*The Korean War can be regarded as the opening of the Third World War*” and Baï Ivan, in the knowledge that his comrades were in the fight in Bulgaria, wrote: “*Who wants a fresh world war and why?*” Well, there were the Bolsheviks who knew that one was needed if they were to hold on to power “*Under General Franco’s bloody yoke*

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<sup>6</sup> Born in the village of Pavel Bania where the influence of anarchist ideas was strong, on 26 January 1902, he died in Villeneuve Saint-Georges on 11 November 1974. As a high-school teacher of chemistry and physics, he was an influence on lots of young people. And a significant figure in the movement. He is another one who is not mentioned by Gueorgui Balkansky’s book, even though Balkansky and his group attended his funeral and wept over his grave.

<sup>7</sup> Tretia mirovaya voina [Third World War] No 42, May-September 1953; he also used the by-line Jivko Kol

*in Spain, the peoples in the colonies and the émigrés, etc., all hope that war will deliver them, at the least, partial liberation, will rattle the social, national and colonial powers of certain classes and will at the very least deliver a short breathing-space in the wake of the conflict, during which time they can be free to raise up their heads, organize themselves and prepare themselves for a social or national revolution.”*

Baï Ivanov cut to the chase. *“Some comrades see themselves cast in the role of a sort of a third force that can crush the other two and steer events. By standing aloof whilst remaining pure, clinging to their innocence and undiluted neutrality, they say they can be onlookers. Other comrades of ours make no bones about their being eager to take a hand in the war. Some of them, in spite of themselves, are in danger of becoming instruments of one of the armed camps, unless we simultaneously and openly sort out where we stand on the matter of the war.*

*But lest we let down our own movement and run counter to the interests of the working class and of the people, we must at no point forget that Bolshevik dictatorship is very often worse and more dangerous than (bourgeois) and socialist social democracy and that if, in this new war, the democratic bloc should win, we will be able to publish our bulletins and our books and will be able to think, speak, organize and combat, not just future bolshevism and future fascism, but democracy itself: if, come the end of a third world war, Bolshevik authority is foisted on the proletariat the world over, our movement, the proletariat, the peoples and the entirety of humankind are going to be stripped for some indeterminate period of their entitlement to fresh air, a human existence and left bereft of ideas in the strict sense.*

On the other hand, we will be committing a repulsive act of treachery and a ghastly crime if we forget that democracy, for all its organic shortcomings, ought to be preferred (!) over Bolshevik dictatorship and tyranny [...]

In “Whom Shall We Serve?”, Todor Mitev<sup>8</sup> offered a very belated, reasoned, considered answer, once the dust had died down, steering well clear of the invective of Bulgarian émigrés in France. He began by thanking Kolev (Ivan Ratchev) for having broached the issue of where anarchists stood on war. Then he went on to rebut the categorization of Bolshevism as the Number One Enemy, of no concern to the colonized in Africa and Asia, or in Spain and Portugal. And he brought up the fact that certain comrades had picked a side during the First World War and mentioned the socialists who had voted in favour of war loans. *What guarantee is there that comrade Kolev, having entered into a coalition with anti-Bolsheviks, is not going to put the case for all of the measures they put forward? This is the choice of the lesser evil: unquestionably, there is a difference between dictatorship and*

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<sup>8</sup> Born in Sofia on 19 March 1926, he died in Vauhallan on 20 August 2002. See *Le Monde libertaire* of 3 September 2002 and the *Marseilles CIRA Bulletin* for November 2002

*democracy. But what guarantee is there that today's democracy is not going to turn into a dictatorship tomorrow?"*

#### Re-purposing the aims of the CIA

Stalin's death in March 1953 offered all the émigrés from the Eastern bloc a glimmer of hope as one can discern in Ivan Ratchev's article. Besides, in June 1953 there was that workers' uprising in East Berlin against the social exploitation of "actually existing socialism" and the Soviet forces of occupation. Previously, that spring, *Bogdan Stefanov* (Khristo Dimitrov Nestorov), Miliou Ivanov and Dontchev Karaivanov had entered Bulgaria with arms and a radio transmitter, but had been unable to ford the swollen river Dospat and had doubled back in the direction of Greece.<sup>9</sup>

Ivan Ratchev had put some comrades from his area on alert and had contacted the CIA which trained them for a mission involving their being dropped by parachute with radio equipment in order to broadcast pro-US propaganda before being brought back to free territory again. The initial three tried to bring other comrades along with them, comrades such as Todor Mitev. According to him, that was because he was a doctor and familiar with the mountains: *"We talked things over a lot. I spelled out my misgivings because, as I saw it, the situation inside Bulgaria was not revolutionary and isolated action was not about to draw in the masses [...] Moreover, I had no great trust in the Americans who had given a commitment to help them. I thanked them for having spoken to me and I promised not to breathe a word. But I later found out that the secrecy had been breached by some comrades who, taking fright at the point at which they were to join them, had let the whole secret out of the bag at a meeting of a Bulgarian libertarian group."*<sup>10</sup>

Whether the comrades had made their choice on the hoof or by arrangement with Ivan Ratchev, I do not know, but their broadcasts were libertarian and revolutionary in tone. And apparently they came through clearly and reached a sizeable audience.<sup>11</sup> Which is why the CIA failed to pick the parachutists up again.

Specifically, from September 1953 through to 23 March 1954, the comrades survived in the mountains thanks to help from the locals. Todor Mitev reports: *"I also had a visit from Dontcho who filled me in on his odyssey inside Bulgaria. He had managed to hold out for*

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<sup>9</sup> *Parachutnata epopeia* by N. Yanteur (Paris, Iztok, 1991) p. 3

<sup>10</sup> Testimony entitled *Une Vie*, 21-11-1996. During the 1960s Mitev added that he had confessed to his friends that he was scared and refused to abandon his young family.

<sup>11</sup> Evidence of this was the comments of a traveller on board a train from Sofia to Kustendil sometime around 1972 who bragged about the correctness of the "anti-government" criticisms uttered. His fellow travellers barely reacted. Might he have been a provocateur or a simpleton? Given the dictatorship in place, there was no way of pursuing the matter. Nikola Tenzerkov is considering searching for evidence about the broadcasts over that radio transmitter.

*nearly six months, hiding out in the Sredna Gora mountains, but the army had tracked him down and there must have been a fire-fight. Bogdan had been killed and Miliou seriously wounded and nothing more was heard from him. Dontcho and his wife managed to fight their way out through the encirclement and spent more than a fortnight tramping through the Rhodop mountains by night until they reached the Greek border.”* In conversations some forty years ago, Mitev described how the fighters had opted for the couple to escape by breaking through the siege, Bogdan and then Miliou having agreed to sacrifice themselves.

According to one comrade I ran into in the 1970s at the home of the painter and engraver Vessiline Stalkov<sup>12</sup>, the couple’s escape from the country was down to a number of anarchists who held CP membership cards (“sleepers”) and who used their connections to supply them with phoney papers and exit directions (the borders were partly electrified, mined and monitored by dog patrols). A dozen arrests were made and some of these were sentenced to several years in prison.

The testimonies are a bit contradictory, but it seems plain to me that Dontcho and Emilia would never ever have been able to cross the border without assistance.<sup>13</sup>

### Forbidden thoughts

I shall set aside the refusal of Bulgarian comrades themselves to deal with this subject in any language other than in Bulgarian. The fact remains that this is an incident that cries out for theoretical and practical scrutiny.

Given that Ivan Ratcho’s decision was part of an overall tactic, back in the days when we were part of the grassroots in Ukraine and Spain, our influence during armed conflicts came from our rejection of hierarchy and the effectiveness of the tactics employed by agricultural and industrial workers. Foisting a conflict – even in embryonic form – upon a country without preparing libertarian groups in situ, without potential anarchist backing from abroad, turns into a nonsense, as the masses are open to complete manipulation by the victors and the United States has plenty of examples to point to where one dictatorship was shrugged off just to see another one set up (as in the Philippines, South Korea, Iran, Guatemala, etc.)

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<sup>12</sup> See *Les Temps maudits*, No 12, p. 2

<sup>13</sup> Hypotheses become hard to follow, frankly, when certain people let Nestorov’s wife know that her husband had been betrayed by Dontcho or that Bodgan was not dead at all, but had supposedly been sent to Siberia and had died. See *Parachoutna Afera* (Debeletz, 1991)

Together with the “*Gorians*”<sup>14</sup>, our anarchist comrades were the only ones to take the fight to the butchers who even fed the inmates of certain camps human flesh<sup>15</sup> (that of deceased prisoners, of course), ‘disappeared’ numbers of strikers (like the bakers in Sofia’s Nadezhda district around 1975) and, between 1948 and 1989 relentlessly harassed all the members of families that were “on file”. And if Bulgaria lacked for dissidents, that was due, in part, to their not having any western journalist to champion them the way they did elsewhere, and, on the other hand, to “State Security”<sup>16</sup> having operated with unimaginable brutality.

It is reassuring to learn that some anarchists had it in them to stand by their anarchist ideas. And regrettable that what they did proved to be a sacrifice, but, faced with an émigré community where there was no vision of a way out – such as in the Russian émigré community from the 1920s onwards – it was left up to the individual to lead the rootless existence of an exile or look to guerrilla action at home.

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<sup>14</sup> A “*Gorianin*” (forest-dweller) was an anti-communist maquisard: “Following the victory on 9 September [when the Red Army arrived in Sofia] some armed gangs sprang up opposing the people’s power. They were dubbed *goriani* in order to distinguish them from the *partizani*. And so the term *goriani* took on a new meaning [in addition to meaning mountain breeze and snake living in the forests and mountains], a pejorative significance” in *Edin ezikovets za tchudoezikovoto aboutchenie* by Jana Molkhova (Sofia, 1975) p. 43

<sup>15</sup> See the written instruction issued by State Security minister Mirtcho Spassov (1913?-1993), as disclosed in the Bulgarian and Russian press around 1991

<sup>16</sup> Derjavna Sigurnost, a fully-fledged ministry with unlimited powers under the supervision of Boris Spassov, the real leader of the country between 1944 and 1978-1980, in close concert with the embassy of the USSR

*To Mark Your Seventieth Birthday*<sup>17</sup>

Papa  
They issued summonses, interrogated  
Insulted and harassed:  
I was required to go without rights  
Without a mind of my own, without the right to speak  
Just for being your daughter

Art, Science  
Creativity  
The lure of beauty  
Were frozen deep in the dungeons  
Of Power

But I am your daughter!  
Even in the gutter  
Down there in the mud  
I stood with head held high

They bled my fingernails  
Exposed to blow after blow  
My soul groaned through clenched teeth  
My forehead frowning with anger  
I was expecting them to break my knees  
And see me sprawled out on the ground

But I was not afraid  
Come what might, I will weather the blow  
For I am your daughter

*Written in Kazanleuk by Goriana Khristorova Nestorova, daughter of Khristo Dimitrov  
Nestorov*

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<sup>17</sup> Poem published in *Trudova Misseul*, op. cit., p. 5

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