

The welfare of socialism in the opera art in Bulgaria in the second half of the 20th century

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Abstract. The text examines the modifications in the opera repertoire resulting from political changes after 1944 and throughout the second half of the 20th century. These changes initiated shifts in attitudes toward opera and its creators, influencing the repertoire, the nationalization of certain troupes and the calling of other formations of opera houses “community playhouse”, without the government being aware what exactly such institutions needed and the problems with which all those adjustments were mined.

Keywords: opera art, people’s power, socialism, ideology

The influences of the Bulgaria Communist Party’s directives handed down “from above”, the historical-cultural usages and the institutional changes during the time of socialism also reflect on the opera art in Bulgaria.

By the end of 1944, the diversity of composers and works in the “emerging” Bulgarian opera scene was impressive. Sofia Opera launched a total of 175 premières, with that total including several ballets¹. The only extant non-capital opera troupe, the Stara Zagora Opera troupe, had also been seeking repertoire diversity, in a more modest version though².

¹ Some operas have been staged several times: *Cavalleria rusticana* (1910, 1926, 1942), *Eugene Onegin* (1919, 1920, 1923, 1931), *La traviata* (1891, 1910, 1925), *Un ballo in maschera* (1926, 1941), *Rigoletto* (1920, 1930), *Il trovatore* (1891, 1914, 1927, 1933), *Aida* (1914, 1925), *Tosca* (1925), *Carmen* (1891, 1912, 1919, 1924, 1942), *Werther* (1920, 1931), *The Bartered Bride* (1912, 1936), etc. The interesting fact to note here is that the list of premières would also include some of the quite rarely performed works such as *Les Huguenots* by Meyerbeer (1922, 1934), *Samson et Dalila* by Saint-Saëns (1924), *Dalibor* by Smetana (1924), *Orfeo ed Euridice* by Gluck (1927, 1942), *La Juive* by Halévy (1927), *La Gioconda* by Ponchielli (1934), *The Queen of Sheba* by Goldmark (1935), Puccini’s *Il trittico* (*Gianni Schicchi*, *Il tabarro*, and *Suor Angelica*) (1936), *La fanciulla del West* (1938), *Fidelio* by Beethoven (1941), and Wagner’s *The Flying Dutchman* (1930), *Tannhäuser* (1931, 1939), *Lohengrin* (1934), and *Das Rheingold* (1943) (cited in Bozhkova 1975).

² With its 18 premières by 9 authors of different nationalities, the enthusiasts from Stara Zagora carried out a large-scale popularization string of activities oriented to the population in

Upon 9 September 1944, political changes in Bulgaria led to alterations in all areas and that would also include the opera repertoire and the rendition thereof. Some professional ensembles were created such as orchestras, opera theatres, although members of the Fatherland Front Committees and formed shortly after 9 September 1944 Primary party organizations were not quite aware of what the opera art would mean, but on the other hand, they based themselves on some slogans that had gained some high levels of popularity, one of them being “art from the people and for the people” (Petrova 2020).

As early as on 9 September 1944, Decree No. 1 of the Council of Ministers of Kimon Georgiev’s Government established three new ministries: the Ministry of Public Health, the Ministry of Social Policy and the Ministry of Propaganda (Elenkov 2008, 19). Dimo Kazasov³ headed the Ministry of Propaganda⁴ (Harkov 2021, 63, 102) that was renamed subsequently to Ministry of Information and Arts⁵ (Decree No. 14 of 3 September 1945 - see Elenkov 2008, 67-68), and thereafter it was renamed again and this time its title sounded as Committee for Science, Art and Culture (Komitet za nauka, izkustvo i kultura - KNIK)⁶ - this “administering and comprehensive ideological institute [...] directly subordinated to the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Workers’ Party (Communists)” (Elenkov 2008, 19-20), whose employees were appointed directly by the Council of Ministers for their extraordinary merits in the “intensification of the revolutionary process” and in particular in the process of the “Cultural Revolution” (Elenkov 2008, 141). They administer the

Southern Bulgaria and successfully toured beyond the Balkan Mountains (see Draganov 1970, where the events of the establishment and subsequent resumption of the *Kaval* Music Society were described meticulously and in detail until the nationalization of the Stara Zagora Opera House in 1946; numerous documents were cited, of which only a small part is currently stored in the funds of the State Archives (SA) and at the Stara Zagora Regional Museum of History; yet another considerable part has been irretrievably lost).

³ Dimo Kazasov (1886-1980), Bulgarian intellectual, journalist, writer, politician, Minister of Railways, Posts and Telegraphs (1923-1924) in the Government of Aleksandar Tsankov. During World War II, he was active in the campaign to save Bulgarian Jews in his role as chairman of the Committee for Protection and Amnesty of Political Fighters. Minister of People’s Propaganda (1944-1945), Minister of Information and the Arts (1945-1947), Head of the Glavlit (Directorate-General for Publishing, Printing Industry and Trade in Printed Works) (from 1950 to 1953).

⁴ Established to exercise control and censorship over art and culture by the State. Its institutional predecessor was the Directorate of National Propaganda, established after the Coup d’état of 19 May 1934 in the country, using the model of the Reich Ministry for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda (Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda) headed by Joseph Goebbels in Nazi Germany.

⁵ By mid-1945, it was already felt that the term “propaganda” would carry some sort of compromising connotation. On 5 June 1945, Dimo Kazasov sent a report to the Chairman of the Council of Ministers with the proposal to rename the Ministry with the main argument “the problematic visibility of the propaganda tasks” (Elenkov 2008, 67).

⁶ From 1947 to 1954, it functioned as the Committee for Science, Art and Culture (KNIK) with the rank of a ministry; in 1954 it functioned under the name of the Ministry of Culture, and from 1957 to 1963, its name was Ministry of Education and Culture.

“inevitable adoption of the Soviet model of socialism”⁷ and “the transformation of the class-party approach into the sole value criterion for science, art and culture” (Isusov 1978, 34; Elenkov 2008, 142).

Less than a month later, on 4 October 1944, Dimo Kazasov reported to the National Committee of the Fatherland Front that the Soviet high command had expressed displeasure that the Bulgarian press was left uncontrolled (Ivanov 2009, 287). The Politburo, holding regular meetings almost every morning scheduled between 7 and 12 a.m. since September 1944, made some specific organizational decisions for the country’s administration, for campaigning and propaganda, book publishing, press, party and popular education, radio, work among writers, artists, etc. (Isusov 1978, 34). It would provide prescriptions in every field (Elenkov 2018), i.e., political, economic, cultural, although it had no way of having trained experts that would represent the Workers’ Party⁸, which until then had been underground. It was quite logical that, with the changes imposed on the management staff and its continuous growth, the requirements that “all posts from inspector upwards be filled by persons with proved anti-fascist experience”⁹ could not be met. That led to a number of decrees abolishing the required census for holding a certain office (Elenkov 2018, 44-45; Isusov 1978) (Fig. 1).

⁷ For the acquisition of Soviet experience and expertise, KNIK sent a Bulgarian delegation to the USSR in October 1949 tasked to examine the structure and work of Soviet agencies and services. The delegation staff included representatives of the Communist Party and administrative leadership of culture in Bulgaria, as well as of the creative organizations of the intelligentsia, among them musicologist Stoyan Stoyanov. For their stay for 20 days, they **examined** (text in bold by me, E. Zh.) the experience of the Committee on the Arts, including all its departments, main directorates and services, as well as institutes and academies. Among the sites visited were the Moscow Conservatory, the Moscow Philharmonic, the Maly Theatre, the K. I. Stanislavsky Theatre (where they examined its organization, services, management and studios), the Operetta Theatre, some libraries and more. The delegation took part, actually attended a meeting of the leadership of the Committee on the Arts at the admission of a new opera show and also attended a concert by Boyan Lechev who was completing his postgraduate studies (see Elenkov 2008, 146-147).

⁸ The knowledgeable specialists who were members of the Workers’ Party had already been getting on in years. Although they had long shared the left-wing ideas, they did not approve of the 1941 course of armed struggle and did not take any active part in that struggle. Consequently, after upon 9 September 1944, they were severely criticized and deprived of their right to hold responsible posts. “*The issue of qualified human resources had many facets. In the course of the revolution, it became more and more important. In a letter to Georgi Dimitrov, a member of the Politburo wrote: “There is no complete clarity on the issue of the treatment of qualified staff who worked in the past, but for one reason or another left the movement, and now return to the party”. In response to this, G. Dimitrov wrote on 4 November 1944: “All the old party qualified staff who have not been compromised in the past should be used. But you should not allow such comrades, who in the most difficult period for the party stood aside and took care of their personal affairs, to take any leadership positions or to publicly represent the party. We should use them mainly for auxiliary work. Preference should be given to those qualified people who have fought and suffered for the cause of the party. At the same time, a special cult should not be created around partisanship and prison experience. The approach should be individual”* (Isusov 1978, 38-39).

⁹ Central State Archives, f. 2, inv. 1, file 2, p. 118. Predlozheniya na kulturnata komisiya pri Agitpropa na TsK na BRP (k) za strukturata (Proposals of the Cultural Commission under the Agitation and Propaganda Department (Agitprop) of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Workers’ Party (Communist) regarding the structure) (cited in: Elenkov 2008, 44).

МИНИСТЕРСТВО НА ВЪТРЕШНИТЪ РАБОТИ**ЗАПОВЪДЪ**

№ 3123.

На основание чл. 5 отъ Наредбата-законъ за назначаване, уволняване и класиране на служителитъ по ведомството на Министерството на вътрешнитъ работи и за временната общинска управа

ЗАПОВЪДВАМЪ:

1. Премахватъ се изискванията за образователенъ и служебенъ цензъ за следнитъ длъжности по ведомството на Министерството на вътрешнитъ работи:

Областни и помощникъ областни директори,
Секретари и подсекретари на областни дирекции,
Околийски управители,
Секретари на околийскитъ управители,
Директоръ на Народната милиция и всички органи на Народната милиция,
Кметъ, помощникъ кметъ, кметски намѣстници и кметски представители.

2. Намалѣва се образователния цензъ за длъжността секретаръ-бирникъ на завършено петокласно образование съ издържанъ специаленъ изпитъ за секретаръ-бирници.

Тази заповѣдъ да се счита въ сила отъ 9. IX. 1944 год.

София, 6 ноемврий 1944 година.

Министъръ: (п) **АНТОНЪ ЮГОВЪ**



Fig. 1. Order for the removal of educational qualification requirements for regional directors and district governors, the director and officers of the People's Militia, etc., in effect from 9 September 1944¹⁰

¹⁰ With gratitude for the provision of the copy to Dr. Andrey Avramov Andreev.

At the same time, attempts were being made to destroy everything related to pro-German, anti-Soviet and monarchist orientation (Ivanov 2009). Prof. Stoyan Brashovanov, the first Bulgarian graduate musicologist and Doctor of Philosophy, was visited late in the evening on 11 October 1944 in his home by two civilians and was accused of possessing fascist literature, i.e., books in Latin script (Yapova 2021, 16-31). He was then arrested and tortured. Due to accusations of ideological sins, Brashovanov's scholarly works on the history of music were discredited (Brashovanova 2001, 76; Yapova 2010, 16-28) - a fact that Angelina Petrova commented with a certain dose of irony: "A bourgeois residue [...] was also the quote of Philipp Spitta (Bach's first biographer - A. P.), who (obviously and naturally - A. P.) was not a follower of Marxism-Leninism" (Petrova 2020, 86-87). A similar fate befell the works of Ivan Kamburov¹¹, another German graduate, a musicologist who studied at the Leipzig Conservatory. The fact that he was head of the music department of the Chamber of National Culture (Kamarata na narodnata kultura - KNK) in the period 1945-1947 did not save his written legacy afterwards.

On 1 April 1946, the signature of Dimo Kazasov nationalized a number of drama theatres that had been municipal until that point, including the Stara Zagora Opera (Draganov 1970; Dimitrova 2004; Zhunich 2014). The day before, on 31 March 1946, the regents signed a decree on the composition of the second cabinet of Kimon Georgiev (Isusov 1978, 265). That says the nationalization order was definitely prepared earlier. Thus, after twenty-one years of existence and more than 1,000 performances of 12 opera titles (in 18 productions) by 9 composers in front of more than 400,000 spectators¹², the Stara Zagora Municipal Opera was nationalized (Biks et al. 2005). This act would radically alter the organization of the troupe, the selection of the repertoire, the artistic units, the creative pursuits and the fulfilments¹³. Immediately after 9 September 1944, as well as in all other organizations and institutes, a newly formed Fatherland Front's Committee temporarily took over the management of the troupe. In the beginning, the opera staff seemed to be no stranger to the enthusiasm that covered everyone. It was a phenomenon that was characteristic of the era. They hoped for the moral and material support from the State. The

¹¹ Ivan Dimitrov Kamburov (26 September 1883 - 23 January 1955) was a Bulgarian choral conductor, folklorist, teacher and kapellmeister. One of the first Bulgarian musicologists and biographers of Bulgarian musical figures. As a specialist with a tendency for collecting, searching, studying and publishing Bulgarian and other folk songs of Slavic origin in 1926-1928, together with Vasil Stoin, he recorded about 2,000 folk songs (cited in: https://bg.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bacua_Cmouh).

¹² SA - Stara Zagora, f. 47, inv. 2, file 7, p. 3.

¹³ "All organizations, associations and private directorates in Sofia should submit in advance for approval to the Ministry of Propaganda, Department for Cultural Creativity, the programmes for the concerts, matinees, parties, evening happenings, etc. they arrange. All posters, programmes, etc. should also be presented. [...] It is forbidden for private persons to organize any kind of parties, matinees, evening happenings, etc. [...]" (Rabotnichesko delo - organ of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Workers' Party (Communists), cited in Andreev 2021).

Fatherland Front's Committee, which took over the leadership of the Stara Zagora Opera, continued with the insistence of the troupe to turn it into a branch of Sofia Opera. The idea was not new: since 1939, similar accounts and requests had been written from the Stara Zagora Opera enthusiasts. The stage director of the Sofia Opera, Ilia Arnaudov and the playwright Nikolay Liliev (a native of Stara Zagora) encouraged the work of enthusiasts in Stara Zagora. More than once, artists from the Sofia Opera were long-term seconded to the Stara Zagora¹⁴. Otherwise, the membership fees and the revenue from the sale of tickets did not cover the expenses, with the performances being moved to the hall of the "Theatre" Society, and with the same scene being used by both the Drama Theatre and the Community Centre Cinema, i.e., letters and requests were written for each show, with every spectacle needing negotiations. The scene was small and uncomfortable, there was no good acoustics, the heating was almost symbolic, there were no dressing-rooms for artists, and the toilet under the stage would bring the fetidity all the way to the hall. The correspondences with the "Theatre" Society Board of Trustees, requesting improvements to the hall, stage, and orchestra pit, continued (Draganov 1970; Dimitrova 2004). The opera activists would continue to make specific proposals, mentioning that despite requests and invitations to the previous Board of Trustees, this issue had always been neglected, "because they were proverbially cheese-paring". However, now, when the Chitalishte (Community Centre) was headed by "active and progressive people", the Opera staff believed that improvements to the stage and hall would finally be made (Dimitrova 2004, 103). Together with their sympathizers, who were experts at the same time, the Opera members also drafted a renovation project, pushed for a revision of the hall usage schedule, and requested additional hours for rehearsals and performances¹⁵.

In order to recruit Dragan Kardzhiev (until recently the chief stage director of the Sofia Opera, but as a German graduate inconvenient to the Fatherland Front authorities) the management had to have a written consent from Sofia (Zhekov 2002, 42-43). The central management of the Union of Theatre Employees specifically considered the matter and in September 1945 decided: "It would give its consent to the appointment of Dragan Kardzhiev, former chief stage director of the People's Opera, to be appointed as stage director of the Opera in Stara Zagora". This is followed by the signatures of Chairman P. Dimitrov and Secretary Asp. Temelkov¹⁶. In early October, Dragan Kardzhiev submitted a report¹⁷ to the Chairman of the Opera Board of Trustees. It stated

¹⁴ Ivan Petrov, Antonia Deneva (Violetta, Rosina), Dimitar Hristov (tenor) and Stoyko Dikov (baritone, who remained in the troupe after its nationalization, and all the way to his retirement) - in 1940, at the insistence of the stage director of the Sofia Opera Ilia Arnaudov, Mihail Yankov (Mephistopheles) - a basso, Zlatko Grigorov (tenor), later interned (1945-1948) singers with national and foreign prestige, namely, Elisaveta Yovovich and Katya Spiridonova...

¹⁵ SA - Stara Zagora, f. 47, inv. 1, file 1, p. 9, 16.

¹⁶ SA - Stara Zagora, f. 47, inv. 1, file 2, p. 20.

¹⁷ SA - Stara Zagora, f. 47, inv.1, file 2, p. 27.

that he had already studied the working conditions of the Stara Zagora Municipal Opera and considered it his duty to report that in terms of stage and technical organization the Opera lagged quite behind, or more precisely, it lacked them entirely... “Let us not forget that an opera is, first and foremost, a theatre and only then a musical institution” - Kardzhiev reminded. With exceptional finesse, conciseness, and clarity, he proposed the appointment of a set designer, a scenic artist, a house manager, a props master, an upholsterer, wardrobe assistants and tailors (both men and women), a hairdresser, stage technicians, a stage manager, and lighting technicians - outlining various ways this could be implemented gradually and with minimal disruption.

Based on the report by Kardzhiev, the Board of Trustees wrote a new account to the Ministry demanding an increase in staff, i.e., it requested more actors, more choir members, more members of the orchestra, a choir conductor, four ballerinas, an electrician and an administrative secretary. Probably the subsidies allocated so far (300,000 leva¹⁸ by the end of 1944, 1,400,000 leva in 1945¹⁹ and another 300,000 leva from the KNK²⁰ at the end of December that year) were perceived as an acknowledgement and as an expression of a new attitude to the provincial cultural institutions, or as a favourable attitude to the problems of the only non-Sofia-based opera troupe that had existed for more than two decades (Dimitrova 2004). The pride in the successes achieved during the 1944/1945 season, along with Dragan Kardzhiev’s well-founded arguments in his report, prompted the leadership to make greater and bolder requests to secure both performing and technical staff for more normal operation. As a result, on 9 October 1945, G. Kostov arrived in Stara Zagora for a meeting to discuss the issues of the Opera and the Chitalishte.

The reason is that, in addition to theatre performances, opera productions, and film screenings, the hall of the Chitalishte was then also used for political meetings and other cultural and educational events. After the Opera’s nationalization, the Chitalishte Board of Trustees took back to their possession both pianos, making the preparation of the performances even more difficult. Secondary schools’ managements and some individuals took back to their possession the wind instruments and the harmonium (Dimitrova 2004, 110). The Headmaster of the Girls’ Gymnasium prohibited to the students to take part in the performances where they were invited as extras²¹. The widespread propaganda claiming that the state would take greater care of culture than previous governments, along with rumours that the Opera House would be nationalized, likely led citizens to believe that everything necessary for its development and operation would be provided immediately (Dimitrova 2004, 110). It may have happened that some citizens would fear that their instruments

¹⁸ SA - Stara Zagora, f. 47, inv. 1, file 1, pp. 10-14.

¹⁹ SA - Stara Zagora, f. 47, inv. 1, file 1, p. 36. The newspaper *Septemvri*, No. 22 of 9 July 1945 states the amount of 1,600,000 leva.

²⁰ SA - Stara Zagora, f. 47, inv. 1, file 1, p. 32.

²¹ SA - Stara Zagora, f. 1 B, inv. 1, file 152, p. 71.

might have been registered as property belonging to the nationalized Opera House. At the same time, the possession of a German musical instrument could have been qualified as an anti-national deed. There was also a further issue to be considered and namely that the well-arranged city house at that time would be a sufficient reason for its owners to be classified as members of the bourgeoisie, i.e., to be declared “enemies of the people”.

During the 1946/1947 season, the Opera employed 10 managerial staff members (conductors, a stage director, a stage manager, etc.), 67 performers (including full-time choristers), 18 technical staff members, and 8 administrative staff members. When shaping the personnel, members of the Bulgarian Workers' Party (Communists) insisted that some of the actors should not receive an appointment because they were considered “inappropriate in ideological terms” (Dimitrova 2004).

With the seizure of power, the Fatherland Front's Government launched an ubiquitous “purge” of “enemy and anti-national elements” - “loyal representatives of the reaction, either open or hiding behind some Fatherland Front party opposition”²². Entire files were filled with all sorts of lists of troupe members with their complete personal details (even marital status, number of children with specified ages and gender!²³), information on material assets, repertoire, number of performances, number of visitors, etc., with requests often including the word “immediately” (!) and a reminder that “whoever refuses to give the information requested will be charged up to 50,000 leva worth fine, and whoever knowingly provides false information will be imprisoned for up to 1 year and will owe a fine of up to 100,000 leva”²⁴.

Having taken on the position of administrative director, Tosko Iliev concentrated his great efforts to convince party members, mainly technical and service staff, that in order to work well, it was necessary that the soloists and the choir were properly arranged, and that there were no trained experts who would stand left-wing ideas (Dimitrova 2004, 110). On a number of occasions, he would write and explain (his legal education and former lawyer practice speak for themselves!) that the performers had not had membership in any pro-fascist organizations and that, with a few exceptions, their interests were focused on art, not politics. He was the reason why there was no purge at the Opera (Dimitrova 2004). At the invitation of the musical workers, Tosko Iliev left his lawyer practice²⁵ and accepted a position as a librarian in Stara Zagora (1933-1946), while in the evenings he transformed into Nikola from the Bulgarian opera *Gergana* by Maestro Gueorgui Atanassov, or Alfredo, Manrico, Turiddu, Almaviva, and others. Moreover, he was the most logical choice when the Opera House was nationalized and the rule was introduced that the Opera House was supposed to have an administrative director approved and appointed by the Ministry, rather than elected by all members of the Board.

²² SA - Stara Zagora, f. 47, inv. 1, file 5, p. 8.

²³ SA - Stara Zagora, f. 47, inv. 1, file 5, pp. 4-5.

²⁴ SA - Stara Zagora, f. 47, inv. 1, file 5, p. 14.

²⁵ Draganov 1970, 23; SA - Stara Zagora.

The constant inquiries about the repertoire or the performances of the artists, on the number of performances, on the number of tickets, on all kinds of personnel data, etc., as well as the ultimatum and threatening tone, caused this otherwise benevolent person to answer that during the amateur performance period in the Opera House, no documentation was kept and the requested information could not be prepared and provided. Later, when the atmosphere calmed down and the tone of the requests became softer, more humane, it turned out that in the initial period documentation not only existed, but that it was kept extremely accurately and precisely: with names, dates, protocols, revenues, expenses, guest performances, tours, etc. (Draganov 1970). It was a separate issue that in later years a large part of the cited archival documents was destroyed, and again by order “from above”. After all, how else could it be claimed, even in the pages of the officials 20-30 years later, that “all of this was created by our people’s government”²⁶!

In addition to the current troupe, Tosko Iliev had also to justify the selection of titles. “Over this long period of amateur existence of the Stara Zagora Opera House, no talking about repertoire policy could prove to be serious. Everything in the past was adjusted according to the stage and staffing capacity”, he would write in another report of his²⁷.

Today, we cannot even imagine what it means to justify before higher authorities the staging of works such as *Tosca* or *La Traviata*, *Carmen* or *Madama Butterfly*. Is there an opera theatre at all where such spectacles would not be staged?! But in those years, world-renowned and established masterpieces would be subjected to political dissection and would need an acceptable ideological justification and protection... In a letter to the KNK chairman dated April 1947, the Opera House Administrative Director Tosko Iliev explains that the Opera House has not yet gained enough professional experience to follow a full-scale repertoire policy as recommended by Sofia. However, the stage directors at the Stara Zagora Opera House seek, interpret and recreate “all ideologically progressive sentiments and life-inspired human emotions, even if they are subtly suggested, striving to free themselves from the banal opera pattern”. Tosko Iliev provides examples such as *Tosca* - directed by Stefan Makedonski, *Rusalka* and *Rigoletto* - directed by Dragan Kardzhiev, in which the producers tried to bring to the forefront the living human sense of righteousness and freedom (*Tosca*), the elements of rebellion by a humiliated individual (*Rusalka*), and the struggle against the “decayed aristocratic society” (*Rigoletto*) (Dimitrova 2004). Finally, the Opera House Administrative Director expresses his confidence that the Opera House will cope with the tasks set to meet the public and cultural needs of people²⁸. Tosko Iliev, beyond being a singer and an Opera House administrative director, also became an advocate for the arts (Zhunich 2022a).

²⁶ A statement by Hristo Brambarov at the Festival of the Opera and Ballet Arts - Stara Zagora, cited in Zhunich 2020, 110-121.

²⁷ Reg. No. 230/21.04.1947 - SA - Stara Zagora, f. 47, inv. 1, file 8, p. 10.

²⁸ SA - Stara Zagora, f. 47, inv. 1, file 8, p. 10.

After its nationalization in 1946, the Opera House saw the imposition of ideas originating from the ranks of the Bulgarian Workers' Party (Communists). This was also due to the fact that as early as 1946, members of the collective established their own Primary Party Organization (PPO). The 24 members, primarily technical and service staff, viewed the organization as a corrective force in the board of the cultural institution (Dimitrova 2004). The Opera House Administrative Director Tosko Iliev was forced to report on every action he took and to discuss every decision with the PPO. Party members would be generally dissatisfied with his management and would often express their opinion that he was too "soft" with the collective. At the beginning of 1948, Administrative Director's work was considered and discussed at several meetings of the Bulgarian Workers' Party (Communists) organization within the Opera House. The main issue on the agenda, in fact the primary accusation, was that Tosko Iliev would not take sufficient measures against performers' "fascist and reactionary manifestations". However, a representative of the City Committee of the Bulgarian Workers' Party (Communists), deliberately summoned, spoke in defence of the Administrative Director. The statements made by the members of the PPO were a troubling signal of an intolerant attitude toward the artistic spirit of the ensemble, individualism, and pluralism - key characteristics of the creative process and the main artistic core²⁹ (Dimitrova 2004). The PPO's desire to rule on all issues in an authoritative manner inevitably led to controversy, aggravated the atmosphere and generally entailed a negative impact on the quality of the work (Dimitrova 2004). The PPO maintained unity of command, exercised great vigilance, monitored all statements and actions in order to prevent "enemy elements" from infiltrating the collectives³⁰. The PPO demanded that every issue be first discussed at a party meeting and only then by the artistic expert board. The Opera House trade union was also affected: it could have a leadership only if it was pre-approved by the party organization's bureau³¹. "The Administrative Director's unjustified liberalism", his consultations with stage directors and especially with conductors Romeo Raychev (Zhunich 2022b) and Simeon Fetvadhiev (whom the PPO labelled as "ideologically unaligned individuals"), as well as his consideration of their opinions were attributed to their long-standing friendship rather than to their professional qualities and

²⁹ As a result of this "competence" in any issue, whatever its nature might be, along with intolerance toward different opinions and the blatant interference even in privacy, several significant events took place: the resignation of Tosko Iliev; the so-called "conductor crisis" after the mid-1950s; Yosko Yosifov's moving to the newly established Varna Opera House; the departure of Romeo Raychev, who, as of 1 April 1954, began work at the Ruse Opera House after being publicly insulted in front of the entire team by a seamstress from the workshops who intruded into his personal life; Anna Vorobyova's leaving in 1954; and later - the expulsion of Simeon Fetvadhiev to Sofia in 1958, and other similar cases.

³⁰ SA - Stara Zagora, f. 47, inv. 1, file X, p. 8: Circular dated 18/09/1946 on "*purge of enemy elements*".

³¹ SA - Stara Zagora, f. 409B, inv. 1, file 3, p. 39.

skills. The fact that the Administrative Director did have that right under Article 13 of the Theatre Act (June 1949) was disregarded and carried no weight.

Given this accountability and documentation growing like an avalanche, those endless reports, continuous meetings and stupid, annoying, even insulting arguments, it seems almost unbelievable that Tosko Iliev still found the time and energy to continue his singing activity³². However, in the summer of 1952, exhausted by senseless disputes and petty remarks, by baseless criticism and constant suspicion, by endless justifications against groundless accusations, he resigned. However, he was forced to find the strength and continue to be the operative administrative director, assisted by a newly formed team, for another two years, i.e., until the end of August 1954 when a suitable replacement was found. Meanwhile, the PPO proposed the candidacies of Kyosyo Markov, head of the Propaganda and Agitation Department of the District Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party, and Ivan Bakalov from the Municipal People's Council³³. Since 1 September 1954, the newly assigned Opera House administrative director was Mihail Yankov³⁴, while the newly assigned deputy administrative director became Lyubomir Piperov³⁵.

With the onset of Bulgarian society's total politicization and the widespread purges - first because of "fascist elements", then because of "lack of ideological content", "bourgeois remnants" and so on, the "institutional battles" broke out (Elenkov 2008, 85-86; Petrova 2020, 82-104; Zhunich 2016; Zhunich 2022a), as well as the endless debates³⁶. However, the pursuit of the new government was not to achieve profitability of the structures being built but rather to showcase them (Harkov 2021, 82), i.e., the public was supposed to see how much care was taken for the workers, how much more generous help was given when compared to "all previous regimes". At the same time, there was a shortage of professionally trained personnel in opera theatres, vacant positions in orchestras, discussions about the lack of professional stage directors, the absence of an ideologically appropriate repertoire, and issues with the halls, stages, and their technical capabilities. According to a number of authors (Elenkov 2008;

³² "...he [Tosko Iliev] is also the administrative director of the Opera House from its nationalization and is daily absorbed with the administrative and artistic guidance of the opera" (Krastev 1951, 12-14).

³³ SA - Stara Zagora, f. 409B, inv. 1, file 6, p. 39.

³⁴ Mihail Yankov, a basso, already known to Stara Zagora public from the *Faust*: the first Mephistopheles interpreter in the city. He has also performed the parts of Don Basilio, Angelotti, Barone Douphol, etc. In 1945, he moved to Sofia where he became part of the State Musical Theatre's troupe; Administrative Director of the Stara Zagora Opera House until 31 August 1956. Later, he was a lecturer in the Sofia Conservatoire.

³⁵ SA - Stara Zagora, f. 409B, inv. 1, file 6, p. 39.

³⁶ It was precisely this "banal and cumbersome ideologization that was the reason to easily turn the direction of the dispute and find a way to sharply hurt the canon of socialist realism, particularly in the field of ideological constructs and the dominance of words over music. The dispute "journalism or science" became serious". And Stoyan Dzhudzhev's position: "We do not have musicologists who would be creative in the area of music science. And what is being written today is not science, it is journalism..." (see Petrova 2020, 89).

Elenkov 2018; Dimitrova 2004), the decline in audience interest in the production was due to the complacency stemming from the “secured livelihood” of the artists. However, the more likely reason thereto was that the replacement of the previously functioning natural selection of creative personnel with forcefully imposed new rules under the Communist party command, the denial and/or downplay of all their previous achievements, and the qualification of their work as “amateurish” and “dilettantism” led many to feel disgusted - they themselves knew best what they had gone through and what they had achieved. Additionally, they were increasingly forced to work on coercion³⁷ in completely inappropriate conditions³⁸. After the order³⁹ that “all those who have shown some talent should be encouraged to pursue art”⁴⁰, young but not entirely prepared talents entered the theatres (Dimitrova 2004, 107-108), who, after the initial successes, “thought they had already achieved a lot”⁴¹, and did not want to learn anymore. The Fatherland Front activists were quite sincerely convinced that the people’s government generously provided money and created conditions “to sweeten a little the lives of those who create the goods, of those with the cracked hands and burned faces” (Z. T. 1945, 4). However, to what extent even the activists themselves would be inclined to devote themselves to the opera art?! Or they would just fancy a convenient lifestyle as “artists”?

An interesting document from 1959 is also noteworthy: Decree of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party and the Council of Ministers of the People’s Republic of Bulgaria on the regulation of the public, material, and living conditions of the active fighters against fascism and capitalism, signed on 14 July 1959 (Fig. 2). Fifteen years after seizing power, party members had become so intoxicated by it that “as a sign of national gratitude” and in connection with the solemn celebrations, they decided to place the “active fighters” in “suitable” jobs with priority, “without complying with the requirements for educational and professional qualifications”; their children were supposed to be accepted with an advantage to be assigned, in contradiction with the plan of the schools, without age restrictions, etc.; the entitlement to people’s pension

³⁷ Especially when the Party assigned them tasks to give concerts and performances at construction sites, factories, Labour Cooperative Agricultural Farms, clubs, rallies, open-air stages in towns, etc., where there were usually no basic conditions even for a chamber concert.

³⁸ “... in 1946, when the students were building the Lovech-Troyan railway, a cultural brigade was sent from the Opera House to sweeten the work of the youth with its songs. Every night at various sites, Nadya Afeyan, Virginia Popova, Katya Popova, Mara Hinova, Lili Bareva, Ilia Yosifov, Boris Hristov, Traycho Vatashki, Dimitar Nenkov, and a group of male choir would perform on the impromptu stages songs and arias. They were accompanied by the newest pianist, Petar Shtabekov, under the baton of the young conductor Konstantin Iliev. The solo ballerina Lili Beron also took part in this brigade...” (Bozhkova 1975, 105).

³⁹ SA - Stara Zagora, f. 91K, inv. 2, file 1, p. 65

⁴⁰ SA - Stara Zagora, f. 91K, inv. 2, file 1, p. 65.

⁴¹ That was a speech by Stoyko Dikov, who besides being a baritone in the Stara Zagora Opera troupe, together with the tenors Boris Hristov and Tosko Iliev, had been training newcomers who had shown a certain talent (see Draganov 1970, 146. SA - Stara Zagora).

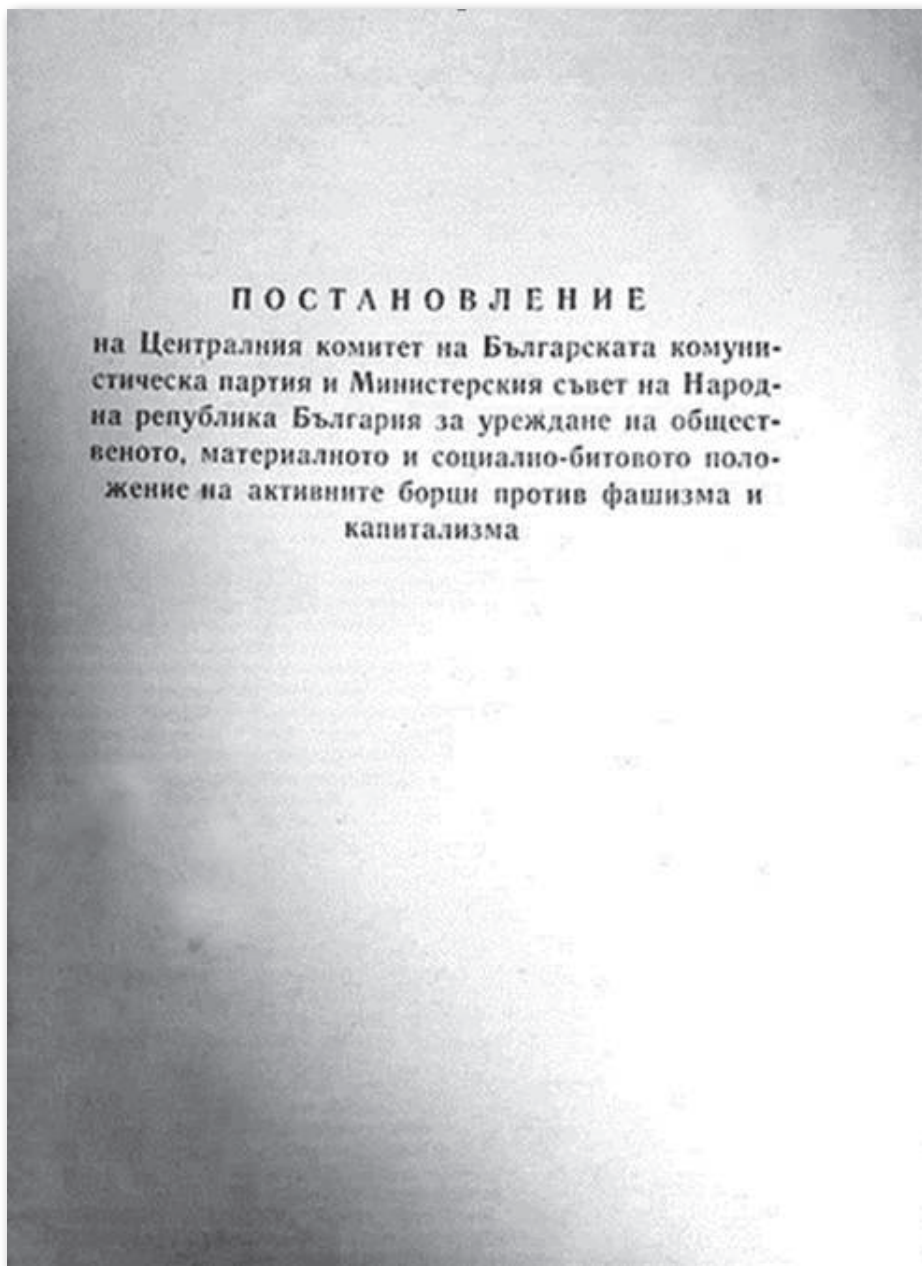


Fig. 2a. Decree of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party and the Council of Ministers of the People's Republic of Bulgaria on the regulation of the public, material, and living conditions of the active fighters against fascism and capitalism⁴²

⁴² With gratitude to Nikolay Padalski from a permanent action "Save a book" for providing the copy of the document.

Централният комитет на Българската комунистическа партия и Министерският съвет на Народна република България приемат единодушно предложението на първия секретар на ЦК на БКП др. Тодор Живков за уреждане на общественото, материалното и социално-битовото положение на активните борци против фашизма и капитализма, неизменили на партийната политика, останали верни и последователни на революционната борба.

В дългогодишните борби против фашизма и капитализма под ръководството на Българската комунистическа партия участваха хиляди самоотвержени борци. Отгледани и възпитани от Партията в безпределна вяроност към великото дело на пролетариата — дело на социализма и комунизма, в дух на социалистически патриотизъм и пролетарски интернационализъм, тези кадри минаха с изключителна смелост и твърдост през огъня на борбата, с чест издържаха най-сурови изпитания като партизани, политзатворници, нелегални партийни и ремсови дейци, интербригадисти, политемигранти, активни участници в Септемврийското въстание през 1923 г. и против деветоюнския преврат, ятаци, концлагеристи и др. В тази борба рамо до рамо с комунистите взеха активно участие самоотвержени дейци на

Fig. 2b. Decree of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party and the Council of Ministers of the People's Republic of Bulgaria on the regulation of the public, material, and living conditions of the active fighters against fascism and capitalism, p. 3

БЗНС и безпартийни патриоти и патриотки. Голлям брой от активните борци против фашизма и капитализма не пожалиха своя живот и геройски загинаха за победата на нашето велико дело.

С най-голямо задоволство трябва да се подчертае, че останалите живи борци, преминали през тежките условия на суровата борба, и днес съставляват ръководното ядро на Партията и на нашата нова държава, стоят начело на стопанския, общественно-политическия и културния живот в страната. Те достойно изпълняват поверената им от Партията и народа работа, денонощно се борят с всички сили за изграждането на социализма. Поради тежките условия на живот в миналото, трудностите на нелегалната борба, свирепия фашистки терор, жестоките инквизиции в полицията, затворите и концлагерите, немалка част от активните борци против фашизма и капитализма са с влошено здраве, с намалена работоспособност. Вследствие на това или на напреднала възраст някои от тях сега не са ангажирани активно в партийния и обществения живот, не участвуват в държавната и стопанската работа, поради което изпитват материални затруднения.

В знак на всенародна благодарност за големите им заслуги пред Родината Българската комунистическа партия, Правителството и цялата наша общественост са полагали и особено след Априлския пленум на ЦК продължават да полагат не малко грижи за общественото, материалното и социално-битовото положение на активните борци против фашизма и капитализма, както и за родителите, децата и близките на онези, които загинаха в борбата.

Fig. 2c. Decree of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party and the Council of Ministers of the People's Republic of Bulgaria on the regulation of the public, material, and living conditions of the active fighters against fascism and capitalism, p. 4

На сегашния етап от нашето развитие, когато страната ни достигна безспорни стопански успехи и трудещите се разгръщат всенародно движение за ускоряване на икономическото ни развитие, се създават много по-добри условия и материални предпоставки за цялостно уреждане на положението на тези предани народни синове и дъщери.

С цел да се изтъкнат големите заслуги на активните борци против фашизма и капитализма към Партията и народа, да им се отдаде нужната всенародна признателност и за да се уреди цялостно тяхното обществено, материално и социално-битово положение и във връзка с предстоящото чествуване на 15-годишнината на Деветосептемврийското народно въоръжено въстание Централният комитет на Българската комунистическа партия и Министерският съвет

ПО С Т А Н О В Я В А Т :

I. За обществено-политическото значение и ролята на активните борци против фашизма и капитализма в борбата за социализъм и комунизъм.

I. Считат за целесъобразно да подчертаят отново пред Партията и пред целия народ особено важното обществено-политическо значение и голямата роля в миналото и сега на активните борци против фашизма и капитализма, на онази гвардия от верни народни синове и дъщери, които, вдъхновявани от комунистическите идеи и под ръководството на Българската комунистическа партия, участваха активно, непрекъснато и последователно в дългогодишната сурова борба

Fig. 2d. Decree of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party and the Council of Ministers of the People's Republic of Bulgaria on the regulation of the public, material, and living conditions of the active fighters against fascism and capitalism, p. 5

ци против фашизма и капитализма като проява на заслужена признателност и законна грижа към ония, които през годините на антифашистката борба при най-тежки изпитания не пожалиха сили, здраве и живота си дори за свободата и щастието на народа, за светлото социалистическо бъдеще на нашата Родина.

Централният комитет на Българската комунистическа партия и Министерският съвет са уверени, че активните борци против фашизма и капитализма както досега и занапред ще участват в първите редове на битката за социалистическото преустройство на страната, ще бъдат винаги и навсякъде сред народа, ще служат за пример на непоколебима твърдост в борбата за прилагане на правилната партийна линия в живота, ще работят с неукротима енергия и революционна страст за пълната победа на нашето велико дело — комунизма.

София, 14 юли 1959 г.

*Централен комитет
на Българската
комунистическа партия*

*Секретар:
Т. Живков*

*Министерски съвет
на Народна република
България*

*Председател:
А. Югов*

Fig. 2e. Decree of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party and the Council of Ministers of the People's Republic of Bulgaria on the regulation of the public, material, and living conditions of the active fighters against fascism and capitalism, p. 16

would be given starting from the age of 45 for women, while for men this age threshold would be 50, etc. This explains why, at the end of the period under review, the number of “active fighters” had increased instead of decreased (due to natural causes)!

And despite upheavals of all kinds, the rejection of artists and works, the bans, and the neglect of the Bulgarian professional opera ensembles (in favour of amateur, pop and variety ones), opera has nevertheless survived. Immortal masterpieces outlive dictators and revolutions, take-overs, ideologies. This is why they are immortal after all.

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