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Symbolic Time(s) of Violence in Late Socialist Bulgaria

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They took us to go and watch the movie *Vreme razdelno* (Time of Parting). Somehow, every single pupil in the school had to attend. “Come and see what the Turks did to us,” that was the kind of dominant pathos. . . . I have to confess that back in those years the message did get through. What impressed us most was the display of violence in the film. It was appalling, and we were convinced that the Party was right about changing the names of the Turks. When you considered what they had done to us, it felt like we were not even responding in kind.¹

In March 1988, *Vreme razdelno* (Time of Parting), a two-part historical epic directed by Lyudmil Staykov, appeared in Bulgarian movie theaters. Based on the eponymous novel by Anton Donchev (1964), the movie tells the story of a seventeenth-century Orthodox priest who faces the forced mass conversion to Islam of parts of the population of the Rhodope Mountains. The novel itself draws on a document supposedly written in the seventeenth century by a local priest, the “Chronicle of Metodi Draginov,” which has proved to be a nineteenth-century forgery produced during Bulgaria’s struggle for independence from the Ottoman empire.² Set in splendid mountainous landscapes, the high-budget film depicts at length the suffering of the Orthodox people, the cruelty of the enslavers, and the torments of those who betrayed their faith under duress. Within months, over 5 million tickets were sold in a country of 8.9 million inhabitants.³ Overall *Vreme Razdelno*’s first part, *Zaplahata* (The Threat), was seen by 5.3 million viewers, and *Nasilie* (Violence), the second half, by 4.5 million.⁴ Although some viewers—people who enjoyed the historical genre and were impressed by the famous cast, the battlefield scenes, and the natural settings—may have enjoyed the film, public enthusiasm was far from spontaneous. Since the early 1980s, patriotic, state-sponsored cinematic epics had attempted to bolster Bulgarian national pride and buttress claims

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1. M., 39 years old, interview, Sofia, September 30, 2011.

2. Maria N. Todorova, “Conversions to Islam as a Trope in Bulgarian Historiography, Fiction and Film,” in Maria N. Todorova, ed., *Balkan Identities: Nation and Memory* (New York, 2004), 130–36.; Antonina Zheliazkova, *Razprostranenie na islama v Zapadnobalkanskite zemi pod Osmanska vlast. XV-XVIII vek* (Sofia, 1990).

3. *Rabotnicheskoto delo*, June 5, 1989, 5.

4. Alexandür M. Ianakiev, *Bg: 100 godini filmov protses* (Sofia, 2003), 31.

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of historical and national continuity. Efforts to publicize *Vreme razdelno* involved cinema critics, historical lectures, compulsory collective screenings, and discussions for pupils, workers, and soldiers, as well as screenings at international film festivals.

The release of *Vreme Razdelno* came at a time when Bulgaria, a multiethnic state where Muslims made up about 14% of the population, had engaged in a violent attempt to “unify” the nation by curtailing minority rights and negating Turkish and Muslim identities.⁵ Between December 1984 and March 1985, about 800,000 Turks were forced to replace their personal and patronymic names with Bulgarian ones, and Muslim religious and cultural practices were forbidden. Resistance to assimilation was brutally crushed; several thousand Turks were jailed and dozens were killed.⁶ In official discourse, the renaming campaign was depicted as a “revival process,” through which descendants of Bulgarians who had been forcibly converted to Islam during Ottoman times were voluntarily reclaiming a Bulgarian national identity. *Vreme razdelno* was used to legitimize anti-Muslim policies through the display of extreme violence, a selective portrayal of the past, and assertion of the Bulgarian roots of Turkish and Muslim minorities.

Since the end of socialism, our knowledge of the assimilation campaign in 1980s Bulgaria has expanded tremendously.⁷ However, the role attributed to cultural policies—in particular to cinema—in the fashioning of majority and minority national consciousness has received less attention. Most scholarly contributions have centered on the print word, only occasionally extending their purview to moving images.⁸ In a widely discussed article, Maria Todorova

5. Despite the lack of official statistical data on Muslims in mid-1980s Bulgaria, archival records are available: in June 1985, a report from the Ministry of the Interior claimed that 822,588 name changes had taken place in 1984–85; in May 1989, a military source indicated a total of 1,306,000 name changes. These sources do not include the Bulgarian-speaking Muslims whose names were changed in 1972–74, nor the Muslim Roma subjected to renaming in 1958–59. In December 1985, Bulgaria’s population was 8,948,649 million. See census results at: “Sravnitelni tablitsi po godini na prebroiavaniia” at <https://www.nsi.bg/Census/SrTables.htm> (accessed April 17, 2023), and Arhiv na Ministerstvoto na vŭtreshnite raboti (hereafter AMVR), Fond (f.) 1, Opis (op.) 12, Arhivna edinitsa (ae.) 661, list (l.) 35 and AMVR, f. 1, op. 12, ae. 940, l. 32 (in *Ikonomika na “vŭzroditelniia protses,”* Rumen Avramov [Sofia, 2017], 110).

6. Iskra Baeva and Evgeniia Kalinova, eds., *“Vŭzroditelniiat protses”*: *Bŭlgarskata dŭrzhava i bŭlgarskite turtsi*, 2 vols. (Sofia, 2009); Mikhail Gruev and Alekseĭ Kal’onski, *Vŭzroditelniiat protses: Miusiulmanskite obshnosti i komunisticheskiiat rezhim* (Sofia, 2008); Evgeniia Kalinova, “Remembering the ‘Revival Process’ in Post-1989 Bulgaria,” in Maria Todorova, Augusta Dimou, and Stefan Troebst, eds., *Remembering Communism: Private and Public Recollections of Lived Experience in Southeast Europe* (Budapest, 2014); Evgeniia Ivanova, *Otkhvŭrlenite “priobshteni” ili protsesa, narechen “Vŭzroditelen” (1912–1989)* (Sofia, 2002); Mikhail Ivanov, “Kato na praznik. Dokumentalni stranitsi za ‘vŭzroditelniia protses,’” https://www.omda.bg/public/biblioteka/mihail_ivanov/praznik_1.htm (accessed April 17, 2023); Ibrakhim Ialŭmov, *Istoriia na turskata obshtnost v Bŭlgariia* (Sofia, 2002).

7. D.A. Arhiv, “Vŭzroditelniiat protses”; Gruev and Kal’onski, *Vŭzroditelniiat protses*; Ivanov, “Kato na praznik;” Ivanova, *Otkhvŭrlenite “priobshteni.”*

8. Dina Iordanova briefly alluded to *Vreme razdelno* in Dina Iordanova, *Cinema of Flames: Balkan Film, Culture and the Media* (London, 2001). On fashioning minority identities through culture, see Theodora Dragostinova and Yana Hashamova, eds., *Beyond*

explored the role attributed to the so-called “forced conversions” to Islam in Bulgarian national discourse from the mid-nineteenth century onward. She also reconstructed the context in which the “Chronicle of Metodi Draginov” was circulated, Anton Donchev’s novel was written, and the movie was shot.⁹ This benign neglect of visual culture is all the more surprising as scholarship on the political uses of visual culture in the molding of identities and the crafting of (socialist) empires has blossomed in recent years.¹⁰ Meanwhile, scholars of southeastern Europe have shown the gains in knowledge visual studies are likely to deliver on daily life and politics in the Balkans.¹¹

Filmmaking and movie-going are considered here to the extent that they provide a window onto efforts to “nationalize” the country’s multicultural citizenry. In adopting this focus, the study explores the concrete workings of ideology through the constitution of visual, auditory, and textual projections of “the national body.” More specifically, film is considered as an entry point into the interplay between symbolic and physical violence in Bulgaria during late socialism. By symbolic violence, I refer to Pierre Bourdieu’s understanding of the exercise of power over the dominated, a violence also exerted through symbolic channels of communication and purporting to turn the dominated into the co-producers of their own submission.⁹

A note of caution is needed here. The notion of “symbolic violence” is as many-faced as is Bourdieu’s own sociology.¹² In his early works on social reproduction, the famous French sociologist coined this expression to dissociate himself from Althusser’s notion of the ideological state apparatus:¹³ he wished to offer a more subtle reading of domination, one that was not limited to state coercion and social dominance, but comprised forms of “cultural arbitrariness.”¹⁴ Symbolic violence, therefore, was “any power that manages to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate, while hiding the power

Mosque, Church and State: Alternative Narrative of the Nations in the Balkans (Budapest, 2016).

9. Maria Todorova, “Conversions to Islam.” On Bulgarian socialist historiography about the Islamization of the Rhodopes, see Stefan Dechev, “Za falsifikatite, istoriografiata, naslietio i ‘razdelnite’ vremena v naukata,” 1 & 2, *Kultura.bg*, at: <http://kultura.bg/web/za-falshifikatite-istoriografiata-na> and <https://kultura.bg/web/za-falshifikatite-istoriografiata-na-2/> (accessed April 17, 2023).

10. For a few notable works on the USSR, see: David Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian National Identity (1931–1959)* (Cambridge, Eng., 2002); Francine Hirsch, *Empires of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (New York, 2005); Juliette Cadiot, *Le laboratoire impérial: Russie-URSS 1860–1940* (Paris, 2007). On cinema, see Cloé Drieu, *Cinema, Empire and Nation in Uzbekistan* (Bloomington, 2019); Gabrielle Chomentowski, *Filmer l’Orient: Politique des nationalités et cinéma en Union soviétique, 1917–1938* (Paris, 2016).

11. Karl Kaser, *Hollywood auf dem Balkan: Die visuelle Moderne an der Europäischen Peripherie (1900–1970)* (Cologne, 2017); Daniel Šuber and Slobodan Karamanić, *Retracing Images: Visual Culture After Yugoslavia* (Leiden, Netherlands, 2012).

12. Gisèle Sapiro, “Violence symbolique,” in Gisèle Sapiro, ed., *Dictionnaire international Pierre Bourdieu* (Paris, 2020), 304–13.

13. Pierre Bourdieu, “Sur le pouvoir symbolique,” *Annales. Economies, sociétés, civilisations* 32, no. 3 (May 1977): 405–11.

14. Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (London, 1977), 11.

relationships” underpinning them.¹⁵ As Bourdieu further explored “symbolic power,” he developed an interest in the state’s attempt to achieve a “monopoly over legitimate symbolic violence,”¹⁶ in particular through its ability to name, classify, and create legal categories perceived as natural.¹⁷ Ultimately, arbitrary domination is internalized by the dominated to such an extent that they fail to recognize its arbitrariness.¹⁸ This ambition lies at the center of the present case study.

Drawing on a wide range of archival records (Central State Archives in Sofia, Blagoevgrad Regional Archives, the Archives of the Ministry of the Interior, and the Bulgarian National Film Archive), the state-wide and regional press, as well as interviews with film professionals and spectators, this study accords particular attention to the filming and reception of the movie in one region of Bulgaria, the Blagoevgrad district, in southwestern Bulgaria, which includes part of the western Rhodopes. There are three reasons for this choice. First, ever since this area was incorporated into the Bulgarian state in 1912, it has occupied a central place in the state’s nationalization policies, in part owing to the presence of a Bulgarian-speaking Muslim minority. In 1973 the region had about 320,000 inhabitants, including 50,000 Bulgarian-speaking Muslims, 3,000 Turks, and 6,000 Roma,¹⁹ whose “integration” was repeatedly attempted through coercive means.²⁰ Second, the “events” narrated in *Vreme razdelno* specifically concern the destinies of the converts to Islam from the western and central Rhodopes. Third, segments of *Vreme razdelno* were shot in these highly emotionally charged locations, at the heart of contentious national visions.

Against this background, I argue that in order to comprehend the Promethean ambition and minute workings of the “revival process,” one must go beyond the study of changes in identity cards, the proscription of religious and cultural practices, and even the disruption of life-cycle events. State engineering of identities reached deep into the unfolding of lineages, shaping of personal and collective memories, and bodily experiences of the self. Cultural policy was part and parcel of this endeavor to carve out new identities. The rewriting of national history evidenced in films aimed to boost the national pride of the majority, achieve support for anti-minority measures, and win the obedience of minorities. The blurring of the distinction between facts and fiction and the presentification of the past offered in such features as *Vreme razdelno* were some of the devices used to this end.

The article is organized in two sections. First, a cursory survey of the development of the Bulgarian film industry details the missions assigned to cinematic images during socialism in the modelling of minority identities. Second, the focus narrows to place the making, distribution, and reception of

15. Bourdieu and Passeron, *Reproduction in Education*, 18.

16. Pierre Bourdieu, *Sociologie générale. Vol. 2, Cours au collège de France, 1983–1986* (Paris, 2019), 700.

17. Pierre Bourdieu, “Espace social et pouvoir symbolique,” in his *Choses dites* (Paris, 1987), 147–68.

18. Pierre Bourdieu, *Méditations pascaliennes* (Paris, 1997), 150.

19. Dürzhaven Arhiv Blagoevgrad (hereafter DA Blagoevgrad), f. 2, op. 10, ae. 6, l. 27.

20. Ivanova, *Otkhvürlenite “priobshteni.”*

Vreme razdelno in the twin contexts of state support for historical epics and the conduct of the assimilation campaign.

Cinema in the Service of Nationalizing Minority Policies

Screening Minorities

After a brief period of denouncing “bourgeois” nationalism and supporting minority cultures, Bulgaria’s socialist rulers swerved to “modernizing” minorities.²¹ Following Todor Zhivkov’s ascent to power in 1956, nationalism gradually took precedence over class struggle.²² Concerning Bulgarian-speaking Muslims, this process had begun earlier.²³ These policies intensified in later years, as the authorities worried that Bulgarian-speaking Muslims might identify as Turkish. In the western Rhodopes, in 1964, the local elites even tried to forcibly rename Muslims, but were compelled to reverse these policies by local resistance and the central authorities.²⁴ Meanwhile, the dissemination of “correct” visions of the past through visual culture persisted.

In 1948, a public monopoly, *Bŭlgarska Kinematografiia* (Bulgarian Cinematography)—placed under the authority of the Committee for Science, the Arts, and Culture—was charged with “the production of films dedicated to building socialism in our country by creating on-screen images of new people.”²⁵ Among a Muslim population whose literacy rate was far below the national average, the development of a film culture was expected to foster national and socialist conformity.²⁶ From the late 1940s onward, traveling movie theaters offering outdoor films were replaced by indoor facilities, often in local houses of culture. Efforts were devoted to increasing women’s attendance by altering earlier perceptions of female movie-going as immoral. While “cinema organizers” tried to place tickets with the trade unions of agricultural cooperatives and industries, pupils attended school-sponsored screenings. In the 1950s, a specific system of discount multiple-entry cards was introduced for villagers.²⁷

21. They resettled an estimated 155,000 Turks to Turkey (1950–51) and relocated about 10,000 Bulgarian-speaking Muslims from the southern border into the Bulgarian hinterland (1948–1950), at pains to stamp out religious beliefs and practices at odds with the majority. See Nurie Muratova, “Politiki na sotsialisticheskata vlast v Bŭlgariia kŭm zhenite miusiulmanki,” in Kristina Popova and Nurie Muratova, eds., *Arhivi na zheni i maltsinstva* (Blagoevgrad, 2011), 59–106; Mary Neuburger, *The Orient Within: Muslim Minorities and the Negotiation of Nationhood in Modern Bulgaria* (Ithaca, NY, 2004); Nadège Ragaru, *Assignés à identités: Violence d’État et expériences minoritaires dans les Balkans post-ottomans* (Istanbul, 2019), 45–72.

22. Gruev and Kal’onski, *Vŭzroditelniat protses*.

23. Namely, in 1953 with the distribution of “passports” (*id est* the imposition of state approved pictures, names, and identities).

24. Anastasiia Pashova and Petŭr Vodenicharov, “Vŭzroditelniat protses i religioznata kriptoidentichnost na miusiulmani ot Blagoevgradski okrŭg: Izsledvaniia i dokumenti (Sofia, 2011), 10–12, and Ivanova, *Otkhvŭrlenite “priobshteni.”*

25. “Izvestiia na prezidiuma na NB,” February 19, 1952, 5–10.

26. Sergeĭ Vuchkov, “Kinefikatsiia na miusiulmanskite sela v Iugozapadna Bŭlgariia prez 50-te i 60-te godini na XX vek,” in Ivaĭlo Znepolski, ed., *Da poznaem komunizma* (Sofia, 2011), 371–433.

27. Vuchkov, “Kinefikatsiia.”

From the start, a specific film repertoire was designed for Muslims. It included documentaries on subjects such as hygiene, health issues, women's clothing, child-rearing, and atheism. As far as fiction was concerned, precedence went to features portraying the anti-Ottoman struggles or depicting the transformation of local mores. *Pod igoto* (Under the Yoke), a movie released in 1952 and based on the novel by nineteenth-century Bulgarian novelist Ivan Vazov, toured the Pirin region relentlessly. So did *Rebro Adamovo* (Adam's Rib), a film directed in 1956 by Anton Marinovich, which tells the story of a Muslim woman who leaves her village to receive a socialist education and returns to her hometown as a teacher to transform her fellow Muslims. At moments when assimilation efforts became more intense, the Propaganda and Agitation Departments of the Communist Party, as well as the Department of Patriotic Education, advocated the rescreening of patriotic movies. This occurred in 1964, and in the early 1970s when the regime imposed the Bulgarization of names. In 1971, a report of the Blagoevgrad branch of *Kinefikatsiia* stated: "The regional branch should consider it a permanent mission to work on the national consciousness of the Bulgarian-Mohammedan workers in movie theaters. The economic committee should organize a meeting with them regarding the adoption of new names on a voluntary basis. . . . Films whose theme is suited for the Bulgarian-Mohammedan regions should be collected. In all regions, various activities should be organized around the film *Rebro Adamovo*."²⁸

Print media and targeted radio and television programs complemented the Party's arsenal. On Radio Blagoevgrad, daily broadcasts praised the beauty of local landscapes, celebrated (Bulgarian) authenticity, and engaged in the political education of the public.²⁹ In addition to hearing long hours of Bulgarian folk music, listeners were invited to discover the "Strongholds of the Bulgarian Spirit" (the name of a radio show). From the late 1970s, assembling the traces of a chosen past became systematic. *Pirinsko delo*, the regional Party newspaper, devoted a column to documents and memories about the region. A research group was set up at the Blagoevgrad regional historical museum to investigate the district's Bulgarian "culture and mores."³⁰ Additionally, a nationwide campaign—*Narodna pamet razkazva* (National memory relates)—was inaugurated in 1983 "to contribute to the collection and preservation of the spiritual principles of the past and present." By 1986, more than 9,000 memoirs, 1,000 first-hand accounts, and hundreds of family stories had been solicited.³¹

The 1984–85 Assimilation Campaign

Although the renaming of Muslims had been mostly completed by 1974 in the Pirin area, here too local commissions were set up in December 1984 to

28. DA Blagoevgrad, f. 676, op. 3, ae. 8, l. 153.

29. DA Blagoevgrad, f. 2, op. 12, ae. 2, l. 94–103.

30. DA Blagoevgrad, f. 2, op. 12, ae. 1, l. 22–129.

31. Milena Angelova, *(Ne)spodelenata pamet na kŭsniia sotsializŭm: Dvizhenieto "Narodnata pamet razkazva" (1983–1989)* (Sofia, 2010), 64.

ensure the swift implementation of the assimilation process. To appreciate the breadth of the campaign, one needs to recall that Bulgarian authorities had earlier encouraged a rapprochement (*priobshtavane*) between the majority and the minorities. At the time, most high-ranking officials doubted that ethno-cultural differences could be erased. Historically, the consolidation of Bulgarian national identity had rested upon the drawing of a symbolic boundary between Bulgarians and Ottomans/Turks/Muslims. As a 1980 report from the Propaganda and Agitation Department of the Central Committee explained, “we believe that . . . an approach that . . . eludes deeply anchored ethnic differences cannot be deemed Marxist-Leninist.”³² The 1984–89 assimilation campaign marked a radical departure from this position. Prompted by political, ideological, and geopolitical considerations, communist authorities now advocated a “merger” (*slivane*) of all ethno-cultural groups into the Bulgarian “mother womb.”

This construction demanded that the “true” Bulgarian identity of the remaining Muslims be demonstrated, and that majority and minority members come to believe in it. The identification of people was modified through measures such as the destruction of birth certificates, school records, and medical files that bore “foreign” patronymics, as well as the defacing of funeral steles in Muslim cemeteries. The authorities sought to silence Turkish speech and alter the identity of streets and public squares.³³

In May 1985, “the regional branch of *Kinefikatsiia* [was asked to] elaborate a targeted repertoire comprising films with a patriotic and internationalist theme, and . . . organize meetings with the artistic collectives, the creators of the strong works of filmic art that foster patriotic pride.”³⁴ For persons in ‘mixed marriages,’ the goal was “to overcome their foreign religious complex and to build, in particular among children and youth, a feeling of self-esteem and optimism, of pride in belonging to the Bulgarian socialist nation.” Lectures and research on the “Bulgarian roots” of the local inhabitants were recommended.³⁵ It is against this backdrop that the production, distribution, and reception of *Vreme razdelno* needs to be contextualized.

Fictionalizing the Past, Fashioning the Present

Bulgaria’s Hollywood-Style Epics

From the 1960s, Bulgaria’s rulers espoused a patriotic turn. As hope for a better future receded into the background, the socialist leadership started digging into the more distant past. Bulgaria’s national aspirations, long fed by a belief in the possibility of speeding up development and modernization, were now oriented toward a quest for roots.³⁶ This nationalist impulse was widely supported in the intellectual circles of Lyudmila Zhivkova, the daughter of

32. Tsentralen Dürzhaven Arhiv Sofia (hereafter TsDA), f. 1, op. 63, ae. 106, l. 4–28.

33. Ragaru, *Assignés à identités*.

34. DA Blagoevgrad, f. 2, op. 11, ae. 75, l. 79.

35. DA Blagoevgrad, f. 2, op. 11, ae. 148, l. 210.

36. Tchavdar Marinov, “Ancient Thrace in the Modern Imagination: Ideological Aspects of the Construction of Thracian Studies in Southeast Europe (Romania, Greece,

communist ruler Todor Zhivkov, who headed the Committee on Culture until her premature death in 1981.³⁷

The cultivation of nationalist sentiments received a major impetus on the eve of the 1300th anniversary of the creation of a Bulgarian state, in 681. The Central Committee set up a jubilee committee responsible for the elaboration of exhibitions, symposia, literary works, movies, and commemorations.³⁸ A wave of historical epics swept through the Bulgarian film industry.³⁹ These expansive dramas required a reconstitution of historical settings, the creation of richly decorated costumes, the recruitment of large numbers of extras, and the staging of complex battle scenes. Commissioned by the state, they received direct funding from the Central Committee. A glance at budgetary allocations indicates the significance accorded to these dramas. In 1981, the production plan of feature film Studio Boiana foresaw the making of 23 films, 17 of them “ordinary” and 6 commissioned. The expenditures were estimated at 19,331 million leva. The jubilee films alone accounted for 59.5 percent of the studio’s budget.⁴⁰ While on average a movie cost 382,000 leva in 1980 and 460,000 in 1981, *Boris I* (parts I and II) received an original allocation of 5 million, and *Konstantin Filozof*, 3.5 million.⁴¹

Members of the film guild welcomed the production of patriotic epics. At a time of financial crisis, the leadership of *Kinematografiia* saw the making of historical dramas as an opportunity to boost revenues and, thanks to creative accounting management, to finance the production of smaller Bulgarian films on the side. The directors, operators, actors, and critics took pride in Bulgaria’s ability to mount ambitious productions, most often adaptations whose prestige was magnified by the high cultural status of the books on which they were based. Members of the film industry were longing for international recognition. Besides, production teams enjoyed exceptionally favorable working conditions, including modern cameras, high-quality film, ample choice of locations, and extra time for shooting and editing. A handful of filmmakers soon became key participants in the portrayal of Bulgarian greatness, notably Liudmil Staïkov, who had made his debut with *Obich* (Affection, 1972), winner of the Golden Prize at the 1973 Moscow International Film Festival, and authored *Iliuzia* (Illusion, 1980), a noted film. Staïkov directed several

Bulgaria)” in Rumen Daskalov and Alexander Vezekov, eds., *Entangled Histories of the Balkans*, Vol. 3 (Leiden, 2015), 10–117.

37. Ivan Elenkov, *Kulturniia front: Bŭlgarskata kultura prez epokhata na komunizma* (Sofia, 2008); Ivanka Nedeva Atanasova, “Lyudmila Zhivkova and the Paradox of Ideology and Identity in Communist Bulgaria,” *East European Politics and Societies* 18, no. 2 (May 2004): 278–315; Albena Khranova, “Rodno, diasno i liavo: Anton Donchev,” *Liberalen Pregled*, at <http://www.librev.com/index.php/arts-theory-publis/her/413-2009-06-16-06-07-56> (accessed April 17, 2023).

38. Elenkov, *Kulturniia front*, 357–412.

39. They were intended to celebrate Bulgarian grandeur, and draw the historical, spatial, and symbolic contours of the Bulgarian nation. Garbolevsky, *The Conformists*, 117–68.

40. TsDA, f. 404, op. 6, ae. 25, l. 14.

41. TsDA, f. 404, op. 6, ae. 25, l. 16.

national epics, including the *Khan Asparuh* trilogy in 1981, *681—Velichieto na khana* in 1983, and *Vreme razdelno* in 1988.⁴²

Famous actors—Stefan Danailov and Īosif Sŭrchadzhiev, among others—competed to impersonate the heroes of Bulgaria’s past. For younger ones, such as Momchil Karamitev, who was just finishing the Theater Academy, such roles bode well for their career. The “promotional crusade” from which the epics benefited and their wide resonance with the audience bestowed on their creators additional public acclaim.⁴³ The fate of *Khan Asparuh* illustrates this. The film premiered at the recently inaugurated National Palace of Culture, whose larger hall could accommodate over 3,000 spectators.⁴⁴ The box office numbers were unheard of: 12,814 million tickets were sold.⁴⁵ Dictator Zhivkov in person welcomed members of the film crew at his private residence on the Black Sea coast.⁴⁶ The strengthening of personal ties with the communist leadership was but one of the symbolic rewards that artists could expect from their part in the re-creation on screen of Bulgaria’s officially sanctioned past. Actors were likely to be awarded honors that involved significant financial rewards. In the 1980s about 20 per cent of the salary fund were distributed in the form of “complementary individual work salaries,” whose allocation was decided by the Directorial Council of Cinematography.⁴⁷ In the fourth quarter of 1987, the team of *Vreme razdelno* received 20,795 leva out of a total 28,896 leva.⁴⁸

As one would expect, the state-approved historical narration was linear, tying the medieval period to the socialist revolution. The heroic deeds featured a selected number of episodes: the adoption of Christianity (*Boris I—Pokrŭstvaneto*), the founding of the state and medieval empires (*681—Velichieto na khana*, 1983; *Khan Asparuh*, 1981), the invention of the Cyrillic alphabet (*Konstantin filozof*, 1983), the anti-Ottoman struggle and the Macedonian question (*Mera spored mera*, 1983). The struggles for independence from Ottoman rule were depicted as a prefiguration of socialist revolutionary battles. Meanwhile, past, present, and future were closely intertwined.⁴⁹ In his welcome address to the *Boris I* team on April 1, 1985, Zhivkov summarized the exemplary function attributed to the past:

these films influence the viewer; they reinforce his commitment to and involvement with the traditions of our people and of its most outstanding

42. In 2008, the Committee for disclosing documents and announcing the affiliation of Bulgarian citizens to the State Security and Intelligence services of the Bulgarian National Army stated that Staĭkov had worked as an agent for Departments 6 (Combating ideological diversion) and 2 (Counterespionage) between March 1985 and 1987. See Comdos, Reshenie № 50/ 08.10.2008, at: https://www.comdos.bg/index.php/Начало/Архив_Решения/р/page/76 (accessed on April 14, 2023).

43. Iordanova, *Cinema of the Other Europe*, 49.

44. L. Staĭkov, interview, Sofia, September 29, 2011.

45. TsDA, f. 1b, op. 78, ae. 822, l. 3.

46. TsDA, f. 1b, op. 78, ae. 825, l. 1–4.

47. TsDA, f. 1b, op. 78, ae. 148, l. 53.

48. TsDA, f. 404, op. 6, ae. 10, l. 20.

49. The attempt to shape individual and collective consciousness through these epics would later render such films as *Vreme razdelno* more effective.

personalities; they create in him an appropriate outlook on history and the present; and they prepare him to develop a correct consciousness of today's innovative deeds in the building of socialism.⁵⁰

Novelist Donchev, who had received the prestigious—and, like the Stalin Prize, politically loaded—Dimitrov Award two years after the publication of *Vreme razdelno*, resolved to write a piece worthy of the country's 1300th anniversary. He undertook a tetralogy dedicated to *Khan Asparuh*, the first volume of which appeared in 1982. The author also tried to benefit from the momentum of the 1981 celebrations to adapt his 1964 novel for the screen.⁵¹ However, despite his fame, and much vying for high-level connections, the proposal for a cinematic recreation was not included in the priority list.

This lack of interest vanished overnight after the assimilation process was launched. On April 16, 1985—a few weeks after the ending of the violent name-changing campaign—Nikola Nenov, then general director of the Cinematography and vice-president of the Committee on Culture, proposed a film based on Donchev's novel in a letter to Georgi Ĭordanov, the head of the Committee on Culture, and to Stoian Mikhaĭlov, secretary of the Party's Central Committee:

Dear Colleagues,

At the time of the voluntary replacement of Turkish-Arabic names with Bulgarian ones by our conationals, Bulgarians professing the Islamic faith, "Bŭlgarska kinematografiia" shot some documentary film material. Several films will be made with this material, shorts, and full-length films. . . . There are frames that address the deep Bulgarian roots of this population. . . . It is necessary, however, to create a great feature film—great in terms of staging and artistic achievement—that will expose the tragic events of past centuries, when attempts were made to forcibly divide our people. We are convinced that there is no literary option better than the book of Anton Donchev, *Vreme razdelno*. A few years ago, Bulgarian television conducted negotiations with Italian television, and a joint script is ready, which Anton Donchev deems very good.⁵²

On the same day, a note signed by the head of the Ideological Policy Department of the Party's Central Committee stated that "Approval was orally given to Com[rade] N. Nenov for the making of a film based on *Vreme razdelno*, but with a Bulgarian filmmaker and Bulgarian actors."⁵³ In his letter, Nenov had recommended the cast of foreign actors as a way to ensure that the film would have a "commercial presence in the world."⁵⁴ In the end, Italian actor Walter Toski played the character of the "Venetian," one of the two voices recounting the story of the "forced" conversions. The writing of the script, however, was not entrusted to the novelist, but instead to a team

50. TsDA, f. 1b, op. 78, ae. 25, l. 7.

51. Khranova, "Rodno, diasno i liavo."

52. TsDA, f. 1b, op. 78, ae. 827, ll. 3–5.

53. TsDA, f. 1b, op. 78, ae. 827, l. 1.

54. TsDA, f. 1b, op. 78, ae. 827, l. 4.

of four: director Staïkov, writers Georgi Danaïlov and Mikhail Kirkov, and cameraman Radoslav Spasov.⁵⁵

The creation of this epic required unprecedented financial, human, and technical resources. Shooting started in September 1986 and lasted well into 1987. Cameraman Spasov and his assistants travelled for weeks throughout Bulgaria to choose the exterior settings. The construction of sets included several months of work to recreate the residence of Suleïman Aga, the regional Ottoman ruler in the film, at the high-perched Rozhen Monastery, south of Pirin National Park. “We built a set right in front of the monastery, which was set on fire and burned down,” Spasov recalls, “part of the entrance was actually built from scratch, with real walls, and real houses. That was the strength of the movie; that you should be progressively drawn into the set.” He added, “We needed to be very well organized to stage such scenes as violence in the *konak*.”⁵⁶ Indeed, to maximize the visual impact of combat sequences, no fewer than 10,000 army soldiers were utilized. In technical terms too, *Vreme razdelno* represented a challenge: it was the first Bulgarian movie ever made using Dolby Stereo technology. Renowned sound engineer Liudmila Makhalnishka was sent to London for special training, while British specialist Ray Belon provided his expertise to the Bulgarian team.⁵⁷

When completed, cultural officials gave the film a warm welcome. On February 7, 1988, the communist daily *Otechestven front* printed a large picture of actor Rusi Chaney, who played the Orthodox priest Aligorko (that is, Metodi Draginov), with the caption “*Vreme razdelno* coming soon!” The date of the premiere at the National Palace of Culture was selected to coincide with the 110th anniversary of Bulgaria’s liberation from the “Ottoman yoke” on March 1.⁵⁸ Shortly thereafter, the Bulgarian Film Professionals Association awarded Staïkov a prize for the direction of the film, and composer Georgi Genkov one for his work on the soundtrack.

Public Discourse on a True Fiction of the Past

Before and after its release, the film received a significant number of press articles. These reviews shed light on the channels through which the movie was expected to impact the public. Emphasis was placed on the film’s historical veracity. Three features were deemed to ensure its authenticity, namely the use of academics as consultants, the selection of shooting locations, and the contribution of local residents to the performance. *Vreme razdelno* was

55. *Vreme razdelno* was not the sole film commissioned by the Central Committee in support of the assimilation process. As Protokol A, No. 580, of the May 27, 1986, meeting of the *Politbiuro* indicates: “In the field of mass communications [we order]: . . . that feature films be created that address the violent islamization and turkification of the Bulgarian population under the yoke, and the common struggles . . . against the Ottoman ruler.” TsDA, f. 1b, op. 68, ae. 1386, ll. 1–136; TsDA, f. 1b, op. 73.

56. A *konak* was a vast Ottoman mansion, often serving an administrative purpose. R. Spasov, interview, Sofia, October 2, 2011.

57. L. Makhalnishka, interview, Sofia, November 24, 2011.

58. *Otechestven front*, February 5, 1988, 12; the poster of the film also features in *Otechestven front*, February 26, 1988, 12.

portrayed as a feature film that documented history. Or, as cinema pedagogue Mariana Georgieva put it in a phrase that nicely lumped together facts and fiction, placing them under the aegis of art, “it is an artistic document about the incredible conflicting forces in our people, who have defended with their own blood their name, their face, and their dignity.”⁵⁹ Moreover, public discourse on the movie was grounded in a blurring of boundaries between past and present.

On October 7, 1986, *Otechestven front* ran an article calling attention to the role of scholars in the true-to-life re-creation of the past:

To establish the details and specifics of the time in which the action is taking place, the creative team benefits from the *assistance of historians, ethnographers, archaeologists, architects, specialists in local history, and others.*⁶⁰ There is no doubt that it will be a moving narrative of one of the most dramatic periods in our history and that it will bear witness in a convincing, forceful way to the strength and steadfastness of the Bulgarian, who defended his family, his tradition, his native tongue, and his national consciousness against fanaticism and violence.⁶¹

Further evidence of the veracity of the movie was to be found in the choice of the settings, as indicated in *Pirinsko delo* on March 29, 1988:

The images are shot in the actual places where the past historical events occurred, in the vicinity of Smolian, in Chepelare, in Shiroka lüka, Trigrad, as well as in Melnik and Rozhen. The local population has also taken an active part in the mass scenes, and for some of the major parts, the filmmaker has intentionally chosen nonprofessional actors, Ivan Krüstev in the role of Manol [the peasant who embodies Bulgarian resistance] and Kalina Sefanova for the role of Elitsa.⁶²

It is interesting to note how this discourse operates. The insistence on the locations “where events actually occurred” bypasses questions whether such events did actually take place or how they might be interpreted. As elsewhere, nature has played a central role since the nineteenth century in the construction of a Bulgarian national idiom. At the time of the national revival natural spaces, and mountains in particular, were imbued with cultural meanings and turned into national markers. The fact that “most monasteries in which the Bulgarian literary tradition was maintained were located in mountain regions” added to the significance granted to these reliefs.⁶³

From the 1960s onward, landscapes were again awarded a powerful metaphorical content and, increasingly, a magical quality. The publication

59. *Pirinsko delo*, March 29, 1988, 4.

60. Emphasis added by the author.

61. *Otechestven front*, October 7, 1986, 6.

62. *Pirinsko delo*, 29, 1988, 4. Interestingly, another female character, Sevda, was impersonated by Ania Pencheva who, in an interview to *Otechestven front*, insisted on her intimate link to the region – she was born in Smolian – and recalled the tales she was told as a child about violence against Bulgarians: *Otechestven front*, January 22, 1988, 12.

63. Ulf Brunnbauer and Robert Pichler, “Mountains as ‘lieux de mémoire’: Highland Values and Nation-Building in the Balkans,” *Balkanologie* 6, no.1–2 (December 2002): 84.

of Donchev's novel represented a milestone in this rediscovery of nature. Two decades later, critic Atanas Svilenov still recalled: "The novel shook us not only with the display of the cruel and terrible truth, but also with the sounds of a powerful national saga. . . . The Rhodope region was being reborn as the repository of family memory, as the enduring fortress of the national soul."⁶⁴ Under the guidance of cameraman Spasov—"I wanted people to feel nature as a living being, not to envision it as some kind of background to the main storyline"—the film followed in the novel's footsteps, and centuries were turned into physical and proximate time.⁶⁵

This political use of landscape acquires additional shades of meaning if one bears in mind that during the assimilation process, the communist leadership did not just purport to rewrite individual self-definitions; it also assigned new identities to places, not unlike other states intent on assimilating minorities. Since the early 1980s, the state had sponsored massive archaeological explorations. Gradually, the once familiar ground started to reveal unknown historical artifacts, which were placed in the service of a nationalist revision of history aiming to demonstrate the Bulgarian roots of Bulgarian-speaking Muslims. Thus reinterpreted, the land was later renamed. In March 1985, the Central Committee ruled that toponyms that still had an "Ottoman"/"Turkish" connotation must be Bulgarized.

Against this backdrop, filming locations were key to the claim of *Vreme razdelno*'s historical accuracy. First, these were landscapes repeatedly depicted in legends, songs, and literary works; they were also routine destinations for pilgrimage and tourism. This familiarity was even stronger for those viewers who were born and raised in the western Rhodopes. Channeling the entry into the plot, it also contributed to a mingling of foregone eras and contemporary life. Second, several of these locations had long been sites of ethno-cultural controversy. *Svoboda* (Freedom) Peak in the Rhodopes, for instance, was associated in Bulgarian imagery with the figure of "Momchil vojvoda," who is said to have slowed the Ottoman military advance into the region in 1345. The same location, however, also resonates with Enikhan Baba (Yeni Khan Baba), an Islamic preacher revered by Muslims in Bulgaria as a saint of the Ottoman conquest.⁶⁶ *Vreme razdelno*, by contrast, features Enikhan Baba as a former military leader missing from his own grave, which has been desecrated by Momchil, the son of Manol.⁶⁷

No less interesting, in the light of the role of monasteries in the definition of Bulgarian national consciousness is the decision to house the *konak* of Suleiman Aga in the Rozhen Monastery. The largest sanctuary in the Pirin region and one of the few Bulgarian monasteries of the Middle Ages to have survived relatively intact, Rozhen served as a regional spiritual center in the nineteenth century. In Balkan national mythologies, conversions are

64. *Filmovi novini*, April 1988, 5–7.

65. R. Spasov, interview, Sofia, October 2, 2011.

66. Evgeniia Troeva-Grigorova, "Istoriografiata kato pole na pametta," *Bŭlgarski folklor*, no. 3–4 (2008): 101–17.

67. Finding the grave empty, he returns to the caves where Christians have sought refuge and tells them proudly that the Rhodope is free; there never was any Ottoman victory.

often associated with the taking over or destruction of religious buildings or their reallocation to the newly dominant faith. In *Vreme razdelno*, the link is reversed: most of the local Orthodox yield to foreign pressure and convert. What is destroyed in the film, however, is the Muslim decor, leaving intact the monastery behind it. The creators of the epic may not have intended, or even seen, this connection. However, they shared a common body of socially-constructed representations and memories.

One final element was repeatedly invoked to convey the film's historical authenticity: the contribution of local inhabitants to the re-enactment of past events. The final takes of the movie are explicit: "The film is shot in the Rhodope Mountains, where most of the events took place; the majority of the participants in the mass scenes belong to the very lineage that endured these terrible days of violence."⁶⁸ Nearly all newspaper articles published about the feature emphasized this recruitment of local extras, as does the story printed in *Rodopski-Ustrem Smolian*:

Over the past two months in the region of Smolian and in the neighboring villages, the new Bulgarian feature film *Vreme razdelno* is being shot. . . . The film has to tell a story, and the intention of the art collective, the filmmaker tells us, is to turn it into a document—precise, moving, strong. . . . The shooting is taking place in the region of Rozhen, Trigrad, Chepelare, Svoboda Peak. The local population is providing tremendous help in this work. This is why, the director says, ordinary people appear more often on screen; this film is made by people from the Rhodopes.⁶⁹

Twenty-five years later, this amateur contribution was one of the episodes that Staïkov, the film's director, recalled most vividly:

Everything is authentic. [For] a lot of the people filmed, I had music played into their ears, a kind of music that dates back to those times, and I caught the people with hidden cameras as they started to cry, because these are songs that used to be sung for funerals. . . . and with a hidden camera, I caught the peasants who—as they hear the songs I play—have associations of ideas, and their faces become very real.⁷⁰

The staging of the local extras' participation in public speech is striking: the very "same" people are said to be re-experiencing the past with their own bodies. More accurately, the supposed descendants of former victims (Orthodox believers converted to Islam) are now impersonating victimizers on screen, precisely at a time when the Bulgarian state, off stage, is tearing apart their self-definitions. Fictionalized past violence and the present-day use of force thus seem to be conjoined as the distant reinvented past is turned into the present in the making. Could it be that the past needed to become actual to account for the "voluntary" reversion of Muslims to their "true" Bulgarian identities?

Retrospectively, the creators of the patriotic epic favor neither of these options. Following the 1989 political changes, cinematographer and

68. Read: Bulgarian-speaking Muslims.

69. *Rodopski-Ustrem Smolian*, November 3, 1986.

70. L. Staïkov, interview, Sofia, September 29, 2011.

co-scriptwriter Radoslav Spasov made a feature titled *Otkradnati ochi* (Stolen Eyes, 2005) that denounced the violence associated with the “revival campaign” and the mass exodus of more than 340,000 Bulgarian Turks in spring 1989. At the time, some observers wondered whether Spasov might have wished to make amends for his contribution to *Vreme razdelno*. While conceding that Staïkov’s film had been commissioned, the cameraman offered a different view of it:

I do not accept that the film we did is against the Turks, because if you watch *Vreme razdelno*, and if you study it, a large number of the people who committed these evil acts, the so-called Bashi-bazouks and the Janissaries, they are people who changed religion or adopted a new faith as children. . . . We did not defend the position “you did this to us, now we will do it to you.” We led the film to state that radical fanaticism is really destructive. . . . The state may have granted all these financial means with that motive in mind; in that sense, it is possible to say that the film is commissioned. . . . In the novel, however, Suleïman Aga is a Bulgarian. What we did is that we made him a Turk. He is the one who defends them. There is a very important moment when he is sacrificed because of fanaticism, he, the person who is trying to protect people against the forcible change of name [sic].⁷¹

In talking about the showing of the movie at the Cannes Film Festival in 1988, Staïkov defends a more clear-cut position:

I am not certain that they made a clear connection between those name changes. . . and what had happened historically. . . . To some degree it was clear they had understood that this was a film against fanaticism, not a film serving short-term interests. . . . It is a film about the strength of the human soul and the defense of human values. . . . We tried to look at these things from a philosophical standpoint, to stay above things. Think about the final scene of the movie: in one hand there is a cross and in the other hand, a fez.⁷²

Was the movie understood in this way by the audience? An examination of the response of the public to the drama shall answer this question.

The Reception of Vreme razdelno

Which film did spectators actually watch? The epic follows the route of an Ottoman Janissary sent to the Elindenii valley to Islamize the local Christians, at a time when the empire was engaged in a costly war in Crete and was in desperate need for military manpower (and, therefore, Muslim converts). To “convince” the local inhabitants to adopt the “true” faith, Karaibrakhim interns their elite in the local *konak*, ordering rapes of virgins, murder by impalement, and quartering or beheading (bodies speared onto sticks). The episodes of violence are much longer and more horrendous than in the novel, leaving the viewer stupefied.⁷³

71. R. Spasov, interview, Sofia, October 2, 2011.

72. L. Staïkov, interview Sofia, September 29, 2011.

73. For instance, the rapes are filmed complacently in the open air (not in the relative seclusion of *konak* rooms). Learning that Karaibrakhim, who murders his own brother and father in the name of Islam, is a native of Elindenii adds another traumatizing layer

Vreme razdelno reached Blagoevgrad on March 28, 1988, and remained in local theaters until April 15, with four daily screenings. At the time, most features were programmed for two or three days, one week at most. In the region, the film's success was overwhelming. Rumen Zhechev, vice-head of Blagoevgrad's *Kinorazprostranenie*, expressed a somewhat naïve amazement at this success: "In nearly all the regional centers, including Varna, Shumen, Smolian, and Kürdzhali, the tickets are sold out for the first week of April. . . . There are numerous announcements of collective screenings, but this time, we are not those seeking [them], they are looking for us."⁷⁴

Attendance, however, does not tell us much about the audience's decoding of the movie. Neither the members of the majority nor minorities were devoid of agency, and reception was more diverse than official media and statistics might suggest.⁷⁵ In Bulgaria in the 1980s, a portion of the educated public tended to give preference to those foreign films—western or Soviet—perceived as offering a critical, artistically creative message. Others, without publicly dissenting from the general patriotic mood, privately lamented the revision of national history. Mikhail Ivanov, who became an advisor on minority issues to President Zheliu Zhelev in 1990, recalls: "At the time, I did not go and watch the movie. People in my circles did not care much for this kind of film. The state propaganda was appalling. But there was nothing like a dissident attitude there. Simply a matter of personal taste."⁷⁶ In his study of the Bulgarian Union of Writers, Plamen Doñnov has shown the internal diversity and limited empathy of the urban elite for minorities. Some intellectuals, while close to the dissident movement, were reluctant to take sides on a question they felt to be extremely divisive, as well as remote from their own concerns.⁷⁷

In other social milieus, the film seems to have resonated more deeply. Readers' letters to the press are revealing, although they should be handled with care, as editors published only letters they deemed "in line." In June 1989, in the Party organ *Rabotnichesko delo*, E. Mikhailova of Sofia rejoiced that "this film really leaves a mark as it transmits souvenirs from our ancestors, from the traditions and moral virtues preserved deep in the heart of Bulgarians." Engineer Stanchev of Sofia added: "I had read. I had learned. But now I am horrified. I am proud I had a grandfather like Manol"—the main Bulgarian character in the film, who fights against the supposedly "forced" conversions

to the narrative. True, Suleiman Aga has become a Turk and opposes the Janissary's methods. The endings also differ. While the novel concludes with the destruction of the *konak* in a Bulgarian uprising, the film's final takes are shot on a stone bridge, as the "Venetian" is taking leave of the converted priest Aligorko. After learning of the birth of Elitsa's child, the former priest takes off his fez (a symbol of allegiance to Islam in the movie), and the "Venetian" hands back his former Christian cross. Aligorko stands still, a religious symbol in each hand. A return to the old faith is not entirely precluded.

74. *Pirinsko delo*, April 6, 1988, 1.

75. On Muslim women's resistance to assimilation, see Yana Hashamova, "Women between State and Mosque: Compliance or Agency?," in Theodora Dragostinova and Yana Hashamova, eds., *Beyond Mosque, Church and State* (Budapest, 2016), 205–30.

76. Mikhail Ivanov, interview, Sofia, June 12, 2011.

77. Plamen Doñnov, *Bŭlgarskiiat sotsrealizŭm: 1956, 1968, 1989: Norma i kriza v literaturata na NRB* (Sofia, 2011), 292–302.

to Islam.⁷⁸ Manol, the defender of Bulgarian-ness and religious integrity, is here incorporated into the personal genealogy of the viewer. A 60-year-old woman concluded: “Moving, with an unspoken strength. A grandmother 60 years of age and a 9-year-old granddaughter come out of the movie theater, bowing before the film. Thanks for the unique music. Words fail me.”⁷⁹

Even for those youngsters who attended lectures on national history, there were several ways of getting interested in the costume drama. Among the high schoolers, rumors circulated that the movie featured scenes of nudity, a rarity in the 1980s.⁸⁰ Some also looked forward to the impressive battle scenes, as one recalls:

I was in the 11th grade at the time. Kino Blagoev was packed. Large screen, Dolby Stereo. What impressed us most was the display of violence in the film. . . . Some guy had told us there were “tits” to be seen, and a lot of violence. Of course, this is what we longed for. We wanted to go there right away. But the violence was actually appalling. And after we left the movie theater, we did not talk much.⁸¹

What about the film’s reception in minority-inhabited rural areas? Evidence of how spectators reacted to the display of Muslim brutality, the numerous rapes, and the portrayal of “forced conversions” is sketchy. *Pirinsko delo* printed a few readers’ opinions on the movie, enthusiastic overall. The “spontaneous” character of these letters may be doubted. Another feature of the correspondence deserves attention: because, in official language, Bulgaria was now devoid of minorities, how could readers identify comments by Bulgarian-speaking Muslims? References to ethnic differences were prohibited; names were not always easily identifiable, as they had been “Bulgarized” in the 1970s. Yet if the local authorities wished to ascertain the benevolent reception by the local Muslims of the state-sponsored reading of history, the “separate” identity of those who had “merged” needed somehow to be revealed. This perilous exercise was accomplished by the reference to religious backgrounds and the location of the authors—in this case, Ribnovo. In June 1988, *Pirinsko delo* ran a column titled “A ‘Survey’ among Bulgarian Muslims: A Film on Truth, on Roots.” Two inhabitants from the predominantly Muslim village attested:

We watched the film, and we were especially impressed with the natural environment in the Rhodopes, the way of life in those times, sacrifice for one’s family and homeland. This was not easy for our forefathers when a foreign faith was imposed upon them. We are certain that this film will play a great role in the class-party and international education of the new generation. This film production fairly reflects this time of separation, and that is the reason why it fosters such an interest among spectators.

—Orlin Machev and Gülüb Mirkhin from the village of Ribnovo⁸²

78. *Rabotnichesko delo*, June 5, 1989, 3.

79. *Ibid.*

80. By contrast, nudity was featured in some films in the 1970s, such as the noted *The Goat Horn* (1972) by Metodi Andonov.

81. M., 39 years old, interview, Sofia, September 30, 2011.

82. *Pirinsko delo*, June 25, 1988, 4.

Local Muslims and non-Muslims alike were familiar with the ethnic composition of the vicinity. They remembered, or at least had heard, that in 1964, when the regional communist leadership tried to bring about the forcible change of names, opposition was the staunchest precisely in Ribново. The publication of these letters, therefore, exposed the acquiescence of those who had been most reluctant to abide by the new state rules.

Documents from communist State Security and interviews conducted with Muslims who were schoolchildren at the time suggest a very different account. Watching the movie was hardly an individual choice. Collective screenings, followed by lectures on the proper deciphering of the film and its present-day significance, were supplemented by televised reruns, especially on the eve of March 3, Bulgaria's national holiday.⁸³ Early on, the State Security observed local responses to the film. A report from the Interior Ministry's Information-Organization department, dated April 1, 1988, implies some proud responses to the forced screening, as well as fears that anti-Turkish feelings might further increase.⁸⁴ A week later, the same department drew further attention to local beliefs that the movie served a propaganda purpose, as well as the pain experienced by viewers from this rewriting of the past.⁸⁵

Interviews of Muslim teenagers relay the sense of despair provoked by the contrast between self-image and the othering image sustained by official ideology. N., a Turk, recalled how she felt when asked by a close Bulgarian friend about the truthfulness of the state version of Turkish lineage:

One day she came to me and asked, "Is it true that you were Bulgarians and that one day, they came, and they forced you to become Turks?" I felt ashamed because Turks, with all I had read in the books and seen in films like *Vreme razdelno*, were so bad, so brutal; there was no way I could resemble them. With all they said in the media, in the ideology. So I gave some sort

83. See the testimony of Sevginar Şen, a Turk from Bulgaria, in the documentary film *Göç: Stepping Across the Border* by Irina Nedeva and Andrey Gotov (Sofia: The Red House & Mono Kolektiv, 2010), at <https://www.monoco.eu/goc>, accessed on July 30, 2022). "*Time of Parting*, she says, was always broadcast on March 3 and that was the time when harmony was turned into quarrel. Because of this film, I quarreled with some of my Bulgarian friends. They literally told me: 'Get out of our way because our national feeling is rising'" (min. 14.02–14.39).

84. "In the Kürdzhalı district some people commented: 'Had we wanted Bulgarians to make such a film, they would not have made it.' Now let everybody see how great our Turkey was. In Shumen . . . for now, negative statements on a pro-Turkish basis have not caught on. People with restored names in Ruse considered that the film will help 'Bulgarians to hate the Turks even more,' and for this reason everyone who had the opportunity should emigrate to Turkey." Comdos, *Dürzhavnata sigurnost—Smianata na imenata—Vüzroditelniat protses (1986–1990 g.)*, vol. 2 (Sofia, 2013), 336, at https://comdos.bg/media/DVD_DOKUMENTALEN-SBORNIK-12-TOM-II-DVD.pdf (accessed on April 17, 2023).

85. "In relation to the film *Time of Parting*, high school kids with restored names in the region of Türgovishte shared that some of the historical facts presented did not correspond to the truth, and pro-Turkish fanatics said that film was "yet another Bulgarian propaganda campaign." At the screening of the film, an employee of TK "Orfei" in Kürdzhalı said: "The film is a falsification of history. When I look at the ads and the pictures, my blood boils of anger. Old wounds open in my soul." *Dürzhavnata sigurnost*, 341.

of uncertain answer. I said, “Perhaps, maybe, I believe my grandmother told me something of that kind.”⁸⁶

In some circumstances, pupils’ frustration and humiliation led to a boastful attempt to reverse the imposition of the stigma, as in this anecdote recounted by a Bulgarian of German descent:

At the time, my father was teaching in a Turkish village in the Central Rhodopes. The kids liked him. They knew that my family too had suffered from the regime. And somehow it brought us together. Yet after they watched the film, one child turned to my father and said, “See, this is what we did to you in the past, and this is what awaits you in the future. We dominated you and, one day, we will dominate you again.”⁸⁷

Nevertheless, to conclude that all members of minorities were equally affected by state propaganda would be methodologically wrong. The discussion so far has focused on party policies and bureaucratic injunctions, presuming that state decisions were always successfully implemented, and daily lives limited to state surveillance. Even during these painful years, there were limitations to the rulers’ ability to control the imaginaries of the local Muslims. The second half of the 1980s also coincided with an increasing circulation of videotapes. In April 1988, Banichanski, the head of *Kinefikatsiia*’s regional branch, tellingly complained:

Over the past two or three years, a worrisome phenomenon has developed, which is called “video piracy.” At the moment, nobody knows who is actually distributing films. . . . A few days ago, I was in Abramovo, Iakoruda municipality. There, based upon Council of Ministers’ Decree 35, nearly seventy people purchased a western VCR, which plays on and on in the local *krūchma*. It is impossible to determine who is drinking and who pays. One must put some order into this business.⁸⁸

Reports from the Interior Ministry confirm the decreasing ability of the central authorities to prevent access to alternative sources of information and entertainment:

New signals were received concerning the showing of Turkish video films in private homes, and the territorial units in Varna, Plovdiv, and Silistra are working toward documenting these cases. A painter from the ship repair and shipbuilding plant G. Dimitrov was identified and arrested for having distributed nationalist videos, organized gatherings in his home with people with restored names, during which Turkish video films were screened.⁸⁹

Videotapes were a sensitive issue in the tense relationships between Bulgaria and Turkey—as was the release of *Vreme razdelno*. Turkey’s leadership naturally had seen in the Bulgarian epic a tool in the campaign to legitimize the erasure of Turkish identities in Bulgaria.⁹⁰ On August 9 and 19, 1988, the

86. N., 39 years old, interview, Istanbul, August 9, 2009.

87. M., 46 years old, interview, Sofia, June 4, 2011.

88. *Pirinsko delo*, April 6, 1988, 1.

89. AMVR, f. 1, op. 11, ae. 743, ll. 24–27.

90. That a shorter version of the movie was performed at the Cannes Film Festival only intensified their concerns. After they learned of Bulgaria’s intent to screen the film

two parties discussed the possibility that the Bulgarians would give up the screening in Seoul in exchange for an agreement not to broadcast on Turkish television *Belene*, Hüseyin Karakaş's documentary film on the camp where opponents to the assimilation process were detained.⁹¹ In May 1989, Turkish diplomats expressed further concern over the televising of *Vreme razdelno* at a time of mass exodus of Bulgarian Turks. Turkey responded in kind, with documentaries circulating in Bulgaria as videotapes.⁹²

Examining the use of cinema in the service of state assimilatory policies has offered insight into the complex interweaving of physical and symbolic violence aimed at minorities, and, ultimately, into the diverse social experiences under late socialism in Bulgaria. The making of *Vreme razdelno* testified to the primacy accorded to films in the formation of national and political consciousness. Yet, to account for the impact of national epics, one cannot study cinema in isolation from the visual, auditory, and written environment of which it was part. Shaped before Bulgaria's independence from the Ottoman empire and later transmitted through both high and popular culture, some representations of the past and the national body were appropriated by Bulgaria's socialist elites, especially after the 1960s. These representations, in turn, were internalized by citizens to the extent that they permeated their daily universe—through tales, literary works, songs and melodies, as much as through official party slogans, and were circulated through diverse media, including radio and television. Exploring the workings of national ideology under socialism thus requires that one traces the multiple ties that unite propaganda and sensibilities.

From this perspective, cinema offers a heuristic device for scholars of nationalism. Symbolic violence, the attempt at establishing names, norms, and categories and achieving support for them from those subjected to state domination, starts at the moment a schoolchild reads history texts that depict their group as the “villain.” It continues with novels, ballads, and historical dramas that further challenge a young person's definition of self and understanding of family history and community values. Filmed at a time of a radical negation of the “other,” *Vreme razdelno* has proven useful in reconstructing the process through which specific actualizations of the past made certain aspects of the present conceivable and perhaps even legitimate. Examination of these connections does not reflect an assumption that ideological products are always efficacious. Rather, it informs us about the strategies pursued by ruling elites. Interestingly, however, *Vreme razdelno*'s message has outlived socialism. The movie was named best Bulgarian film in two national surveys, the first in 2010 and the second in 2015. It continues to be broadcast regularly on Bulgarian television.

in Seoul, Turkish diplomats in Sofia requested a meeting with the head of the Bulgarian Interior Ministry's Ideological Section.

91. TsDA, f. 1B, op. 101, ae. 1971, ll. 1–7, in Veselin Angelov, *Strogo poveritelno! Asimilatorskata kampaniia sreshtu turskoto natsionalno maltsinstvo v Bŭlgariia, 1984–1989* (Sofia, 2008), 418–22; and TsDA, f. 1B, op. 101, ae. 1971, ll. 8–17.

92. TsDA, f. 1B, op. 63, ae. 164, ll. 1–2, in Angelov, *Strogo poveritelno!*, 618–19.

In my survey of nation-building via the cinema, I have also argued that it is appropriate to widen the analytical scope beyond filmic content. The story of a movie begins before the production phase and continues after its showing in theaters. Only by considering the entire film-making process can one get a glimpse of the meaning-making activities of cultural officials, critics, and average viewers. In dark auditoriums, these diverse segments of the public engage their bodies, emotions, thoughts, and memories, as well as individual reactions to the past, as they watch the colorful events on the screen. Trying to gauge the impact of *Vreme razdelno* on socialist Bulgaria—a challenging endeavor at any time—I have therefore incorporated into my analysis several factors that I believe had an influence on reception by audiences, such as shooting locations, use of local background cast members, and reviews published before the film's release. This approach helps to illuminate the ways in which fictionalized past violence and the current use of force against minorities became intimately entangled.

Finally, once contextualized, the study of *Vreme razdelno* offers a window on the fragmented experiences of late state socialism in Bulgaria. Scholars of eastern Europe have contrasted the highly repressive early years of socialist rule with the more lenient 1960s and 1970s.⁹³ By the second half of the 1980s, Bulgaria had evolved into a milder form of authoritarianism. The intelligentsia in Sofia, which closely followed developments in the USSR, hoped for further liberalization and a renewal of the top leadership.⁹⁴ But the 1980s are also associated with the most brutal assault on minority rights. How can one reconcile these conflicting features? The problem lies in the assumption that it might be possible to write a unitary narrative of socialism at the nation-state level. While Sofia was experiencing a timid, albeit genuine, move toward perestroika, border regions inhabited by minorities were facing a brutal attempt to alter their identities. In the last resort, while deconstructing national narratives, many scholars of socialism seem to have remained attached to nation-states as the proper unit of analysis. My case study suggests that it might be both fruitful and necessary to reconsider spatial frames in order to interpret the complex reality of nation-building during socialism.

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93. David Crowley and Susan Reid, eds., *Pleasures in Socialism: Leisure and Luxury in the Socialist Bloc* (Evanston, 2010); Nadège Ragaru and Antonela Capelle-Pogăcean, eds., *Vie quotidienne et pouvoir sous le communisme* (Paris, 2010).

94. Nataliia Hristova, *Spetsifika na bŭlgarskoto "disidentstvo"* (Sofia, 2005).