

ASSESSMENT 1

The communist takeover of Bulgaria, 1944-48

The occupation of Bulgaria by the Red Army in September, 1944 was a direct result of the entry of the country in the 2nd World War three years earlier on the side of the Axis power.

Mussolini's foolish attack on Greece in 1940, forced Hitler to send the army to help the Italian dictator. Under German pressure Bulgaria was considering joining the Axis powers and allowing German troops to pass Bulgarian territory on their way to Greece.

The Allies were so alarmed by this turn of events that in January 1941 President Roosevelt at the request of London sent to Sofia his special representative Bill Donovan to explain to the Bulgarian prime-minister Bogdan Filov and to the Tsar what would be the consequences of such action.¹ That verbal intervention did little to convince the Bulgarian government who had a way more pressing problem: a 100,000 strong German army on its northern border ready to march through Bulgaria either as ally or as an occupier. Ultimately the Bulgarians joined the Tripartite Pact and allowed the Germans to use their territory to invade Greece.

¹ Michael M.Boll, *Cold war in the Balkans: American foreign policy and the emergence of Communist Bulgaria, 1943-1947* (Lexington, Ky: University Press of Kentucky, 1984),p.8.

Fast forward to 1944, the Germans were losing the war badly and the Red Army after quickly subduing the Romanian resistance was at the Bulgarian borders. On September 5, 1944 the Soviet Union declared war on Bulgaria.

It is important to note that by that time at Churchill's proposal the Brits have already divided the world with the Soviets on spheres of influence although the British-Russian percentage agreement was not to be taken too seriously at least according to London. British foreign secretary, Anthony Eden stated in a letter that "too much attention should not be paid to percentages which are of symbolic character only."²

A *coup d'etat* in Sofia on September 9, 1944 brought a new government of the so called Fatherland Front. This was a loose coalition of parties with very different platforms led by the Bulgarian communists behind which was lurking the ominous shadow of the Soviet occupation force.

During the first few months after the arrival of the Red Army even the Bulgarian communists were not sure of the Stalin's intentions. The Russians were following a policy of strict neutrality in regard to the political situation in the country and the domestic attempts for purely communist uprising were not instigated by Kremlin.

² Marietta Stankova, *Bulgaria in British Foreign Policy, 1943-1949* (London: Anthem Press 2014), p.75.

For the Soviets the most pressing issue was how to use the Bulgarian army to help them defeat the Nazis. The Americans tried to do that but now the Russians had the distinctive advantage of being able to dictate to the government in Sofia where in key positions they had the Bulgarian communists. The Soviets did not intent to abandon the idea of establishing a communist regime in Bulgaria but that was not their main priority during the first months of the occupation. Thus, on September 10, 1944 one day after the coup the new Bulgarian government declared war on Germany.³

In his dispatches to the State Department, Barnes, the US representative in Bulgaria proved to be very perceptive and very well informed about the political situation in the country. For example as early as January 1945 he shared with the State Department the suspicion that the National Committee of the Fatherland Front "dominated by the prison-hardened and Russian trained female secretary Zola Dragoicheva" had been used to the Soviets as an instrument to transform the country into a communist dictatorship.⁴

In the meantime Georgi Dimitrov the leader of the Bulgarian communists who spent the last 22 years in exile in Moscow was ordered by Stalin to return to Bulgaria and run for a seat in the Parliament. In his diary, he could not contain his excitement that he

³ Boll, *Cold War in The Balkans*, p.62.

⁴ United States Representative in Bulgaria Barnes to the Secretary of State, 8 January 1945, *Foreign relations of the United States: diplomatic papers, 1945. Europe, Volume IV* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1945), p.139.

was going home at last.⁵ In Bulgaria he would have a direct telephone line with Moscow and also Soviet security detail to make sure he is was not assassinated.

By that time the Soviets were sure that they could wrestle control of Bulgaria from the West. Dimitrov's task was to transform the country into a communist state and deal with the opposition so he did not waste much time reminiscing about the past. Although formally he did not held any position in the government as the leader of the Communist party Dimitrov was the one who exercised absolute control over the affairs of the state. For the time being the communists maintained the pretenses of supporting democracy by allowing freedom of press and tolerating other independent organizations but in reality the intimidation and harassment were at all-time high.

The elimination of the opposition was not the only step taken to transform Bulgaria. There was a nationalization of the big factories, currency reform and purges in the universities, the army, the church and the government administration. The Parliament enacted a new Constitution. In summary no segment of the Bulgarian society was left untouched. By 1948 the Iron Curtain had cut Bulgaria from the rest of the civilized world.

⁵ Georgi Dimitrov and Ivo Banac, *The diary of Georgi Dimitrov, 1933-1949* (New Haven: Yale University Press,2003)p.389.

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