

SOYUZ POSTSOCIALIST STUDIES NETWORK

Blackwashing History



Kristen Ghodsee



The Soviet Army Monument in Sofia, Bulgaria commemorates the Red Army's defeat of the Nazi-allied government of Boris III. Photo courtesy Kristen Ghodsee

On February 1, 2013, Bulgaria celebrated the official “Day of Homage and Gratitude to the Victims of the Communist Regime” for the third time since the holiday was created in 2011. The date marks the decision of a Bulgarian “People’s Court” to summarily execute three regents to the young Bulgarian king, 67 members of parliament, 22 cabinet ministers and 40 military generals and senior officers of the Bulgarian Royal Army as well as a number of other political figures.

One [article](#) in an English-language newspaper in Bulgaria reported that on this day “Bulgaria’s former political and military elite was liquidated at a single stroke.” Sending the story out on the newswire, the Associated Press [reported](#) that some Bulgarians laid wreaths at a wall inscribed with the names of many who died at the hands of the communists: “The victims memorialized on the wall include many political opponents of communism executed after September 1944, when Bulgaria’s communists seized power in this tiny Balkan country.” Around the world the AP story was published and republished on news websites under the headline, “Bulgaria honors victims of communism.” Nowhere is it mentioned that these “victims” were also Nazi allies.

Bulgaria was an Axis power during World War II. Although Nazi troops were allowed to pass through Bulgaria on their way to Greece, Bulgaria was under the full control of the Bulgarian Royal Army. Bulgaria’s King Boris III made this allegiance in a hope to regain lost Bulgarian territories in the Balkans. The Bulgarians occupied large parts of Northern Greece and Vardar Macedonia, which remained under Bulgarian administration until September 9, 1944 when the Bulgarian communists overthrew the monarchy.

Bulgaria was not a nice little parliamentary democracy before 1944. It was a petty Balkan dictatorship that brooked no political dissent and ruthlessly persecuted dissidents. During World War II, there was a partisan resistance in Bulgaria, many of them Jewish, who hid in the mountains and actively sought to oppose the Bulgarian Axis forces. The King’s government responded to this threat by creating special detachments of the gendarmes that brutalized local populations sympathetic to the partisan cause. They decapitated partisans and mounted their severed heads on stakes in village squares. They burned the homes of anyone who sold food to the partisans. The gendarmes raped, tortured and indiscriminately murdered local peasants for information. Bulgarian officials executed even uniformed British officers, who should have been prisoners of war, without due process.

The King’s government was also responsible, on the night of March 10, 1943, for the arrest of over 7,000 Macedonian Jews who were subsequently deported on Bulgarian trains through Bulgaria to the death camps at Treblinka.

It was representatives of the Bulgarian King’s Nazi-allied government who were executed by the People’s Court on February 1, 1945. When Bulgaria now celebrates the official Day of Homage and Gratitude to the Victims of the Communist Regime, the problem is that everyone (including the Associated Press) conveniently fails to mention that some of the “victims” were men responsible for the heinous described above. The entire “political and military” elite was an elite that had allied itself with Hitler.

To be fair, the government of Boris III did save its own Jewish population from deportation, a fact that was proudly mentioned by Vice-president Margarita Popova at the February 1 ceremony this year. Popova failed to acknowledge the role that the Bulgarian political and military elite played in the extermination of the Macedonian Jews. Bulgarian elites today are keen to wipe away the memory of Bulgaria’s role between 1941-44. Indeed, a recent Macedonian [film](#) about WWII, *The Third Halftime*, enraged some of Bulgaria’s politicians because it portrayed the Bulgarian government as fascist, which was, after all, true.

There were legitimately victims of the communist regime in Bulgaria; that cannot be denied. But the specific victims who are honored and bestowed with gratitude on February 1 were not innocent civilians with no blood on their hands.

In the contemporary political climate of many East European countries, including Bulgaria, there is a growing tendency to blackwash history—to paint the communist era as unequivocally evil, to ignore or belittle inconvenient historical facts that might explain (or at the very least complicate) the actions of the

communist governments that came to power after WWII.

The February 1 memorialization was not without controversy in Bulgaria. The [Bulgarian Anti-Fascist Union](#), a national organization with leftist sympathies, actively opposed the Day of Homage and Gratitude to the Victims of the Communist Regime. The holiday was only marked in a few Bulgarian cities and the number of people in attendance was small. Most ordinary Bulgarians are not fooled by political rhetoric that is most likely meant for international consumption. Like all postsocialist countries, Bulgaria is keen to reassure foreign investors and Western governments that their communist days are long behind them.

Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that these new days of commemoration for the victims of communism have appeared in the wake of the global financial crisis that began in 2007-08. As markets plunged and the Eurozone economies teetered on the edge of collapse, the European Parliament passed a resolution establishing a European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism, commemorated for the first time in 2009. Bulgaria's economy has also been devastated by the crisis, and popular faith in democracy and capitalism has evaporated. Suddenly, it becomes necessary to honor and pay gratitude to all victims of communism, no matter who they were or what they did to deserve such swift justice.

The dynamics of memory and memorialization are a rich field of inquiry for scholars interested in the cultural studies of postsocialist societies. Where the popular media ignores nuance and unquestioningly reproduces knee-jerk anticommunism, it is important for anthropologists and ethnographers working in these societies to remind the world that the picture was more complicated. We should not implicitly honor Nazis and Nazi sympathizers in our collective zeal to discredit communism.

Kristen Ghodsee is contributing editor of the *Soyuz* column in Anthropology News.



This entry was posted in [February](#), [Knowledge Exchange](#) and tagged [Soyuz Postsocialist Studies Network](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#). Trackbacks are closed, but you can [post a comment](#).