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**Bulgarian National Heroes: People Fighting an Empire, People Forging  
Socialism**

*"National heroes, literature, folklore, events and the sites of events in the past - these are some of the symbols utilized to define what it means to be a member of a particular people."<sup>1</sup>*

The image of the masculine hero has been used in various historical contexts across time and space. Political elites have constructed heroic notions, so that people have an ideal to look up to and strive towards. The power of these ideas of individuals treated as greatly important for the nation has been used as an attempt to build nations, as power-holders have devoted a significant place in the popular literature and educational textbooks to these milestone figures. After regime changes, such as the Communist takeover of power in Bulgaria in 1944, elites tend to "shape" the images of popular figures of the past; it is beneficial to follow the continuities in the descriptions of these heroes across political regimes, in order to generate general historical inferences.

Traditionally, politicians and the media have viewed nationalism and communism as the two opposing ends of a straight line of political ideology. Starting from the rivalry between communists and nationalists in Europe during the first half of the 20th century, nationalist elites have often depicted themselves as the opposite to communists, and vice versa. In Bulgaria, the coming of the Communist Party to power in 1944 started a process of anti-nationalist propaganda that blamed the pro-Nazi Tsarist government for the losses the country experienced in World War II, and developed a new interpretation of Bulgarian history, compatible with Marxism-Leninism. Spas Raikin notes the exclusive nature of the communist rule in Bulgaria in terms of intellectual freedom: "Marxism-Leninism was enthroned as the official and only permissible ideology permitted in the country, and all national culture was to be tailored according to its precepts. The legacy of the past was re-evaluated and the blueprints of the future culture were clearly outlined. The Soviet doctrine of

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<sup>1</sup> James Frusetta, "Common Heroes, Divided Claims: IMRO Between Macedonia and Bulgaria." In *Ideologies and National Identities : The Case of Twentieth-century Southeastern Europe*, ed. Mark Mazower and John Lampe. (Budapest; New York: Central European University Press, 2004), 110.

Social Realism was made mandatory in literature, art, architecture, and music."<sup>2</sup> After regime changes, totalitarian governments incorporate ideologically compatible expressions in the arts and the humanities, and Bulgaria in the late 1940s - early 1950s was no exception.

Despite the animosity between nationalists and communists, however, in the sphere of popular heroes, the two types of regime ideologies resemble one another; they each embrace popular, individual masculine heroes to represent the collective nation. This common feature is particularly true for the historical experience of Bulgaria, which had both a nationalist government and a communist one in the period of less than a century, from the 1870s to the 1940s. In the Bulgarian context, the popular images of the hero were present in the literary works of intellectual elites, especially in poems that carried powerful nationalist and socialist messages to the public.

Furthermore, the similarities in the representation of the masculine hero suggest a possible connection between the value systems in nationalist and communist regimes. In addition to the fact that both types of societies adopt normative criteria for the depiction of the male body<sup>3</sup>, we see the image of "the warrior", as categorized by George L. Mosse, to convey its message of "courage, sacrifice and camaraderie"<sup>4</sup> in poems from both periods in Bulgarian history. This suggests a similar purpose in the mindset of the elites and the intelligentsia of communism to that of nationalism - to set up examples for the masses to live up to, and thus to motivate desired behavior in the population. Heroism, death and sacrifice - values that Mosse considers to be traditionally Christian and Greek<sup>5</sup>, and associated with manliness, are present in the re-formulated "heroic" poetry of pro-communist nature around the 1940s.

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<sup>2</sup> Spas T. Raikin, "Bulgaria." In *Eastern Europe: Politics, Culture, and Society since 1939*, ed. Sabrina P. Ramet. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), 234.

<sup>3</sup> George L. Mosse. *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity*. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 4.

<sup>4</sup> Mosse, *The Image of Man*, 108.

<sup>5</sup> Mosse, *The Image of Man*, 50.

This paper will explain the similarities and the differences between the nationalist and the communist constructions of the masculine hero in part by comparing the gendering of national mythology in each context. In doing so, the paper will argue that the construction of the masculine hero is done along the same lines when aiming at motivating the masses to fight against a political regime or to form a political regime. This approach challenges the traditional theories of the formation of the national identity as the basis of the nation-state and of the international identity used in communist countries. Scholars that come from the Western tradition, such as Benedict Anderson, have built up their analysis of the nation and nationalism by using the experiences of the Western world and its colonies. Classical historians of Europe, such as Anderson and Ernest Gellner have left Eastern Europe out of European history, but in doing so have lost the grasp on the full picture of nationalism and its nuances. The experiences of the Eastern European border countries, especially Bulgaria, is much more diverse in terms of political ideologies, and the interesting mixtures of political regimes and political elite values have the potential to enrich our understanding of major concepts in history, such as nationalism.

Some Eastern European scholars, especially Mark Steinberg, have already noted this contradiction between the individualism of the nationalist ideology and the collectivism of the socialist one. However, there is a need for a theoretical approach that explains how the ideas of nationalism were reconciled with the ideas of socialism. In the case of Bulgaria, many of the heroes of the Bulgarian Revival (or what I will call the *nationalist* period in Bulgarian history) were not only accepted, but also greatly praised by the communist elites, which took over Bulgaria about seventy years later. This paradox of an internationalist and collectivist elite adopting nationalist and individualist values will be investigated by this paper, with the purpose to provide a general explanation to the political choices of the communist elites in what to include in their official propaganda.

The argument that will be proposed by this study is that foreign relations dictated the aforementioned choice of the Bulgarian elites. The *Russophiles* who became influential during the second half of the 19th century in the example of Vazov and Botev, established a tradition of pro-Russian sentiment in a certain sector of the Bulgarian political and intellectual elite. The close ties during both the *nationalist* and the *communist* periods between Bulgaria and Russia (later the USSR) were crucial in shaping the value systems of the political elites of the time. This paper will argue that the Bulgarian elites not only made rational political choices, dictated by foreign relations objectives, but also adopted values regarding the nation, which formed a unique mix of nationalist and socialist ideology. In other words, the project of nation-building was tied to both love of the *fatherland* and love of Bulgaria's "big brother" Russia.

These value systems of the Bulgarian elites are particularly evident in poetry, produced by the intelligentsia who supported these elites. Poetry has long been used as a method of propaganda by elites to promote a certain set of convictions, because of its immense power to excite and motivate the masses. In the case of Bulgaria, poetry has been a very influential form of political persuasion, ever since the Bulgarian Revival. As Misha Glenny argues, the poets of the Bulgarian Revival have shaped the value systems of the population: "Levski and Botev<sup>6</sup> remain central icons of Bulgarian national identity to this day"<sup>7</sup>. Even nowadays, the poems discussed by this paper have been studied for decades by heart in primary school to educate the young Bulgarian children in the values, accepted by the elites as "national". Such poems have been very influential and popular in Bulgaria, many of them written by Bulgarian heroes themselves.

The region of modern-day Bulgaria was the subject of a struggle for influence by two major empires in the 19th and 20th centuries: the Ottoman and the Russian Empires. From

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<sup>6</sup> Bulgarian revolutionary leaders during the Revival.

<sup>7</sup> Misha Glenny. *The Balkans, 1804-1999 : Nationalism, War and the Great Powers*. (London: Granta Books, 1999), 119.

1393, when the Ottomans conquered the capital of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom - Tarnovo, to 1878, when Bulgaria became independent, the region was a part of the Ottoman Empire. Throughout this time, however, the local population, consisting primarily of Slavic people, preserved their Slavic language and culture, along with the Eastern Orthodox Christian religion. The attempts to convert the local population to Islam by the Ottomans, especially in the first two centuries of the Ottoman rule, was mostly unsuccessful.

The main result of these attempts, along with the cultural, economic and political oppression, which the Bulgarian people experienced for five centuries, was a nationalist movement for liberation, called *The Bulgarian Revival*, which emulated the wave of revolutions that swept Europe in the 19th century. This movement was instigated by Bulgarian intellectual elites, living outside of the Ottoman Empire, mostly in Bucharest, whose writings became the popular propaganda that inspired the masses with nationalist sentiment and eventually led to the April uprising of 1876, which mobilized the Bulgarian population to resist the imperial power.

The uprising was unsuccessful and was ended with great atrocities and a lot of violence on behalf of the Ottoman authorities. However, the nationalist sentiment did not end with that, and with the support of another European empire - Russia - Bulgaria became independent on 3rd March 1878. The Bulgarian intellectual elites had long lobbied for Russian support of the independence movement by evoking a Slavic linguistic and a Christian religious brotherhood between Bulgarians and Russians.

Charles and Barbara Jelavich analyze the political power game of Russia in the Balkans in their book *The Establishment of the Balkan National States, 1804 - 1920*, pointing out that the power vacuum, left by the "weakening of Ottoman control", was filled by Russian influence.<sup>8</sup> This argument proposes a purely merit-based relationship between Russia and the

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<sup>8</sup> Charles and Barbara Jelavich. *The Establishment of the Balkan National States, 1804 - 1920*. (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1977), 158.

Bulgarian elites, while there might be much more than that. As evident through the poetry of the period, the Bulgarian elites did not desire simply liberation from the Ottomans, but desired liberation by Russia.

One of the greatest Bulgarian authors from the Revival period, Ivan Vazov, portrayed this specific desire in his poem *Ода на Императора Александра II* (Ode of the Emperor Alexander II). The last verse of the poem bears the importance of Pan Slavism:

*"накрай – между братя да няма веч делба,  
един вожд да имат, един същ олтар  
и двацет народи от Босфор до Елба  
да поздравят скоро Славянския цар."*<sup>9</sup>

(in the end - between brothers there will no longer be partition,  
one chief they will have, one and the same altar  
and twenty peoples from the Bosphorus to Elba  
to greet soon the Slavic Tsar.) - translation

Vazov's pro-Russian feelings were shared by many, and the Russian Tsar Alexander II became a national hero for Bulgaria, his name remaining in history as *Цар Освободител*, or "Tsar-Liberator", and his monument founded in 1907 as a symbol of the Bulgarian liberation by Russia. Vazov presented the hero Alexander in the poem in a very Eastern Orthodox masculine light, typical for the national heroes of Bulgaria. His choices of words for the Tsar: *царствено лице* (tsarist face), *лъчезарност* (radiance), *монарх славен* (glorious monarch), *доблестен* (valorous), *колос* (colossus), *гласа ти гръмоуен, магичен* (your voice thunderous, magical)<sup>10</sup>, are exemplary of the awe and the love of the Bulgarian people to the Tsar.

Vazov's image of Alexander II also stresses the power the Tsar had at the time:

*"Ти дума пришуишеши – оковите падат,  
ти махнеш с ръката – трепери Елбрус,  
ти вежди намръщиши – бледней Цариградът,*

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<sup>9</sup> Vazov, Ivan. "Oda na Imperatora Aleksandra II". [www.slovo.bg](http://www.slovo.bg), 1877, <http://www.slovo.bg/showwork.php3?AuID=14&WorkID=15962&Level=2>. Accessed 03.29.2019.

<sup>10</sup> Vazov, Ivan. "Oda na Imperatora Aleksandra II". [www.slovo.bg](http://www.slovo.bg), 1877, <http://www.slovo.bg/showwork.php3?AuID=14&WorkID=15962&Level=2>. Accessed 03.29.2019.

*ти тупнеш с крака си – навред става трус.*<sup>11</sup>

(You whisper a word - the chains fall,  
you wave your hand - Elbrus shakes,  
you frown - Tsarigrad fades,  
you pat with your foot - a truce occurs everywhere) - translation

We can certainly see from Vazov's poem that the Tsar was not only loved, but also respected and feared - a true national hero!

The ode on Alexander II is exemplary of the direction of the Bulgarian nationalist sentiment of the 1870s, which has been tied by *Russophiles* in Bulgaria (Botev, Vazov) at the time to Pan-Slavism. Charles Jelavich argues in his book *Tsarist Russia and Balkan Nationalism; Russian Influence in the Internal Affairs of Bulgaria and Serbia, 1879-1886* that "Bulgarian nationalism was in 1878 synonymous with certain Pan Slav aspirations",<sup>12</sup> and these aspirations were tied to Russia. In other words, the very foundations of nationalism in Bulgaria was placed on this Pan Slavic connection with Russia, which would shape the ideological values of the Bulgarian elites not only during the Bulgarian Revival, but also later during the coming of communism to power. The achievement of independence from the Ottoman Empire by the Bulgarians with Russian help would leave a permanent mark in the mindset of the elites and the population, promoting a strong pro-Russian sentiment amongst many. Jelavich relates to this argument by pointing out that the Russian army in 1878 became the symbol and "the instrument" of Bulgarian liberation.<sup>13</sup> Sixty-six years later, the Red Army of the former liberators of Bulgaria came at the Bulgarian frontier again, but at that time to "liberate" the Bulgarians from the pro-Nazi Tsarist regime.

This connection between the two peoples remained strong through the period of the Third Bulgarian Kingdom (1878-1944), at least in the writings of Bulgarian intellectuals.

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<sup>11</sup> Vazov, Ivan. "Oda na Imperatora Aleksandra II". [www.slovo.bg](http://www.slovo.bg), 1877, <http://www.slovo.bg/showwork.php3?AuID=14&WorkID=15962&Level=2>. Accessed 03.29.2019.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Jelavich. *Tsarist Russia and Balkan Nationalism; Russian Influence in the Internal Affairs of Bulgaria and Serbia, 1879-1886*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1962), 1.

<sup>13</sup> Jelavich. *Tsarist Russia and Balkan Nationalism*, 28.

After some political truces and a struggle between *Russophiles* and *Russophobes* in Bulgaria since the 1880s, pro-Russian feelings once again became the dominant ideology in the country. In the beginning of World War II, a new wave of pro-Russian sentiment arose after Bulgaria sided with Nazi Germany in the war. A resistance movement by organized guerilla groups, called *partizani*, began fighting against the pro-Nazi Bulgarian authorities with the purpose of ending the Bulgarian-Nazi alliance and turning to the Soviet Union as Bulgaria's "big brother" once again. Eventually, with the Red Army at the border, the Bulgarian regent government was deposed in 1944 and Bulgaria became a communist People's Republic and a satellite of the USSR.

While the Revival movement of the 1870s was much different ideologically from that of the anti-Nazi communist movement of the 1940s, there are significant similarities between the two, especially in terms of the constructions of the identities and the images of the heroes, who fought in these two organized movements. In both periods of time, the intellectuals, whose works motivated the masses to resist, appealed to the "Slavic brotherhood" with Russia and the USSR. While historians would expect to see different ideals formulated according to the different political regimes in Russia at the two periods of time, the construction of the national heroes had very similar characteristics, implying a nationalist legacy employed in socialist elite consciousness.

"Every revolution needs its heroes", writes Victoria Bonnell.<sup>14</sup> In fact, in the Bulgarian context of the 1870s, the revolution not only needed heroes, but it was also inspired by these heroes. Bulgarian historians in the 20th century have established as national heroes the figures of Vasil Levski, Hristo Botev and Lyuben Karavelov, whose novels, poems and words have inspired the Bulgarian population to form an organized resistance movement. Hristo Botev - the poet-revolutionary, fought the Ottomans in 1876 and died in his resistance struggle. As the

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<sup>14</sup> Victoria E. Bonnell. *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 21.

case is with many other Bulgarian heroes of the time, not only his actions, but also his words inspired nationalism among the Bulgarians.

Botev's poem "На Прощаване в 1868 г." (On Farewell 1868) was written before he embarked with his revolutionary squad south of the Danube river from Romania into Ottoman territory, as part of one of the Bulgarian uprisings. The poet uses very dramatic language to portray himself as a national hero, ready to die for his people in his youth. Many of the verses in the poem evoke national sentiment by appealing to the people with the image of a young strong man who is on his way to death for his nation:

*"Но кажи какво да правя,  
кат си ме, майко, родила  
със сърце мъжско, юнашко,  
та сърце, майко, не трае  
да гледа турчин, че бесней  
над бащино ми огнище:  
там, дето аз съм пораснал  
и първо мляко засукал,  
там, дето либе хубаво  
черни си очи вдигнеш  
и с онази тиха усмивка  
в скръбно ги сърце впиеш,  
там дето баща и братя  
черни чернеят за мене!..."<sup>15</sup>*

(But tell me what to do,  
when you have, mother, given birth to me  
with a heart of a man, of a hero,  
so the heart, mother, does not stand  
to watch the Turk rages  
over my father's fireplace:  
there, where I have grown up  
and first milk breastfed,  
there, where beautiful swain  
her black eyes lifted  
and with that silent smile  
on mourning heart set them  
there where fathers and brothers  
black blacken for me!...) - translate

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<sup>15</sup> Botev, Hristo. "Na proshtavane v 1868". [www.slovo.bg](http://www.slovo.bg), 1868,  
<http://www.slovo.bg/showwork.php3?AuID=1&WorkID=9&Level=1>. Accessed 03.29.2019.

Botev's lines here have several powerful images transmitted to the public: his masculinity, his heroism, his patriotism and the sense of brotherhood. All of them are parts of the image of the modern Bulgarian hero - a young male who is fighting for his people and his country, which he loves. First, the references to the masculinity and the heroism of the character (the poet himself), inspire feelings of awe in the reader. Then, the references to childhood and the home evoke a sense of love for the motherland, which undoubtedly Botev possesses. The separation of the hero from the homeland is even more dramatic by the fact that he is away from the girl that he loves - once again stressing the masculine aspect and relating to the common people on a very intimate emotional level. Finally, the references to the family of the poet, and especially his brothers (the people), suggest a feeling of brotherhood that is common to nationalism in the 19th century.

In another poem of his, *Hadzhi Dimitar*, Hristo Botev writes on another revolutionary: the *haidutin* Hadzhi Dimitar. In the poem, the hero is wounded in his fight against the Ottomans and is lying on the ground, ready to die. Once again, the scene is full of masculine nationalist dramaticism:

"Жив е той, жив е! Там на Балкана,  
потънал в кърви лежи и пъшка  
юнак с дълбока на гърди рана,  
юнак във младост и в сила мъжка."<sup>16</sup>

(Alive he is, alive! There on the Balkan,  
covered in blood lying and groaning  
a hero with a deep on the chest wound,  
a hero in youth and in strength male) - translate

The image of the dying young male hero provokes pity and awe at the same time. He is dying at the wrong time - in his youth. He is not dying a natural death - he is dying from his wounds in a battle. The depicted type of death is the ultimate desire of the male hero - to die

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<sup>16</sup> Botev, Hristo. "Hadzhi Dimitar". [www.slovo.bg](http://www.slovo.bg), 1873, <http://www.slovo.bg/showwork.php3?AuID=1&WorkID=3158&Level=1>. Accessed 03.29.2019.

young, fighting for his cause. And his cause is his country again, his people. For these reasons, the name of the hero will stay forever in the memories of his nation:

*"Тоз, който падне в бой за свобода,  
той не умира: него жалеят  
земя и небе, звяр и природа  
и певци песни за него пеят..."<sup>17</sup>*

(He, who falls in a fight for freedom,  
he does not die: he is mourned  
by earth and sky, beast and nature  
and singers songs for him sing...) - translate

These lines capture a very specific part of the character of the Bulgarian hero - his immortality in the memory of his people. In fact, what Botev wrote in the 1870s about Hadzhi Dimitar - that the latter would never die - turned out true, since this poem is to this day studied as a song by every single Bulgarian student.

Perhaps the most popular, loved and written about Bulgarian national hero is Vasil Levski. He led the popular revolutionary movement in Bulgaria until he was captured and hanged by the Ottoman authorities in 1873, at the age of thirty-five. Both Ivan Vazov and Hristo Botev - the greatest poets of the Bulgarian Revival - wrote poems on the hanging of Levski. This dramatic event, the sacrifice of the young man for his nation, became the symbol of Bulgarian nationalism. The death of Vasil Levski, depicted by the powerful words of Vazov and Botev, left a permanent mark in the memories of the young Bulgarian nation.

The last verses of Botev's poem are one of the most popular ones in Bulgarian history and literature to this day:

*"Умря той вече! Юнашка сила  
твоите тиране скриха в земята!  
О, майко моя, родино мила,  
плачи за него, кълни съдбата!"<sup>18</sup>*

(He died already! Heroic strength

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<sup>17</sup> Botev, Hristo. "Hadzhi Dimitar". www.slovo.bg, 1873,  
<http://www.slovo.bg/showwork.php3?AuID=1&WorkID=3158&Level=1>. Accessed 03.29.2019.

<sup>18</sup> Botev, Hristo. "Obesvaneto na Vasil Levski". www.slovo.bg, 1875,  
<http://www.slovo.bg/showwork.php3?AuID=1&WorkID=3164&Level=1>. Accessed 03.29.2019.

your tyrants hid into the earth!  
Oh, my mother, dear homeland,  
cry for him, curse faith!) - translate

The strength and the heroism of the young revolutionary, who is executed by the "tyrants" convey a strong message to the reader. All of Bulgaria - the Bulgarian nation is sad and angry at the same time. The feelings of sadness and anger, brought together, are a powerful mixture able to motivate the people and unite them with nationalist sentiment. The death of the most cherished hero of the Bulgarian people only served to unite the nation more by giving it an unforgettable image of Bulgaria's most loved young son dead on the rope.

Even more dramatic and heroic is the depiction of Levski in his last hours by Ivan

Vazov:

*"Окован и кървав, във тъмница ръгнат,  
Апостолът беше на мъки подвъргнат  
ужасни. Напразно! Те нямаха власт  
над таз душа яка. Ни вопъл, ни глас,  
ни молба, ни клетва, ни болно стенанье  
не издаде в мрака туй гордо страданье!  
Смъртта беше близко, но страхът далеч.  
И той не пошушна предателска реч.  
И на вси въпроси - грозно изпитанье -  
един ответ даде и едно мълчанье  
и казваше: "Аз съм Левски! Ей ме на!"  
И никое име той не спомена."<sup>19</sup>*

(Chained and bloody, in a cell cast away,  
The Apostle was set to suffering  
great. In vain! They had no power  
over this strong soul. No lament, no voice,  
no plea, no swear, no sick wailing  
did this proud suffering yield in the darkness!  
The death was near, but far was the fear.  
And he did not whisper traitor speech.  
And to all questions - an ugly test -  
the same answer gave and a single silence  
and said: 'I am Levski! Here I am!'  
And he mentioned no name) - translate

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<sup>19</sup> Vazov, Ivan. "Levski". [www.slovo.bg](http://www.slovo.bg), 1881,  
<http://www.slovo.bg/showwork.php3?AuID=14&WorkID=909&Level=2>. Accessed 03.29.2019.

The image of Levski in the poem is the image of a true masculine hero; not masculine because of sex-appeal, but because of the firmness of character and the determination of will he shows even when chained and tortured. The powerful message to the reader is that the true example of a male hero does not lament over suffering - he does not surrender until the death. Levski's last hours were made exemplary by Vazov to show to the public that the leader of the independence struggle did not hesitate in his fight even for a second, even threatened by death. This message appears throughout Bulgarian heroic literature, evoking the masculine determination of the male hero in front of death.

Historians refer to Levski as the *Apostle of Freedom*. In her book *Bones of Contention: The Living Archive of Vasil Levski And the Making of Bulgaria's National Hero*, Mariia Todorova argues that he was "the major and only uncontested hero of the Bulgarian national pantheon."<sup>20</sup> His words "Ako specheliya, pecheli tzyal narod, ako izgubiya, gubiya samo mene si", or "If I win, I win for the whole nation, if I lose, I am losing only myself" are well-known to every Bulgarian and are exemplary of the nationalist ideology of the time. They represent the resistance struggle, in which the Apostle was involved, and the insignificance of his life compared to the good of the nation. In July 1996, Levski was appointed by the Bulgarian Orthodox Church to the status of saint because of his importance for the national struggle of the Bulgarians in the 19th century.<sup>21</sup>

Todorova discusses the importance of Levski, and national heroes in general, in the light of the revolutionary movement of the 1870s. She connects nationalism with national heroes with the statement that "national heroes are a recognized cornerstone of the symbolic repertoire of nationalism."<sup>22</sup> However, her argument is that Bulgarian nationalism was not as strong as in other places: "the absence or weakness of a strong national feeling among the

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<sup>20</sup> Mariia Nikolaeva Todorova. *Bones of Contention: The Living Archive of Vasil Levski And the Making of Bulgaria's National Hero*. (Budapest: Central University Press, 2009), IX.

<sup>21</sup> Todorova. *Bones of Contention*, 349.

<sup>22</sup> Todorova. *Bones of Contention*, XI.

Bulgarians was lamented by writers, scholars, and politicians alike, at different moments of Bulgaria's national development in the past two centuries."<sup>23</sup> This opinion is a bit controversial, given the fact that the actions and words of national heroes in Bulgaria have become a part of the Bulgarian education and remain such to this day. Furthermore, there was an organized resistance movement against the Ottomans, which is a sign for the popularity and the power of the nationalist sentiment among the Bulgarian population.

However, scholars that study Bulgarian history of the 19th century, mostly fail to account for the continuation of the national hero discourse into the early socialist period in Bulgaria. They limit themselves to the heroes of the resistance in the 1870s and fail to recognize that the next wave of a popular resistance movement - the one against Nazism - had its own national heroes, too. Furthermore, the national heroes of the two movements resemble each other greatly, judging from the construction of their images by popular literature.

Nikola Vaptsarov, a Bulgarian poet and revolutionary (1909-1942), is the perfect example of how similarly the heroes of the two periods are depicted. Vaptsarov was one of the leaders of the underground movement against the government of Tsar Boris III and its alliance with Nazi Germany. He was captured, sentenced and shot by a firing squad because of his revolutionary activities as a communist.

Similarly, Vaptsarov died at an early age (thirty-three) from the hands of the government, against which he was revolting. They were both young male heroes ready to die for their people, despite the hypothetical difference between the nationalist convictions of Levski and the communist ones of Vaptsarov. The masculinity, the youth and the readiness to die for the popular cause were all major similarities between the heroes of the nationalist and the communist resistances.

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<sup>23</sup> Todorova. *Bones of Contention*, 506-507.

The last poem by Vaptsarov was written hours before his death in the cell. In addition to the already familiar heroic characteristics of the character: youth, masculinity and love of the people, we see the emergence of socialist values of collectivism and anti-individualism:

*"Борбата е безмилостно жестока.  
Борбата, както казват, е епична.  
Аз паднах. Друг ще ме смени и...*

*толкоз.*

*Какво тук значи някаква си личност?!  
Разстрел, и след разстрела - червеи.  
Това е толкоз просто и логично.  
Но в бурята ще бъдем пак със тебе,  
народе мой, защото те обичахме!"<sup>24</sup>*

(The fight is mercilessly cruel.  
The fight, as they say, is epic.  
I fell. Another will take my place and...  
done.  
What here means a single individual?!  
Firing squad, and after the firing squad - the worms.  
This is so simple and logical.  
But in the storm we will be again with you,  
my people, for we loved you so!) - translate

Vaptsarov's last piece evokes the image of death to transmit an influential message to the reader. The presence of a fight is crucial for the young man to be considered a hero, and he looks the more heroic the closer he gets to death. Furthermore, the love for the nation, the people, is still present in the writings of the communist poet-revolutionary. It is obvious that the internationalist values of communism had not been able to replace the foundational nationalist sentiment of the Bulgarian heroic intelligentsia poetry.

However, the 20th century communist ideology is apparent in the line "what here means a single individual". This line was considered later by the communist authorities as a truly communist anti-individualist line, suggesting that the hero does not position himself above the ordinary people - the proletariat, for whom he revolted. The biggest commonality

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<sup>24</sup> Vaptsarov, Nikola. "Borbata". www.liternet.bg, 1942, [http://liternet.bg/publish22/n\\_j\\_vapcarov/borbata.htm](http://liternet.bg/publish22/n_j_vapcarov/borbata.htm). Accessed 03.29.2019.

between the Revival and the communist guerilla resistance was that at both times the discussed heroes were considered to be fighting a revolutionary battle against the oppressors.

The *partizani*, or the Bulgarian guerilla fighters against the pro-Nazi regime, became the revolutionaries of communism. In the poems describing them, the same symbols as during the 1870s are present: struggle against oppression, love of the nation, and especially masculine determination in front of death. Veselin Andreev's poem on a fictional *partizanin*'s torture contains the latter and draws an interesting similarity with the image of Levski in the dungeon, discussed earlier:

*"Те в раните люти  
посипали сол като жар —  
скърцал с зъби нечуто  
и как ли без вик издържал? ...  
И в злоба безсилна  
пак били го диви и зли  
в страшни мъки се свивал,  
но дума не им промълвил ...  
После бавно притихнал-  
смутени, учудени в страх,  
те го гледали тихо —  
безмълвен, но горд, величав.  
— Не човек, а желязо —  
просъскал агентът фашист.  
Тихо мъртвия казал:  
— Не, комунист!"<sup>25</sup>*  
("They in the burning wounds  
poured salt as fire -  
he gritted his teeth unheard of  
and how without screaming resisted? ...  
And in powerless spite  
they beat him wild and evil  
in great suffering he shrunk,  
but did not whisper a word ...  
Then slowly became silent -  
disturbed, amazed in fear,  
they looked at him quietly -  
speechless, but proud, noble.  
- Not a man, but iron -  
fizzled the Fascist agent.  
Quietly the dead said:  
- No, a communist!) - translate

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<sup>25</sup> Andreev, Veselin. "Balada za komunista". www.chitanka.info, Summer 1946, <https://chitanka.info/text/12606-balada-za-komunista>, Accessed 03/29/2019.

The greatest quality displayed in the verses is one defining a very masculine personality - the ability to withstand extreme pain. As Levski in Botev's poem, the partizanin does not say a word even after the torture and questioning done by the Fascists. His determination to his cause, so typical of masculine heroes, is present in almost every line. The greatness of his male spirit "disturbs" the torturers, who are amazed by the firmness the communist shows. The comparison between his spirit and "iron" suggests the masculine desirable for every man trait to be firm and strong in front of challenges, pain and even death.

Another similarity between this poem and Botev's on Levski is that we have the images of the oppressors. These images serve not only to anger the reader, but also to further present in a positive light the revolutionary, who is tortured by these monsters. During the Revival, the oppressors were the Ottomans; during the 1940s - the pro-Nazi Tsar Boris III and his government. The crucial similarity at both times was that the Bulgarian revolutionaries looked for foreign support and found it in the face of Russia and the USSR. The "Big Brother" of Bulgaria, the fellow Slavic Great Power, was where the Bulgarian revolutionary elites had set their eyes upon. From there, they sought not only military support to their revolutions, but also political approval.

To achieve that approval, the Bulgarian elites in the 1940s had to reconcile the inherent Bulgarian nationalism and individualism from the Revival with the Marxist-Leninist internationalist and collectivist ideology. This reconciliation could not simply be on paper or in the propaganda of the communists, but also in their thoughts, in their feelings. And what better expresses the values and the feelings of the revolutionary elite by the poet who was one of the leaders of the communist resistance: Nikola Vapzarov.

Many historians have not been able to consider the possibility that the elites actually believed in the strange mixture of values that nationalism and communism created in Eastern

Europe. Due to the continuous intellectual exchange between Russia (later USSR) and Bulgaria, one can trace how communist ideology regarding the hero was transferred to the Bulgarian people. Victoria Bonnell, although looking at posters, acknowledges the importance of heroes for communism by arguing that by the 1920s, the new icons in the Soviet Union were of heroes (saints) and enemies.<sup>26</sup> However, there is a slight difference between the Soviet and the Bulgarian use of heroic figures, where Bulgaria preserved its nationalist sentiment in the creation of its heroes of communism. The Soviet ideal of the hero, on the other hand, focused on the proletariat as "the collective hero of world history."<sup>27</sup>

Despite this difference, Bulgarian elites borrowed significantly from communist ideology from the USSR. Vaptsarov was named a hero not only because he was a revolutionary, but also because he was a part of the workforce as a machinist, which Bonnell would incorporate into the Soviet idea of "the cult of little men", or the making of ordinary people as heroes<sup>28</sup>. In focusing only on the Soviet idea of the hero, Bonnell attributes the qualities of "youth and enthusiasm" to the changes in the workforce and the appearance of a working class with a voice<sup>29</sup>. The fact is, that both Levski and Vaptsarov were young and enthusiastic. In the Bulgarian context, this is true for both those who fought against the Ottoman Empire and those who fought against Tsarist Bulgaria and the Nazis. Apart from being young, enthusiastic and masculine, these fighters for freedom were all ready to die for their nation. Bonnell's argument that "class, rather than nationality, religion, gender, or ethnicity, was to serve as the basis for social and political solidarity"<sup>30</sup>, does not completely explain the fact that the heroes of the nationalist movement in Bulgaria remained heroes during communism and up until today.

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<sup>26</sup> Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, 7.

<sup>27</sup> Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, 22.

<sup>28</sup> Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, 34-35.

<sup>29</sup> Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, 40-41.

<sup>30</sup> Bonnell, *Iconography of Power*, 2.

The theory that gives the best explanation of this contradictory phenomenon is provided by constructivist theory, which comes from international relations. Ideas and norms can be constructed by political elites to shape value systems and formulate popular opinion. Once adopted, these value systems become powerful agents of the political interest of their promoters. In his *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson looks at nationalism and nationality as "cultural artefacts".<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, he considers the nation as "'an imagined political community".<sup>32</sup> Using parts of his theory, one can explain how the images of heroes remained similar in Bulgaria with the coming to popularity of communism. Anderson looks at the nation as always conceived as a "deep, horizontal comradeship".<sup>33</sup> The word *comradeship* applies not only to the nation of the 19th century, but also to the communist state of the 20th. Clearly, one can see how communist intellectuals and elites borrowed from nationalist ideology to construct their idea of society.

Ronald Suny's work *Constructing Primordialism: Old Histories for New Nations* acknowledges similar aspects of the construction of the nation. Suny views the nations as "particular forms of collectivity that are constituted by a process of creating histories."<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, one can see in Suny's article that certain parts of the construction of the nation were transferred to communist ideology on the same topic: "Though the nation may be divided or gradated along several axes, it is politically and civilly (under the law) made up of equals."<sup>35</sup> Even though the experiences of Western Europe during the French Revolution and the Enlightenment were geographically distant from Eastern Europe, their echo influenced the political discourse and possibly shaped the value systems of the population even in the Balkans. Daskalov even goes further to make the claim that "The Bulgarian Revival was thus

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<sup>31</sup> Anderson. *Imagined Communities*, 4.

<sup>32</sup> Anderson. *Imagined Communities*, 6.

<sup>33</sup> Anderson. *Imagined Communities*, 7

<sup>34</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny. "Constructing Primordialism: Old Histories for New Nations". *Journal of Modern History* (December 2001): 869.

<sup>35</sup> Suny. *Constructing Primordialism*, 870.

a correlate of the Reformation and Enlightenment at the same time and it can (paradoxically) be called 'an Enlightenment in the form of Reformation'.<sup>36</sup>

The key term that brings together nationalism and communism is *collectivity*. Whether citizens, workers or revolutionaries, people in the two ideological currents are treated as equals. This is best explained by Gellner, who argues that "the myths of nationalist ideology invert reality: it claims to protect an old folk society while in fact helping to build up an anonymous mass society".<sup>37</sup> Just as in communism, the individual is insignificant (*anonymous*) and the object is the *mass collective*.

Suny's definition of the nation is broader than Gellner's and includes the modern nation of the 20th century, rather than just considering the original nationalist ideas of the 19th century. According to Suny, "Modern nations may be defined as those political communities made up of people who believe they share characteristics (perhaps origin, values, historical experiences, language, territory, or any of many other elements) that give them the right to self-determination - perhaps control of a piece of the earth's real estate (their homeland), even statehood and the benefits that follow."<sup>38</sup> The notion of the community tied to the homeland was borrowed by the communists and incorporated into their doctrine regarding national heroes.

John Georgeoff looks at textbooks in Bulgaria to explain this continuity regarding national heroes. His account of communist political elites considers the national hero rhetoric to be rationally used by the authorities as propaganda: "Of all contemporary forms of government, communism has probably made the greatest use of history to serve political ends."<sup>39</sup> One can find this explanation in the official account of the Teaching Institute in the

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<sup>36</sup> Roumen Daskalov. *The Making of a Nation in the Balkans: Historiography of the Bulgarian Revival*. (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2004), 40.

<sup>37</sup> Gellner. *Nations and Nationalism*, 124.

<sup>38</sup> Suny. *Constructing Primordialism*, 866.

<sup>39</sup> John Georgeoff. "Nationalism in the History Textbooks of Yugoslavia and Bulgaria". *Comparative Education Review*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (Oct. 1966): 442.

Bulgarian Academy of Sciences: "The study of history in the schools has as its task: to give students an elementary knowledge of the historical development of our people; to develop a feeling of national pride in them, of love and devotion to the Fatherland, to the Bulgarian Communist Party and the Soviet Union, and for the comradeship among the nations that are fighting for peace and liberty."<sup>40</sup> However, the author argues that "non-communist heroes are considered only nationally".<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, in the case of constructing the image of the hero for the masses, Georgeoff views history as "a means for inculcating a deep and stirring patriotism"<sup>42</sup>. The crucial link here is between nationalism and communism, both of which used patriotism. Even Gellner considers nationalism as " a very distinctive species of patriotism".<sup>43</sup>

Scholars, such as Anderson, have proposed that the nation is a social construct. As Gellner writes, "nations are the artefacts of men's convictions and loyalties and solidarities".<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, Suny elaborates on the way the construct is created by focusing on "the stories people tell about themselves".<sup>45</sup> In other words, to find the connections between nationalism and communism, we must look at popular discourses, such as textbooks that are nationally used as sources of historical education. Nationalism, nationality and the nation are constructed in discourse, and it is discourse that we must look at to explain them.<sup>46</sup>

The phenomenon that the nationalist heroes of Bulgaria resemble those of communism is best explained by a continuity in the historical discourse of elites. The images of the masculine heroes were compiled by using the same qualities: youth, readiness to die for the country, comradeship. The constructed image of the executed by the Ottoman Empire Levski seems much like the executed by the pro-Nazi Bulgarian monarchy Vaptsarov. Whether they

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<sup>40</sup> Georgeoff. *Nationalism in the History Textbooks of Yugoslavia and Bulgaria*, 444.

<sup>41</sup> Georgeoff. *Nationalism in the History Textbooks of Yugoslavia and Bulgaria*, 445.

<sup>42</sup> Georgeoff. *Nationalism in the History Textbooks of Yugoslavia and Bulgaria*, 442.

<sup>43</sup> Gellner. *Nations and Nationalism*, 138.

<sup>44</sup> Gellner. *Nations and Nationalism*, 7.

<sup>45</sup> Suny. *Constructing Primordialism*, 866.

<sup>46</sup> Suny. *Constructing Primordialism*, 868.

fight against an empire, or they fight for an ideology, heroes preserve similar traits. It is interesting how much of the nationalist ideology has become a part of communist propaganda in the case of Bulgaria. It seems that the foreign influence of the USSR was not able to subdue the deeply rooted nationalism, inspired by the memories from the Bulgarian Revival and the liberation struggle against the Ottomans.

However, the strange mixture that was created and formed a totally new and distinct value system in the Bulgarian communist elites, may make us, scholars, question the separation of the two ideologies as the two poles of the political axis, often used in rhetoric by political elites since the early 20th century. Other states, which have experienced a similar transition of ideology from nationalism to communism, specifically the Russian/Soviet case, are likely to be the arena of similar elite and intelligentsia dynamics of image construction, which are worth investigating in a larger study. The implications of a comparative cross-space, cross-time study of nationalist and communist images of the masculine hero in poetry may potentially be very interesting to establish a bridge of legacy between nationalism and communism in the study of political regimes and ideologies.

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