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# BETWEEN TRAUMA AND NOSTALGIA



**Stories of Bulgarian  
literary exile (1944–1989)**

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# MENU

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## BETWEEN TRAUMA AND NOSTALGIA

In the post-war period, Bulgarian society developed under very similar socio-cultural conditions to those in Czechoslovakia; in Bulgaria, too, literary production was divided into three streams due to the politicization of cultural life – official, unofficial, and exile literature. The latter remains a poorly researched phenomenon in literary history, yet it was precisely exile literature that represented a significant ideological and aesthetic alternative to official literary production, which, due to the Sovietization of cultural life, was under the ideological control of the Communist Party.

In exile, Bulgarian literature was able to develop in a freer atmosphere. However, creative freedom was also accompanied by considerable ideological diversity, which in the Bulgarian context often had political and ideological background. Monarchists, nationalists, agrarians, social democrats, liberals, and anarchists were all active in exile. In addition, Bulgarian Jews, who emigrated to Israel in the post-war period and whose motivations for emigration were specific in nature, also wrote and published their works in Bulgarian. Exile literature thus represented the soul of a kind of “other Bulgaria” that lived and thought independently of the dogmas and resolutions of the ruling Communist Party. However, this extraordinarily diverse diaspora was generally united by one ideological bond – a fundamental anti-communism.

In the soul of the Bulgarian Cold War exile, there was an irreconcilable conflict between two modes of memory. On the one hand, there was the trauma associated with the regime’s repression of all real or perceived opponents. On the other hand, however, there was also nostalgia for the lost homeland, which was often reflected in literature in retrospective returns to the idyllic world of the old order. In their writings, exiles often constructed a kind of dreamlike Bulgarian Arcadia, a mythical land of abundance, peace, and general social idyll; nostalgic returns thus often led to Tsarist Sofia, to the traditional countryside, or to the unspoiled nature of the Bulgarian mountains. Bulgarian literary nostalgia returned the exile’s soul to a world that no longer exists, and perhaps never did...

## GEORGI MARKOV

During the 1960s in socialist Bulgaria, the literary star of Georgi Markov (1929–1978), author of successful prose works, including the 1962 novel *Mazhe* (published in Czech as *Muži*, 1964) and the 1968 collection of short stories *Zhenite na Varshava* (published in Slovak as *Ženy Diabolského vrchu*, 1970), shone brightly. Markov was also a popular playwright who introduced elements of absurd drama into Bulgarian theater at the time. During 1968, Markov closely observed the reform process in Czechoslovakia, and shortly after its military suppression, he lost all illusions about the Soviet model of socialism. After going into exile, he settled in London and began working for the Bulgarian section of the BBC. Soon afterwards, he also began collaborating with DW and RFE, where his cultural and political essays, known as *Remote Reports on Bulgaria*, were broadcast regularly from 1975 onwards. It is believed that these uncompromising texts, which criticized not only the Sofia regime as a whole but also the personality of dictator Todor Zhivkov directly, may have been the reason for his assassination.

On Thursday, September 7, 1978, at around 6:30 p.m., an assassination attempt was made on the exile. On Waterloo Bridge in London, near a bus stop, Markov “accidentally” collided with an unknown passerby, feeling a slight prick in his right thigh. His health began to deteriorate rapidly and he had to be hospitalized. However, British doctors were unable to help him; Georgi Markov died on September 11 at the age of 49. A Scotland Yard investigation later revealed that the cause of death was a miniature metal ampoule containing ricin. The killer was never identified, nor was those who planned and ordered the murder—to this day it is believed that the Bulgarian secret services were behind the attack.

## GEORGI MARKOV AND THE REFORM PROCESSES IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA

Some of Markov's essays on the reform processes in Czechoslovakia were published in Czech thanks to Vladimír Kříž (1951–2019) in 1991 under the title *Úvahy o československém jaru 1968*. In the first part of the essay, entitled *Marně to světlo zhasínáte*, the author writes, among other things:

*I want to write about Czechoslovakia, about the tenth anniversary of the invasion by Warsaw Pact troops, and about everything that is happening there today. I want to write, but I don't know where to start. Memories and images swarm in my head, pushing their way to the surface, provoking and evoking pain and anger in me, as if Czechoslovakia were my homeland and everything that happened there affected me personally.*

*In the middle of winter, which Dubček turned into spring, we, a few friends from the writing fraternity, applied to move to Czechoslovakia. At the time, it seemed to us that it was the most attractive country to live in. Something spectacular was happening there. We didn't speak Czech very well, but we wanted to be there. We didn't really know what we would do in Czechoslovakia, but we wanted to be there. We had no intention of changing our nationality, but we said to ourselves:*

*"Let's be Czechs!"*

*It meant joining them, being like them, and devoting our energies and abilities to their cause, which was also our cause. Perhaps behind this desire lay a passionate urge to escape our own winter and experience the Prague Spring. But while the bureaucratic delays in processing our emigration dragged on, the bars closed behind Czechoslovakia.*

*Or more precisely, behind "our Czechoslovakia." In October of that year, an acquaintance of mine, the mother of a soldier in basic service who served with the paratroopers and was therefore one of those half a million attackers, told me what her son had confided in her: "Mom, when you walk down the street in Prague, people ask you what you're doing there. And they look you straight in the eye! You feel like a punching bag, like an intruder, and you feel ashamed, you suffer, you would like to say: sorry, it was an order, but you know that no one would accept such an excuse anyway and that you wouldn't be able to say it anyway, so you'd rather disappear somewhere..."*

(From the book *Úvahy o československém jaru 1968*, p. 43.)

## ZHENI ZAIMOVA

Zheni Zaimova (1917–2005) was the most active and significant female author of Bulgarian literary exile. The lyric poet traveled to Rome with her husband in 1947, where her husband Stoyan Zaimov was working in a diplomatic position at the time. When her husband was called back to his “people’s democratic” homeland, Zheni refused to return and remained abroad. In 1957, she moved to the US, where she began studying literature. All of her Bulgarian-language poetry books were published in the US, starting with *Scattered Songs* (*Pesni razpileni*, 1971), followed by the collections *Storks* (*Shtarkeli*, 1972), *Poems* (*Stihotvoreniya*, 1974), *Martenitsas* (*Martenitsi*, 1977), and finally the collection *Thracian Gold* (*Trakiysko zlato*, 1981).

Her poems reflect the heavy burdens of a soul separated from family, home, and homeland. In 1972, the poet was further struck by the news of the tragic death of her son Vladimir, who perished in a plane crash during a trip to the Soviet Union. Her verses written in exile are imbued with a heavy nostalgia. She did not return permanently to her native Bulgaria until 1993, after 46 long years of separation. She remained active in literature until her death in 2005.

## THE POEM AND THE SNOW PILES UP (*SNYAG SE TRUPA*)

From the collection *Thracian gold*

*Under a gloomy, overcast sky,  
the snow piles up, piles up, piles up...*

*It white joy for the soul,  
with a group of children.*

*as we sledded together.*

*And that snowball fight...*

*All of that remained behind the wall.*

*There is no one to say two tender words*

*to you here in this land.*

*I am huddled in a hollow*

*(now only the likeness of an old woman),*

*and the snow piles up, piles up...*

## THE CULT OF NIKOLA PETKOV IN EXILE

Nikola Petkov (1893–1947), an agrarian and leader of the united anti-communist opposition, was executed after a fabricated political trial on September 23, 1947. Within the context of exile memory, Nikola Petkov embodied not only Bulgarian democratic resistance to communist dictatorship, but also decisive opposition to the previous policy of the tsarist regime as an ally of Nazi Germany. In post-war exile literature, the tragic fate of the agrarian leader was not only addressed in poetry and prose, but was also frequently mentioned in non-fiction and politically engaged essays. Nikola Petkov became a cult figure with hagiographic traits, and the executed opposition leader represented an important symbol of Bulgarian exile memory and political religion. His sacrifice was commemorated annually, particularly at events organized by the exiled BNC (Bulgarian National Committee).

In 1988, the book *Nikola D. Petkov 1893–1947* was published in Paris, prepared by agrarians from the circle around Tsenko Barev (1919–2023). In the book, the martyrdom pathos surrounding Petkov's execution is further emphasized by intertextual references to the poetic works of Bulgarian literary classic Ivan Vazov, as well as to leading figures in the national liberation struggle against Ottoman rule.

*His earthly journey ends here: at the gallows in Sofia Central Prison.  
To immortality!*

*Legends are told about Nikola Petkov. Just as legends are told about exceptional freedom fighters. About giants.*

*Just as people once believed for a long time that Botev had not fallen at Vola, that Levski had not been hanged in Sofia, but that both had been exiled to Diyarbakir, so too did legends about Nikola Petkov circulate for a long time. Rumors claimed that he was alive and exiled to Siberia or that he was lying in the sinister Lubyanka in Moscow, where he ended his life—nameless, buried alive!*

*He died, but his work, his struggle, his name remain! The legend of him remains!*

*Because what doesn't extinguish, doesn't extinguish.*

*Ideas do not fade; the will for freedom does not fade. And the great example gives birth to thousands, millions of new examples. Others take the place of those who have fallen to take up the fallen banner.*

*This is how nations survive – to endure through the centuries!*

(From the book *Nikola D. Petkov 1893–1947*)

## NIKOLAY LEVKOV

The poet and prose writer Nikolay Levkov (1933–2020) belonged to the Paris circle around the Bulgarian National Committee (BNC – a kind of analogue to the Council of Free Czechoslovakia). Levkov published his work in Bulgarian exile periodicals such as *Mladezhka borba*, *Osvobozhdenie*, and *Badeshte* (often under the pseudonym Nikolay Sarnogorski). He entered the history of literary exile mainly with his thriller novel *The Earth Cries* (*Zemyata plache*, 1958), which was published in Paris by *Narodna borba*. *The Earth Cries* is a dramatic novel about collectivization, telling the story of the desperate resistance of peasants against the sovietization of the Bulgarian countryside. In the following excerpt, Levkov's narrator explains why Bulgarian peasants could never come to terms with collectivization and the violent creation of TKZS (the Bulgarian equivalent of JZD – Collective farm in former Czechoslovakia).

## FROM THE LEVKOV'S 1958 NOVEL THE EARTH CRIES

*There is a kind of invisible steel bond between the villager and his land. Man is connected to the land by a certain mutual force, as if they both had common roots. Although the local people knew nothing about art, they themselves were creators of something sublime. The love of a countryman for his fields could move one to tears and throw one off balance. The tenderness and warmth of his relationship with the land was simply beyond comprehension. For him, it was not just a dead pile of black soil. For the villager, the land was both father and mother. [...] The fate of the soil was also his fate. During periods of heat and drought, the farmer withered along with his crops. When hailstorms came, every piece of falling ice pierced his heart. When beneficial rain fell, he straightened up, breathed, and revived along with his crops. The farmer was bound to the land by some kind of inseparable and superhuman mystery.*

## BULGARIAN ANARCHISTS IN EXILE (1944–1989)

The Soviet-style communist regime, which became firmly established in Bulgaria in 1947–1948, did not tolerate any ideological alternatives, including radical left-wing anarchism. Bulgarian anarchists formed a relatively large community in this Balkan country, and many of them were imprisoned and interned in labor camps by the new “people’s democratic” regime. Some managed to flee to the West, where they formed active communities, particularly in France, Switzerland, and Australia. The magazine *Nash pat* was published in Paris from 1952 onwards. Its editorial team, led by Georgi Hadzhiev (1906–1992), published anarchist literature of various origins: from brochures promoting the ideology of anarchy to memoirs of leading figures in the movement to a special type of revolutionary poetry mercilessly denouncing the ills of both rival Cold War ideologies – Soviet communism and Western capitalism.

## LITERATURE OF BULGARIAN JEWS IN ISRAEL

The fact that Bulgarian Jews were not deported to extermination camps during World War II (unlike their fellow Jews from areas of Yugoslavia and Greece occupied by Bulgaria) and thus survived the war enabled them to emigrate to Israel in the post-war period. However, Bulgarian Jews, who were mostly of Sephardic origin, remained connected to the Bulgarian language and culture even in their new homeland. Bulgarian remained their cultural language, and from the 1950s onwards, a considerable amount of literature written in Bulgarian was published in Tel Aviv and Jaffa. Authors such as Albert Mihael, Albert Beni, Albert Varsano, Tilda Levi, Yona Schwartz, and others wrote and published short stories, novels, poetry, essays, and memoirs. While some texts are imbued with nostalgia for their old Balkan homeland, others deal with traumatic memories of the war period and later also the turbulent events of the 1960s and 1970s in connection with the Arab-Israeli conflicts.

## FROM THE BOOK BELENE – ISLAND OF THE FORGOTTEN BY NEDYALKO GESHEV

*Our barrack, the one for young people, was a dark straw barn with small openings and wooden bars, about 40 meters long and 6 meters wide. On both sides of the narrow path, that served as a passageway, stood wooden bunk beds. Instead of springs, we had intertwined willow rods, on which we rolled over each other according to our work brigades. Inside, it was completely dark, there was no lighting and no heating in winter.*

*Even during the day, when it was cloudy, we had difficulty finding our beds. In the evening, when they read us propaganda lectures, we were lit by dimly flickering kerosene lamps that smoked so heavily that we were suffocating. The air was unbearable, especially at night. Five hundred prisoners suffered from the stifling heat. And in winter, snow penetrated through the uncovered bars, and we had to plug them with rags. Hygiene was out of the question. There were countless bedbugs, and mosquitoes constantly serenaded us at night. [...].*

## EXILE LITERATURE AS A PLATFORM FOR HUMAN RIGHTS DISCOURSE

In connection with the so-called Helsinki Process in the 1970s, there was a rise in the number of publications in exile focusing on the repressive machinery and human rights violations in communist Bulgaria. Exiles often returned to the theme of the labor camps and prisons of the 1940s and 1950s; an interesting book in this regard was the memoir by former political prisoner Nedyalko Geshev (\*1928) entitled *Belene – Island of the Forgotten* (*Belene – ostrovat na zabravenite*, 1983). Several exile editions were also published of the memoirs of Blagoy Popov (1902–1968) entitled *Let It Never Happen Again* (*Za da ne se povtori nikoga veche*, 1981). Blagoy Popov was one of three Bulgarian communists (along with G. Dimitrov and V. Tanev) accused by the Nazis of setting fire to the Reichstag in 1933. After being acquitted, the three Bulgarian communists traveled to the USSR, where Blagoy Popov fell victim to Stalin's purges in 1937. He was arrested, convicted in a show trial, and sent to the Gulag. Popov returned to his native Bulgaria a broken man in 1954. The manuscript of his raw memories of the Gulag was subsequently smuggled to the West, where it was published as a book.

## OLD SOFIA IN THE SHORT STORIES OF ILKO ILIEV

The poet and prose writer Ilko Iliev (1920–1987) remains a somewhat mysterious figure in Bulgarian exile. In the 1950s, Iliev lived in exile in London, where he published his nostalgic collection of poems *Through foreign countries* (*Po chuzhdi zemi*, 1957). Two years later, a book of short stories entitled *Charcoal Sketches* (*Skitsi s vaglen*, 1959) was published in Munich, in which the narrator returns to old Sofia during the Tsarist era and successfully reconstructs the long-lost world of the former Sofia elite.

In 1960, Iliev, who was working for the BBC at the time, attempted to arrange an exit visa for his widowed mother through the Bulgarian Embassy in London. He was allegedly lured to the airport in connection with this matter and kidnapped by members of the Bulgarian secret service to Sofia, where his ordeal with the repressive apparatus began; he subsequently spent one year in prison. Probably in 1963, following diplomatic pressure from U.S. authorities, he was released and allowed to travel to the United States (Iliev held American citizenship). After emigrating for the second time, Iliev published exclusively in English under the changed name Gerald Dorset.

## FROM THE COLLECTION OF ILIEV'S SHORT STORIES CHARCOAL SKETCHES

Excerpt from a short story *Referee in a Bag* (*Refera v chuval*), which reconstructs the faded glory of the traditional Sofia derby between the Levski and Slavia clubs.

*They set off through the crowd, pushing their way through groups of people arguing about the qualities of individual players. There wasn't a cloud in the sky. The sun was setting behind the cooperative houses across the river, and the shadow from the main grandstand spread over the benches and part of the playing field. A military band played marches on the stage opposite. Vendors selling seeds and lemonade moved between the wooden benches. Friends who found themselves on different benches called out to each other by name. Some visitors in the cheaper seats turned their heads to see the officials in the stands. The military band suddenly stopped playing; the bandleader raised his baton high and waved it energetically. With the first notes of Shumi Maritsa, everyone stood up. The stadium fell silent. Several small children began to cry. Their mothers tried to calm them down. After Shumi Maritsa, the orchestra moved on to the Tsar's anthem, and everything ended with applause and enthusiasm.*

[...]

*They stood behind the people on the last bench and were happy that they could see the whole field so well. The path on the embankment behind them was full of standing spectators. The voices of the seed and lemonade sellers fell silent. The referee blew his whistle sharply and the round leather ball rose above the heads of the players in blue jerseys.*