

Inside the tremendous tobacco industry of Haskovo in the 20th century

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Abstract. The article presents a short extract from the monography *The Untold Stories of Haskovo Merchants and Fabricants* which is the first complete and detailed economic history of Haskovo region from 19th to 21st century, with great contribution to the local and national history. The article follows the history from the introduction of tobacco processing and cigarette making to the tobacco worker strikes in 1953, which is the most essential part of the history of the tremendous tobacco industry of Haskovo. The subject has been elaborated little and unsufficiently by Bulgarian historians and quite well by foreign ones, more or less correct in the historical data and detail, but competently captured the local culture and lifestyle in spirit of time.

Keywords: tobacco industry, Haskovo, Herzog and Co., Georgi Ioannou, State Tobacco Monopoly

The tobacco past of Haskovo, with its beautiful tobacco warehouses, has left a deep mark in the hearts of its citizens over the years. Thousands of tobacco workers and several hundred merchants, experts and commission agents marked the history of the city in the romantic but troubled times of three devastating wars. It is no coincidence that the tobacco industry was one of the fastest growing and most dynamic in the city. From the middle of the 19th century, tobacco production became the main livelihood for many agricultural producers from Northern and Aegan Thrace. The aromatic Oriental tobacco grew in the fertile soils suitable for this crop and turned the biggest city in that area - Haskovo into a centre of trade and production of high-quality tobacco. Busy merchants and shrewd agents bargained, processed and exported the precious golden leaves to the domestic and foreign markets. The following study reviews the history of tobacco growing and processing in the area of Haskovo and the turning of the region into one of the centres of tobacco trade with Germany. The great heights in production, quality and export was followed by a crushing decay after the 1944 coup, ending in a disgraceful crush of worker strikes in 1953 which took place both in Plovdiv and Haskovo.

Entered the life of the Bulgarian population at the end of the 17th century, tobacco began to be grown in small quantities near the mouths of the rivers Maritsa, Arda, Struma, Mesta and Drin. In the Rhodope valleys and some parts of Rila Mountain, tobacco found even more favourable conditions than in its own homeland - America. Therefore, the tobacco produced in these places held the record in world markets as fragrant and sweet to spice up the blend in the cigarette industry (Chanev 1921, 1-6). Oriental tobacco was small-leafed, milder flavoured and contained less nicotine. Its sweet taste quickly conquered the world of temptations and pleasures that the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century offered to the new, modern society.

An industry so powerful, so great to change the course of history

In the 1880s, tobacco in Bulgaria was still produced in smaller quantities. At that time, in addition to smoking, the plant was also used for treatment, but in the last decade of the 19th century, it became a major driver of rapid economic development. Encouraged by the higher demand of Oriental tobacco, farmers in Northern and Aegean Thrace increased their production. While in 1883 the yield of tobacco in the region was 296,000 kg, in 1890 it grew to 391,784 kg, to reach 800,383 kg in 1893 (RMH - Haskovo, Modern History Fund, inv. 1892).

The continuous enlargement of tobacco crops and the quality tobacco produced in the region was seen as a good opportunity for local merchants to direct their capital to the tobacco trade, which provided fast and sustainable profits. In 1884, three Tobacco trade houses were established in the county. At the same time, small and medium-sized tobacco factories opened in the city of Haskovo (RMH - Haskovo, Modern History Fund, inv. 1892, p. 20-27). Gradually, the tobacco industry became fundamental to the economic life of the city and region. The cover story in the *Tyutyun (Tobacco)* magazine from 1921 defined the importance of tobacco production in Bulgaria as “too big” in the economic life of the country. The author pointed out a number of advantages of its cultivation, such as “*the possibility to use small pieces of land on which other crops were difficult to grow. Its processing required the least and cheapest agricultural equipment and the work was relatively easy and provided year-round employment for farmers’ families. And most importantly - tobacco has a quick return on investment*” (Chanev 1921, 1-6).

In 1884, shortly before the Bulgarian Union, the local firm Pulevi Brothers opened a cigarette factory under the name *Petel* (Cock). Located in the city bazaar, initially in the building of an old barn, the factory was described in the memoirs of Atanas Popov and Dobri Ivanov, tobacco experts in the first half of the 20th century, as a dark room of a hundred square meters, with tinted windows, chained with wire mesh. At the start, the factory employed 20-30 people who worked in unhygienic conditions, without ventilation, in an air full of odors and harmful fumes. Workers’ wages ranged between BGN 0.50 and BGN 2, with skilled workers receiving BGN 2 on a 12-hour working day, and the unskilled - from BGN 0.50 to BGN 1.50. The primitive production was carried out exclusively by hand, and the technical equipment consisted of 4-5 mortars -

wooden gutters covered with sheet metal and a guillotine, which was used to cut tobacco leaves. The process was called “drobene” (cutting) and was an important part of the tobacco processing of that time. Next to the mortars, the cut tobacco was “blended” by hand, whereby the dry tobacco was thrown upwards to undust. The filling department was located in one corner of the room. There, ready-to-market tobacco was packaged and cigarettes were made in hand-made coils (RMH - Haskovo, Modern History Fund, inv. 1964). Cigarettes under the brand *Petel* were offered on the domestic market (Fig. 1).

The Pulevi Brothers’ ‘Petel’ Factory was the first cigarette factory in Haskovo and one of the first in Bulgaria. A little earlier in Plovdiv, Tomasyan’s cigarette factory opened in 1872 installed the first cigarette-

making machine. The cigarettes *Tomasyan* successfully found a market in Western Europe, where the brand was highly valued. The offered paper cigarettes, for which only the Oriental tobacco was suitable, started a true revolution among the tobacco consumers in Europe. By World War I the Europeans had abandoned the old-fashioned pipes and smelly cigars, and replaced them with the cigarette holders as an invaried fashion accessory, especially for the ladies. The main buyers of Oriental tobacco, Germany and Austro-Hungary, very quickly adopted the use of this specific and mild-flavoured tobacco brand and opened their own cigarette factories, advertising the fashionable smoking throughout Europe and the large Russian Empire. The growing demand for high-quality tobacco from Thrace and Macedonia looked like a promising future for the economies of Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey.



Fig. 1. The building of ‘Petel’ Factory owned by Pulevi Brothers, 1960s

The great foreign competition: Company M. L. Herzog and Co. and American Tobacco

The high-quality Oriental tobacco grown in Thrace along with the great trading conditions attracted the attention of the Austro-Hungarian merchant, the nobleman Baron Mór Lipót Herzog, and in 1899 he sent his nephew Aladar Ottai-Oeserreicher to Bulgaria as his representative. The connection was made through a company’s local business associate, Hanumolou, who was instructed in a letter to meet with Aladar in Haskovo and introduce him to a trusted person

to help him with the purchase of tobacco and the construction of a warehouse. Realizing the great opportunities that Haskovo offered, Hanumolou embarked on the venture himself and helped Aladar buy some land in the outskirts of the city (RMH - Haskovo, Modern History Fund, inv. 1964). The first warehouse of Herzog and Co. was a massive three-storey building located by the road to Kayadzhik (today's Dimitrovgrad). A few years later the company built another, larger warehouse on the road to Harmanli.

In the first decade of the 20th century, M. L. Herzog and Co. was the largest tobacco company in the city, with a share of 70% of the total tobacco production. In 1905-1906, Haskovo tobacco companies bought and processed 1,620,611 kg of tobacco, whereas M. L. Herzog and Co. held the first place with 851,355 kg, followed by the branch of "Commecial" with 276,440 kg. In terms of sales of processed tobacco during the same period, again the first place was held by M. L. Herzog and Co., which exported 576,481 kg and sold 58,290 kg on the domestic market. The export from Haskovo was directed to Egypt, Austria, Germany, and Turkey.

For the time of Aladar Ottai's stay in Haskovo, local people remembered him as the largest and most important tobacco merchant in the city. He spent around 30 years in Bulgaria and often visited Haskovo, but his name was mentioned long after his departure. He left two large warehouses and numerous tobacco experts for the city. Remote from the centre of Europe, both physically and culturally, Haskovo welcomed the first European investor with curiosity and a little hostility. To the surprise of its citizens, the eccentric foreigner brought his two St. Bernard dogs which loafed about the tobacco warehouses all the time. Then the people of Haskovo, who often came up with colourful nicknames, began to call "*all the phlegmatic idlers of that time Aledar Köpek*" (Aledar's dogs) (Arnaudov 1965, 36).

Not only in Southeastern Thrace, but throughout Bulgaria, tobacco production began a dynamic development in 1903. Then the great buyer of Oriental tobacco American Tobacco appeared and established its trading offices in the former Ottoman lands. The company founded in 1890 by James Duke purchased huge quantities of Oriental tobacco, generously prepaying for the producers' tobacco crops. That is why local people called 1903 the "*American year*", and the period from 1908 to 1911 the "*American rain of gold*" (Behar 1927, 273).

The competition of the great foreign companies turned out quite favourable and stimulating for the local tobacco merchants. Along with Pulevi Brothers, there were others who started succesful tobacco business in the late 19th century. One of them, Georgi Ioannou, born in Haskovo grecoman¹, took up travelling around 1890 to the Harmanli and Kardzhali regions to inspect the tobacco, establish contacts with producers and collect samples. He then went to Thessaloniki, where he offered locally produced tobacco to the Commercial

¹ Bulgarian nationals with Greek identity were very common for the second half of the 19th century.

Compagny of Salonica Limited and managed to negotiate favourable terms of delivery. At this point, the foreign company refused his proposal to open a factory with a warehouse in Haskovo. Instead, they started purchasing processed tobacco from G. Ioannou as their agent. The arrival of Aladar Ottai and the plans of M. L. Herzog and Co. to establish a company branch in Haskovo caused serious concern to G. Ioannou and he reported in Thessaloniki on the appearance of European competition. In response, he received an immediate order to look for a place to build a warehouse. Having already bought a piece of land in the city centre for an office and a house, G. Ioannou ceded it for the construction of a tobacco warehouse and opened an official representation of the Greek Commercial Compagny of Salonica Limited (Fig. 2). Managed by Georgi Ioannou himself, in a few years the Haskovo branch of the company expanded its production and increased the number of its employees (RMH - Haskovo, Modern History Fund, inv. 1964).

The rapid and steady growth of tobacco industry can be seen in the export. While in 1890 the country exported 384,520 kg, in 1910 it was already 2,375,000 kg, and in 1917 the export increased 6 times - 13,866,000 kg. Government revenue from taxes were growing, and for a workforce, which was physically unfit for other work, tobacco processing turned out to be quite convenient. It is no coincidence that so many women and children started working in the tobacco warehouses. The number of tobacco workers in the country in 1917 was about 15,000. 1/3 of them were employed in Haskovo (Chanev 1921, 1-6).



Fig. 2. Commercial Company managed by Georgi Ioannou, 1922

The development of the tobacco industry in Haskovo in the early 20th century was accompanied by the construction of larger and more specific industrial buildings. Each building had its own name and unique architecture, corresponding to the capabilities, character and aesthetic views of the owner. The newly built tobacco warehouses quickly changed the architectural appearance of the city and especially its central part, the “bazaar”, which in the early 20th century was a preferred place for construction by tobacco merchants. There Yordan Mantov and his sons, Dimitar Hadzhitonev, Dukovi Brothers, Nikola D. Kovachev, Pulevi Brothers, Todorovi Brothers, Mehmed Boyadzhiolu, Mihal Haralanov and many others raised their beautiful warehouses.

During World War I, Bulgaria lost some of its foreign clients, but became an exclusive supplier of tobacco to Germany, Austria and Hungary, which purchased over 10 million kg per year. The share of exported tobacco in 1917 and 1918 represented 70-80% of the total export of the country. The tobacco industry was attracting more and more resources and capitals, and the golden mirage of tobacco was taking over the city with promises of easy profits and quick investment returns. In addition, the war between Greece and Turkey that broke out in 1919 took them out of the international tobacco market. Bulgaria got a great chance to sell its tobacco without competition. In this favourable market environment, tobacco companies in Bulgaria were multiplying, and merchants were competing to purchase tobacco from the villages. In 1919, there were 24 operating tobacco warehouses in Haskovo, most of them financed with foreign capital. The poor financial opportunities of some local merchants did not allow them to respond adequately to the present market conditions and to participate equally in the tobacco trade, so their share in it was significantly smaller compared to the users of foreign capital, who invaded undisturbed the tobacco industry, turning Haskovo into a centre of large financial capital in Bulgaria (Dimov (ed.) 2005, 87).

One of the first large companies to move to the region after the war was Balkan Bank. It worked with Austrian, French and Bulgarian capital and maintained direct relations with the United Tobacco Factories - Haskovo Branch. Its subsidiary was the large tobacco export joint-stock company Nicotea. As a subsidiary of the large bank of French financial capital was the company Tahindag, owned by Carlo Vaccaro, which also opened a branch in Haskovo. The tobacco trading house Fernandez Brothers, a large exporter of tobacco from Haskovo after the war, was a subsidiary of the Franco-Belgean Bank. The Bulgarian East Bank, Bulgarian Macedonian Bank, Bulgarian Joint Stock Company for Cigarettes and others opened their branches in the city. Thus, the number of tobacco companies and their factories and warehouses in the city was constantly growing (Fig. 3).

The devaluation of the German currency in the early 1920s posed a serious danger to the Bulgarian tobacco industry, which at the time was dependent on the German market. Much more concern was the end of the war between Greece and Turkey and their re-entry into the European tobacco market. In just one year, in 1923, Greece tripled its tobacco production, and in 1924 Turkey produced 64 million kg tobacco and sold it at a lower price. The shortage of tobacco on the European market created between 1916 and 1922 was quickly



Fig. 3. Workers of the Balkan tobacco branch in Haskovo, owned by Jacques Aseov, 1921

overcome and replaced by overproduction, which reflected adversely on the Bulgarian tobacco industry. Many foreign companies began to withdraw from Bulgaria.

The hesitant partial economic stabilization in our country quickly turned into an economic crisis that lasted until 1933. One of the features of the Great Depression which spread over our country was its catastrophic impact on agriculture. The tobacco industry was among the industries that felt the crisis particularly harshly and reported low yields. While tobacco production in 1929 reached 4,977,000 kg, in 1933 it fell to 3,374,000 kg, forcing the government to look for ways and means to help producers by adjusting and maintaining competitive purchase rates.

The Reemtsma, German market and the “Gold from Bulgaria”

The fading crisis was followed by a period of economic recovery in the world economy which lasted until the beginning of World War II. The long-awaited economic boom in Bulgaria unfolded between 1935 and 1939. Both the political stabilization which took place in the fall of 1935 and the establishment of an authoritarian regime played a role in this process. An actively regulated

economy was achieved through strictly targeted economic policy and a significant increase in government procurement in strategic construction and rearmament. The economic boom, the expansion of foreign markets, and especially the opening of the German market for the Bulgarian tobacco and cigarettes played a crucial role in the development of the local tobacco industry. The government increasingly relied on the tobacco industry, which was predominantly dictated by the merchants and industrialist from Thrace and Macedonia.

During the economic crisis of 1929-1934, when the tobacco industry was one of the most affected, the subject of the tobacco monopoly was again brought before the Bulgarian society. Difficulties in international trade stroke a further blow to the industry, as much of the production intended for export remained unsold and piled up in the warehouses. The instability of the tobacco market created preconditions for the expansion of smuggled production and distribution of tobacco products, which deprived the government of significant revenues, especially needed after the outbreak of the global financial crisis in the summer of 1931. The People's Bloc government saw salvation for the economy in the tobacco monopoly. The ongoing crisis convinced Prime Minister Kimon Georgiev that monopolies on key economic sectors were a guarantee of the country's economic stability. That idea was abandoned in the beginning of 1935.

Despite the failure of monopolization in the economic life of Bulgaria for the period 1935-1939, the idea of further development and deepening of state intervention in the economy continued to materialize. The following economic awakening stabilized finances and expanded the public sector. However, mostly the large exporters could benefit from the strict control that the state exercised over the foreign trade. Dr. David Schnur, the representative of Reemtsma, who most fiercely protested against the monopoly, after 1935 became the nucleus of large exporters. He was the main agent of the German Reemtsma Concern and was represented in Bulgaria by Jacques Aseov. As permanent suppliers for Reemtsma, Schnur signed agreements with the companies of Stefan Chaprashikov, Todor Karshev, Takvoryan, Buchner and Kocho Apostolov, while large companies such as Tabakus, Nicotea, Company General, Orientabako and others disappeared. With the deepening of the Bulgarian-German relations, Accianda Tabaki Italiana, the Austrian-Bulgarian Joint Stock Company, the companies Buchner and Lumberg opened their representative offices in Bulgaria (CSA, f. 1449, inv. 1, file 269, p. 19-20) (Fig. 4).

At the beginning of World War II, the local representations of the Czechoslovak, Austrian and Polish regies in Bulgaria closed down displaced from the German market as the main one for the Bulgarian tobacco. During this period in Haskovo the number of smaller tobacco trading companies increased. Much of the tobacco produced in the region was bought by Georgi Chalburow's trading company, which at the time was one of the largest in Bulgaria. After the Nazis came to power in Germany, D. Schnur was replaced by Kurt Wenkel, and the main supplier to Reemtsma in Bulgaria Jacques Aseov along with other Jews emigrated to America. These changes largely cleared the trade horizon for Chalburow. Aseov's company was briefly replaced by Takvoryan, who was later removed as a French citizen after Germany invaded France in 1940. Minister Slavcho Zagorov signed an agreement with Germany on the purchase



Fig. 4. The large warehouse of Nicotea in Haskovo

of processed Bulgarian tobacco at very low prices, which evoked protests from tobacco traders. However, instead of complying with their demands, he issued an ordinance and most of the tobacco went to Germany at prices about 50% lower than the market ones (CSA, f. 1449, inv. 1, file 280, p. 250-252).

After 1940, Reemtsma decided to set up its own company in Bulgaria, instead of working with local agents as before. As a result of this decision Count Lerchenfeld arrived in Bulgaria and headed the tobacco trade. After the official entry of Bulgaria into the Tripartite Pact, corruption throughout the tobacco industry flourished. Before the People's Court in 1945, the chairman of the Fatherland Front Committee of the Union of Tobacco Traders, Georgi Bozhkov, stated: "*Count Lerchenfeld did not have any knowledge of tobacco. He was a degenerate type. He was spiteful and watched everyone. He was acting foully with his suppliers because they were buying American cars, not German ones, reduced the prices of already sold lots and despised the Bulgarians*" (CSA, f. 1449, inv. 1, file 269, p. 19-20).

Bulgaria's entry into the war completely binded its economy to Germany. Foreign trade operated on the basis of clearing agreements signed annually between Bulgaria and Germany. In 1941, with a Ministerial Decree, the tobacco production became contingent, for which the then Minister of Trade Slavcho

Zagorov came under criticism from the tobacco merchants. Fixed purchase prices were determined on the basis of the prices from 1940, which BZK Bank² managed to reduce significantly. This seriously harmed the interests of producers and raised fears among merchants that many farmers would give up tobacco production. The Foreign Trade Directorate allowed the entry of seven German companies that bought tobacco directly from producers at low prices. At the same time, lending to Bulgarian companies could only be done by the German Reemtsma through the Bulgarian Credit Bank, through which Germany managed to completely occupy the Bulgarian domestic market. Meanwhile, the Union of Exporters was preparing a bill which determined not only the fixed purchase rates, but also the quantities and companies. In this way, the Union and the Government altogether were given the opportunity to promote new companies at the expense of old and established ones, which were forced to close their production. Later, Georgi Bozhkov noted in his defense before the People's Court: "*The biggest crime of Foreign trade was that it allowed the export of tobacco and others valuable goods without providing for their value goods that Bulgaria was feeling a great need for, and they sent us toys, porcelain and other trinkets*" (CSA, f. 1449, inv. 1, file 269, p. 19-20).

This moment marked the beginning of decline of the tobacco industry in Haskovo, as it was created in the early 20th century by the local and foreign marchants. The thirty warehouses, each distinct and remarkable for its architecture, and the III tobacco companies which established the city as a centre of the tobacco trade remained only a distant memory from the past.

Bulgarian tobacco industry in transition 1944-1953

On 9 September 1944, with a military coup, the Fatherland Front Coalition, dominated by the Communist Party, took over. A so-called "people's democracy" established in Bulgaria was modelled on the Soviet system of government. With a dissolved National Assembly, Prime Minister Kimon Georgiev undertook a series of drastic reforms through emergency legislation. Any expression of doubt or disagreement with the new government was met with violence and threats of moral and physical destruction. The new regime of government affected the whole of economic life, especially the foreign trade which fell under the control and needs of the USSR. The export of goods was controlled by the Soviet occupation troops and the accompanying intelligence apparatus, which closely monitored the departure of certain items from the country. Among them was the Bulgarian tobacco. The unpredictable course of events in the last months of 1944 left large quantities of tobacco unexported. Through ordinances, the government confiscated thousands of tons of stale bales of tobacco from merchants' warehouses, along with production equipment. Especially large were the quantities of tobacco seized from the Aegean Thrace, the value of which exceeded 3.5 billion leva.

² Bulgarian Agrarian Cooperative Bank.



Fig. 5. Assembly of the Union of Tobacco Traders held in Sofia, 1940s

After the end of the occupation, bilateral economic relations with the USSR began to be based on barter agreements, under which the government collected, processed and delivered at its own expense more than half of its tobacco production without the knowledge and consent of the still existing Union of Tobacco Traders (Fig. 5). Many of its members under the provisions of the newly enacted laws were arrested, deported or imprisoned without convictions. Haskovo tobacco merchant Georgi Chalburow was arrested, Stoyu Mantov and former director of Daniel Shaki Company Petar Varsanov “disappeared with no trace”³ and, as it became clear much later, they were murdered in the first days after the coup. Their families as a more affluent part of the population became subjects of emergency legislation. Through it the government was able to acquire the savings and property of most of them, depriving their wives and children of the opportunity to work and study, denying them the right to a pension and legal benefits, condemning them to poverty and starvation in the difficult postwar years. The ominous events that followed the establishment of the Fatherland Front government, according to its public speakers, were an inevitable part of the political process. The thirst for blood and revenge hovered in the air and appeals, such as the one made by the commander of the militia in Haskovo G. Yordanov in 1946, were in the spirit of the times: “*Do not question the ruthless purge!*” (SA - Haskovo, f. 12B, inv. 1, file 1, p. 3).

Despite the socio-political tensions in the country, economic life continued to run, albeit severely limited and distorted. Tobacco merchants still formally owned their warehouses and businesses, but were not allowed to participate in their management. Until the nationalization in the spring of 1947, the

³ An official term used by the People’s Militia to define the status of all missing people in 1944-1945.

export of Bulgarian tobacco was determined by legal acts for the collected and manipulated tobacco from each yield. The Union of Tobacco Cooperatives took on the responsible task of collecting and processing tobacco from the 1945 yield onwards, and BZK Bank was in charge of the trade. Special ordinances determined the fate of the first-quality tobacco from the 1942 and 1943 yields. The problem with the sales continued in 1945, when the collected and manipulated tobacco reached 29,340 tons, and only 6,347 tons were sold (Panayotov (ed.) 1999, 446).

For several years, the new government put under full control the economic life in the country. The nationalization of the tobacco industry was accompanied by the controlled tobacco production through the collectivization of the land within the established Labour Cooperative Agricultural Farms (*trudovo-koooperativni zemedelski stopanstva – TKZS*). The changes that took place in the country after 1944 marked the beginning of an active migration process from the villages to the cities. The outflow of agricultural workers to factories created an insurmountable problem in agriculture. The shortage of workforce was not very successfully compensated by the organization of youth, student and worker brigades engaged in unpaid work during the agricultural campaigns. In addition to the beneficial economic results, the brigades aimed to have an educational effect on everyone and especially on adolescents. Until the end of the socialist period in 1989, students and pupils organized by the communist youth organizations participated in labour brigades to help the cooperatives. The school year invariably began with student brigades, and in Haskovo some of the physical education premises were often turned into temporary tobacco warehouses. The leadership of the Komsomol⁴ appointed its organizational workers as commanders, who controlled the implementation of certain labour tasks. Discipline and regime were built on the paramilitary principle.

“No one is greater than the USSR!”

In the early 1950s the Town Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party, in tune with the cheerful mood inspired by the achievements of the First Five-Year Plan⁵, noted significantly improved product quality and successful attempts by State Tobacco Monopoly (STM) to increase labour productivity. The new director Yanko Hristov Arnaudov (1951-1959) made efforts with various initiatives to stimulate workers to higher labour achievements. The warehouses operated independently from each other and often set up production competitions, usually on the occasion of upcoming national holidays, such as 1 May and 9 September. A common practice in everyday work was the submission of a “*report-promise*” by individual workers or a group of workers to the Town Committee, or of personal letters to the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian

⁴ Communist youth organization.

⁵ The five-year plans called “*petiletki*” started in 1949, after the historical 5th Congress of the Bulgarian Communist Party (end of 1948).

Communist Party Valko Chervenkov, and later to Todor Zhivkov, in which they took responsibility for their future production results. The fulfilment of the given promises was strictly monitored by the Communist Party and production management.

The work of the new director Y. Arnaudov was accompanied by constant crises and conflicts. At an extended Plenum of the Town Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party in Haskovo, he was accused of “*showing low vigilance*” over the 1952 incident of sending contaminated bales to the USSR and Poland without the permission of the government. Tensions escalated when the director got into an argument with Soviet tobacco expert Tarnansky, who, he said, arbitrarily determined the quality of the tobacco without listening to STM experts. The conflict flared up even more when a violent quarrel broke out between the two in the city centre. The director’s conduct was subsequently investigated by the party organization. Before the Secretary of the Town Committee, Tarnansky insisted that Arnaudov be reprimanded because he “*had no bolshevik attitude towards the USSR*”. Arnaudov, in turn, defended himself by claiming that the Soviet expert was an “*adzhamiya*” (rookie). The plenum critically examined the director’s work and decided that he would be severely reprimanded for his misconduct. Some party secretaries from the tobacco warehouses tried to protect him by reminding of his good attitude towards the tobacco workers before 9 September 1944. Nevertheless, the majority of the party members insisted on a severe punishment for “*undermining the authority of the USSR with his remarks to the Soviet expert*”. Georgi Ivanov spontaneously expressed his indignation with a memorable remark: “*It turns out that Arnaudov is a greater specialist than the Soviet one*”, and recalled instructively as a phrase from a slogan: “*No one is greater than the Soviet Union!*”. Nedyalka Georgieva saw the conflict as an enemy manifestation of the experts left over from Chalbuurov’s time, as non-partisans close to the popular former tobacco merchant continued to work around Arnaudov (CSA - Haskovo, f. 12B, inv. 1, file 170, p. 266).

The radical changes that tobacco processing underwent in the 1950s affected the production. In Haskovo, it reached 20,850 tons in 1955, concentrated mainly in the southern part of the district where the population was predominantly Turkish. The establishment of cooperatives (TKZS) was the most difficult there, and by the mid-1950s most tobacco growers continued to cultivate their land on their own. Only 3% of the tobacco produced at that time was on cooperative land (RMH - Haskovo, Modern History Fund, inv. 1663). In 1949, the first 12 Soviet Universal-2 tractors were delivered to help them, and the land sown with tobacco increased.

In the late 1950s, despite all the difficulties, tobacco still held the first place in Bulgarian exports and the government made serious investments in research and implementation of Soviet initiatives to rationalize and optimize the tobacco industry. A detailed report on the state of tobacco production for 1959 reported 94,000 tons of Oriental tobacco harvested and processed in the same year - a top achievement in Bulgaria until then. New varieties were created such as Rila-9, Nevrokop-5, Harmanli Basma No. 163, Kozarsko-541. Various experiments were implemented, including growing tobacco in the winter in Nevrokop (today’s town of Gotse Delchev). Despite the positive first evaluations, the idea subsided

and the experiment was no longer mentioned (SA - Haskovo, f. 762, inv. 1, file 8, p. 17).

Reports on the state of tobacco production during this period outlined serious shortcomings. In the first place, it turned out that the large yield was solely at the expense of quality. Tobacco between first and third quality produced in Bulgaria until 1944 already gave way to the mass-produced low-quality tobacco of sixth quality Bash Bali and seventh quality Basma. The reason for this laid in the pursuit of high yields and the introduction of some Soviet initiatives, such as removing certain stages of the production, which immediately affected the quality. Mass cultivation of low-quality varieties in unsuitable areas in Northern Bulgaria completely ruined the reputation of the Bulgarian tobacco. Due to poor pay, tobacco growers from the suitable areas for this crop in Southern Bulgaria began to give up growing it (SA - Haskovo, f. 762, inv. 1, file 8, p. 43).

Empty warehouses and tobacco workers' strikes

Government efforts to cover up and reduce the ever-accumulating tensions in the tobacco industry in the late 1940s and early 1950s failed. The bilateral agreement concluded in 1948 obliged the country to hand over 22 million kg of tobacco to the USSR in exchange for Soviet goods. The agreement did not prohibit Bulgaria from selling tobacco to Western countries, albeit with Moscow's permission. However, in the 1950s, a new problem arose when Soviet companies organized the manipulation of Bulgarian tobacco and Bulgarian tobacco workers lost their jobs. To get out of the difficult situation, the government received permission to seek trade intermediaries for Western European clients, and STM tried to involve several former tobacco traders as consultants (CIA Archives, Reading room). The Soviet government realized the great importance of the tobacco industry for the Bulgarian economy. In order to support the sale of Bulgarian tobacco, Moscow forced East German companies to buy large quantities of low-quality unsold tobacco from STM and to process it into cheap cigarettes for the Soviet army (CIA Archives, Reading room).

Faced with a severe crisis in the tobacco industry, in 1952 the government decided to increase the tobacco sown areas in the Haskovo region to 347,079 decares, of which the cooperators collected 11,359,002 kg of tobacco. To overcome the poor quality, STM ordered the first stage of the manipulation to be carried out within the cooperatives under the supervision of experts. The measures taken did not bring tobacco processing out of the crisis. Due to the lower average yield, the harvested tobacco was nearly 8,000 tons less than the previous year, the quality remained poor and the main customer, the USSR, began to buy unprocessed tobacco. The management of STM in Haskovo was forced to suspend work for six months and dismiss workers, which increased the already existing serious unemployment in the city and thwarted the implementation of production plans. These events remained veiled in a mist by the 1990s. More information about it is given by the reports of the American intelligence from that time. They reported unprocessed tobacco from the 1952 yield exported to the USSR in early 1953, which left Haskovo workers without work and livelihoods, and

the BCP Central Committee reported the closure of the processing warehouses for six months. The burden of implementing the plan was shifted to the fourth quarter, which provided for the implementation of the plan by 60% more than the previous year (SA - Haskovo, f. 12B, inv. 1, file 169, p. 5). Unemployed tobacco workers were sent to earth up the tobacco in the plantations. However, this did not end the problems. According to the same American reports, dissatisfied with what was happening, Haskovo tobacco workers used the Labour Day parade in 1953 to draw attention to the unemployment in the city and to express their disagreement and protest, replacing the usual communist slogans with others that said "*We want work*". Some of the workers refused to take part in the parade at all (CIA Archives, Reading room). Entirely in the spirit of the times, the workers' protest was silenced and authorities pretended nothing was happening. On its pages, the local newspaper *Rodopska Borba* published a carefully prepared article for the Labour Day under the title "Magnificent parade in Haskovo". In it, the author enthusiastically noted the "*most solemn celebration*" of Labour Day and the party speech delivered by the member of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party Ivan Arakliev about the life of workers in the new communist order. The article reported on the workers marching in front of the official rostrum, led by the representative group of trade unions with the flags of the organizations. "*After them, the fighters from the People's Army are marching with a decisive step. They hold schmeisers and carbines in their hands, and hatred for the enemy boils in their hearts*" (RMH - Haskovo, Modern History Fund, inv. 1953). Against the background of wishes for world peace, the protest march of tobacco workers was mentioned vaguely.

The unbending silence of the ongoing tobacco crisis did not make the problem disappear. Dissatisfaction continued to smolder and a month later, in June 1953, strikes broke out in the tobacco warehouses in Plovdiv and Haskovo under the slogan "*It is time to overthrow the government, which does not give us work*". The workers' protest was crushed in a flash. The events following the strikes sank into a complete oblivion as no Bulgarian newspaper at the time reflected them. The riot of 2,500 tobacco workers in Plovdiv and 1,500 in Haskovo was reported by US intelligence in Athens, citing several workers from Haskovo who managed to escape to Greece. They reported one killed in Plovdiv, two in Haskovo and about 50 injured in clashes with the militia. Trials behind closed doors sentenced eight tobacco workers to death for inciting riots and demonstrations, and many unemployed people were sentenced for complicity in the workers' protest (CIA Archives, Reading room). The party leadership in the city defined the workers' strike as a disgrace and a shameful stain on the history of communist Bulgaria. The lightning-triggered repressive machine of power silenced all voices and did not leave even a memory of the events. Despite their bloody suppression, the strikes were still somewhat successful, as workers kept their jobs throughout the year and were not treated as part-time anymore. The once strong Bulgarian tobacco industry at the end of the first five years reached its bottom in 1953 - low yields of poor quality, the lowest export of about 20,000,000 kg, mainly for the USSR, and angry and rebellious workers and political unrest.

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