

## **Bulgaria: “Power and Resistance”**

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**Ilja Trojanow’s latest documentary-fiction novel deals with two men, Metodi and Konstantin, who grew up in the Bulgarian countryside, went to school together but have been personal and political opponents ever since Metodi informed on Konstantin. While this secured Metodi a high-flying career in the party bureaucracy in Communist-era Bulgaria, Konstantin spent most of his adult life behind bars as a political prisoner after blowing up a statue of Stalin. Following the fall of the iron curtain, Metodi advances from a party bureaucrat who tortured prisoners to a become rich businessman, while Konstantin, who remained committed to his anarchist ideals, lives in destitution and commits his life to uncovering a state security system. Trojanow illustrates this development with de-classified documents from the Bulgarian secret police, which he intersperses throughout the novel in order to illuminate the extent of the espionage system, which reached into the most inner circles of families.**

The novel is based on countless interviews with both state security officers and political prisoners, who come together in the figures of Metodi and Konstantin as narrators of their own stories. This is complemented by original de-classified documents. Years of research mean that Trojanow can show two sides of “Communist” Bulgaria through the characters, who are living and contradictory beings fraught with fears, doubts, desires and passion. While this is unlike many political novels in recent years, where characters simply come to stand in for political ideologies, the characters might still be criticized for being superficial in their politics. Thus, Konstantin’s anarchism remains something of a personal trait handed down from his father and not grounded in a theoretical perspective of social change. While in jail it is his dream that works like Marx’s *Kapital* (which he has read seven times) will be no longer needed. Meanwhile, Metodi does not morally justify his own Communist and authoritarian politics at any point within the novel.

Metodi’s story is driven by appearance of a young woman at his door one day. She tells him that he is her father and that he impregnated her mother while he was a prison guard and she a prisoner. They continuously meet up and Metodi believes that his past political opponents want to smear him and set him up for his past crimes. He then begins to believe that the woman is acting on someone else’s instructions. He interrogates her and treats her like one of the “criminals” he had to deal with during the Communist era, as he cannot remember whether anything had happened between him and said female prisoner. This story line draws on the way in which former state bureaucrats are plagued by collective amnesia and have not had to face justice for the crimes they committed during more than 40 years of dictatorship. With this story Trojanow implicitly shows how the Communist Party’s power affected all spheres of life. Party bureaucrats like Metodi had access to sex and women at all times and used many of the women who desired a better life just as rock stars, football players and Donald Trump do today. For all the antagonism that exists between Metodi and Konstantin, the two are united by their relationship troubles and the way they prioritize their passion for politics above their female companions. During his time as a high-ranking official in the party bureaucracy, Metodi entertains two women at the same time, both of whom decide to pick him up from the airport after a visit to Moscow. This means he loses both and settles down with a woman who couldn’t have children and is nothing special, just a steady woman who cooks for him and isn’t

bothered by his obsession with the daily political routines of the bureaucracy, and later of his business.

Metodi's paranoia surrounding the young woman's appearance in his life becomes understandable when one reads Konstantin's side of the story and learns how he was persecuted during the Communist era for upholding the very ideals that the state bureaucracy claimed to represent. From his early teen years Konstantin organized anarchist activities with his peers after picking up anarchist writings by Proudhon and Kropotkin from his father's book shelf. Despite being a small group, they always feared state security. Thus, Konstantin and his anarchist groupuscule needed to organise in cell structures with each comrade only having one contact. However, their system was not fool-proof, and Konstantin ended up imprisoned after the attack on the Stalin statue. Given the fragility of power and the little organized resistance, power and resistance are experienced through the prism of a paranoia which even haunts the characters once the regime has collapsed. In this sense paranoia becomes the governmentality of the Bulgarian state during the Communist era and after the fall of the Eastern Bloc.

Konstantin's story is driven by the desire to uncover the web of the espionage and state security that persists after the fall of the iron curtain. For this Trojanow has dug up from the state archives original documents on dissidents, which show the depth of Bulgaria's system of state security and espionage. These vignettes demonstrate that Konstantin was up against a web of informants which even extended to his older brother, which he finds out is the main reason he ended up in jail. Even though the documents are now publically available, one day the state archivists decide to not give him any papers, only to flood him with information the next day, making it impossible to process everything. Then they raise the price for photocopies so that he cannot actually afford to copy vital documents. At one level, this is symbolic of the way in which people suddenly had "democratic" rights but did not have the financial means to make use of them. This is also highlighted by the contrast between how Metodi and his family travel around the European Union and how Konstantin has only left Bulgaria once since the iron curtain fell, on a cheap bus tour. At another level, this shows how the past has not been worked through collectively, but rather remains the task of the individual citizen. This individual responsibility for working through history is paralleled by Konstantin's loneliness and the fact he no longer feels the same with his comrades as he used to; unlike his fellow resistance fighters, he is also obsessed with restoring some sense of justice and revenging himself on Metodi. By placing Konstantin's and Metodi's story in one book, Trojanow makes a useful contribution to a kind of collective working through of Bulgarian history, similar to that which other societies have embarked on, such as South Africa with its concept of Reconciliation or Germany with its acceptance of historic guilt for the Holocaust.

These narrations are interspersed with short vignettes from the years which Konstantin and Metodi recount in their narration. For example, 1953 and 1956, the year of the abortive East German uprising and the year of the failed Hungarian revolution against Stalinism, respectively, are retold from the point of view of the year itself. By placing a year in the position of the narrator, Trojanow uses an innovative literary device which highlights how years of world historic proportions attain personal characteristics akin to those of a human. This allows Konstantin's and Metodi's experience of rationing and of the tightened state security to be read as actions by the year itself. To some extent it might even be argued that presenting these years as characters shows the way in which 'their' actions affected the lives of Metodi and Konstantin. In doing so, Trojanow reinvents a collective consciousness of history, as the two sides of Bulgaria enter into dialogue over how they experienced a particularly eventful year. This contributes to the sense that Trojanow seeks to construct a collective story of the Communist era, a story that can bridge political divides which continue to exist today, but which can also transcend the perpetrator-victim narrative, which is the result of an individualized approach to historic events.

Given the book's title, it seems appropriate to ask what the novel contributes to our understanding of power and resistance. Through the overall story, and through the character of Metodi, Trojanow is able to show the continuity between the old ruling bureaucracy in Bulgaria and the new bourgeoisie, which became rich in the wake of the fall of the iron curtain and the privatisation of state enterprises. Metodi's descriptions of his *family* parties and gatherings and those of the *political* party meetings during the Communist era strikingly resemble each other. This further underlines the continuity between the power of the unaccountable ruling cliques, who live lavishly while the Bulgarian citizenry remains powerless and continues to be exploited. Metodi is well aware, however, of the fact that the money possessed by this new ruling elite is not real power. The transition has left the same people in power. Authoritarian power is therefore not anonymous; rather, it takes form and manifests itself in Metodi's character. This allows the author to move away from the view that the system was run by a group of faceless bureaucrats, and to show how power manifested itself in people's personal lives as well. Trojanow thus devises a story of the collective Bulgarian experience through a story of personal retribution. At the same time, Trojanow shows that devising a collective narrative does not mean that people are not individually responsible for their actions.

When it comes to resistance, this does not work so well. Trojanow tends to postulate resistance as a personal characteristic rather than the consequence of any type of ideological commitment. Konstantin's cell mates are anarchists, fascists, Trotskyists, a heretic of the official Church – all of whom are suddenly united in their opposition to the Bulgarian Communist system. Here it would have been interesting to explore the nature of right-wing opposition to Communism and the way today the right wing in most of Eastern Europe has hegemonized opposition to the current state of affairs and has framed the social question in its own terms. This would have added a level of depth to this political novel which continuously draws parallels between the past and present. It would have also illuminated how sincere the right-wing opposition to the Communist regime was. Yet Konstantin's anarchism means that Trojanow can present a critique of Bulgarian Communism from a leftist, anti-authoritarian standpoint, which enables him to recuperate the leftist and progressive causes of social justice and economic equality. This is a necessary task, given the weakness of the extra-parliamentary left and the lack of sustained intellectual left-wing critiques of the Eastern Bloc. The fact that Konstantin opts for terrorism to bring about social change in Bulgaria raises the question of the legitimate means to get rid of an illegitimate government; but more importantly perhaps, it also raises the question: Why does Bulgaria celebrate its Communist resistance fighters against the Nazis but not the resistance fighters against the Communist regime? Metodi had been a resistance fighter against the Nazis during World War II and had a successful career within the Bulgarian Communist Party and as a businessman afterwards, while Konstantin remains an outsider for his entire life even after the regime he fought against finally falls. The answer to the second question does not lie in the fact that both are resistance fighters, but in the fact that the system, regardless of its ideology, rewards compromise and opportunism rather than the kind of stubbornness that Konstantin displays.

Konstantin displays this stubbornness until the end. When he calls one of his anarchist meetings to discuss Metodi's sudden death, a man enters the room. He would like to participate in an action against Metodi. But Konstantin recognizes him as the judge who sent him to jail and sends him away immediately. Konstantin, however, is angry that he never managed to get justice for the crimes that Metodi committed against him and others, as death took Metodi first. He doesn't let that deter him, however, and he starts ringing up his old anarchist friends, most of whom have either died before Metodi, or can no longer walk. Konstantin puts together a sound system and disrupts Metodi's funeral with an anarchistic carnival, which gives him some satisfaction at last.

Trojanow's story is very particular to the Bulgarian context. It shows the way in which Bulgarian history continues to be either written from an anti-Communist or a Communist perspective, as these

fault lines continue to exist even since Bulgaria joined the European Union. Trojanow has written a great political novel that masterfully reconstructs the Communist era, through characters in the party bureaucracy as well as the anarchist underground, contrasting this era with the post-Communist period. The novel shows the continuity between the old Soviet-style system and today's regimes in Eastern Europe, and it does this without being politically heavy handed, but with a depth and clarity that shows Trojanow's research into the subject matter and the continuity of power beyond a given political system. Through the first-person narration, the reader enters into this world and into the characters' inner lives during a period of adjustment and transition. Trojanow's method of adding short vignettes from defining years in the history of the Eastern Bloc is a way of contextualising the two character's actions and the political circumstances that influenced their decisions. On another level, these events also reconfigure the balance of power between the poles of power and resistance and the characters' adherence to these two poles.

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