Ana Luleva
Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies
Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

Transitional Justice and Memory Culture in Post-Socialist Bulgaria

Abstract: A significant aspect of the post-socialist transformation in Bulgaria is the policy of justice. The concepts of justice, restitution, compensation and identification of victims, de-collectivization, and reconciliation have been debated in Bulgarian society after 1989 as closely related to memory – memory was turned into a key-organizing concept for those processes. The present article discusses the relation between discourses of justice and remembering in Bulgaria after 1989, focusing on one aspect of transitional justice – memory politics and the construction of collective identities of victims and heroes after 1989. The article is based on an ethnographic study of two groups of victims of political regimes – forced labourers before and after September 9th 1944 – and also on field research conducted in the small town of Bełene, where the largest Bulgarian communist work camp once operated.

Keywords: memory politics, memory culture, transitional justice, post-socialist transformation

Introduction

At a meeting in January 1990 in the Ministry of Interior, the Minister of Interior of Bulgaria, General Atanas Ēmerzhiev (an ex-partisan; Minister of Interior after the retirement of the Head of the State Todor Zhivkov in December 1989; later, in August 1990, vice-president, following an agreement between the Bulgarian Socialist Party and the opposition), said the following words: “I again put forward this question: Bełene should vanish from our public life, from the face of Bulgaria! We should think over this issue. Bełene should vanish as the symbol of the repressive system”. At the same meeting, the leadership of the Ministry of Interior discussed the urgent need to ‘clean’ the documents testifying to the repressive nature of the communist regime. In January 1990, ‘the transition’, as it is generally called, started in Bulgaria. The question hanging in the air was how to come to terms with the past. The topic of the camp was at the core of the discourse on the repressive nature of the communist regime. There appeared issues of guilt, apology, responsibility, punishment for the injustices committed during the communist period. How is the political justice experienced and reflected upon by people today – 23 years after the beginning of the transition? How is the transitional justice realized in Bulgaria? From an anthropological perspective these are questions of importance. In the present paper, I will discuss one aspect of transitional justice – memory politics and memory culture after 1989. My conclusions are based on anthropological research conducted in the period 2009–2011 in the framework of a research program supported by the Foundation “Memory, Responsibility and Future”, Berlin. I studied the
memory culture surrounding the phenomenon of forced labour in Bulgaria practised by two political regimes – before and after 9.09.1944, the date of the entry of the Red Army into Bulgaria (Luleva, Troeva & Petrov 2012). Together with other participating colleagues, I recorded over 50 interviews with victims of forced labour in the work camps from the period of the WW II, and with those sent to ‘work re-education facilities’ after 9.09.1944 until 1962, when the last and the most sinister work camp – in the town of Lovetch – was closed down. The people we met were among the last representatives of their generation who could testify to this traumatic experience. Besides, we did fieldwork in Belene – a settlement on the Danube River – where in the war period (1941–1943) a dike was built on the river by forced labourers (Luleva 2008: 171–184) and where after 9.09.1944 the biggest communist work camp was established.

The Concept of Transitional Justice

Transitional justice can be defined as a conception of justice associated with periods of political change, characterized by legal responses to confront the wrongdoings of repressive predecessor regimes (Teitel 2000; Kritz 1995; Stan 2009). Transitional justice is a comparatively new multidisciplinary research field – an intersection of legal studies, political studies, moral philosophy, and anthropology. ‘Justice’ is a moral category directly related to the social order and collective identities. At the core of the concept of transitional justice is a belief in universal human rights. Elazar Barkan (2001) emphasises that universal rights are locally negotiated. John Torpey (2001: 333–358) writes about the formation of a new culture of rights: universal values and human rights, repentance and punishment are locally realized and local traditions have impact on the development of this process. The increasing centrality of redress stems from the process of “localization of rights” (Barkan 2001). In other words, redress brings human rights and conflict resolution together by replacing a universal standard of justice with a standard of justice that is negotiated among opposing groups of actors and parties. Global discourse of forgiveness and restitution does not seem to be based on an absolute universalistic ethic. It is a product of negotiation with the significant other.

Depending on the relationship between the new and the old elites, the politics of transitional justice is realized between the poles of democratic stability (civil piece) and retributive justice. The goal is to reach a balance between the search for justice and the need for civil and political stability. In eastern European countries a significant part of the politics of transition comes under the sign of “coming to terms with the past” and connects the realization of retributive justice to memory (Stan 2009). The concepts of justice, restitution, compensation and identification of victims, de-collectivization, and reconciliation are closely related to memory – which is turning into a key-organizing concept of those processes (Levy & Sznaider 2006: 96). The mnemonic turn in legislation and the question of “how much memory is necessary for democracy” and “aren’t we burdened with memory that divides society and hinders its unification around common goals”, have been hotly debated (Luleva 2010: 77–93).

Researchers of collective memory in societies undergoing a transition from dictatorships or authoritarian regimes to democratic systems write that the politics of traumatic memory divides society into conflicting groups (De Brito et al. 2001). Basically, memory politics can be practiced in two ways: the first might be named “reconciliation through forgetting”, and the second is that in which the memory of the past is not pushed aside but actualized. In the latter case “coming to terms with the past” has two varieties: 1. legalistic, which accentuates
investigation of past crimes and establishment of retributive justice; and 2. utopian-ethical, which gives greater significance to forgiveness and repentance (Todorov 2002; Ash 2002: 107; Misztal 2003: 133–135; Ricoeur 2006: 424–514).

Concerning the choice of “reconciliation through forgetting”, Paul Ricoeur (2006), Barbara Misztal (2003) and other authors consider cases from different historical times whereby banning of the memory of the past is as a way of attaining peace and uniting citizens. They point to the etymological connection between ‘amnesia’ and ‘amnesty’. The importance of forgetfulness for national cohesion is emphasized by Ernest Renan (Renan 1995: 3). This mode was once accepted in Spain. In Spain, cited also by Bulgarian politicians as a positive example of national reconciliation through forgetting, there are visible signs today of non-forgetfulness along with the desire to regenerate the memory of the vanished republicans. The battle for memory regeneration is fought in the field of jurisdiction. The Amnesty Law from 1977 has been attacked since it blocks any investigation and reaffirms ‘the pact of forgetfulness’ exported as a model to Latin America as well. The activity of civil associations that require the establishment of “commission of truth” indicate that the question of memory is a central element in practicing democracy (De Brito et al. 2001: 92–119; Ortis 2009: 5).

John Borneman claims that after the end of the Cold War there was a world movement for retributive justice: condemning criminals and rehabilitating the dignity of victims. In his research on violence, justice, and responsibility in post-socialist Europe (Borneman 1997), he stresses that the meaning of the retributive justice in contemporary context goes beyond the destiny of individual victims and criminals; it is important as part of the global ritual of purging the core of political regimes that strive towards democratic legitimization.

Only in this way, i.e. by purification by means of retributive justice, can regimes striving towards democratic legitimacy obtain this legitimacy. Borneman does not support the view that economic growth and reconciliation legitimate the new democratic states and prevent violence during a period of transition. In his opinion, democratic states need to reinforce the principles of responsibility in order to restore their moral authority and make the claim to represent the entire society; the failure in correcting past injustice would undermine the legitimacy of the new states.

**The Bulgarian Case**

The two extensive political transitions in Bulgaria (after 1944 and after 1989) differ from each other according to their politics of transitional justice. The first period, after September 9, 1944, was dominated by retribution. The punishment of ‘people’s enemies’ and retribution motivated the verdicts of the so called People’s Court (December 1944 – April 1945), which aimed to destroy political opponents, imprison people in work camps without a court trial and conviction (Sharlanov 2009; Luleva, Troeva & Petrov 2012). As early as October 1944, a Law supporting victims of the fight against fascism and capitalism was passed. It provided compensation to participants of the Resistance Movement. After some time the idea of compensation was replaced by the idea of rewards and privileges for ‘merits’ (rather than for incurred losses, as was the case at the beginning). Those given recognition as fighters received privileges (pensions, services, access to goods), which distinguished them as a group according to a paternalistic model (“gratitude and commitment to the Bulgarian Communist Party and USSR” were emphasized). The Resistance was the ‘Gründungsmythos’ of the new socialist state. In the new pantheon of heroes next to the heroes of the Bulgarian National Revival now stood the partisans and those perished during ‘the people’s revolution’.
In the second transitional period, after 1989, two arguments on the memory of the recent past were advanced in the Bulgarian public discourse. The democrats often repeated Santayana’s words – a person who does not learn from the past is destined to repeat it. This argument is related to the understanding of memory as a duty – preserving the memory of past injustices is seen as a responsibility towards the next generations and a guarantee of democratic order. This is the dominant idea of antitotalitarian discourse, according to which Communism is equal to Nazism, the camps in Belene and Lovetch are comparable to Gulag and Auschwitz. The memory and condemnation of the crimes committed by the regime are a question of moral position and humanitarian values. The other argument – about national reconciliation and agreement – was voiced for the first time in a Declaration read at the First plenary meeting of the Round table in Sofia on February 12, 1990. During the years of transition, the ideas of national agreement and reconciliation were supported by the political Left. The memory politics of the recent past is realized between the poles of these two opposing arguments. This duality reflects the positions of the leading political forces and the opportunities of different social groups to achieve recognition of their status and to legitimate their collective memory.

The political transition in all post-socialist countries is closely related to the idea of new political justice (Kritz 1995; Stan 2009; De Brito 2001; Teitel 2001). In Bulgaria it is realized as retroactive justice, which lends great symbolic significance to the political rehabilitation of groups treated as enemies by the past regime. An expression of such restorative justice is the Law for the political and civil rehabilitation of repressed persons, passed in 1991 (Darzhaven vestnik 1991). The Law defines those falling into the category of ‘repressed’ due to their origin, political convictions or religious beliefs in the period 9.09.1944 – 10.11.1989. These are persons: convicted in criminal cases; convicted by the People’s Court whose verdicts were cancelled after 1990; imprisoned in re-education and work facilities and in camps, as well as mobilized for forced labour; internees and exiles; dismissed university students and school students; repressed in connection with the forced change of names (during the “Rebirth process”2). In the amendments of 2004 and 2005, further included were those “missing without a trace; killed during attempted border crossing; perished in work camps, prisons; people with university and college education, dismissed from work or forced to work at construction sites, in the system of public cleaning or in agriculture; deprived of the right to a pension”. Persons belonging to any of these groups or their descendants are entitled to a single compensation for incurred material and immaterial damages. The Lawmaker provides for the compensation claim to be brought to the regional governor according to the permanent residence address. In his turn, the governor pronounces on the merits of the request after evaluating the presented evidence on the type, character and duration of the repression and the quality of the entitled person. Thus the personal biographical experience is normatively defined or not as a ‘repression due to political reasons, religious beliefs or origin’. The subjective experience of repression is confronted with the opportunity to be proven as much with evidence having a judicial value – documents, testimonies, etc. The experience, the memory of the repressed or their families have no value before the state authority reviewing only the presented documented evidence. The rulings of the Supreme Administrative Court on citizens’ complaints against orders from regional governors indicate that the latter sometimes unreasonably deny the right of citizens to receive compensation and a re-
spective recognition as repressed for political reasons, origin, etc. Such problematic court procedures reinforce the long-standing distrust towards the state authorities; the ungrounded rejections create a belief that the new state does not differ from the old one and ‘everything is the same’. The organizations of the repressed provide protection for their members, but this does not change the fact that the repressed have limited social influence and are a marginalized social group with minimal pensions. With the exception of those who have regained their seized property, they are at the social bottom. The rehabilitation does not change their social status; it has primarily a symbolic value.

It was only in August 2010, after a 20-year delay, that the Parliament passed the last amendment to the Law and, in addition, proclaimed as repressed victims of the terror from the first three days following the entry of the Red Army into Bulgaria – 9th, 10th and 11th of September 1944. Until August 2010, according to the Law repressed were those persons who suffered after September 12, 1944. In the debates concerning the review of the initial date of repressions, the political Left and the Parliamentary majority in the past Parliament supported the argument that persons killed for political reasons in the period 8th–11th September should not be rehabilitated, defining them as ‘murderers and thugs’ caught up in ‘the just people’s fury’.

In 1990, lawsuits began for reviewing the overseeing order of verdicts issued by the People’s Court. The realization of retroactive justice in the form of reviews of separate rulings of the People’s Court demonstrates the democratization of the judicial system and its separation from its predecessor. Additionally, it provides the opportunity for cancelling many unreasonable and ungrounded convictions of the People’s Court, and has a symbolic and material effect on the victims (they are recognized as innocent and given the opportunity to regain ownership of the seized property). At the same time, it is indicative of the compromising way in which the justice of the transition is realized – by implicit agreement among the major political actors, without announcing the Regulation-law for the People’s Court as anti-constitutional and its verdicts cancelled en bloc, thus helping maintain the view that some of its rulings were right and just.

It is hardly a surprise that ten years later the political forces still did not reach a consensus in their evaluation of the People’s Court. The ruling of the Council of Ministers (from 19 January 2010) to pronounce the 1st of February as a Commemoration Day of paying homage to the victims of the communist regime became an occasion for the next conflict. The ruling was accepted after a proposal made by the ex-presidents Zhelyu Zhelev and Petar Stoyanov. The motives of the Council of Ministers indicate that “the 1st of February, 1945, is the day in which regents, deputies, officers, ministers, social figures were murdered – all victims of the First establishment of the so called People’s Court. This day becomes a sign in our history because it is a starting point of the bloody repression against the Bulgarian people”.

The Left and its satellite civil organizations protested, declaring that the People’s Court had not been established by the communist state, since during that time Bulgaria was still a constitutional monarchy. This was not a ‘Bulgarian vagrancy’, but a duty to fulfil in accordance with the Reconciliation Agreement which Bulgaria had signed on October 28, 1944, along with the USA, the USSR and the UK. According to this Agreement, the country was obliged “to dismantle all fascist organizations and bring to court and justly punish the people guilty of affiliating Bulgaria to the Tripartite Pact and those who committed war crimes”. According to the Declaration of the Fatherland Front, the People’s Court had created condi-
tions for distorting the historical truth [emphasis by author], discredited Bulgaria before the countries of the anti-Hitler coalition and again divides and opposes the Bulgarian nation”.

In April 2000, with the Party of United Democratic Forces in power, the Law pronouncing the communist regime in Bulgaria as criminal was passed. This act has had meaning as a moral and political message, but has no legal consequences for society. It illustrates the desire of the political Right to maintain its identity as an anti-totalitarian political force but, at the same time, to refrain from the politics of retributive justice accepted in other post-socialist states.

After 1989, attempts were made in Bulgaria to accomplish retributive justice through accusations brought against former members of high state authorities. The contrast between the initiated ‘mega-trials’ and those ending with a verdict is impressive. Among the most distinguished trials of social importance were the so-called trials ‘for the work camps’, for ‘Chernobil’, and about the ‘Rebirth process’. Grigor Stoichkov, deputy chairman of the Councils of Ministers and chairman of the government Commission for overcoming the consequences of disasters, catastrophes and breakdowns, was sentenced to ten years in prison in the ‘Chernobil trial’. He was set free before term in 1996. The press presented him as a victim of a political trial, and Chernobil was hardly mentioned. The trial about the ‘Rebirth process’ has been initiated many times yet stopped, to this day. Almost twenty years after its initiation, it was blocked without convicts. The legal persecution of culprits for crimes committed in the communist work camps of Lovetch and Skravena was initiated, amidst great social interest, and stopped as overdue. The development of these trials is indicative of the (in)ability to accomplish retributive justice in post-socialist Bulgaria. The unsuccessful end of loudly initiated trials, the lack of convicts and inadequate exposure of crimes have created social attitudes towards such trials as being motivated politically with unjust accusations (according to the supporters of the Left), and provoked distrust towards the leaders of the Right among its supporters.

The victims of the old regime experience the justice of the transition as injustice:

“Nobody was punished for these crimes which should not have a prescription similar to the Nazi crimes. They are all the same. Nobody punished them. Even the compensations were distributed selectively. The events were not authentic – no justice was accomplished” (Interviewee, born 1927).

Belene as a memory place

Belene – as a memory place – is an accurate illustration of the developments and results of the memory politics after 1989. Today the landscape of the island of Persin6 does not remind at all of the communist work camp (termed ‘work – re-education facility – WRF’) – a place of slave labour and human suffering. Today the island is accessible only for one day during the year – on the Commemoration Day. For the rest of the year it is unreachable because it is a part of the territory of a still functioning prison.

In the morning of the last Saturday of May 2010, elderly people gathered before the prison gates. They had come from all over the country by bus. The residents of Belene, as in the previous years, did not show any particular interest. The announcement on the local cable TV channel about a special bus provided by the municipality for those willing to at-

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6 Belene (or Persin) is the name of the biggest island of the Belene archipelago on the Danube river. In 1949, a labour camp was located there, which after 1959 was transformed into ‘Belene prison’. Along the river, opposite the island is the village of Belene. In 1964, it was declared a town. Nowadays Belene is a small town with about 8,000 inhabitants.
tend ‘the Gathering’ failed to get the attention of the locals (the bus was needed because after passing the pontoon bridge on foot, there is a road 10 km long leading to the place of homage; usually available buses and minivans transport strangers as well). The residents of Belene were ‘represented’ by the researcher of the locality and his friends, a grandmother and her grandchild and a circle of friends with families who had decided to take advantage of the access to the island and to go on a picnic on the sunny Saturday. Taking no interest in the event itself, but intrigued by the inaccessible island, a small group of Russian citizens working in the Nuclear Power Station Belene crossed the bridge in their minivan. By the prison entrance, a small group of men were waiting (visibly younger than any of the formerly repressed), actively sharing memories about the island ‘as it was before’. To my question if they had ever been there, one of them responded with a vague smile and ‘no, never’, while another one started saying that he had worked there as a tractor driver during the time when affluent produce was acquired from the cultivated island (“thousands, thousands of tons of produce – such watermelons, aubergines, peppers, corn, wheat, everything there is in farming, was produced”).

The first man, apparently not willing to talk about the past, deviated from the topic while insistently asking what the reason for my interest in ‘the prison’ was. My explanations did not satisfy him and he made it clear that he was not willing to talk with me. The behaviour of this resident of Belene indicated anxiety. My questions and the dictaphone made him feel uncomfortable and threatened. He and his silent friends had worked on the site (only one of them said he was “a civilian tractor driver”), when political prisoners and camp prisoners were brought there. They came to see ‘what was there now’, but were not willing to share what they remembered from ‘those’ times to a stranger like me. That conversation, as well as the meetings with the residents of Belene during the fieldwork, made the impression that before and after 1989 the locals who worked on the island were unwilling (and maybe unable) to talk as eyewitnesses of the camp regime: before – because they were scared and had signed a declaration to keep secrecy, working at a site important for the ‘state security’ (“when the topic is brought up, they are reserved, keep secrecy”, said the researcher of the locality, Todor Gospodinov); and now – because they feel being implicitly accused as accomplices of the repressive apparatus.

In fact, the prison was the primary employer of the locals (see Koleva 2010: 17). Probably back then, as today, they tried to ‘made it all look normal’, talking about their work there – in the fields or in the administration building – as if about a regular working activity. Part of this strategy, which makes them feel ‘normal’ people, is the version they had adopted for the imprisoned (“criminals, radicals… thugs deserving their punishment for some reason”). At the same time, back then some residents of Belene, considered to be “more eager/earnest as supervisors”, had paid for their sins with disease and agonizing death. Their unwillingness to remember the camp and the cover of silence placed over it speak of their desire for this past to be forgotten, because it is considered sinful – it is a desire to push aside the traumatic memory producing feelings of guilt and shame. In contrast, the repressed have transformed their traumatic memory into a source of positive self-identification and a sense of moral authority.

Paying homage on the island of Persin near Belene provides an opportunity for the repressed to meet each other, “to count”, and to announce their political stance. The commemoration is done at the place where there used to be a ‘Second Site’ of the camp. There is no trace of it left.\footnote{Without a trace was the title of an exhibition dedicated to the Belene camp. It was organized by associates of the Institute for the Study of Recent Past and presented at the National Art Gallery in 2009 on the occasion of the 20\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of November 10.} The remains of a massive building tower in the field overflowing with abundant greenery. The building was erected in the 1980s, when Bulgarian Turks, convicted
as ‘enemies’ of the ‘Rebirth process’, were imprisoned there. On its wall is a small commemorative plaque reminding that this was the place where a ‘Second site of the Belene camp’ used to be and that on June 1, 1990, at that location the first meeting of the camp survivors took place “to pay homage to the thousands of victims of the totalitarian regime”. The plaque was placed in 2005 by the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union (BANU), the district of Plevén. This inscription, as well as the wooden cross attached to the building, is the only indication of the camp. Over the last years a memorial has been constructed – it will bear the names of the camp and political prisoners who were taken to that location. Nevertheless, the work is slow due to the restricted access to the island. The concrete stele is empty while the organizations of the repressed are compiling ‘their’ lists.

It is a general opinion that with each subsequent year the number of those paying homage has been going down. After the initial enthusiasm and hope that their voice would be heard, the repressed group fragmented due to internal fights and conflicts, trapped into the “narcissism of petty distinctions”.

“In the beginning there was a great enthusiasm, a great joy that we meet at a damned place where we shared our bread […] it was a joy for us to go as free citizens, with hugs […] with greetings”. “At the first gathering in 1990 we were about 80 thousand people, and maybe more. There were 12 buses from Plevén that drove us to site 2, then returned and took the next passengers […] Now if there are 150 people, it is still good” (Interviewee, born 1927).

“In the first years we were happy, we had about 60 people, members of the parliament, from the repressed thanks to the benevolence of the democratic forces – and also the Party, regrettably, arranging those things […] we thought the people would change, have stable views, see who had contributed to the democracy in Bulgaria. This did not happen. Only our memories have remained. But initially there was enthusiasm. We went to Belene from all over the country” (Interviewee, born 1922).

In May 2010, one hundred people gathered in Belene – camp survivors, their relatives and members of the Unions of the repressed. The political parties, traditionally claiming moral allegiance to the memory of the victims of communism, did not send representatives of their central leadership. After the usual prayer commemorating the victims of communism, the speeches of the leaders from the organizations of the repressed followed. A representative of the Movement for Rights and Freedom spoke of the imprisoned Bulgarian Turks during the ‘Rebirth process’. The leaders of the repressed emphasized that Belene was a sacred place – ‘the Bulgarian Golgotha’, ‘the Bulgarian Gulag’, through which the Bulgarian ‘martyrs and fighters’ had passed. The inhumane conditions in which the victims of the regime had been placed were remembered. Everyone expressed their disappointment that the Bulgarian society did not know and remember and was not “grateful to these martyrs and victims”. Once again it was mentioned that the repressed should unite to make their voice heard.

The rhetoric of commemoration, evident at other public events of the repressed as well, indicates that the anti-totalitarian discourse about democratic values and justice provides them with the opportunity to construct a positive and, in many cases, heroic image and meaning of their lives as ‘fighters against the totalitarian regime’: “We fought for the freedom of Bulgaria […] in the prison and in the camps we were taught to become pastors of justice in our country […] we struggled for a just society”. Similarly, individual traumatic experience is integrated into a collective cultural trauma of the ‘martyrs of Belene’, turning into a source of collective identity, evoking a sense of pride. Almost everyone of those paying homage with whom we spoke in Belene, as well as our respondents, had the awareness that they were ‘the last witnesses’ of the camp regime. In some sense this fact made their status and stories sacred. Many of them regarded other activists of the organizations of the
repressed with condescension and distrust because they had not suffered ‘such repression’ – in the sense that they themselves had not been to a camp or a prison, but had ‘only’ been expatriated or deprived of student rights. There was a visible effort at making a hierarchy of the ‘repressions’ and the victims, and competition among them. One respondent pointed out about his fellows by destiny: “All of them had been to camps, prisons, but they cannot stand each other. The suffering does not bind them together”. According to former prisoners and camp survivors, there was considerable distinction among them, originating from the past and the political affiliation that had led them to imprisonment. According to the supporters of BANU, “those people [the former members of the legion – A. L.] had sinned: the People’s Court had convicted them… and that is why there existed two unions of the repressed”. They were rehabilitated after lawsuits for reviewing the overseeing order that cancelled some of the verdicts issued by the People’s Court. This fact did not mitigate the feeling of moral superiority among the supporter of BANU, who had not been convicted by the People’s Court, but considered themselves to have been persecuted as political opponents of the communists (“I am not in a rehabilitation court case. I was punished as a human being; I had my land taken away”). On their part, members of the legion accused supporters of BANU of supporting the Law for the People’s Court and of participating in its proceedings.

On the public stage, the memory of the last witnesses is made sacred and the distinctions among the groups of the repressed are demonstrated – distinctions rooted in the past and in the reasons leading to ‘the repression’, but also in the dependency of the repressed on the political conjuncture and – according to their general opinion – on the security of the communist State. The speeches, made from the speaker’s stand on the island of Persin, contained mainly moral and political messages. Overall, the commemorative ritual was telling much more about the present, about the state of the community of the repressed as a memory-organized and political group, rather than about their past. The disappointment that the repressed had no political influence and significance, shared by respondents in their biographical interviews, was also publicly expressed during the homage (“we, the martyrs, we, the fighters, are held in low esteem”). The repressed considered themselves to be the “backbone of the right democratic forces”, but realized with bitterness that they were not supported by the same political forces. In the general opinion, the latter were interested in them only before elections, counting on their votes as a ‘hard electorate’. The lack of such support was visible in the condition of the memorial place – abandoned, unmaintained, apparently unnecessary.

In the first years after 1989, when there were still living survivors of the camp and the prison, the idea of freeing the island from the functioning prison was put forward. A museum of the victims of communist repressions was to be created. Krum Horozov, a former camp prisoner, supporter of BANU and member of the Great National Assembly, fought for this cause on behalf of the repressed and sent such a proposal to the state institutions (the President, the National Assembly). For him and his followers it was important that the camp be remembered as related to the struggle against the regime:

“I wanted a museum to be established in Belene, but as long as there is a prison, it won’t work. There should be open access, a shrine should be made, reconstruction should be done […] a port, passing ships should stop, a beautiful alley, to enter the site, to see and light a candle […] Belene was a prison for political opponents; it was a labour camp for politicians, for the new intelligentsia of rural Bulgaria – deprived of the right to study, driven out of universities, out of the state administration – we were tortured there to remove the humane from our souls and made to ac-

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8 On the competition among the victims of Nazism in Germany, see Von Plato (1999).
cept this animal-like, cattle-like obedience – *molchat' i ne rassuzhdat'* [in Russian: “Be silent and don't think” – A. L.]. There we fought for the freedom of Bulgaria, against the dictatorship and there is still a prison for criminals that remains now, no place to enter and pay homage – it is a disgrace”.

The state institutions did not respond to the proposals of the Union of The Repressed, did not close down the functioning prison on the island of Persin, did not support the repressed in establishing a museum or memorial to the victims of the communist camps on the island. Creating an impression of symbolic continuity, the prison is still operating; the island remains its territory and is ‘swallowing’ WRF-Belene.

According to Alexander Etkind (2004), museums and memorials comprise ‘the hardware’ of memory culture and in cooperation with ‘the software’ – narratives and films – re-live that culture. The two kinds of memory co-exist. While creating films and memoirs of the camps is done by private persons and can be done without the sanction of the state institutions, the building of a memorial or museum on the island could not take place without the support of the state. The state’s reply until now (or more precisely its lack) indicates an absence of political will and social consensus for preserving the camp on the island of Persin as a symbol of the communist work camps in the memory culture of the nation.

Until now the memory of the camp in Belene has been kept only in texts: numerous memoirs, among which *The Saga on the concentration-camp Bulgaria* by Stephan Bochev stands out, as do the poems by Joseph Petrov and Ivan Selanovski, the films by Atanas Kiriyakov, Stanimir Trifonov, Iliya Troyanov, the book and exhibition of the Institute for Researching the Recent Past (Koleva 2010). With each passing year the number of pilgrims declines, restricted to the circle of relatives. The media and other institutions do not show interest; the camp theme slowly passes into the zone of public amnesia.

An attempt at reviving the memory of the Belene camp was the conference under the title *The suffered European dream of Bulgaria 1944–1989*, organized by MEP Andrey Kovachev in the European Parliament in November 2010. Representatives of the camp prisoners and political prisoners were invited to the conference. The idea was to demonstrate that Bulgaria was also part of the trans-national discourse on the resistance against the communist regime. The event was mainly oriented outwards, towards partners from the EU, rather than towards the Bulgarian society. This idea corresponds to the desire of the camp and prison survivors to be recognized as fighters, participants in the resistance against the communist regime in Bulgaria.

“Everywhere people were saying – in Bulgaria there was no resistance movement, only in the Czech Republic and in Poland, not in Bulgaria. Perhaps 50–60 thousand political and camp prisoners passed through the prisons and camps. Including their relatives, this amounts to 150–200 thousand people. There was no resistance; the dissidents were people who decided upon the change of the regime – this, of course, is not true” (Interviwee, born 1925).

The memory of the communist labour camp in Belene could be regenerated if a memorial was built and the camp became part of the cultural-historical tourist routes in the settlement. What is seen there now is far from such a perspective. The institutions working for the memory – the school and the municipality – ignore the camp theme as part of the town’s past. This is so because the residents of Belene are distanced from its history. The building of the dikes and the reclamation work began before WW II and was part of the positive story about a ‘reclaimed land’ and the victory over malaria in the region. However, the forced labour of the youth mobilized there in 1942 is not remembered, WRF – Belene is not mentioned. The local cultural memory is constructed upon the pillars of antiquity (archaeological excavations are made at the Dimum fortress) and three churches.
Since 2000, the Belene islands on the Danube have been included in the Natural Park “Persina”. The Danube wet zones are restored as unique ecosystems with the help of European programs and the World Bank. The restoration of ecological balance goes opposite to the reclamation done for many decades at the price of hard forced labour. The dike in the eastern part of the island of Persin is destroyed so that water can flow in again and form natural wet zones. The ecotourist routes include Roman excavation sites and cruise tours around the islands. The camp is not included in this picture, and there are no signs of this. It is destined to oblivion. It seems that the order of General Atanas Semerdzhiev from January 1990 is about to become reality.

Conclusion

In the post-socialist period, universal discourse about human rights dominated. The voices of victims were heard in public, the Bulgarian labour camps were compared to Gulag and Holocaust (as genocide). The privileges of the ex-fighters ‘against fascism and capitalism’ were taken away; the former heroes were taken down from the pedestal and began to feel like victims of ‘democracy, globalization and neo-fascism’. New groups appeared, searching recognition as victims of the communist regime; their trauma became a basis for a new collective identity. They were rehabilitated with a law, recognized as victims of the regime, but the fact that nobody was punished as guilty produced the impression of unaccomplished retributive justice. De-communication and lustration have even less supporters, because the communist regime was not so hard and repressive in its last years and the current economic crisis has displaced priorities. The conclusion about the justice of the transition, thus far, is that the Bulgarian experience for establishing retributive justice has been unsuccessful, uncertain and inconsistent. As a result, the trust of the citizens in democratic institutions – the court, the parliament, the political elite – has been undermined.

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Biographical note: Dr. Ana Luleva is Associate Professor, Head of the Department of Ethnology of Socialism and Post-Socialism in the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. Her main research topics are: memory studies, gender studies, anthropology of socialism and post-socialism.
Email: analuleva@gmail.com