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## WESTERN MODELS, EASTERN FOLLOWERS: BULGARIAN CRIME FICTION FROM SOCIALISM TO POST-SOCIALISM

**Abstract.** This article analyzes the evolution of Bulgarian crime fiction from the socialist period (1944-1989) to the post-socialist era, focusing on the work of Bulgarian writer Andrei Gulyashki and on various elements of crime prose as a mirror of the country's sociopolitical transformations. During the socialist period authors such as Andrei Gulyashki created ideologized heroes like Avakum Zakhov, a socialist counterpart to James Bond, who operated within the rigid narrative boundaries imposed by socialist realism. The genre served both as a propaganda tool and as a form of controlled escapism. The comparison between the Russian translation, faithful to the original work, and the English translation of the novel Momchilovo Case demonstrates substantial differences. With the fall of the regime in 1989, detective fiction underwent a radical metamorphosis: incorruptible heroes gave way to morally ambiguous antiheroes, reflecting the chaos, corruption, and crisis of values of the post-communist transition. Through textual and comparative analysis, this article demonstrates how Bulgarian crime fiction has maintained a national specificity while dialoguing with Western traditions, functioning as a literary barometer of the country's historical upheavals.

**Keywords:** Bulgarian crime fiction; spy novel; Avakum Zakhov; Andrei Gulyashki; genre literature.

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## ЗАПАДНИ ОБРАЗЦИ, ИЗТОЧНИ СЛЕДОВНИЦИ: БЪЛГАРСКАТА КРИМИНАЛНА ПРОЗА ОТ СОЦИАЛИЗМА КЪМ ПОСТСОЦИАЛИЗМА

**Резюме.** Тази статия анализира еволюцията на българската криминална литература от социалистическия период (1944 – 1989) до постсоциалисти-

ческата епоха, фокусирайки се върху творчеството на българския писател Андрей Гуляшки и върху различните елементи на криминалната проза като огледало на социополитическите трансформации на страната след 1989 г. По време на социализма автори като Андрей Гуляшки създават идеологизирани герои като Авакум Захов – социалистически аналог на Джеймс Бонд, които действат в рамките на твърдите наративни граници, наложени от социалистическия реализъм. Жанрът служи едновременно като пропаганден инструмент и като форма на контролирано бъгство от действителността. Сравнението между руския превод, верен на оригиналното произведение, и по-свободния английски превод на романа „Случаят в Момчилово“ демонстрира съществени различия. С падането на режима през 1989 г. детективската литература претърпява радикална метаморфоза: неподкупните герои отстъпват място на морално двусмислени антигерои, отразяващи хаоса, корупцията и кризата на ценностите на посткомунистическия преход. Чрез текстуален и сравнителен анализ тази статия демонстрира как българската криминална литература запазва национална специфика, като същевременно диалогизира със западните традиции, функционирайки като литературен барометър на историческите превратности на страната.

**Ключови думи:** българска криминална литература; шпионски роман; Авакум Захов; Андрей Гуляшки; жанрова литература

## Introduction

The detective novel today represents one of the most widely appreciated narrative forms internationally, with its multiple subgenres ranging from classic detective fiction to thrillers, from noir to spy novels. Although the founding fathers and most celebrated exponents of this genre are predominantly Western (from Edgar Allan Poe to Agatha Christie, from Arthur Conan Doyle to Raymond Chandler) Bulgaria has also contributed to the development of crime fiction, albeit along a peculiar path profoundly marked by the country's sociopolitical events. Bulgarian detective fiction indeed constitutes a fascinating case study of how a literary genre can reflect and simultaneously influence a nation's transformations, initially developing within rigid ideological boundaries during socialism (1944-1989) and subsequently undergoing a radical metamorphosis with the fall of the regime.

## The Bulgarian Literary Context in the First Half of the Twentieth Century and the Rise of the Socialist Detective Novel

Before analyzing the development of socialist detective fiction, it is necessary to understand the preceding Bulgarian literary context. As Vanya Yakova (Yakova 2022) highlights in her study, in the first half of the twentieth century Bulgaria remained substantially isolated from the main currents of international crime literature. Despite their worldwide fame,

authors such as Agatha Christie, Graham Greene, Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and G.K. Chesterton were ignored or published only partially and with decades of delay compared to their international affirmation. This lack of translations was due to various factors: genre prejudices, limited knowledge of the English language among publishers, conservative commercial choices, and problems related to copyright (Yakova 2022: 30). Bulgarian readers of the period between 1878 and 1948 were thus deprived of access to masterpieces of detective fiction, losing a fundamental part of the world literary heritage that could have constituted the basis for the development of an indigenous tradition of the genre.

With the establishment of the socialist regime in 1944, Bulgarian literature, including genre literature, was subjected to rigid ideological control. Socialist detective fiction had to conform to the principles of socialist realism, presenting detectives who embodied the values of the Communist party and criminals who represented "anti-socialist" or Western forces. However, despite these government-imposed limitations, some authors managed to create works of artistic value that, while formally respecting ideological guidelines, offered readers windows onto otherwise inaccessible worlds. In socialist Bulgaria, two closely related concepts were used to define the crime novel: *crime prose*, according to Svetlozar Igov's definition, and the *spy novel*. Since the ideology of the period established that in victorious socialist society there could not exist conditions for crime, and that any violation of the law was necessarily linked to external elements or remnants of the bourgeois past, the true classic crime novel could not develop in Bulgaria. The figure of the private detective typical of the English tradition found no space: the detective had to be in the service of the State security services. Consequently, the spy novel prevailed, where crime was always connected with political threats against the regime (Фадел 2021: 103 – 104).

Violation of the law could only be accidental or caused by remnants of the "previous regime," by citizens not re-educated in socialist norms, or by agents of enemy states. The latter were divided into sympathizers of capitalism and local or foreign persons paid by capitalist espionage agencies. As Trendafilov emphasizes, the key characteristics in Bulgarian crime literature of the socialist period resided primarily in the plot and characters. The "bad guys" did not kill for money, women, fame, or for the pleasure of transgression. Their function was ideological. These were "spies" or "saboteurs," sent from some location beyond the border to commit crimes in Bulgaria with the aim of compromising national socialism or stealing one of its precious assets. Thieves and murderers were remnants of the bourgeois past or agents sent by enemy foreign forces. This is linked to the fact that

throughout the communist period, detective literature categorically shifted responsibility for crime to outside the country, since it could not derive from the conditions and rules of the socialist system itself. On the contrary, the "good guys," secret agents often aided by local police, were those who perceived in time the infernal moves of the enemy and thwarted their plans (Трендафилов 2007: 111). The State's attitude toward the criminal was also different: in socialism, the criminal was re-educated rather than punished as occurred in Western novels (Фадел 2021: 112).

### **The Rise of the Socialist Spy Novel**

After the mid-1950s, certain strictly regulated forms of crime representation once again became possible in Bulgaria. As is well known, the emergence of the new Bulgarian detective novel—developed entirely within the framework of socialist realism—is associated with the names of Pavel Vezhinov, Andrey Gulyashki, and Bogomil Rainov. The revival of the genre is commonly attributed to these three major figures. In particular, A. Gulyashki and B. Rainov enriched the genre with new forms, not only through a distinctly different ideological and human orientation, but also through the richness of its artistic texture (Аретов 2007: 202). However, the claim made by some scholars that the genre did not exist prior to the April Plenum of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party in 1956 is inaccurate (Аретов 2007: 203).

The spy novel genre received immediate support from the regime, and the first works were published by publishing houses such as "People's Youth" (Народна младеж). Cinema also played a fundamental role, with the creation of films based on secret agents such as Avakum Zakhov and Emil Boev. The cinematic and literary wave related to secret agents in Bulgaria did not represent an isolated phenomenon: its rise occurred in parallel with that of the Soviet Union, particularly after the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU in 1956 (Фадел 2021: 104).

The narrative of the spy novel centres on the concept of *spy mania*, which is part of a broader phenomenon termed "enemy mania." This concept evolved into a fundamental element of the communist mentality. It is crucial to remember that not only the Party but also many citizens had a need for it, as it provided a sense of purpose to their lives. The espionage element was imported into Bulgaria from the Soviet Union and is perceived and depicted as a major theft or sabotage—that is, as an attempt to steal or destroy significant state assets: mineral deposits and dams, scientific discoveries,

technical projects (most often bearing the "Made in USSR" label), etc. (Аретов 2007: 206).

The legitimatation of the genre was fueled by the ideological principle that espionage could serve as an educational means and defense of the socialist cause. In the approval of the genre, ample space was dedicated to the figure of the secret agent, who represented a perfect concretization of the character required by socialist realism: only this type of hero could fully manifest his dedication and patriotism toward the socialist homeland.

A fundamental theoretical contribution came from the monograph *The Black Novel* by Bogomil Rainov, the writer and creator of the secret agent Emil Boev. The monograph was divided into two parts: the first traced a panorama of crime literature, the second analyzed the spy novel (Фадел 2021: 110). Rainov's conception of crime was close to Lenin's: crime represented not a biological but a social phenomenon, determined by social conflicts that exerted influence on the individual's psyche and behavior. Only when these conflicts ceased would crime also lose ground. Furthermore, it must be recalled that according to the ideology of that period, crimes and their perpetrators are in principle impossible in a socialist society; all negative phenomena within it are linked to foreign intelligence agencies or the actions of "former" people (Аретов 2007: 204). Through his novels, Rainov sought to transform the spy novel into a means capable of re-educating social classes and praising the defenders of the homeland.

### **Andrei Gulyashki and the Birth of Avakum Zakhov**

The genre of the Bulgarian spy novel was introduced in the early 1960s by writer and playwright Andrei Gulyashki (1914-1995), one of the most significant authors of the socialist period (Hashamova, Ivanova-Sullivan 2012: 123). Gulyashki is famous for having created the character of Avakum Zakhov, the protagonist of a series of novels that constituted the literary saga *The Adventures of Avakum Zakhov*. The author began working on the cycle of novels and idealizing the character in the late 1950s, making him appear for the first time in 1960 in the novel *The Momchilovo Case* (Гуляшки 1990). Andrei Gulyashki's saga *The Adventures of Avakum Zakhov* was considered, from the moment of its creation, among the most representative works of Bulgarian prose (Аретов 2007: 215). Furthermore, numerous scholars unequivocally associate the very beginnings of Bulgarian detective literature with the name of A. Gulyashki.

Zakhov represents the archetype of the socialist detective: an agent of the Bulgarian secret services, loyal to the party, incorruptible, and endowed

with acute intelligence. Through this character, Gulyashki managed to create a socialist counterpart to James Bond, giving life to spy stories set predominantly in Bulgaria. Toncho Zhechev, an important scholar of Bulgarian literature, wrote regarding Gulyashki's character that there was much of Sherlock Holmes, but that he was a new socialist Sherlock Holmes, full of ideas and inspiration, spiritual refinement and knowledge" (Hashamova, Ivanova-Sullivan 2012: 123).

### ***The Momchilovo Case and the Structural Elements of the Socialist Spy Novel***

*The Momchilovo Case* is the first novel in the series dedicated to Avakum Zakhov and introduces for the first time the figure of the socialist secret agent, a sort of Balkan James Bond. The story begins on an August night with the assault on the sentry Stoyan in the village of Momchilovo, south of the border with NATO countries. The sentry was guarding the headquarters of a geological expedition, from whose office a map containing vital military information is stolen along with a large sum of money. The motive seems clear: the expedition has discovered a deposit of Linnaeite, a rare mineral of military interest.

On the same night, and also the evening before, near Momchilovo the activity of an ultra-short wave radio station is detected exchanging encrypted messages with another station across the border. After the discovery of fingerprints, a towel soaked in chloroform, and a cigarette butt at the crime scene, the village schoolmaster, Metodi Parashkevov, is arrested. Avakum Zakhov, about to leave for a vacation on the shores of the Black Sea, is called back by his superiors to investigate the case together with local investigator Kovachev.

While Kovachev immediately suspects that Parashkevov is the culprit, Zakhov recognizes that the teacher is actually innocent and that the evidence has been intentionally planted to frame him. Zakhov therefore decides to infiltrate the village undercover and, with the help of his friend Anastasi Bukov, a veterinarian, and some inhabitants, manages to solve the mystery. The culprit turns out to be the chief geologist of the expedition, Boyan Icherenski, a cover name for Ilari Stratev, a spy for the British secret services.

Regarding the description of the socialist spy novel, Bogomil Rainov's division into two subgenres is significant: on one hand espionage, on the other counterespionage. Between the 1960s and the second half of the 1980s, two series of novels are developed in Bulgarian literature constructed according to the typical model of the crime genre: different plots with a common central hero. Except that at the center of events is not the traditional

detective, but the secret agent. Gulyashki's novels deal primarily with counter-espionage, presenting the struggle against enemies within the country (Фадел 2021: 125).

Gulyashki's works satisfied the public's desire for detective fiction in an era when detective literature was substantially impossible, while simultaneously filling the gap in the history of the genre in Bulgaria. Despite the orientation towards different variants of the genre of crime fiction, the early Bulgarian detective works of the socialist period are dominated by certain common characteristics in their depiction of the investigation. Almost without exception, a key place is occupied by questions concerning the verification of alibis and, especially, the material evidence left at the crime scene—fingerprints, footprints, torn buttons, broken watches, etc. These are all elements of the Holmesian model, which is connected to Western environments, traditions, and investigative techniques—forms that by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century had become stereotyped on a global scale. Some of these elements are also present in *The Momchilovo Case*. However, for the young Bulgarian audience, which was cut off from foreign models and unfamiliar with older editions, all of this appeared exciting. (Аретов 2007: 210). Gulyashki's novels also follow the conventions of original detective fiction, namely the mystery to be solved in which the crime is unmasked (Fadel 2017: 12). As in *The Momchilovo Case*, the crime was committed before the beginning of the narration and the story concerns the solution of an enigma that is traditionally revealed at the end of the novel.

To bring his novels closer to detective reading, Gulyashki often avoids inserting crimes of an explicitly political character (Фадел 2021: 132). For example, in *The Momchilovo Case*, the violation of the law is configured in a broken window, the theft of a secret sketch and money, and an assaulted militiaman, rather than in acts of direct political sabotage.

The novels featuring Zakhov are distinguished by their ability to combine elements of propaganda with compelling narration. In his adventures, the enemies are typically Western agents or internal traitors. However, the language of the Bulgarian communist spy novel is devoid of the most annoying aspects of works of the era: the repetition of the same formulas and endless testimonies of loyalty to the regime and its leaders. The novel about secret agents aspires to be considered a serious work of art, and the idea around which it attempts to unify the public is not communism, nor the communist party, nor the proletariat, but the Homeland.

Bulgarian communist espionage fiction perceives the Homeland as constantly threatened, attacked from outside as from within. Saboteurs and spies wear different masks: they are foreign diplomats, Bulgarian scientists,

recruited emigrants (Fadel 2017: 13). This is the case of *The Momchilovo Case*, where the spy and saboteur is the Bulgarian emigrant Ilari Stratev, working undercover with the name Boyan Icherenski, recruited by the British secret services.

The figure of the traitor is central to the spy novel. Traitors are divided into two groups: characters unfaithful to the homeland through confusion or momentary weakness, and irreducible and radical enemies. This latter type, the radical, often appears amoral. The antagonist of *The Momchilovo Case*, the saboteur Ilari Stratev, does not hesitate to marry his stepsister Viktoriya, daughter of his father's second marriage, in order to hide his own identity. This framework also encompasses the pedagogical intent of the spy novel: to show that traitors are a deviation from the normal condition and from morality (Fadel 2017: 14). However, the motif of incest as an element discrediting negative characters is extremely unusual for Bulgarian literature of that time (Апетов 2007: 220).

### **The Character of Avakum Zakhov: Between Tradition and Innovation**

The high regard for *The Adventures of Avakum Zakhov* was due to its formal style. The series doesn't stick strictly to the detective genre but mixes in other storytelling elements. These include long detours featuring the character Anastasi Bukov, Avakum's love life and memories, the hero's aging, descriptions of nature, and scenes from life in the Rhodope mountains or artistic circles. All these elements connect the Avakum Zakhov novels to other literary genres. What's historically important is that in this early period of socialist realism, the detective genre did not yet insist on being pure and self-contained. Furthermore, it's worth noting that similar digressions are also found in the hugely influential James Bond series by Ian Fleming and this let suppose that Andrei Gulyashki was clearly familiar with some of Fleming's works (Апетов 2007: 216).

Avakum Zakhov represents a variant of the classic detective inserted into the context of the Bulgarian Secret Services during the communist period. The character consciously reprises the canons of the traditional detective genre: like Sherlock Holmes, he is accompanied by a narrator-friend who recounts his adventures, smokes a pipe, possesses an intellectual passion (archaeology instead of violin), and masters the art of disguise. As in Conan Doyle's works, where the narrative voice is that of Holmes's companion, Dr. Watson, the adventures of Avakum Zakhov are also recounted by his friend, the young veterinarian Anastasi Bukov (Fadel 2017: 12). Bukov is depicted as a gentle, timid, and enchanted soul, which has

earned him the nickname "poet," although he does not compose poetry but only writes a diary from which the novels about Zakhov are presented as extrapolations (Трендафилов 2007: 117).

The Bulgarian secret agent also shares with the classic literary detective the fundamental characteristic of sentimental failure: he is a bachelor incapable of finding love (Фадел 2021: 128). His personality is articulated in a duality typical of the genre: on one hand existential dissatisfaction, solitude, and unfulfilled dreams of a different life (as an archaeologist or traveller), on the other, the instinctive and total activation when a case presents itself to be solved. This transformation takes him from a romantic and melancholic figure to a "rational animal," where investigative logic merges with predatory instinct in pursuing the enemies of the State.

However, unlike the traditional detective, Zakhov remains a figure in the shadows: while Holmes becomes a public celebrity, the Bulgarian secret agent maintains professional anonymity. Paradoxically, while having no secrets of his own, his mission consists of penetrating those of others. From a physical and character point of view, Zakhov combines elements of romantic imagery (curly blond hair, intellectual forehead, 180 cm tall with broad shoulders) with more prosaic traits (boxer's hands, emotional coldness), also manifesting negative aspects such as arrogance and opportunism that he exploits even in interpersonal relationships (Трендафилов 2007: 116).

Zakhov is not only an ideological symbol, but a character with his own psychological depth and cunning, who reflects on his own actions, sometimes showing moments of doubt and vulnerability. In the course of his adventures he even comes to clash with the famous British agent created by Fleming, although his name is never explicitly mentioned and every reference to 007 is modified by removing a zero, transforming him simply into 07.

In most of his missions, Zakhov confronts foreign spies or saboteurs, but always in the form of mysteries to be solved. His approach recalls that of Sherlock Holmes: he meticulously observes the smallest details and combines various observations to arrive at surprisingly accurate deductions. While Holmes smokes his pipe to reflect on clues and plays the violin in moments of deep perplexity, Zakhov enjoys his tobacco pipe and dedicates himself to cleaning or studying some archaeological artifact.

Moreover, Zakhov behaves like the first famous investigators in the history of the genre. Realizing the idea that in crime fiction literature connects with science, he is a man of knowledge, his legal profession is that of archaeologist, around him there are always books. The case presents itself as an enigma to be solved and, as a typical concretization of *ratio*, Zakhov formalizes it in an intelligence equation, as he does in *The Momchilovo*

*Case*, establishing known and unknown quantities to methodically solve the mystery (Фадел 2021: 167).

### **Ideological Contrast: Socialism versus Capitalism**

Gulyashki, as a representative of socialist realism, prefers realistic representation techniques. The story *The Momchilovo Case* follows the conventions of rural life prose: picturesque and sunny nature, colorful-speaking popular characters, beautiful and attractive women, spicy peppers, soft bread, and taverns. The "rural" prose presents the life of the socialist citizen that flows under the open sky, illuminated by the southern sun, slightly oriental (the novel develops at the Bulgarian-Turkish border), natural and convivial.

When speaking of enemies, however, Gulyashki changes tradition, resorting to the bourgeois urban novel. The house of the saboteur Icherenski is in semi-baroque style, the furniture bears the imprint of late baroque from the beginning of the century, the internal staircase is of red wood with polished columns and railings. Icherenski's sister, Viktoriya, has a delicate and weak face, while his wife has a withered expression (Фадел 2021: 125-126).

The contrast between the rural-socialist world and the capitalist-bourgeois one is made evident also through the description of places and individuals who frequent them. The new restaurant *Karabair* in the village of Momchilovo is described as the incarnation of the new in the inhabitants' lives: a modern building with wide windows, with buffet shelves that extend to the ceiling. However, at the sight of white tablecloths, the well-planed wooden floor, and the abundance of modernity, the inhabitants experience a sense of embarrassment and estrangement. The other tavern (Ilcho's tavern) is instead described as a low house, dilapidated, peeling from time and in poor condition. Yet, it is described as a much more cordial and welcoming place, frequented by honest and hardworking people, "real" ones, and therefore more preferable compared to the modern tavern, which appears cold and soulless.

The contrast is also exacerbated through the description of the managers of the two taverns and the dishes served. Through vividly sensory narration rich in local colours, the narrator contrasts the two gastronomic spaces to celebrate the genuineness and human warmth of the rustic tavern. The praise of simple but ardent food (like the "green flame tongues" peppers) and the figure of Marko Krumov, the manager with a jovial appearance and haiduk mustache, is charged with strong nostalgic and identity value, transforming the "old shack" into a symbol of authenticity.

The figure of the rustic inn manager is contrasted with that of the modern tavern director, who appears severe, dry, and with a distrustful gaze.

It is interesting to note how the rural, convivial, and serene environment is somehow contaminated by the arrival of the group of geologists from Sofia, headed by the spy Boyan Icherenski. The arrival of this group changes the atmosphere in Ilcho's tavern: the members of the group, accustomed to comforts, initially honor with their attention the clean and modern *Karabair*, also attracted by the radio and daily hot dishes.

Much of the narration is imbued with this type of exaltation of authentic values and simplicity, suggesting that the story is also a means of propaganda aimed at celebrating the virtues of a simple life and dissuading from the desire for capitalist luxuries present in the West.

### **Female Representation**

The world of detective and spy fiction presents itself as a primarily masculine territory. Unlike other literary strands, these genres offer limited space to the sentimental dimension that traditionally characterizes female characters. The emotional component, typically associated with the female world and considered fundamental for artistic appreciation, finds scarce welcome and valorization. In these narrative contexts, the dominant register privileges action and investigative rationality over affective dynamics. It is precisely when the spy abandons himself to his feelings that he fails, abandoning his cold reason.

Some of Gulyashki's novels do not include female protagonists at all. War, even when on the "silent front," has no female face. Gulyashki is a patriarchal author in all respects. However, the erotic theme appears in a very limited way. When speaking of sex, he is laconic and does not depart from good taste, but the patriarchal decorum of expression inevitably breaks down and then emerges what the narrator likes most in women: the body. The allusion to the theme of the breast is frequent and recalls the image of the immodest woman, as in the case of the ample bosom of the peasant Balabanica, local widow with whom Zakhov will spend the night during his mission (Фадел 2021: 145-146).

The avoidance of the question of the female body in Gulyashki, besides being a patriarchal trait, is proper to socialist literature: it, although not patriarchal in theory, tends to present a woman not as a being closed in her natural functions and in the family, but as a participant in the socialist world (worker, revolutionary, party leader) and not erotic. As one might expect, female characters are usually passive (Фадел 2021: 145). They do

not express their feelings, but only blush or smile, giving voice to their emotions through their eyes, as when Zakhov observes a woman whose eyes seem to smile, but deep down are sad.

This represents a cliché through which the narration seeks to arouse admiration for morality. No female image has an erotic emanation. The positive heroine in the literature of that period is devoid of any sensual charm: in her there is nobility, sense of responsibility, loyalty, courage, and dedication (Трендафилов 2007: 113). Just like the heroines of traditional male literature, also in Gulyashki women are connoted through beautiful eyes and a fragile and graceful character, like the widow of the forest ranger Maria, described as a "fragile and gracious creature" with "thin shoulders, sad blue eyes, and a small mouth," who recalls "the blonde dolls that are often given to little girls."

### No Man's Land as Narrative Space

*The Momchilovo Case*, like other novels centered on Zakhov, has common characters and the action develops in the same places, clearly showing an element also present in other espionage readings: life in socialist Bulgaria is generally serene, people have no material problems and coexist peacefully. However, the spy novel highlights the importance of inserting the action in a specific place for the genre: no man's land, a territory outside the law, the most suitable area for secret agent operations (Fadel 2017: 15). The events of *The Momchilovo Case* take place in the vicinity of the border (with Greece or Turkey), in a neutral zone, in the territory of encounter between two opposing social systems, where saboteurs plan to enter the motherland.

### International Diffusion and Translation Discrepancies

If the socialist reader had no idea of the existence of the novels about Bond, in England, the United States, France, Italy, and dozens of other capitalist countries, Avakum was well known. The French were the first to translate him from Bulgarian: the first novel was published in French with the title *Mission a Momchilovo* (Gouliachki, 1962; Tsvetanov, 2011). Translations into Russian and French of the various books focused on Avakum's espionage activity rapidly followed, arousing international interest, so much so that reviews and articles were written in French and English journals, such as *Le Figaro* and *Newsweek* (Tsvetanov, 2011).

During the Cold War, the figure of James Bond emerged as a quintessential icon of Western espionage fiction. In response, communist Bulgaria developed its own analogue: Agent Avakum Zakhov, conceived by

the writer Andrey Gulyashki. Zakhov's exploits resonated widely, and Gulyashki's contributions were highly esteemed by the Bulgarian regime. He was rewarded with an annual salary of 30,000 leva for the series, and the state security services even presented him with a jeep in recognition of his success. The popularity of the Zakhov character was so pronounced that plans were considered to produce a film adaptation for Western audiences. In 1966, Gulyashki traveled to London to negotiate with the publishers of Ian Fleming. Ultimately, however, the project failed to materialize for several reasons. Bulgarian authorities harbored concerns that the narrative could be altered to criticize the communist system. Simultaneously, British publishers declined to permit the use of the Bond character in a new novel and dismissed Gulyashki's manuscript, written specifically for the British market, as insufficiently compelling and of poor literary quality. Consequently, the ambitious attempt to introduce the Bulgarian hero to a global cinematic audience faltered, and the Zakhov series concluded definitively in 1976 (Klub Z, 2021).

However, comparing the Russian translation, more faithful to the Bulgarian original, and the English-language one with the title *Avakum Zakhov's Mission*, several significant discrepancies can be found. The presence of such divergences could be due to the fact that the English version was translated from French rather than from the original Bulgarian version.

A significant example emerges in the scene where Avakum and the widow Balabanica find themselves in front of a hearth. In the English translation, the scene is charged with sensuality and visual ambiguity: the woman is observed by the secret agent as she leans forward, with her skirt lifted and calves that "shine like copper in the firelight," rich in elements and gestures that appear intimate, almost sensual (Gulyashki 1969: 124). On the contrary, in the Russian version the tone becomes more sober and pragmatic and the atmosphere is more restrained. Avakum appears as a dominant and moderately austere figure, without any seductive play. Avakum appears as a man in full control of his emotions and impulses. The woman's bodily details (the "robust" legs, the wet apron from which steam rises) (Гуляшки 1990) maintain a real and less idealized dimension. This shows how the Western imagery differs, more oriented toward sensual individuality, from the Eastern-Soviet one, more contained, in which intimacy translates into an implicit communal act and not into an explicit erotic tension.

Another substantial difference concerns the narrative style: while in the Bulgarian and Russian versions the story is told in the first person by the veterinarian Bukov, a friend and colleague of Zakhov, in the English translation all the narration is in the third person through the voice of a

narrator external to the plot. Moreover, the name of Anastasi Bukov never occurs in the English translation, where the character is named only through the simple label of veterinarian.

The ending of the work also presents a completely divergent scene. In the English translation, the final scene is constructed as a moment of romantic intimacy between Zakhov and the widow Balabanica, with evident sensory and emotional elements: the visual detail of her embroidered dress and transparent blouse, the warm atmosphere of the fire, refined food, wine and brandy, and the proposal of a vacation on the Black Sea. There is physical contact, direct dialogue, and evident erotic tension. The hero does not appear as an investigator in full control of emotions, but as a man capable of experiencing desire, vulnerability, and affection (Gulyashki 1969: 167-168).

On the contrary, in the Russian version the scene is transformed into a collective and idealized episode, devoid of references to intimacy between the characters. The atmosphere is that of a communal and sober celebration: a fire is lit, potatoes are cooked under the ashes, there is singing. Balabanica is present but no longer as an eroticized female figure: she sings traditional songs and participates in a collective convivial moment. Zakhov is cheerful but wrapped in thoughts. The scene concludes with a declaredly optimistic tone, in which the narrator Bukov's memory is linked to the future industrialization of the region (the song of pickaxes and shovels), as if intimacy were replaced by socialist imagery of progress (Гуляшки 1990).

### **The Paradoxical Function of Socialist Detective Fiction**

Gulyashki's works perfectly illustrate the paradoxical function of socialist detective fiction: on one hand they reinforced official ideology, on the other they offered escapism and indirect access to forbidden realities. At its inception and in the subsequent years, the detective novel of socialist realism became virtually the only form of literature in which elements such as eroticism, the perverse, incest, and above all, the frightening and the horrific, could be introduced. Official ideology categorically labelled these elements as survivals from the past. Nonetheless, it also recognized, to some extent, the necessity of incorporating them into popular literature. While this fusion of elements is characteristic of crime and investigation stories in general, it was particularly conspicuous in the Bulgarian literature of that time, which lacked literary genres focused on the terrifying, the erotic, or the supernatural. It was for this precise reason that within the rigid confines of socialist realism, the detective novel acquired a unique status: it was the sole genre permitted to utilize elements that were forbidden in any other literary

context (Апетов 2007: 211). The creation of a true popular culture hero like Avakum Zakhov represented an important phase in the adaptation of the stylistic forms of Western popular culture to the needs of the socialist system. Zakhov, a solid, sophisticated figure with sarcasm similar to that of Holmes, deals with missions on the southern borders of NATO countries, that is, with Greece and Turkey. Zakhov also became a transmedia hero thanks to the Bulgarian television series *The Adventures of Avakum Zakhov*. This demonstrates how there was a certain tolerance on the part of the authorities of communist countries, which allowed the production of popular fiction using the literary and artistic forms of the Western model to develop the idea of a war against corruption, Western decadence, and enemies of the socialist homeland (Фадел 2021).

### **Other Exponents of Bulgarian Socialist Detective Fiction**

Besides Gulyashki, the panorama of crime fiction in socialist Bulgaria included authors such as Bogomil Rainov, creator of the agent Emil Boev, a sophisticated and complex character, who operates mainly abroad. While Zakhov represents the more orthodox socialist ideal, Boev shows greater moral ambiguity and modernist charm, reflecting the tensions between socialist tradition and Western attraction.

In Bulgarian socialist detective fiction there also existed more traditional detective fiction, set within the country and focused on more common crimes, which turn out to be a misunderstanding or an insignificant infraction (Апетов 2007: 207-208) These novels typically presented socialist policemen who solved cases with the help of the community, emphasizing values such as social cooperation and collective vigilance against antisocial behaviors. An example of such fiction is Vezhinov's novel *Следуме остават* (*The Traces Remain*) from 1954, in which a group of pioneer children and youths helps the police capture a group of saboteurs who refuse to participate in the "construction of socialism" (Fadel 2017: 10).

### **The Post-Socialist Transition: From Ideological Certainty to Moral Ambiguity**

With the fall of the socialist regime in 1989, Bulgaria went through a tumultuous transition period characterized by economic instability, growth of organized crime, and profound crisis of values. These changes radically transformed detective fiction, which moved away from previous models to tend toward more contemporary and problematic horizons.

A distinctive characteristic of the post-socialist period has been the confusion between reality and fiction, in which real crime, particularly organized crime, became so pervasive and dramatic as to render literary fiction almost superfluous. Journalists and writers began to document the activities of real criminal figures in works that blurred the boundaries between reportage and fiction. An emblematic example are Vulgar Novels by Hristo Kalchev, based on the life of well-known Bulgarian criminals, which sold thousands of copies (Hashamova, Ivanova-Sullivan 2012).

In this context, the distinction between crime fiction and crime non-fiction became increasingly blurred. The protagonists were no longer incorruptible socialist heroes like Zakhov, but morally ambiguous figures who reflected the ethical confusion of the transition period. Former socialist secret service agents, once heroes of the homeland, were now represented as cynical figures who used their skills to prosper in the new capitalist system, often through illicit activities or on the margins of legality.

Post-socialist fiction progressively abandoned the optimism and didacticism of the previous period to adopt a darker and more cynical tone. Themes such as corruption, violence, and moral degradation became central in popular fiction. The "forbidden" was no longer the decadent West from which to defend oneself, but the truth about the socialist past and the post-socialist present to be unveiled and confronted.

Authors such as Georgi Stoev created characters who live in a chaotic world where the old rules no longer apply and the new ones are not yet clearly established (Hashamova, Ivanova-Sullivan 2012). Antiheroes, often former members of the socialist state apparatus, mirror the disillusionment and cynical pragmatism that characterized the transition period. These characters operate in a moral gray zone, where the distinction between good and evil, between legal and illegal, between justice and personal vengeance becomes increasingly blurred.

Organized crime, a phenomenon practically absent or hidden in socialist fiction, becomes the central protagonist of the new literary panorama. Post-socialist novels describe a world in which the structures of criminal power intertwine with political and economic ones, creating a network of corruption that pervades every stratum of Bulgarian society. The loyal and incorruptible secret agent is replaced by the corrupt policeman, the former agent turned criminal, or the ordinary citizen forced to navigate a system where traditional morality no longer offers certain reference points.

## **The Gender Question in Post-Socialist Crime Fiction**

Another significant change concerned the representation of women, who from marginal or stereotyped figures in socialist novels acquired greater visibility and complexity, both as characters and as authors. Writers such as Daniela Velikova began to explore the genre from a female point of view, creating a decisive step toward greater visibility of women in the world of crime and law enforcement within Bulgarian literature (Hashamova, Ivanova-Sullivan 2012: 132). Female protagonists of the post-socialist period are no longer only the passive and fragile widows of Gulyashki, nor the workers dedicated to the socialist cause. Instead, more articulated and complex female figures emerge: women detectives, women criminals, victims who transform into avengers. These figures reflect the broader social changes in post-communist Bulgaria, where women had to redefine their role in a rapidly transforming society, often facing new forms of economic and social vulnerability, but also conquering new spaces of autonomy and agency.

A characterizing element of post-socialist Bulgarian crime fiction is the growing interest in sensationalism and in the documentation of real crimes. This phenomenon can be interpreted as a reaction to the censorship and idealized representation of reality typical of the socialist period. After decades in which crime was minimized or presented exclusively as an external threat, the Bulgarian public developed an almost insatiable hunger for "true" crime stories, for the raw and uncensored details of the violence and corruption that characterized the new post-socialist reality. This tendency led to the proliferation of works that occupy a hybrid space between investigative journalism, criminal biography, and fictionalized narrative. Many of these works focus on real figures of the Bulgarian underworld, presenting them with a mixture of moral condemnation and almost mythical fascination. The criminal becomes, paradoxically, a sort of post-modern antihero, a figure who embodies the total rejection of the rules of both the old socialist order and the new capitalist order.

## **Comparison Between the Two Periods: Continuities and Ruptures**

The passage from the idealized socialist detective to the corrupt antihero of the post-socialist period reflects the loss of the ideological and moral certainties that characterized the transition toward a market economy. Paradoxically, while socialist realism limited the creative freedom of authors, imposing rigid ideological and moral schemes, it nevertheless also stimulated sophisticated forms of narration that, through the figure of the detective-secret agent, allowed the exploration of otherwise inaccessible

worlds and offered the public forms of intellectual escapism within a controlled context.

In the post-socialist period, the creative freedom conquered initially led not so much to a flourishing of artistic experimentation as to an interest in sensationalism and in the documentation of real crime. The genre became more crude and direct, interested in real crimes and explicit violence, blurring the boundaries between fiction and judicial chronicle, between literature and pulp. If Avakum Zakhov represented a positive ideal, a model of behavior to emulate, post-socialist antiheroes rather represent a mirror of the contradictions and difficulties of society in transition, without offering solutions or clear reference models.

However, it would be reductive to view this evolution only as an impoverishment. Post-socialist crime fiction, while losing in some cases the narrative refinement and psychological complexity of the best examples of the previous period, gained in terms of realism, of the capacity to address taboo themes and to represent the moral complexity of contemporary life. If the socialist spy novel always had to conclude with the victory of good over evil, with the punishment of the traitor and the reaffirmation of the values of the socialist homeland, post-socialist crime fiction can afford ambiguous endings, where justice does not always triumph and where the distinction between victims and perpetrators becomes problematic.

### **The Pedagogical and Social Role: From Propaganda to Critical Interrogation**

An interesting aspect of the evolution of Bulgarian crime fiction concerns its pedagogical and social role. During the socialist period, as we have seen, the spy novel had a clear educational function: it had to teach readers to be vigilant against enemies of the homeland, to recognize traitors, to understand that deviation from the socialist moral norm inevitably led to ruin. The spy novel was a tool of propaganda, but also of socialization, which taught which values were considered positive and which behaviours were deplorable.

In the post-socialist period, this pedagogical function does not disappear, but is radically transformed. Crime fiction no longer offers moral certainties, but poses disturbing questions: how is it possible to build a just society when institutions are corrupt? How can one distinguish between justice and vengeance when the legal system is ineffective? Who are the real criminals in a society where former communist officials and new capitalist oligarchs divide power and wealth? In this sense, post-socialist crime fiction, while losing its direct propagandistic function, acquires a critical and

interrogative dimension that makes it perhaps more mature and complex from an intellectual point of view.

### **The International Dimension and Dialogue with Western Tradition**

Another significant aspect of the evolution of Bulgarian crime fiction concerns its relationship with the international traditions of the genre. During the socialist period, despite limitations in access to Western works, authors such as Gulyashki sought to create a synthesis between the conventions of classic detective fiction (Sherlock Holmes, Agatha Christie) and the ideological requirements of the regime. The result was a hybrid product that, while respecting the formal canons of socialist realism, incorporated elements of the Western detective tradition.

In the post-socialist period, with the opening of cultural borders and the availability of translations of contemporary Western authors, Bulgarian crime fiction has finally been able to dialogue freely with international trends in the genre. This led to the adoption of styles and themes typical of American noir, Scandinavian detective fiction, Anglo-American psychological thrillers. However, Bulgarian crime fiction has maintained its own specificity, linked to the particular history of the country and the specificities of the post-communist transition.

While classic American noir explored the contradictions of mature capitalism and contemporary Scandinavian detective fiction analyzes the cracks in the Nordic welfare state, post-socialist Bulgarian crime fiction focuses on the specific contradictions of a society in transition from one system to another, where elements of the old socialist order and the new capitalist order coexist, often in the most problematic and contradictory ways.

### **The Question of "No Man's Land" in the Two Periods**

An interesting element of continuity between the two periods concerns the importance of the space of "no man's land" as a privileged place of narrative action. In the socialist spy novel, as we have seen, no man's land was typically the border zone between Bulgaria and NATO countries, a liminal space where the two opposing ideological systems met and clashed (Fadel 2017: 15). This space had both a geographical and symbolic valence: it was the place where the external threat could penetrate the socialist homeland, but also the space where the secret agent could operate with greater freedom of action, outside the rigid conventions of ordinary social life.

In the post-socialist period, "no man's land" is no longer necessarily a zone of geographical border, but becomes a metaphor for the social and

moral space in which characters move. Post-communist Bulgaria in its entirety becomes a sort of "no man's land," an anomic space where the old rules no longer apply and the new ones are not yet established, where the boundary between legal and illegal, between moral and immoral, between right and wrong becomes increasingly difficult to trace. In this sense, if in the socialist novel "no man's land" was an exceptional space where extraordinary events took place, in the post-socialist novel it becomes the ordinary condition of existence.

### Conclusions

The evolution of Bulgarian crime fiction from the socialist to the post-socialist period offers a fascinating cross-section of the transformations that Bulgarian society has undergone over the last seventy years. During the socialist period, authors such as Andrei Gulyashki and Bogomil Rainov created idealized heroes who operated within a morally defined system, offering the public both forms of entertainment and tools of ideological propaganda. Figures like Avakum Zakhov embodied the values of the regime—patriotism, incorruptibility, dedication to the socialist cause—while maintaining elements of the classic detective tradition that made them literarily interesting and psychologically complex.

The paradox of Bulgarian socialist detective fiction lies in the fact that, despite being subjected to rigid ideological constraints, it managed to create works of a certain literary quality and to satisfy the public's desire for genre fiction, opening windows onto otherwise inaccessible worlds. The creation of characters like Zakhov and Boev represented an important adaptation of the forms of Western popular culture to the needs of the socialist system, demonstrating a certain capacity for cultural mediation even in a context of ideological control.

With the fall of the regime in 1989, Bulgarian crime fiction underwent a radical transformation that reflects the chaos and uncertainty of the transition period. Post-1989 writers had to confront a more complex and morally ambiguous reality, where the incorruptible heroes of the past gave way to corrupt antiheroes or to ordinary citizens trying to survive in a system devoid of certain reference points. The passage from the socialist detective to the post-socialist antihero reflects the loss of ideological and moral certainties, but also the acquisition of greater expressive freedom and a more mature critical capacity.

Contemporary Bulgarian detective fiction thus reflects the contradictions of a society suspended between the disappointments of the

socialist past and the frustrations of the capitalist present. If the socialist spy novel celebrated the victory of good over evil and the protection of the homeland from external threats, post-socialist crime fiction explores the gray zones of morality, questioning the nature of justice in a society profoundly marked by corruption and crisis of values.

In both periods, however, crime fiction has played an important role in the Bulgarian cultural panorama, offering readers not only entertainment, but also tools to understand and interpret the surrounding social reality. If during socialism this occurred through the celebration of official values and the demonization of the external enemy, in post-socialism it occurs through the critical representation of the contradictions of society in transition. In both cases, crime fiction confirms itself as a genre capable of functioning as a mirror, however deformed or idealized, of the society that produces it.

The analysis of Bulgarian crime fiction through these two historical periods thus reveals not only the evolution of a literary genre, but also the profound transformations of an entire society, its values, its fears, its contradictions. From the secret agent Avakum Zakhov who protected the socialist homeland from Western threats, to the corrupt antiheroes who navigate post-communist chaos, Bulgarian crime fiction has accompanied and reflected the troubled journey of a nation through one of the most tumultuous periods of its modern history.

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