

STORIES OF BULGARIAN ANARCHISM

An Interview with Yavor Tarinski by Ondřej Slačálek

Abstract

Yavor Tarinski is an activist and scholar whose writings address both the history of anarchism in the Balkans and the contemporary problems of the environmental movement, with an emphasis on its social dimensions. In this interview, we discussed the historical vicissitudes of the Bulgarian anarchist movement and their impact on the current condition of anarchism in the region.

Keywords

Yavor Tarinski, Bulgarian anarchism, Federation of Anarcho-Communists in Bulgaria, Balkan Federation, Stalinism

Anarchism in Bulgaria has a long-standing history, going back to the 1870s. It includes participation in insurrections against the Ottoman Empire, as well as attempts to build independent communes. A vibrant movement of tens of thousands of people in the 1920s was crushed by the repression of the far-right monarchist regime in the 1930s and even more by the Stalinist dictatorship. While hundreds of anarchists ended up in Stalinist labour camps, some others continued to struggle in the mountains or in exile. We can see imprints of this movement in reconstructed Bulgarian anarchism after 1989, and its experience is sometimes debated – but more often omitted – in discussions about inter-

national anarchist history and theory. We have discussed Bulgarian anarchism with Yavor Tarinski, who has been devoted to researching the history of Bulgarian anarchism for a long time.

Could we start a little bit personally? What is your relationship to the story of Bulgarian anarchism?

My name is Yavor Tarinski. I was born in Sofia, Bulgaria, and have lived there most of my life. But for almost a decade now I have lived in Athens, Greece. While in Bulgaria, I was active in various grassroots social initiatives like the social centre Adelante, which was the first self-organized social centre in Sofia. I was also part of the platform Life After Capitalism, which provided analyses of different alternatives to capitalism that were directly democratic, grassroots, and based on the building of people power. So it is logical that I was also interested in the ideas behind such initiatives, which were rooted in the libertarian tradition of the Balkan region as a whole and in Bulgaria in particular.

Later on, when I moved to Athens, I continued being active in initiatives in Greece and also in transnational initiatives dedicated to the production of grassroots knowledge, like the Transnational Institute of Social Ecology. I am also a bibliographer at Agora International, a website dedicated to gathering bibliographies in as many languages as possible of the work of Cornelius Castoriadis. I am responsible for the Bulgarian section.

Generally, I am very interested in finding out the historical trajectories of different grassroots projects that exist today. And in the Balkans, Bulgaria has one of the richest histories of anarchist and libertarian ideas and practices. So naturally over the years, I have grown to be very interested in it.

What distinctive characteristics define Bulgarian anarchism?

Well, first of all, I think that each context around the world has its specificities. The lands where Bulgaria lies today have a rich history dating back to antiquity. Some of the Slavic tribes that inhabited these lands were quite decentralized. During the Middle Ages, in the Byzantine Empire, there was the so-called heresy of the Bogomils, who lived in commune-like communities. They opposed private property and the centralized form of the Church. The Bogomils were heavily persecuted by the Byzantine Empire. Later on, during the Ottoman rule, there were different forms of resistance. For example, the hajduks, who were rebels, or “social bandits” if you wish. In Balkan folk memory, they are roughly analogous to the way Robin Hood is viewed in the UK or Jánošík is viewed in Slovakia.

More importantly, all these traditions started to take on a more clearly libertarian outlook with the struggle of the Bulgarian liberation movement against the Ottoman Empire. It is at this moment that things start to flourish a lot, and they get a further boost as the struggle unfolds. In the mid to late 19th century, many Bulgarian revolu-

tionaries came in touch with Russian anarchists, nihilists, Narodniks, and anarchists such as Chernyshevsky, Bakunin, and Nechayev. There was a rich exchange. Back then, Bulgaria was still under Ottoman rule, so many of them went abroad (and because of the language similarity, many travelled to Russia). Some of them studied in Moscow, and many of them studied in the liberated parts of Romania. We know that not only libertarian-minded revolutionaries, but also people like Lyuben Karavelov, who was a progressive liberal, were in touch with Bakunin.

Revolutionary and poet Hristo Botev, who in Bulgarian nowadays is considered a “national hero”, was in touch with Nechayev. He was even imprisoned in Romania for distributing Nechayev’s *Catechism of a Revolutionary*. We can say that Hristo Botev is one of the first Bulgarian revolutionaries to directly and openly express anarchist views. He spoke of himself as a socialist, but with references to Proudhon and Fourier. He also publicly defended the Paris Commune. He said that the goal of the commune was to turn the person not into a mere son of God or a citizen, but into someone whose city’s destiny directly depends on himself. He tried to contextualize each person as a driving force of history, instead of distant power figures, kings, monarchs, or politicians.

So we can say that these figures and events played an important role in the development of anarchism in Bulgaria. There was, for example, a large section within the Bulgarian liberation movement that was very open to the idea of a Balkan Federation – the most iconic names of the Bulgarian liberation movement like Vasil Levski, Georgi Sava Rakovski, Karavelov, and Botev. All of them in one way or another supported the idea of a unified Balkans beyond national identities.

The idea of a Balkan Federation was repeated again and again during the 20th century in many forms. If we think about that time in the Bulgarian liberation movement, how did it differ from the ideas of the Balkan Federation that came later on?

Even back then, there were different tendencies among these revolutionaries. Lyuben Karavelov, who like I said was a progressive liberal, envisioned something like a Switzerland-type of federation where each nation would have its own cantons. It would be a type of federation of mini-states, but still it was quite the radical proposal for its time. Another case is Vasil Levski, who spoke about the Balkan Republic with popular rule. The rules would be decided with the majority of the population, and there would be one common law for all ethnicities that would guarantee their equality and freedom.

Then you have Hristo Botev, who explicitly referred to the ideas of Proudhon and Fourier. His vision of the Balkan Federation was a form of stateless, classless unity of all these Balkan people that would guarantee their equality and diversity. And it is interesting that he, as well as all other Bulgarian revolutionaries of that period, see the need for such a federation in which Bulgaria and all the Balkan people in general do not descend into a new type of dependency on a foreign power, be it the Russian Empire or some Western Power. Then they would once again be subjected to foreign exploitation

from a foreign power. Hristo Botev was also pretty much aware of that, and there is a strong anti-imperialist element in this thought. Also, Vasil Levski said that we did not want a tsar, since we now had a sultan. The Ottoman Empire was not that ethnically based, but there was a huge hierarchical machine that was bureaucratic and exploitative.

This was the problem for these revolutionaries. They did not want to replace the ethnically Turkish national elite with an ethnically Bulgarian national elite. And this is more specifically and more explicitly clear with the likes of Hristo Botev. He was not interested in replacing one elite with another, but in putting an end to elite rule. As he says regarding the Ottoman Empire, we are aware that the laws were only written for the slaves. Because he is very aware that the laws that are presented to the population of the Ottoman Empire do not apply with the same strength as the old Ottoman bureaucracy, and of course, we know that they did not apply at all to the sultan himself. So there is this idea of one such federation in which people will regain power and be able to set the rules, the social contract, anew. That will be respected because it will be created by all, its implementation will be observed by all, and it will put an end to exploitation.

In some contexts, the Balkan Federation means the South Slavic Federation, and it was connected with Slavic ethnicism. In some other contexts, Romania, Greece, and Albania are also included, so it transcended Slavic exclusivity. What was the case in the Bulgarian liberation context? Were they connected with ideas of revolutionary Slavism, to which Bakunin, we also know, in some moments of his life, was inclined?

As you know, Bakunin wrote “The Appeal to the Slavs” in 1848. He was very interested in the struggles of the Slavic people, and it is known that in 1869 there was the first meeting, in Geneva, between Bulgarian revolutionaries on the one side, and Bakunin and Nechayev on the other. These were two delegates – Raycho Grablev and Theofil Raynov – of an organization called Young Bulgaria (Mlada Bulgaria). There is even speculation that the first program for Bulgarian liberation was written by Bakunin. So, there was this interest of course, but some of these revolutionaries went beyond Pan-Slavism, and I think this is important. Specifically, Karavelov expressed this, and he even refers to it in his writings. In the project of the Balkan Federation that he envisions, Bulgarians, Serbians, Romanians, and Greeks were all included, but on the condition that they all abandon their dreams of Great Empires.

There will even be efforts by revolutionaries and intellectuals from all over the Balkans to initiate such a federation. One of the earliest such cases took place in Belgrade in 1865, when a number of Balkan intellectuals founded the Democratic Oriental Federation, proposing a federal union spanning from the Alps to Cyprus, based on political freedom and social equality. Their inspiration came from the ideals of the French Revolution, Saint-Simon’s federalism, and the socialist ideas of Karl Marx and Mikhail Bakunin. Later, in 1894, in France, a League for the Balkan Confederation was declared,

in which Greek, Bulgarian, Serbian, and Romanian socialists participated, supporting Macedonian autonomy inside the general federation of Southeast Europe.

This trend was also strengthened by the activity of mixed groups of Balkanites that organized on the local level. In 1909, the Thessaloniki Socialist Workers' Federation was created primarily by Sephardic Jews and Bulgarians, as a federation of separate sections, each representing the four main ethnic groups of the city: Jews, Bulgarians, Greeks, and Turks.

So, some of these revolutionaries went beyond Pan-Slavism. This was important because, unlike other parts of Eastern Europe, the Balkans region was more ethnically diverse, especially when speaking about the future of the peninsula, you cannot begin by excluding peoples. We know also that Vasil Levski, another revolutionary that I mentioned, has insisted that the struggle is not to chase away the Turkish people from the Balkans, but the Sultan and his unjust laws. So, we observe over and over this element of rejecting projects of empire, while embracing the huge diversity of ethnicities.

For the last time about Botev. As you posed it, it was a question of theory and ideas about the future, but at the same time, it was a question of immediate emancipatory national liberatory struggle. How did he connect his radical socialist ideas with Bulgarian resistance against the Ottoman Empire?

Well, first of all, Bulgaria was one of the last countries to liberate itself because of its position. Greece was positioned in a place that was harder to be controlled by the Ottoman Empire, and there was a vast interest there by the English and the Russian Empire as well. And also one of the strong elements of the liberation was the widespread piracy that the Greeks practised. On the other hand, Romania was separated by the huge Danube River. So once these lands were liberated, it was much more difficult to retake them. Bulgaria was one open field from Istanbul; it was much more prone to direct control by the sultan.

And there is also a major difference between the different revolutionary struggles and movements that is also time-specific. The Greek liberation movement developed in the transition from the 18th to the 19th century, so the ideas are much different. One can detect some kind of proto-socialist ideas, but these have yet to ferment into a clearer political project. Of course, there are figures like Rigas Feraios, who advocated one of the first visions for a Balkan Federation, basing it on a common Christian ideology that was shared by the majority of Ottoman subjects in the Balkans. And then again, there is one specific Greek figure, Alexandros Ypsilantis, who did everything to prevent the people of the peninsula from revolting together against Ottoman rule. There was a time when the well-known conspiracist organization Filiki Eteria, which organized the Greek Revolution, had members from the Romanian and Bulgarian liberation movements, and there was the idea of preparing a pan-Balkan Revolution. But Ypsilantis,

who was raised amidst the upper crust of the Russian aristocracy, through a series of machinations manages to push away any Romanian and Bulgarian presence within the organization and put an end to the idea of a revolution by all Balkanites. So, with this, the revolution in Bulgaria is postponed.

A time had to pass until a liberatory movement was formed again. And when such was finally reinvigorated in the second half of the 19th century, it was the Paris Commune that proved a huge influence on a number of Bulgarian revolutionaries. For example, Ivan Vazov, considered one of the greatest national poets of Bulgaria, who wasn't a radical himself, notes that while residing in Romania, he came in touch with Bulgarian exiles there, and he writes in one of his plays, *The Outcasts*, a very characteristic line that the Bulgarian revolutionaries have started having appetites not only for revoking the Ottoman yoke from their back but also for universal equality and a commune. So we start seeing this element of the Commune appearing in the works of Botev and in the works of Vazov. More and more we hear about this radical proposal for social revolution and not simply for national liberation. And this is very time-specific. It couldn't emerge that easily before.

Later on, the examples that we have for communes at the end of the 19th century are all referenced either by the revolutionaries themselves, naming these uprisings communes, or by the programs that they started implementing, which we see resembling heavily the programs implemented by the Paris commune. When Botev speaks about the Balkan Federation, we see elements of Proudhon's federalist principle. We see all these things that are time-specific that made these radicalized revolutionaries go ahead and propose things that were quite ahead of their time for Bulgaria. Suddenly we see the federation going from a project based on Christian common belief among enslaved peoples to a project for a classless society of universal equality.

How did the anarchist movement develop after Botev's death in 1876 and after the foundation of independent Bulgaria two years later?

During the initial April uprising of 1876 – some of the most notable revolutionaries died, including Botev, in an attempt to make the Bulgarian population revolt from within the Empire. This plan envisioned committees be created, in small villages and in cities, that would prepare the ground for popular revolt. This did not happen and many of these revolutionaries were killed.

There was one notable example in the city of Panagyurishte, where the revolutionary Georgi Benkovski was based. He was very influenced by utopian socialists and we can also say by libertarian ideas. Before the uprising, there was a meeting of *voivodi*: leaders of guerrilla groups that were acting against the Ottoman Empire. There they devised a plan for how the uprising should develop, which included the formation of a federation of communes. And in the city of Panagyurishte, the rebels tried to initiate

this plan. When they took over the city, they declared that there was no longer a distinction between our Muslims and Christians. Also, they abolished private property (while recognizing the right to personal property, something which is completely different). All the large cattle, pigs, and cows are gathered in a space called an *Obshta bachia* (a common house or common barn) that is accessible to the population of the settlement. Individual households are allowed to keep their chickens and some smaller animals, but the large cattle are kept in common. They also abolished the monetary system and replaced it with a voucher system that was aimed at more justice and was intended to promote equality and equity among the population. But it was a very short-lived experience because the Ottomans responded with brutality.

After the April Uprising of 1876 came the big Russian-Ottoman war, as a result of which parts of Bulgaria were liberated. But many territories remain under Ottoman rule, and as a result there was the Ilinden-Preobrazhenie Uprising in 1903. During this revolt, we have a very significant example, maybe the most significant of them all. In the Strandzha mountain region, spanning between today's Bulgaria and Turkey, an anarcho-communist commune was established. One of the first things the rebels did after taking control over several settlements was to publish a decree in Greek. While predominantly Slavic, the region also had a Greek minority because of its close proximity to the Greek border. With this decree, the rebels tried to say that they were trying to implement a multicultural project for the Balkans, and not restoring some sort of a Great Bulgarian Kingdom. That this uprising was for all the Balkanites. It was about universal human equality and emancipation. We see again this idea of Balkan unity beyond narrow Slavism, which I find very important.

A prominent figure in the Strandzha commune was Mihail Gerdzhikov, one of the great anarchists who continued the legacy of Botev. He was among the creators, in 1919, of the Federation of Anarchist-Communists of Bulgaria, an organization that now has more than a century of history and existence. So, in 1903 he, his guerrillas, and large segments of the local population created a large commune that encompassed several settlements.

How would you characterize them?

Gerdzhikov and his guerrillas were very reminiscent of the Makhnovists that came in 1918 to Ukraine. They were very clear in their message to the local peasantry that they were not interested in managing public affairs on behalf of the people. They try to liberate the area, but how will it be managed and how will it be run afterwards? That is up to the common population, and they allow space for the locals to organize into committees and councils. It lasted for about a month. The rebels also conducted expropriations. There is one example of a salt mill, with several hundred tons of salt within it, which was opened by Gerdzhikov and his guerrillas. They do not engage in

distributing it themselves to the people to become some kind of heroes. They leave it open and they declare to the nearby villages that “OK, it is open. There is no security. It is up to you to organize the distribution of the salt”. So they are very similar in their understanding of what the Makhnovists think the goal of a revolutionary insurrectionary army should be – to help villagers and workers, without interfering with civil life. Instead, it urges and leaves local populations to immediately begin setting up their own institutions of self-management.

And once again, this commune, as the ones that came before it, is brutally suppressed by the Ottoman army. But we see how as the struggle proceeds, you have more people who explicitly identify as anarchists and such practices of popular self-government happen again and again.

There was a connection between the 1903 uprising and the Macedonian national struggle. As it took place on Ottoman Empire land, was it linked to some versions of anti-imperial nationalism or struggle against empire – and maybe also with foreign affairs of the Bulgarian state? Also, the organization which started this uprising was founded in Thessaloniki. So, was there some nexus between Bulgaria, the Ottoman Empire, and Greece in the transnational activities of this organisation?

To this day, Macedonia remains a matter of dispute between Bulgaria and Greece. Both states have claims over its territory, language, and identity. Of course, there have been different tendencies that have pushed for different agendas. There have been those who have wanted a liberated Macedonia to be included with the territories of the Bulgarian Kingdom.

But there have been others, like Gerdzhikov or Gotse Delchev, who, under socialist and libertarian influences, envisioned Macedonia and Adrianople as autonomous zones, part of a Balkan Federation. It is only logical that there was growing tension between the nationalist and socialist tendencies inside the liberation movement. Things reached the point where assassinations were conducted. One of the most notable victims was Yane Sandanski, one of the leading figures of the left-wing of the movement and also a supporter of autonomism and federalism, who was assassinated by the right-wing.

There is also another Bulgarian-Macedonian anarchist revolutionary of this period – Petar Mandzhukov, who had a close relationship with the Boatmen of Thessaloniki – a nihilist terrorist group that targeted the Ottoman-related capital. He was a participant in the armed struggle against the Ottoman authorities. And in the two volumes of the newspaper which he published, called *Bunt (Revolt)*, there was a program for a Balkan Federation.

We can conclude that for many anarchists and socialists, the struggle for Macedonian independence was the last hope for creating a society that would not be based on nations and states, but rather would be based on this multicultural federation of communes.

At the same time, they combined anarchism with some version of national liberation. For example, Misha Glenny, in his influential history of the Balkans, considered them to be some combination of anarchism and national liberation struggle, which he views to be very dangerous.

I understand this. And it is interesting that in the Balkans the anarchist current in the struggle against the Ottoman Empire and through all its stages was taking an active part in the national liberation movement. It was not a bystander; it was participating and it was trying to infuse it with its ideas and values. And one can say that it ultimately failed. Georgi Hadjiev (aka Georgi Balkanski), the prominent Bulgarian anarchist author, writes in his book *National Liberation and Libertarian Federalism* (1992), that:

Another lesson to be learnt from the participation of Bulgarian anarchists in the national liberation struggles in Macedonia and Thrace is that they closely linked their work as anarchists with the popular movement. They invested much energy in this struggle and made great sacrifices, but this potential was not realized well or to the full. [...] The task of developing a discrete, organized anarchist movement was considered less important and not made a priority until later on.

But, on the other hand, if it wasn't for these libertarian influences, there weren't going to be any remnants of popular insurgent communes, for example. Even if their existence was short-lived, the fact that it even existed is of significance. And to use the words of Karl Marx, "the great social measure of the Commune was its own working existence". Such experiences remind us that the Balkans were not necessarily destined to end up being a peninsula of warring nationalisms and xenophobia. That there were masses of people willing not only to listen to these ideas but to take up arms, to fight and to implement them into practice, to create revolutionary councils, to create communes. This was fascinating in a sense, and has left some relics that contemporary movements in the Balkans can use when articulating their political projects in ways that take into consideration the local context.

Did the suppression of the Ilinden–Preobrazhenie Uprising mean the death of idea of communes?

Despite the death and destruction unleashed by the Ottoman forces, the commune form did not disappear. Within Bulgaria, there were several examples of communes, smaller ones. One of them was created in 1906 near the city of Burgas. It has come to be known as the Tolstoyan commune of Burgas. It was established by a group of anarcho-Christians from the Tolstoyan current who returned from studying abroad.

They proceeded to establish this commune to implement their ideas into practice. They arranged with the local mayor to give them a house and several hectares of land. There were also other communes that were religious, but this one was specifically interested in propagating the Tolstoyan brand of anarcho-Christianism. They were not only a self-managing commune working in common, but they also created a self-organized publishing house where they printed a magazine called *Vazrazhdane (Revival)*, which was dedicated to Tolstoyism. They even sent copies of the journal to Leo Tolstoy himself, who back then was in his eighties. Tolstoy was thrilled. Members of this commune went to his home in Yasnaya Polyana, where they had an exchange and invited him to come and spend his last days in the Tolstoyan commune in Burgas.

But due to the tense political atmosphere in the region, the authorities of Bulgaria did not really like having such pockets of anarchism on its territory. As a result, local authorities got increasingly irritated by the Tolstoyists, especially because they were not enclosed in their own internal affairs but were engaged in printing and distributing their journal and organizing public talks. So, they started accusing them of reviving Bogomilism and undermining Christianity and the Bulgarian Church, thus subverting the Bulgarian Kingdom. After two years of existence of the commune, the Tolstoyists were forced to escape the country. But some of them actually went to Tolstoy's Yasnaya Polyana, where they created a commune with some locals and lived there. Today, in this small village on the outskirts of Burgas, in the local *chitalishte* (cultural and municipality centre), there is an exhibition dedicated to Tolstoyism, which remains an exotic landmark.

Were there some communes later on?

The commune form indeed proved persistent in the imagination and practice of Bulgarian revolutionaries. There was another commune that we know of near the city of Ruse in the early 1920s, located along the shore of the Danube River, which runs along the border between Bulgaria and Romania. Because of its location, it also hosted illegal anarchists, who in case of detection, could cross the border and avoid arrest. This commune endured for several years. We know that one of the most notorious Bulgarian anarchists of this period – Georgi Sheytanov – was also living there for some time while in hiding.

At some point, a sun-worshipping sect called the White Brotherhood, followers of the Bulgarian mysticist Petar Danov, formed a small commune of their own near the anarchist one. The name of the sect comes from its members dressing in white. They established a commune of their own there, but with clear religious characteristics, not political ones. But in the sect's written sources, there are references to the anarchist commune. In these, the anarchists of the Ruse commune are described as very educated people who give lectures and speak about political philosophy. But of course, there was

the problem of religion. The anarchists from Ruse were against any form of authority, including the religious one, while the Donovists recognized in their spiritual leader the highest authority. Thus, there was an unbridgeable chasm.

Unfortunately, the anarchist commune was abandoned in 1923, when a wave of persecutions began against anarchists. It was a period in which the authorities decided to take away the weapons left among the Bulgarian population from the guerrilla warfare of the last periods of the Balkan War. And in the city of Yambol, a local anarchist organization refused to do that. Because of their refusal, there was a massacre in the city, with more than 30 anarchists being killed. Today, there is a monument in Yambol of these massacred anarchists. A wave of prosecutions of anarchists followed. The people in the Ruse commune were forced to flee because it was not safe to reside in an openly anarchist commune. These were the periods between the big revolutions and the big uprisings. And the anarchist movement in Bulgaria tried to maintain the spirit of these uprisings, experimenting with their ideas in practice, even if on a much smaller scale.

You already mentioned the Federation of Anarchist-Communists of Bulgaria, founded in 1919. What do we know about the Bulgarian anarchism of the 1920s?

Anarchism in Bulgaria, especially in the 1920s, became very strong. The members of the Federation of Anarchist-Communists of Bulgaria probably numbered tens of thousands and could be found all over the country. The organization was quite massive, and was divided into four chapters – the Northeast, Northwest, Southeast, and Southwest chapters. The number of anarchist newspapers increased dramatically, especially *Rabotnicheska Missal (Workers Thought)*, with national circulation.

It was within this atmosphere that one last effort to implement the commune form in practice was being made. It was very significant, although very short-lived. It took place in June 1923, when a reactionary coup d'état took place under the approving eye of the King.

In the wake of this event, in the village of Kilifarevo, the local anarchist organization held a big meeting in the night when the coup was announced. They decided that they wouldn't accept this and would prepare for a revolt. They drafted a plan – the next morning they would go out on the street and protest against the coupists, and if there were a lot of critical mass gathered, they would initiate an uprising. During the same night, the local communist group also held a meeting, deciding that it would also act. Members of the agrarian party did the same. But the anarchists were the decisive force. On the 10th of June, a mass demonstration took place. The anarchist Georgi Popov delivered a speech and announced the creation of an insurrectionary commune – the Kilifarevo Commune.

The rebellious population dismantled existing local authorities and replaced them

with a revolutionary council. Nearby settlements did the same, as they were informed of the plan from the previous night. And thus, the whole region around Kilifarevo was mobilized. We see something very important – the rebellion led to the creation of new popular institutions.

This was very characteristic of anarchist tradition back then, including the Bulgarian one, as well as that of the Spanish anarchists of 1936. They were not afraid to set up alternative institutions, something that could be characterized as a problem of modern anarchism. We must overcome, as Murray Bookchin insisted, our fear of institutions – as they can be set up from below to facilitate the values of universal equality and direct participation.

How did this attempt end?

Unfortunately, in just two days, the monarcho-fascist authority sent a huge army, and they brutally repressed the rebellion. Many peasants were killed and many more were arrested and tortured in the prisons. Nevertheless, some of the rebels created an anarchist guerrilla group known as the *Cheta of Kilifarevo* active for some time until it was dispersed by the authorities, and some of its most prominent members, such as Georgi Sheytanov, were murdered by the police.

So, in a sense, the Kilifarevo Commune closes the communard chapter of the history of Bulgarian anarchism.

Michael Schmidt, in his *The Anarchist-Communist Mass Line. Bulgarian Anarchism Armed* (Zabalaza Books, 2008), notes that in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, anarchists participated in the founding of the Leninist Communist Parties, while this was not the case in Bulgaria. He tries to explain it by the fact that there was a mass anarcho-communist movement. Do you agree with him or do you think that there were different causes?

I would agree because, as I mentioned before, the anarchist movement grew rapidly. There were numerous anarchist groups in cities, but also, and especially, in the countryside.

But of course, there were some anarchists that collaborated with the Communist Party in Bulgaria, like Tacho Tachev. He was something like the black sheep of Bulgarian anarchism in those days, because of his relationship with the Communist Party. Tachev in particular is an interesting case because he advocated for anarchists to take part in municipal elections in Bulgaria on the local level. And he was advocating for this in the first half of the 20th century, long before Murray Bookchin did. When the regime change happened in 1944, such anarchists, who prior to that had collaborated with the Communist party, were forced to distance themselves, as the repression of their anarchist comrades increased and the Stalinist state proved a hard bureaucratic mechanism for exploitation.

How would you describe those anarcho-communists in ideological terms? What did they believe in?

There was a mixture of ideological influences. One of the most ideologically influential theoretical figures among Bulgarian anarchists was Bakunin. There was also influence coming from the ideas of Nechayev. They were supporters of the social revolution in a sense of mass popular uprising driven from below, as well as of armed struggle. And of course, they were also influenced by Kropotkin and Élisée Reclus.

But at the same time, Bakunin was not an anarcho-communist...

Yes. But even so – all the anarchists that I have met that are survivors – back then they also described themselves as Bakuninists and anarcho-communists. And also there was an element of conspiratorial manner...

They incorporated certain elements of Bakunin's theory such as his concept of Social Revolution and his vision of a stateless federation of communes.

What about other streams in Bulgarian anarchism? Were there some anarcho-syndicalists or individualists at that time?

Anarcho-syndicalism was the other major anarchist current in Bulgaria, although not as strong as the anarcho-communist one. In the 1930s, in the region surrounding the city of Haskovo, they formed an anarcho-syndicalist confederation called Vlasovden. There are anarcho-syndicalist groups in other parts of Bulgaria as well. In the capital Sofia, such groups published the newspapers *Rabotnik* (*Worker*) and *Rabotnicheski Glas* (*Worker's Voice*). In the city of Veliko Tarnovo, one volume is published of another journal entitled *Federalist*, featuring articles by, among others, Rudolph Rocker.

It is interesting because it was mostly the opposite case in Spain. There were strong anarcho-syndicalists, and even in France there were strong anarcho-syndicalist unions and smaller anarcho-communist groups or federations.

I think one of the reasons behind this is that in the period in question, Bulgaria was predominantly an agricultural society. Because of that, one can also suggest that the ideas of Élisée Reclus, a predecessor of eco-anarchism, were also influential. For example, in the city of Pernik in the 1940s, there was a small group with his name. They were arrested for their intervention – spreading flyers at a Communist Party event on the anniversary of the Spanish Civil War, where they tried to explain that what had happened was the opposite of what the official speaker was saying. They were all arrested and sent to Bulgarian gulags and prisons afterwards. So there was this specificity of a predominantly agrarian society where anarcho-communism firmly took hold.

In the international history of anarchism, Nechayev is mostly considered to be its evil spirit. Even Bakunin distanced himself from him, as well as a majority of anarchists. But not in the Bulgarian case...

There were certain aspects of his philosophy that were influential. His *Catechism of a Revolutionary* in particular, which, as is speculated, was distributed even by Hristo Botev himself. It was his ideas of subsuming one's individual self to a greater revolutionary purpose, as well as his insistence on fighting the State and the Church by any means necessary, with an unwavering focus on their destruction.

In many cases, like French, Czech, Hungarian, and Romanian anarchisms, we can find a strong connection between anarchism, science, and art, especially poetry. Was it also the case in Bulgaria or not?

Yes, definitely. You can start with Botev himself. He is most famous in Bulgaria as being a revolutionary poet. Later on, there were many anarchists in the golden period in the 1920s and the 1930s who were working in parallel as scientists and medical doctors. One of the greatest Bulgarian anarchists was actually one of the first surgeons in Bulgaria – Paraskev Stoyanov. In the 1880s, he studied in France and later returned to Bulgaria. He wrote the first book on practical surgery. Nowadays, there are hospitals and streets named after him. And there were many other cases like this. They were very well-educated people.

So of course, I think there is a common thread that bridges libertarian ideas and science, in the sense that both rest on debating and deliberating, as well as a constant questioning of established truths. We most certainly need a critical approach to science, without negating it altogether, as happens in cases of historical fascism or contemporary anti-vaxxers.

What did come after the glorious “golden years” of the 1920s and part of the 1930s?

There was another coup d'état in 1934, and with it a clear monarcho-fascist regime. Nazi policies began being adopted, even before Bulgaria joined the Axis powers. Communists and anarchists were persecuted. There was a repression of the Jewish people, although the official Bulgarian historiography does not recognize it. In recent years, there have been some major works, especially a book by Lea Koehn on the antisemitic policies of the Bulgarian Kingdom in the period 1940–1944.

What happened with the anarchist movement?

As I said before, during the monarcho-fascist period, anarchists were persecuted and repressed. Many were shoved into overcrowded prisons. In September 1944, the Father-

land Front coalition, led by the Bulgarian Communist Party, and with the help of the Red Army, manages to establish a new regime. Party cadres are installed on all levels of State power, and the era of Stalinist totalitarianism begins.

In the very beginning, there was a beacon of hope, although many were aware of the situation in the Soviet Union. But nonetheless, anarchists hoped that things would be better than under the previous regime. So, at the beginning of 1945 was an effort to reinvigorate the Anarchist Federation and start anew. In Sofia, in a neighbourhood called Knyazhevo on the outskirts of the city, a conference is being held. There is a huge attendance – over 100 delegates from anarchist cells and groups from all over the country. But after the first presenter speaks, militia men enter and arrest everyone. With this, a massive crackdown on anarchists begins. For one night, over 600 anarchists were being arrested in different parts of the country. These were among the most active and energetic figures of the anarchist movement. With them being detained and sent to the first Bulgarian gulags, the anarchist movement is left in disarray and shock.

Very interesting was the case of Gerdzhikov. When the Stalinist regime is established, he is already an old man. So, he was not considered an immediate threat to the Communist Party's grip on power. But beyond that, he was also something of a national hero because of his participation in the Ilinden Uprising and the Strandzha Commune. Originally, when the communists took power in Bulgaria, Gerdzhikov called for his comrades, the anarchists, to critically support the new authority, showing goodwill at the beginning. But very quickly, in 1945, he retracted these words of his. And when the authorities tried to award him a medal for his part in the National Liberation struggle, he refused it by saying that if they wanted to award him, the best award would be the liberation of his anarchist comrades from the prisons and the gulags. He died in 1947 from old age.

What could anarchists do under the new conditions of the Stalinist dictatorship?

Some of the anarchists joined the so-called Goryani movement. The Goryani was a movement of guerrillas in the mountains, in the forest regions where they were hiding. They were trying to use guerrilla tactics against the Red Terror. It wasn't a unified movement. There were different guerrilla groups that acted on their own, or with a little coordination with other groups. There were anarchist Goryani guerrillas, like the group from Karlovo led by the anarchist Hristo Cholakov. The anarchist group from Karlovo was also the longest-lasting Goryani group that fought the Stalinist power – from 1951 to 1954. But there were other groups, often with diametrically opposite ideas from the anarchists, often consisting of monarchists or members of the agrarian party. If there was a collaboration, it was when a group wanted to hit a target that was much stronger and needed extra backup. In such cases, the anarchists collaborated with more left-leaning Goryani groups.

Beyond that, Bulgaria was in a state of a stupor. There was a government that proclaimed, on an ideological level, that power had been distributed to the society, that

a radical equality was being established, that all were now comrades, etc. Simultaneously, its practice showed a completely different picture – you could see everywhere a rampant cult of personality, inequality, etc. You could see many people being repressed for their political ideas. And of course, one of the main enemies of this new “power of the people” were the anarchists.

What was the scope of repressions and their results?

The repressions were massive in scale. In just a few years, all anarchist organizations and press were forbidden. Anarchists by the hundreds were imprisoned and sent to gulags. To avoid persecution, many of those still unimprisoned sought to escape the country, through either Yugoslavia or Greece. Most often, the final destination was Paris. Paris back then was a hotbed of revolutionary ideas. Although one of the big capitals of the Western powers, it nonetheless had a Bohemian culture and tradition of revolutionary immigration. Many Bulgarians also made Paris their home, and whatever political activity continued, it was mostly from there. Many newspapers and journals continued being published from there, and there were efforts to get them circulated in Bulgaria, but this was almost impossible.

Were there other forms of resistance?

One of the most symbolic and probably one of the last symbolic actions of the anarchist movement in Bulgaria happened in 1953. The then-young anarchist Georgi Konstantinov blew up Stalin’s monument in one of the most central and iconic parks in Sofia – Boris Garden in the heart of the capital. He was arrested a couple of days later for this and was sentenced to death. Luckily for Konstantinov, Stalin died just a couple of days after the sentence was issued. Because of this, his sentence was commuted to 20 years in prison. But after nine years in a very harsh prison and gulag environment, he was let out on probation due to a wave of amnesties, and he used the chance to illegally escape the country and move to Paris.

There were also worker strikes. In May 1953, something in Bulgaria took place that many consider the first revolt of East European workers after the death of Stalin – the Plovdiv Tobacco Workers’ Strike. Among the most prominent figures of this strike was the anarchist Stanio Vatev. The tobacco workers were met with fierce repression, with militiamen opening fire, killing several people, among them Vatev.

But generally, things in Bulgaria from the second half of the 1950s and onwards quieted down. In a sense, political life in the country was stifled. There was no public debate, no political life, beyond the party’s bureaucratic apparatus. Unlike the West, for example, where you have popular movements like the one of May of ’68, in Bulgaria, like in most other Eastern European countries, such movements were not allowed to develop.

Were there some examples of self-organization in those gulags? Did anarchist prisoners develop some forms of resistance?

One thing that is positive in Bulgaria is that many of the anarchists that survived the gulags sat down afterwards and reflected upon it, writing memoirs. Some of them are even still alive today, like Georgi Konstantinov, who still, in his nineties, publishes anarchist essays. There are tens of such books by anarchists. And this is very important because it provides a different perspective from the dominant narratives. After all, you know, in Eastern European countries there is a lot of this revanchism coming from the right-wing, trying to present all the existing resistance to totalitarianism as coming from the right. And it is very, very important that there is this effort by these old anarchists to remind everyone that this was not the whole truth. That there were also popular and anti-authoritarian forms of resistance to the actually existing socialism. In these books, anarchists like Alexander Nakov and others describe life in these gulags and the mutual aid being practised by the anarchist prisoners. They shared everything inside, and that is why they had lower death rates than other political groups of prisoners. And this, despite the fact that anarchists were usually sent to the so-called “death units” in the gulags – that is, sent there to die.

The Bulgarian anarchists, although treated very inhumanely, had one another, and whatever package with food – this trope repeats in every memoir – was sent to one of them, it was immediately redistributed among all anarchist prisoners. It was one of the elements that managed to save many anarchists. It was mutual aid that they turned from an idea to practice in the harshest environment imaginable.

Many anarchists immigrated via Greece. What was the reaction of the Left there?

According to old comrades from Bulgaria – the ones that were in the gulags and later moved to Paris – there was not a lot of contact between Bulgarians and Greeks, because the Greeks were very strongly Marxist-Leninist in their majority. There were some Trotskyists. But the Communist Party of Greece had a paramilitary wing called the OPLA, which dealt with political assassinations, with Trotskyists high on the list of targets. For example, Cornelius Castoriadis managed to avoid being assassinated by this Communist Party’s armed wing by sheer chance. He did not end up attending a meeting where he was invited, where he was planned to be killed. When he learned what he had avoided, he left for France.

But many Bulgarian anarchists did immigrate via Greece. Many of them were sent to a camp on the outskirts of the city of Lavrion. In it, there were not only anarchists, but also members of the agrarian party, as well as other political currents.

The food in the Lavrion camp was bad (as in any other refugee camp), but the anarchists quickly self-organized and asked the camp authorities to let them use the

resources that were allotted for food, so that they could form a self-organized canteen and take care of the process of feeding the people inside. Everyone was surprised when the camp administration agreed. With that, the anarchists chose a couple of volunteers to do the shopping, while the rest took over the cooking and cleaning and all kinds of ancillary work. In this way, the food was improved in both quality and quantity.

And regarding mutual aid, the situation was similar to that in the gulags I mentioned before. Whatever package was sent to any of the anarchists, it was immediately redistributed among them all. Because of this, Anton Nikolov, one of the anarchist refugees in the Lavrion camp, remembers in his memoirs how Dimitar Lozev, a senior member of the Agrarian Party, once said: "How come your friends are poor, but they send you aid, while our party partners in the West, if you shove them in the neck they will vomit coins, but they send us nothing."

Today, Bulgarian anarchists are sometimes criticized for siding with the West in the Cold War? Is this criticism inappropriate?

Well, I think it is inappropriate to say that about any anarchist movement. I think one such criticism comes from a dishonest perspective, which considers anyone who opposes actually existing socialism as an ally of the West.

There was an old generation of activists from the 1940s who were imprisoned or who were in exile. On Bulgarian territory, was there a rupture in activism or some continuity with activities after Stalinism?

Well, in a sense you can say that there was a rupture. And not only in Bulgaria! You can still feel the effects Stalinism had on Eastern Europe to this day. Because of this rupture, after the fall of totalitarianism, anarchists had only the classics for their theoretical basis. Newer ideas and tendencies that emerged during the second half of the 20th century were yet to find their way to Eastern Europe. Because of this, many anarchists find themselves still stuck in classic anarchism, which in my opinion is a problem. You cannot stick to dogmas. You have to develop. Conditions change, and societies change.

Fortunately, things have been changing for the better in recent years, with ideas related to feminism, social ecology, autonomy, etc. influencing libertarian tendencies in Eastern Europe.

But what was present in the early 1990s and could contribute to the recreation of anarchism in Bulgaria then?

There was a generation of anarchists in exile that were aging. When many of these anarchists returned from exile, they met younger anarchists who were emerging from the new punk subculture that was rebelling against the totalitarian regime and had

found itself in a new world. And so they both wanted to create something. Thus, these old-timers who returned from exile (many from Paris) renewed the functioning of the Federation of Anarchist-Communists of Bulgaria. But again, because of the Stalinist legacy that I mentioned before, they were forced to cut the “communist” from the title. So it became the Anarchist Federation of Bulgaria because they knew that having “communist” in the title would make most people associate them directly with the old regime. And so there was a mixture of younger punks and all these old veterans.

You can imagine that it was difficult for all those old Bakuninists and anarcho-communists almost from another century to coexist with the younger subcultural punkish anarchists. After some time, they started separating and creating different groups. In my personal opinion, having many tendencies is not necessarily a bad thing because it allows each group more manoeuvring to explore its full potential. In a sense, this gave rise to several social centres or alternative spaces in Sofia revolving around libertarian ideas.

The Stalinist past left a lot of trauma and also created a space for right-wing anti-communism.

A lot of time is needed for this trauma to heal. Some still blame communism for everything that's wrong in Bulgaria today, although the regime has been gone for more than 30 years and we have had capitalism all this time. And then there is a growing trend of nostalgia among conservatives, and even nationalists, for socialist-era Bulgaria. These tendencies have both been pushing narratives that glorify either the West or the East.

There is also a problem of understanding the Stalinist legacy, because of a certain liberal approach which attempts to compare Stalin to Hitler. It seeks to answer the wrong question – that is, who is the bigger monster? Instead, I would argue that they were both very damaging in different ways.

Hitler provided humanity with one of the worst ideologies – if not the worst ideology – humanity has ever known, the idea that you can shift the blame for the problems of a given people to one specific ethnic and/or religious group and imply industrial means to wipe it off the face of the Earth. This idea is monstrous to its very core, and in this sense, the Nazis were much worse than the Stalinists.

But in regards to the revolutionary project, it is Stalinism that has served the most severe blows, from which humanity still cannot recover. It was Stalinist regimes that committed brutalities and horrors in the name of a classless society. All the gulags and persecutions were done in the name of Revolution. All the repressions were done under the banner of “power to the people”. And in this sense, Stalinism sent humanity down a spiral of growing cynicism. As a result, societies worldwide have come to perceive what currently exists as the only plausible option, the other being the dictatorship of a narrow commissariat. And anti-authoritarians and anarchists are often perceived by common people as crypto-Stalinists when they talk about revolution and radical

social change. And especially in Eastern Europe, if you go and speak about people assemblies and popular councils to random people on the street you may be countered by the argument that the old regime also spoke of these things, while imposing the firmest grip on power. So, in this sense, Stalinism has done more harm. Things are not irreversible, though; they can be changed. But it takes time, patience, and the will to seek new ways to communicate these ideas with the widest possible sections of society.

Thank you very much for telling me these fascinating stories about Bulgarian anarchism. What lessons can we learn from these stories? Do you think that they provide us some ideas for contemporary debates, for example about the Russo-Ukrainian conflict and the position of the left?

I think one lesson that we can take is that in pivotal moments it is important for anti-authoritarian and libertarian tendencies, be they anarchist or not, to be present and to take action as long as society is involved and as long as there is a space for independent activity. This is what the anarchists in Bulgaria understood very well. They were open, they were quite social, without abandoning their principles, and they managed to plant certain seeds that can still serve as a beacon of hope in a region such as the Balkans, which nowadays is dominated by nationalism and conservative sentiments.

I read a text by a Finnish anarchist named Antti Rautiainen, in which he argues that this idea that anarchists should never participate in wars is relatively new. In the histories of Finland, of Korea, of the Balkans, anarchists took part on certain occasions. For example, during the First Balkan War, in 1912, Mihail Gerdzhikov, about whom we spoke at length above, led a guerrilla group against the Ottomans on Strandzha Mountain, but was unsuccessful in provoking the local populace to establish a popular commune.

I think it is important for libertarian and anarchist tendencies to participate wherever there is space for autonomous action within social upheavals, because ultimately these are clashes of ideas and political projects.

I think it is crucial that we listen to the voices of social movements and grassroots activists from each locality. In regards to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, we must take into serious consideration that so many anarchists have decided to resist the invasion (resistance takes many different forms) because they believe an occupation by Putin's regime would limit their space for social action. No one outside of this geography can know how successful these anarchists can be at provoking social change along libertarian lines and values. I know that their strength is very limited, but nonetheless it is through persistent work that alternative visions are planted in the social imagination. Otherwise, the inaction of these tendencies will leave societies imprisoned by the dead end of the dipole of liberalism vs chauvinism. A dead end because both sides end up reproducing each other. We need to offer a third alternative, a libertarian one.

Do you think that these stories also tell us something about the relationship between libertarian ideas and movements, nationalism, and internationalism?

They show that there cannot be a society where libertarian and autonomous ideas coexist with nationalism. Nationalism is their opposite. It tends to go somewhere else. Even in its most “progressive” form, nationalism will eventually prove a conservative obstacle to internationalism and transnationalism.

That is why I think that nowadays the re-emergence of this libertarian municipalist and social ecologist tendency is so important. This idea of returning to the political municipality and moving beyond the nation. We are not patriots of this nation but citizens of a communal body politic. One important example in this direction is the Paris Commune, as reconstructed by Kristin Ross’s *Communal Luxury*. She shows how the sections that were created by the monarchy to be a body where the people speak and the monarch could listen, turned into rebellious popular assemblies. This new political framework led the citizens of Paris to abandon the bourgeois terms *Madame* and *Monsieur* when referring to each other. Instead, they started calling each other *citoyen* and *citoyenne* – that is, citizen. Through such small details, we get to see how the communards attempted to put an end, on the one hand, to the nation, which homogenizes everyone, and then, on the other, to bourgeois capitalist society. Consequently, they were not the exclusive “citizens”, as the term has been used, in the sense of who is a citizen of this country and who is not, but in the sense of people who take an active part in the direct self-management of society. This idea has also been developed by other 20th-century thinkers like Murray Bookchin and Cornelius Castoriadis.

We started with the idea of the Balkan Federation, and you described how it was developed in the 19th century and we heard how it was renewed many times during the 20th century. Some people consider the bloody Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s as the end of the idea. Do you think that there is some legacy of the idea of the Balkan Federation which can be somehow renewed and told today?

The Communist parties of the region tainted this idea very much and charged it with very negative connotations. For 19th-century revolutionaries, a Balkan Federation was a way to achieve radical equality between diverse ethnic groups on the peninsula that would also allow them to remain independent on the broader geopolitical map of the world. Later on, it became a tool used by different political regimes to try to take over smaller and weaker countries, and claim some form of decentralization and diversity. However, the Yugoslav Federation was in fact a Serbia-centred federation. Also, often when Bulgarian politicians expressed this idea, it was again with the scope of incorporating Macedonian territories into the Bulgarian sphere of influence. I think one of the fears that people have on the peninsula nowadays is that a Balkan Federation would mean the loss of any kind of ethnic sovereignty and subjugation to another country.

For me, the project of the Balkan Federation is immensely important, but it must not be thought of as a federation of nation-states. It should rather be thought of as a federation of independent, ideally self-organized cantons, similar to the system developed by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (more widely known as Rojava). One such context will actually allow all these diverse peoples to come together, without losing their cultural specificities to the homogenous effects of the Nation-State, and discuss how they should manage their life in common.

I have lived in two countries that were on the opposite sides of the Iron Curtain – Greece and Bulgaria – and I have seen that despite that, they have much more in common than they would like to admit, in spite of all differences in languages, history, geopolitics. And this holds true for the rest of the peninsula as well. I think one such project could bring these people to recognize these similarities without abandoning their specificities.

What we need is to re-read our histories and detect those political projects that can get us away from self-destructive nationalist paradigms and towards contexts that allow for the widest possible social participation and diversity.