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The Iron Fist and the People's Will:
An Analysis of the Bulgarian Anti-Communist Movement and
Meanings of Democracy

With Honors in Department of Sociology

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May 2013

Abstract

This paper will focus on the nature of the Bulgarian anti-communist movement, with particular attention devoted to understanding the different meanings and social constructions held by the people during the time of communist demise in the early 1990s. The main objective of this paper is to analyze whether or not the promised changes toward a democratic system were fulfilled in the eyes of the people living in the country at the time, and whether or not the people's apprehended notions of a democratic nation were consistent with the policies and nature of the state during the breakdown of the communist regime. The first part of this paper outlines the chronological timeline of events that transpired leading up to the protests and revolts of the people of Bulgaria against the 50 year old system of oppression. It considers the role of certain leaders whose presence and policies epitomized the despised system and its many limbs of manipulation and greed. It outlines the roots of the anti-communist movement from a few different sociological perspectives in order to set up a context for the subsequent qualitative portion of the paper. The remaining part of the paper focuses on understanding the subjective meaning of individuals living within this time of transition and how their interpretations of a democratic nation was and was not fulfilled by the changes following the official collapse of communism.

Acknowledgements

Before anyone else, I feel the need to thank my parents. Their benevolence and principle has been my inspiration for many things in life, however the motivation for this thesis is solely due to the magnetic power of their revolutionary spirit and life-long conviction in the idealistic tendencies that they never allowed me to abandon at the start of my many uphill battles. It is this conviction that lights the way through the dark, and often times chaotic, abyss and plants flowers in a previously barren landscape. It is because of their brilliance and magic that I find beauty in the hideous reality, an opportunity in every failure, love in every moment of aversion, and hope in a hopeless world.

I would like to thank Dr. David Wagner for accepting me into the Sociology Honors program and for his patience with my myriad research ideas. Big thanks to professor Aaron Major, who was able to give me precise counsel and practical guidance throughout my work on this thesis. I also want to thank all my professors here at UAlbany who helped me to open new doors of understanding.

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*Do you hear the people sing?
Singing the song of angry men;
It is the music of a people
Who will not be slaves again.*

-Les Miserables

Introduction

The year 1989 holds an important meaning for millions of people struggling to breathe under the oppressive totalitarian regimes of southeastern Europe and the many other millions shackled to the cruel and unjust system of communism, which killed, swiftly and silently, the bravery and morale of the people. It was the year everyone trapped in Eastern Europe believed would usher a new generation for transformation towards a future which promised days where food might be found abundant in the market, there would be no iron curtain, children can grow up witnessing moments of joy rather than hate, where no one would be persecuted for their beliefs, where the people could earn a decent livelihood, and where those responsible for crimes against humanity would be held accountable rather than idolized in the distorted reality which was created and continues to confuse many. Today few people consider the effects of this brutal, monstrous system of injustice, which, in its proud fifty-year reign, enslaved millions, killed thousands, left no one unharmed and everyone fooled.

Few people consider the gravely upside down world which seems to have become the norm these days, whether we wanted it or not. Even fewer attempt to change it. But, in the dust and flames which was the country of Bulgaria for much of the later 1900s, two people were able to rise above the ashes and, with an idealistic vision, harness a glowing light amidst the utter

darkness which was, and will always be, called home. These two individuals looked at their country and saw hope amidst the hopeless masses that lived terrified of the terror and saw beauty underneath the hideousness of what the terror had done. They shared an idealistic vision for the future, one in which the will of the people, their voice and their needs, would be the force that moves the nation forward in a direction towards peace and improvement. Their idealism moved them to join street protests, riots and other demonstrations that called for the fall of communism and the rise of a freedom. That called for the revolutionary spirit to prevail the streets of Sofia, Bulgaria and change everything about the way the country was being run. They thought, quite naively, that the people of Bulgaria would be able to stand up against the system and fight to reclaim their sense of freedom, identity, dignity and all the other human attributes that the communists tried to slay.

Two people who a few years later, in 1993, gave birth to little girl that would one day grow up and find herself with the same revolutionary spirit, the same idealistic vision, and attempt to write about the injustices and the failures of the exploited and backwards country that will always be home.

That is the beginning of our story. A story I've heard countless times throughout my life, reworded and repeated in so many different ways and in so many different situations. Anything can stir up memories of the past, and anything can remind us of why we are here today. The

arrival in America, to this idealized land of opportunity, has never ceased to make us feel blessed for the opportunity to escape the system that betrayed its people. Because only when you step outside of something can you see it for what it truly is, and from what I've seen of Bulgaria, I've seen enough.

I can no longer settle for other people's interpretations of the anti-communist uprising, or their explanation as to why or why not the democratic transition failed. In my view, only those who have lived through it can offer some kind of valuable advice to the discussion. I can no longer sit in indolence and hope that one day someone picks up where my parents left off. I can no longer ignore the fact that my calling in life seems to be activist-oriented in nature, or that I can stop at the first fork in the road and think I've gone far enough. One must always be willing to go too far, because that is where the truth will be found. And one must always go without fear, because that is where the path itself begins.

I am writing this paper because I feel it is my duty to explore the reality for people living under communism in Bulgaria, as well as to investigate the subjective meanings they attached to terms such as democracy and to the general democratization process that occurred following the fall of communism. I consider the anti-communist movement from a historical perspective, and then bring the interviews I held with my participants to delve into what democracy meant to the average person and how their personal views differed from what was said to be happening at the

structural governmental level in the country at the time. My main points of discussion involve analyzing the meanings people attached to democracy, how their experience fit within specific sociological theories, as well as consider reasons for the disparity between people's conceptions and post-communist politics.

The reason I'm writing this paper is because I want to believe that a different future is possible than the one we're living in now. And that maybe one day the world will see an end to the injustice, and Bulgaria will know of peace and see a true end to the communist system, which in 1989, only came down by name.

*“If you want a glimpse of the future, picture a boot
Stamping on the human face—forever.”*

Developing a Space and Context for the Movement

Eastern Europe at the end of the 20th century was a chaotic place where civil uprisings, passionate protests, revolutionary literature and radical thinkers were breaking out of the iron fist and struggling to lay the foundations to a new world where nation's leaders delivered more than just lies and the occasional unjustified massacre. Lives were sacrificed, children were disappointed, students disheartened and many others suffocated under the thick cloak of communism that covered everyone yet left them all in the cold. It was a place where nations had to rebuild themselves after another horrendous political experiment and where people had to learn that what they've been taught their whole lives had been a big lie maintained by a government that cared nothing for its inhabitants. People had to learn that their lives had been a lie, their government was a lie, and that the rest of the world was ages ahead of them but living in a different lie.

But, the truth cannot be hidden for long. And the end of the 20th century, when the communist cloak decided to lift itself off the masses but still hang around in the air, people found themselves lost amidst a myriad of injustices and atrocities which were available for research and knowledge but not for improvement, as many of the same issues, as we will see in a later section, still persist.

The communist regime was first established in Bulgaria on September 9th, 1944 when the Soviet Red army occupied Bulgaria. First to lead the Bulgarian Communist Party was Giorgi Dimitrov, who remained in power until 1949. A few of my participants mentioned Dimitrov as someone they used to look up to as a great savior of the people during their elementary school, when in fact, as one participant told me, he was a “drunken murderer.” The same participant informed me how young students were taught they were young pioneers, whose success was a result of Dimitrov’s leadership. This form of indoctrination, especially for children, was very common in the Soviet nations and resulted in the molding of a creative mind into one that only knows obedience and servitude. After his leadership, power fell into the hands of Valko Chervenkov, under whose governance continued oppression and mass killings of innocent people. In 1954, Todor Zhivkov took office as general secretary of the Communist Party in Bulgaria, as well as Prime Minister and Chairman of the Council of State. He remained in power until the Party disintegrated in 1990.

Participants who were older in age and had lived through this succession of power described these times as ones in which the country was being steered into a “hopeless” direction. They described Bulgaria becoming more and more closed off to the rest of the world.

From the beginning of the communist regime, local resistance came from a group called the Goryani. This movement began in 1944 and lasted until 1956. It was made up largely by regular

people living in the Bulgarian highlands and farms, and was strongest in southern Bulgaria during the late 1940s. At its height, the movement had 10,000 members and hundreds of bases throughout the country. It is generally assumed that the Bulgarian people never took up resistance against the communist regime before its disintegration in the later 1990s, however this misconception is simple due to the fact that the Goryani movement has never been studied in detail (Gortcheva). Official leaders largely suppressed this movement in their efforts to create a populace entirely dependent on the word and law of communism. Even to this day, many Bulgarians remain unaware of their own rebellion in the face of the unwavering iron fist (Gortcheva).

Many of these rebels were former military elite, students, policemen and nationalists who wanted to band together against the mass killings of over 30,000 people following the Soviet invasion (Gortcheva). Hundreds of thousands of people were killed in the concentration camps set up by the communists, as the continuation of the goal of communist leaders to eradicate the indigenous Bulgarian population and assume total control. The communist leaders made the people believe Bulgaria put up no resistance at all and that the communists took power swiftly and effortlessly (Gortcheva). Today, no one speaks of these deaths and people know only of the Jewish Holocaust but know nothing of their own.

Thousands of armed individuals occupied towns and villages and frequently fought with the *narodna militisa*, or the national militia of the Bulgarian Communist Party. The movement had about 28 detachments that operated at different places across the country. Approximately 52 more units arrived from abroad, made up of Bulgarian emigrants who were forced into exile when the regime took over. Their main objectives were not only to combat the communists but to encourage Western powers to begin a liberation war for Eastern Europe, an idealistic expectation which never came to be as the West observed the communist resistance with inactivity (Gortcheva). Interesting to note here is that the first of the anti-communist resistance movement came from the Islamic minority living in Bulgaria (Giatzidis 2002), many of whom were involved in this Goryani movement as the majority of the Bulgarian Muslim population inhabits the southeastern region of the country.

By the 1950s, the Goryani movement created their own radio station and were broadcasting to Bulgaria as well as Greece, calling for a massive insurgent army to form and organize in the Sliven area located in central Bulgaria. This coincided with the collectivization of farmlands. Thousands of Bulgarian farmers fled either to the mountains or neighboring countries such as Yugoslavia to escape communist agrarian cooperatives (Gortcheva). Meanwhile, Prime Minister Chervenkov and leader of the communist party was busy erecting a monument in downtown Sofia of the Red Army. This sent a sinister message to the Bulgarian people that their

resistance movements would be rendered ineffective and futile as the Bulgarian communists would seek the dominating help of the Soviet Red Army. And this did indeed make the people feel hopeless.

Bulgarian resistance movements remained relatively suppressed until the late 1980s and early 1990s. Occurring simultaneously with other anti-communist oppositions in Eastern Europe, thousands of Bulgarians took to the streets protesting the one party system and calling for democracy. This also occurred as more and more material from the West, such as political ideology and cultural elements, were beginning to enter the previously isolated Eastern European nations (Giatzidis 2002). This influx inspired the millions who lived under communist rule to demand a different reality and a total change in the political and economic framework of their nation through civil resistance.

In Bulgaria, the movement was mainly made up of students and revolutionaries who had long opposed the communist system and who finally saw a chance to act on their ideas for a more democratic nation. According to the testimony of my participants these, demonstrations were their biggest hope in inspiring democratic change. Everyone had faith that the collective voice of the people would triumph over the greed and power of those who ran the nation.

The events that transpired in the late 1980s throughout the early 1990s in Bulgaria can be comprehended through various sociological theories. Since the anti-communist crusade is

considered a social movement that brought about substantial changes in the political and social arenas, social movement dialogue is an appropriate one to gain more insight into the anti-communist movement in Bulgaria.

Life for the majority of Bulgarians during communism was less than ideal, when compared to the standard of life in most western countries today. It seems a major misconception people have about life in communist nations is that kids line up in perfect single file lines and enter the school building wearing the same uniform and not making any movement that differs from the mundane or that adults sit at the dinner table with the exact same meal portion and no one dares to say anything other than the monotonous every day banter that doesn't attract attention, and that everyone else simply acts like robotic creatures. In actuality, life was pretty much the same in communist nations as in others—people had jobs appointed to them, kids played outside on the playground and learned different subjects during school, food

Perhaps the first theory to devote attention to is Jenkins and Perrow's political process and opportunity theory. They claim that in order for social movements to succeed they need to take advantage of opportunities presented in the political environment. The Bulgarian people were able to take advantage of the time period between 1988 and 1990 during the communist disintegration in Russia due to strong pressure from Western powers to convert previously communist nations into democracies following the end of the Cold War and the triumph of

Western political values (Giatzidis 2002). They were able to vocally oppose the system for the first time in generations and take an opportunity to collectively tear down the walls of oppression as the Soviet Union slowly headed towards collapse. The importance of the response of the political system to the goals and actions of the social movement is emphasized here, as much of the success of a social movement depends on the response it receives from the surrounding political sphere. Bulgarian leaders, just like any other power-thirsty autocrats, were not willing to give up their thrones of self-proclaimed authority overnight so the response of the political system was not the most favorable. Although it appears the communist elites who ruled the country at the time were highly responsive to the needs of the people as they stepped down from office in 1990 and held free elections for the people (Giatzidis 2002), which seemed to be the start of democracy in Bulgaria, they actually only re-invented the system in a way that would guarantee their continuance of power (Dimitrova 1998). This happened quietly and unnoticeably, as the people were just being introduced to the ideas, music and movies and had little time to think too deeply at what was happening to their country.

The mere collapse of the system was not an adequate enough end, for the corrupt practices and backroom deals continued to go on without question. Communist leaders simply re-arranged themselves into a political system more acceptable to fit the changing global political structure while still remaining in power. This is proven at the 1990 elections when the people freely and

willingly elected 211 of the former communists back into office (Dimitrova 1998). Thus, the question of whether this social movement actually had an impact on the political fabric of the country is questionable (Meyer 2003 and Gamson 1975) and will be explored more deeply through my discussion of the data found in multitude of interviews I conducted. Regardless, the institutionalization of free elections and other changes like the allowance of outside information into the country, indicate a transition to democratic-like principles.

Apart from political process, McCarthy and Zald's (1977) resource mobilization view social movements as thriving as a result of the various resources available to the movement. The basic claims in this theory are that a movement needs to have ample resources in order to carry out its mission and advance its goals. Given the total closure of the political system at the time and the elites consuming all the power in the nation (Jenkins and Perrow 1977), the anti-communist movement didn't have any access to resources such as political support or money in order to sustain itself to a degree where its goals cannot be ignored by the governing elites. If the movement had these resources, it would have made a stronger impact on the political structure and therefore its outcome would have been different for the people. McCarthy and Zald claim that a movement needs to be as disruptive as possible in order to truly make a change, which the Bulgarian movement was not as it was limited in terms of its resources. Millions of people still

have no idea that there was even a movement in that part of the world. Despite this limitation, it was still able to mobilize thousands of individuals in protests of the system that oppressed them.

Political scientist John Glenn (2003) similarly states in his article “Contentious Politics and Democratization: Comparing the Impact of Social Movements on the Fall of Communism in Eastern Europe” that the main indicators of a democratic transition included free elections and civil negotiations about what they want their government to resemble. This gives us an idea of some of the primary goals that people all over Eastern Europe were attempting to achieve through their movements.

The above resources discuss how these aspects of a social movement lead to structural changes within the country, which in this case is a change to a more democratic-style country. They give us an idea of the strategies employed by movement participants and the goals they wanted to accomplish. They also tell us that the Bulgarian people wanted to change the structure of their government from communist to democratic. However, there is another aspect to this that the above articles do not consider, which is the deeper meaning of what the people think democracy actually is. It seems that even though there were structural transformations in a more democratic direction at the formal level, the people still didn't truly believe their country was democratic because many believe the movement failed the people in some way or another (Dimitrova 1998). This points us to a new issue of the difference between the expectations of

what a democratic Bulgaria would look like as opposed to what it was after the fall of communism.

The last major theory, movement framing, considers how the people framed their aspirations of democracy into the movement. This gets at this deeper meaning of what people think democracy is because it considers how the framing process a movement undergoes reflects both the goals of the movement (Benford and Shaw 2001). This theory will look at how the movement's frames reflected its goals, desired changes, and the messages its participants wanted to convey through them (Benford and Shaw 2001). The Bulgarian anti-communist movement framing process was focused mainly on publically criticizing and shaming the Party and its members. Their use of derogatory terms and signs reflected the culmination of fifty years of oppression and injustice. People also yelled and chanted out lists of things that the Party couldn't do for its people and things they wanted them to do, including a variety of democratic principles such as free speech and freedom and equality. This gives us some insight into some of the definitions people attached to democracy. Benford and Shaw call attention collective action framing as a main framing technique. The Bulgarian movement against communism employed this framing process because it called upon its people to join in the collective effort that was gradually building up against the system. The second major framing technique, motivational framing, resembled a kind of "call to arms" for the people to see it as their duty to rise up against

and demand a democratic system that offered them the basic liberties of which the communist system denied them.

This offers a glimpse of these deeper issues because it focuses on what the meanings people attached to democracy were and what they wanted a democratic nation to look like. The frames of the movement and the messages voiced during protests and rallies represent what the Bulgarian people thought democracy was and their desire to institute it in their own country. Needless to say, when these changes didn't happen when the 1990 multi-party elections and the old communist leaders re-entered the political scene, having not left at all, was the biggest disappointment in the whole movement.

The alternative methods of resistance (Vassileva 2000) offer a different analysis that determine whether or not the movement was successful and what other meanings people attached to democracy. Vassileva's ideas suggest that the real progressive act of the movement was not the protests and rallies in which people engaged, but in the mental rejection of everything which the communist system stood for. This occurred at the personal level and symbolized a total break with the system. Thus, the movement succeeded because many people rejected the old structures of communism, their simple rejection serving as the main revolutionary act. This simple rejection of an idea symbolizes the fact that movement participants believe the meaning of democracy is the ability to think for yourself and reject any idea that you don't believe is right.

Thus we understand that movement activists attached the basic right of freedom of speech to democracy, as well as the ability to formally challenge the existing power structure. It also seems that Bulgarian people believed that democracy meant one could vocally and directly challenge a structure or idea they opposed and work together to change it.

This perspective is different from the other definitions of movement successes, which include surface changes like the institution of free elections, and says instead that movement success is measured by the personal rejection of the system that has dominated social life.

*“If we don’t believe in freedom of expression for the people we despise,
We don’t believe in it at all.”*

-Noam Chomsky

Definitions of Democracy

In a rapidly globalizing world where corporations, governments and media outlets tell us what is right and what is wrong, we often times take our own rights and privileges for granted. I think that it is only appropriate to dedicate a short section to remind readers some official and collectively agreed upon definitions of democracy. The term democracy encompasses a whole myriad of characterizations, whose definitions and philosophies are being constantly updated by society, so much so that a lot of its core meaning is either completely changed or forgotten. As with many other things, democracy is different on paper than in practice and, when one lives in a world where one is socialize to believe everyone is created equal, people find it very easy to overlook a discrepancy between the two.

Wright and Rodgers (2010) offer us a concise description of the basic characteristics, which a “democratic” nation possesses. We have all been accustomed to believing that democracy means each person comes into this world with equal standing to his neighbor, has the right and freedom to act, think and speak as he wishes, and has the same chance as his neighbor to to earn a livelihood or seek other opportunities. Democracy coupled with capitalism in today’s world have offered the faintest hope to even the most hopeless soul that with hard work and determination, his ability to climb the social ladder and stand at the top of the mountain of success and privilege. Democracy wants to make us all feel like we are equals, like we have free

choice to regulate the course of our lives without external influence, and that the outside world is maintained in a fair and just way which always gives credence and room for even the weakest voice to be heard. It pushes us to be materialistic and profit-driven so that we can continue to spread the American dream of prosperity, efficiency and freedom.

In general it seems the first thing people think of when they hear this term is that everyone has an equal say in the politics of our time. This, along with the basic ideas of free choice and free speech, were the offered the strongest attraction to people who lived under a non-democratic regime which offered only repression and oppression of basic human rights and liberties. This builds a burning desire within them to be part of a system that they could actually feel part of. A system that offered a new beginning and opportunities for advancement in all areas of life that were not possible before. Democracy has always been the ideal because it promises a nobody that he still has the chance to be somebody, that having nothing still means you have the right to pursue whatever makes you happy and that knowing nothing still guarantees you the same rights as an intellectual prodigy. It assures you no one is going to harm you for your words, endanger your safety for your beliefs, or forbid you do something.

Although the degree to which these basic democratic principles are practiced in every day life and implemented universally is highly debatable and uncertain, as the amount of injustices and inequalities in what is supposed to be the most democratic nation of all far outnumber the

dimensions on which we are all equal, the fact that these principles still dominate our political ideology is significant. Using these basic definitions gives us a foundation on which we can comprehend the various meanings and interpretations attached to democracy in the following section according to the participants I interviewed.

“No problem can be fixed using the same level of consciousness that created it.”

-Albert Einstein

Meanings of Democracy

When 211 former communists were reelected in the 1990 elections as the first leaders in a post-communist nation who promised to bring liberation to the people and reactivate the stagnant economy of the country and when everyone thought they achieved the dream of egalitarianism, many people were not convinced of the supposed democratic salvation. Many did not see a chance and fled the country, many others remained to bear the weight of lies and governmental corruption which never saw an official end. The end of communism brought with it an invigorating promise for a better tomorrow filled with democratic rights, a better economy, better politics and a better standard of life.

Studies designed to measure the degrees of democracy in post-Soviet nations revealed that there was a sharp increase in democratic policies and changes occurring in Bulgaria beginning in 1990 (Polity IV 2010). This data informs us that there were democratic changes occurring in Bulgaria after the fall of communism, however the testimonies I gathered from my participants offer a different perspective. As we will read below, there seems to be a large discrepancy between what the government claimed to be occurring at the structural level and what the people interpreted of these “democratic” transformations.

I begin this section with excerpts from the countless interviews I conducted over the course of several months. My main purpose was to answer the questions of how the people experienced the anti-communist movement and the kinds of meanings and interpretations they attached to the terms democracy. What is interesting to me is whether or not their meanings coincided with the reality of what was going in the country in the few years after the end of communism and to what degree the new “democratic” policies fit people’s beliefs about what should be happening. Overall, I held 17 interviews with people who were heavily or somewhat involved in the movement, as well as those who were simply its bystanders. These were not politically involved individuals, but rather people who opposed the communist regime. Their commentaries, stories and opinions allow us to make sense of what the political and social changes at the macro national level in Bulgaria meant for the everyday civilians who had to follow them as well as what it meant to conceptualize democracy at a such a critical time in the development of a nation which had no previous experience with this political ideology. The anecdotes inserted here help us to understand the particular meanings people at this time in Bulgarian history attached to democracy and how their personal involvement ties in with the larger national, as well as international, narrative of state-building and comprehension of a new democratic order in the post communist era. Their stories give us not only a glimpse at life

during the final stretches of the communist regime, but also inform us of the hopes and dreams that held so strongly by the average person hoping to live in a better world.

M: What was the atmosphere during the first years of political change in Bulgaria?

R1: In the big cities, there was a more uplifted and chaotic atmosphere. People had a more expressed will towards change towards democracy and change of the political picture.

M: How was this will expressed?

R1: With peaceful meetings and demonstrations with thousands of people participating at each one.

M: Were you personally involved in these demonstrations? If yes, how often did you participate?

R1: Yes. A lot depended on the political situation. Sometimes they were daily events. A lot of times this also coincided with the conditions forced upon the people. In the winters of 1991 and 1995-6, there was virtually no food in the markets and naturally people emerged in many numbers with the hopes of taking down the administration. Both of those times, communists held power in office.

M: Communists still held power even though the regime fell in 1989?

R1: Yes, because there is no such thing as a 'former communist,' in Bulgaria the system was changed to socialist but nothing changed.

M: I see. Now back to the demonstrations, what kinds of slogans or mottos were used? In other words, what was a typical protest like?

R1: There was a designated place where everyone met. We took to the streets, singing songs which artist in those days wrote against the communist party, holding up large banners and plaques demanding they step down. This was the desire of the people, for the party to step down.

M: What desire did you have personally during this time?

R1: My personal opinion was that the communist party, with its metamorphosis into the socialist party, was that it should be lawfully banned as it was a terrorist organization which with force took over the country with the aid of the USSR Red Army and killed tens of thousands of intellectuals, parliament people and executive power without any justification and threw another tens of thousands of Bulgarian intellectuals and ordinary people who did not support the party into death camps where their lives were completely and undeniably ruined. I also think there should have been laws for de-communicization of the nation. In comparison, the Nuremburg Trials issued only 8 death sentences to fascists for crimes against humanity. So, you can see, there is absolutely no justice or justice process. And for all these acts against the Bulgarian people, this party and its secret police, was not only not banned but was able to transform their total political

power during the communist regime into total economic power in the post-communist era. This means they made money from their superficial mimicry of democracy and from robbing the nation's people.

M: So what you are saying is that there was no democratic transition in Bulgaria?

R1: There were certain things. Before, we weren't able to have multiple political parties but after, we were. However, the democratic processes in the country were a failure because the masses weren't able to take the economic power into their hands. They instead allowed it back into the hands of former leaders. There were no laws that prohibited these former leaders from participating in civic life and because they weren't prohibited, there were no changes.

M: What other changes needed to happen for democracy to be present?

R1: All the ex-communists who held power should have been slaughtered, along with their secret police and others who murdered for them.

M: Did they happen?

R1: No, because the same people who we tried to fight against ended up back in power.

M: What does democracy mean to you?

R1: Simple. Freedom.

M: How many of these changes happened in Bulgaria?

R1: None. Because people associated with the party were systematically placed at every position, they corrupted the opportunity for the average person to get anywhere in life. Also, private property has still not been returned to people.

I include a large portion of this interview because it offers a rare glimpse into the interpretations of this participant towards the reality created, manipulated, and controlled by the communists in Bulgaria. I would like to begin my analysis of this interview by discussing the protests occurring in Bulgarian cities. Respondent #1 painted a picture of these demonstrations as massive civil parade-like exhibitions complete with songs and slogans in an effort to persuade the communist leaders to step down from the power that they still held. It is generally assumed that communism fell in 1989 with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall, however this is not completely true, especially in the Soviet satellites whose power-greedy leaders were not yet ready to loosen their economic and political grip over the nation. It is known that in the 1990 elections, in what were supposed to be free elections with multiple parties, former communists won back 211 seats in the parliament and thus continued to rule (Dimitrova 1998). Their election back into office is but one of many pieces of evidence illustrating how members of the communist party engaged in a mere re-arrangement of themselves into a political

system more acceptable to fit both the national and global political structure while still remaining in power.

This is what Respondent #1 meant when he used the word “metamorphosis.” The communist system that held the nation in its iron fist for 50 years never actually ended, or collapsed, as everyone was fooled to believe, but reorganized itself to accommodate the growing demands from the West to conform to the democratic form (Giatzidis 2002). Respondent #1 uses the term “mimicry of...democracy” to describe this process. Although there were minor changes towards a more democratic state, as the allowance of multiple political parties as Respondent #1 mentions, real change could not be achieved because the same individuals who were responsible for the nation’s deterioration and ruin remained the country’s law-producing body. This causes this respondent to believe in the idealistic and textbook definition of democracy, however to not associate them with Bulgaria.

This sets up the grounds for most of the protests Respondent #1 discusses and which they participated. Benford and Shaw’s (2001) movement framing theories aid us in better conceptualizing the meaning of the various slogans and phrases used and overused during these demonstrations. This theory focuses on how people tied their own aspirations and convictions into the collective effort to achieve a democratic status for the nation (Benford and Shaw 2001). The signs and banners carried by people expressing their thoughts are a way for those individuals

to tie their personal narrative into the overarching national narrative of coping in a post-communist world still struggling to achieve a stable and fair political identity for its people.

Respondents #1 and #9 provided some information on the types of signs, banners and slogans used in the rallies. Much of the movement's framing techniques were focused on shaming, offending and insulting the party and its members. Phrases such as "cherveni boklutsi" (red trash, as communists are frequently referred to and symbolized by the color red) were a frequent collective chant during demonstrations. Participants loudly and bravely repeated this phrase over and over again, hoping the passion with which they screamed into the dirty streets of Sofia would reach those who ruled from their golden thrones, untouched and unstirred, and change something in the country which they both loved and hated at the same time. A country that gave birth to them and soon after killed them with the utter fruitlessness and despair that wholly consumed everyone to the bone. Respondent #8 claimed that the situation in Bulgaria during the few years after the collapse of communism was of "complete hopelessness."

Songs were also a really important aspect of the anti-communist movement. Emerging singers, musicians and artists were able to take advantage of the boisterous and anarchic social climate to compose lyrics and melodies that would capture the revolutionary spirit of the years and the passions of millions of people fighting to reclaim their freedom. Most respondents, including myself, were able to think of one song in particular that epitomized the emotions of

those who were took to the streets and who believed that change was possible. The chorus of the song, *“God, bestow upon Bulgaria direction, light and freedom,* most distinctly symbolizes the deep-rooted longing for a freedom that came either too late or not at all, and a zealous plea towards anyone or anything who can offer a temporary escape from the demoralized reality that haunted everyone in Bulgaria.

Below is the chorus of another revolutionary piece of music that respondents #2 and 5 described as being a huge inspiration to them and others involved in the movement.

“Open your eyes, look at this world, life today moves forward and not backwards.

Open your eyes, the world is with us, open your eyes and know you have a chance.

Songs like these, along with thousands others, broadened the perspectives of many movement participants and motivated them to open their eyes to the possibility of a new world and were one of the most successful framing strategies of anti-communist crusades in Eastern Europe. For the first time in a long time Bulgaria’s artistically inclined individuals were able to freely express their idealistic visions, dreams and wishes for the country and its people. And in doing so, they both enlarged and deepened the scope of the movement from simple political change to a more existential experience that caused everyone to rethink the meaning of their lives. Many of my respondents claimed that this influx of new movement music, as well as the introduction of a lot of Western music, caused them to rethink their lives in terms of who they

were versus who they wanted to be. Regardless of whether this occurred simply because of the activist-oriented time period in which they found themselves, it seems as though the music of this times was responsible for creating a framing strategy which instilled in the people a new hope and new possibilities for those who were open-minded enough to strive for them.

From this interview, as well as others, it seems a huge fragment in determining whether there is democracy or not is related to the participation of everyday civilians in the decision making process. Thus, one of the central meanings attached to the term democracy is a public participation in the political life. The desires and voices of the entire populace are seen as being a functional part in feeling as though one is living in a democratic nation. The replies of Respondent #1 were also particularly useful in helping us to understand why the transition to democracy never fully took place in Bulgaria. This individual appears to believe that this is due to the fact that instead of the people reclaiming political power and forbidding former communist leaders from continuing their dominance of the nation, they allowed power to go back into the hands of the former communists. Almost all the people I interviewed identified this instance as the biggest disappointment of the entire movement.

“What was the point of having a movement if the same people would end up back in office?” Asked one interviewee when asked about the elections of 1990. With results like the ones seen in what were supposed to be the first democratic elections, the anticommunist

movement seemed nothing more than an unrealistic attempt of an entire populace to rise up against a system they could never overthrow.

“If you told us that back then, no one would have believed you,” said the same interviewee when asked at a different point whether or not anyone doubted the success of the movement.

When completely consumed by the emotionality of a particular moment, no one can imagine being wrong. This faith of the movement participants can quite possibly be seen not only as a passionate faith in their cause, but also as a success of their movement framing strategies. Benford and Shaw (2001) describe motivational framing as one of the main framing techniques movement use to convey the messages of the movement and raise awareness to others. This resembles a kind of “call to arms” for the people to see it as their duty to demand a democratic system that offered them the basic liberties of which the communist system denied them by participating in demonstrations, rallies, protests and other forms of resistance. It seems this was a major technique used in the movement, as many of the people I interviewed described feeling emotionally compelled to join together for a common cause. Others said they felt obligated to seek justice and equality during this time.

M: What changes are needed for democracy?

R2: All the servants to the communists and the communists themselves had to be eliminated. No communist, especially those who were in control should have been allowed to continue participation in civic life. Second, lawmakers and legislators had to be completely changed. The lawmakers and the laws all had to go with democratic laws of the West.

M: According to you, what were the ‘democratic laws of the West?’”

R2: I think one of these was a free market economy. Another is a capacity to designate those other than party members, and therefore not involved with its secret police, to office and executive positions. There also should have been civil rights and liberties.

M: What does democracy mean to you?

R2: A political system in which there is the freedom to express personal will, ability to access unbiased information freedom of people to unite into various organizations and movements with different ideologies, freedom to express any opinion, and laws which apply to everyone.

M: Which is the most important to you?

R2: Equal rights.

M: How many of these changes happened in Bulgaria?

R2: At first glance, you get the sense that there are many newspapers and journals, as if there was freedom of the press, but the press was actually controlled by the former communist

party and its secret police. There are organizations today but none of their goals are reachable because they don't have access to real power for change. As far as equal rights, only those with power have opportunities.

This respondent provides his or her own definitions of what democracy means, many of them in line with the widespread definition of democracy laid out earlier using Wright and Roberts' book. The meanings of democracy seen here are in a way similar to those of respondent #1 in that they are both concerned with the textbook definition of democracy, or what democracy should be, rather than how it was instituted in their own country. This is partially because it seems that their idealistic expectations of what democracy should be were never instituted in Bulgaria, as many of the respondents do not believe that their ideas of democracy were actually implemented.

According to this respondent, the most important meaning they attach to democracy is having equal rights, which the participant claims did not occur after the fall of communism. From this individual's testimony, we can gather quite a few commonalities with Respondent #1 in that both saw the elimination of previous communist leaders as the most important step in democratizing the nation. Thus, democracy means the removal of corrupt and ineffective leaders and replacing them with ones who are capable of instituting democratic changes and who stand

for democratic principles. A general conclusion we can gather from both of these testimonies is that Bulgaria failed to initiate the structural changes, such as eliminating Party members from office, in order to achieve considerable democratic change for its people. This means that the individuals who occupied positions in power played a large role in the subjective interpretation of whether not the country was headed towards positive democratic change.

This relates to the political process theory of Jenkins and Perrow (1977) because even though the activists working to overthrow the system made use of certain political tools, they ultimately didn't have the political prowess to take down the system whose control was just too vast to be diminished. In relation to McCarthy and Zald's resource mobilization theory, this translates into an inadequate supply of resources with which to defeat and take down the system. The people, politically powerless and resource lacking, were virtually unable to achieve any kind of significant structural change in the government. Instead, the BCP (Bulgarian Communist Party) simply altered its name and continued its reign of power without any significant changes in the structure of government or economic functioning (Vassileva 1998). Thus, the ideas people had about a democratic nation were sacrificed for greed of the ruling minority.

This conveys a very bleak and hopeless outlook for the anti-communist movement, one that makes the energetic and dynamic revolutionary spirit of the times seem impotent and incapable. Despite the hopeless situation in Bulgaria during the early 1990s, those who believed

in the power of their effort could not have surrendered a moment to doubt or thoughts of failure.

The general impression I received from my interviews was that all those directly involved in the movement were wholeheartedly convinced they were pushing the country towards a new horizon. The following interviews give us a glimpse of how far we've gone towards that horizon.

M: What does democracy mean to you?

R6: It means you have freedom. You live in a country where there are opportunities for you to do whatever you want. If you want to be a pilot, you can do that. If you want to be a teacher, you can do that. Here, there are so many obstacles you have to go through to even get from one place to the other. I think it means you can make choices about your own life and can have big dreams.

M: Did these things occur in Bulgaria after the fall of communism?

R6: Not really. It is still hard for people do the things they want. My friends applied for visas to the States and were denied without reason.

R6: Do you think Bulgaria is a democracy?

M: I don't know. From the things I've heard about European countries and America, I definitely don't think we have things as easy. I mean, people in America buy new cars all the time. Here, you can't really think about buying a new car.

M: What do you think needs to happen for Bulgaria to be democratic?

R6: I think we need change in the government. All our leaders have been a disappointment. They don't do anything to help us.

This interview reveals the common and almost self-evident theme that democracy means freedom. Most people in Bulgaria and other communist countries believed the end of the communist regime would translate into emancipation from the oppressive practices of the state, even young individuals who were young at the time. It seems that in Bulgaria, the early 1990s was a time when everyone believed in change and everyone intuitively knew that something big was happening. The definition of freedom given here, the ability to do “whatever you want”, is interesting because there is no mention of any sort of existential meaning such as the profound experience of being internally liberated from the iron chains that bound people to a slave-like reality. I would assume this kind of definition would be heard somewhere in the interviews, as this populace came out of communism and is now living what could be termed as a “more free” life than they were twenty years ago. The absence of this deeper definition of democracy could suggest that perhaps the individuals I interviewed didn't see a necessity to discuss that level of depth, or maybe they never learned to associate a definition of such depth with their idea of

freedom. Or perhaps, what I am most inclined to believe, this absence suggests that the iron chains are still present in most aspects of life for people living in Bulgaria.

This respondent uses materialistic wealth and opportunity to justify the lack of democracy in Bulgaria. They believe that the ability to possess things is somehow translated into having more opportunities and thus more freedom to pursue endeavors. A few other participants also seemed to have this inclination.

It also seems that this respondent's definition of freedom is interesting because it illustrates the disadvantaged position of most modern day Bulgarians who aren't involved in politics or who hail from a wealthy family, the family wealth mainly being due to a political career. Today's people of Bulgaria, especially the youth, have much less opportunity for following their aspirations. Many are troubled with economic burdens or insufficient financial assets, many others have an extended family to take care of. Those who attend university don't have very many prospects after completing their education. Respondents 10 and 15, both of whom are young adults, told me at other points in the interview that they are facing difficulties finding jobs related to their fields of medicine and police.

An excerpt from the interview below illustrates similar points.

M: What was your involvement in the demonstrations?

R15: I didn't have any kind of special role, but I participated in the marches and rallies sometimes. My parents took me. They said if the communists saw younger kids they would listen more. I guess I must have been pretty quiet because none of what I wanted happened.

M: What were your desires during this time?

R15: Honestly, I just wanted to see my parents making a decent living. They kept up appearances for me, but I knew they were always worried about something. It was hard not to in those times, everyone had all kinds of problems. No one was happy.

M: When you heard the term 'democracy' as a child, in school or elsewhere, what went through your mind?

R15: To me, it was the thing that made us less good than people in other countries. When I was younger, I heard stories about America and thought everyone must be so happy there because they have democracy and we're unhappy because we don't. I didn't really have a definition, I just knew it was something that made our circumstances in little Bulgaria less fortunate.

M: How would you define it now?

R15: Now, being older and having been to America myself and being able to reflect back on communist Bulgaria, I would still define it as the same thing. It's still that thing that others have and live better because of it.

M: What does it mean to you to be a democratic nation?

R15: I think it means that you are free to do whatever you want, go wherever you want without being restricted, say things without worrying if they are right or not

This respondent consciously realizes the disadvantages associated with being from Bulgaria during its years of political and social transformations, many of which are still under way. This individual's feelings of inferiority indicate the internalization of the painful realization that one cannot fulfill or develop himself in the ways in which one wishes because his surrounding environment cannot offer the same kinds of advantages and prospects as elsewhere. This is a very unfortunate fact in today's Bulgarian society, that young people's dreams are hindered because of improper nation managing and political conduct. Again, the theme of sacrifice for the greed of those in power is evident.

Using McCarthy and Zald's (1977) resource mobilization hypothesis, both of the respondents are suffering from a lack of resources to carry out certain endeavors. This has an impact on the future progression of their lives, as well as how they learn to conceptualize themselves and their place in life. In terms of social movements, insufficient access to resources could mean that if there were to be another uprising against the political system in Bulgaria, activists would be less motivated to participate (McCarthy and Zald 1977). Both also have

similar meanings of democracy in that living in a democratic state affords one the ability to do whatever they wish. It appears this could be due to the fact that not many people have been given this chance in the past, causing today's youth to want to embrace it even more.

Both of the above respondents express the same desire to improve their current life circumstance. Both want to do something to advance in a more progressive direction. Thus, it appears another central meaning of democracy is derived to mean improvement of one's current position in life, or as having the opportunity to improve one's current situation. This can be seen as the continuation of the revolutionary spirit embodied two decades ago by people who, at that time, wanted to fight and push for political change in order to live in a better Bulgaria. This gives an equalizing quality to the people of yesterday and those of today. They are the same person with the same goals, only in a different time and context.

The interviews I conducted over the course of a few months provided valuable insight into the experience of living in Bulgaria during the momentous time period of the early 1990s. The respondents represented the voices of thousands of other Bulgarians whose hopes for a progressive nation were dismembered with the continuation of the communist party to run a corrupt and ineffective regime. Their testimonies lifted the veil of the ways in which democracy was conceptualized by every day people during this time and exposed the tragic truth that none

of the people's expectations for democratic transformations were met. At the structural level, there were changes such as the allowance of free press and something that resembled free elections, however at the deeper, more personal levels people still remain disenchanted and hopeless with regards to their current life conditions.

Overall, the interviews carried out by the participants reveal a large discrepancy between the definitions and meanings these participants attached to democracy and the changes that actually occurred in Bulgaria. None of the participants claimed that their definitions of democracy were made into reality in post-communist Bulgaria. It seemed that individuals, caught up in the emotion of the revolutionary time, believed their conceptions of an entirely free nation which would elect leaders interested in the welfare of each person they represented, took everyone's voice into consideration and a country that granted the same rights and liberties to everyone would be established after the success of their demonstrations and protests. From official studies on Bulgaria's levels of democracy (Polity IV 2010), it appears that Bulgaria was able to institute these changes. However, the testimonies from ordinary Bulgarian citizens, reflect a different reality in which the previous communist leaders simply changed the name of the system but continued to control the nation and thus no real democratic solutions were reached. All the respondents had an idea of what democracy should be, however none believed or claimed that these meanings actually came to life in the aftermath of the fall of communism.

The Intellectual Revolution

Writing about the injustice in Latin America, celebrated author and revolutionary, Eduardo Galeano (1998), informs us about the obligatory amnesia which has plagued his people and kept them from remembering their past and creating a better future. Today this sickness has spread to the Balkans and is rapidly infecting the Bulgarian population. Those that remember are labeled as backwards individuals living in the depressing past and those that forget are modern day people who have sold themselves to Western ethics and the illusion of democracy. The world system today is fashioned in such a way that the dominant values penetrate every level of existence. This infiltration of particular concepts or rules is just as present today as it was in communist times. The only way to break the vicious cycle is to break out of the patterns encouraged by society and doubt everything that has ever been said to you. The goal of this is to become so detached from the system that one's mere existence is an act of revolution.

This is the basis for the Vassileva's article in which she poetically chronicles an alternative form of revolution occurring simultaneously along with the demonstrations and protests of the early 1990s. This intellectual revolution was characterized by a complete rejection of everything that the party stood for and all the things that party members told people to believe. This method of resistance stressed the importance of overthrowing the system on one's own

terms. People engaged in this through written pamphlets, intellectual discourse and gatherings where individuals discussed their mental rejection of everything they have been conditioned to believe and follow. People learned to refuse the timeworn lies and rules that kept them imprisoned in a tyrannical structure from which even a mental escape was dangerous. At the start of 1990s, for the first time in a long time, people were finally allowed to think for themselves and gave themselves the chance to think beyond what they were told. This reopening of the mind and the process of becoming cognizant of the collective condition made everyone more aware of how much change the country needed. The intellectual revolution inspired those involved in creating a better reality for both themselves and those around them.

A defining feature of this limb of the anti-communist movement was the existence of the Seminar and Synthesis, two prominent intellectual circles. During these meetings, people would gather and talk about their visions for the future. Individuals were actively participating in the construction of a new reality for the nation. These intellectuals wanted to bring their idealistic conceptions of freedom and democracy into the broader public sphere so that others can be inspired and continue to push for change (Vassileva 2000). A few of the participants I interviewed were also involved in this area of the movement. They spoke about these discussions as being a substantial part of the time period because it was the first time people could gather and discuss ideas which would have at one point been labeled as a threat to the state.

This tells us a lot about the collective interpretation of democracy. Clearly, the ability to speak freely and publish whatever one wishes energized the society and inspired them to seek change for their country. The movement succeeded because many people rejected the old structures of communism, their simple rejection serving as the main revolutionary act. This simple rejection of an idea symbolizes the fact that movement participants believe the meaning of democracy is the ability to think for yourself and reject any idea that one doesn't believe is right. Thus we understand that movement activists attached the basic right of freedom of speech to democracy, as well as the ability to formally challenge the existing power structure. It also seems that Bulgarian people believed that democracy meant one could vocally and directly challenge a structure or idea they opposed and work together to change it.

Conclusion

The Bulgarian anti-communist movement is just one example of the many collective efforts to rid of an oppressive regime and replace it with a democratic system, or another form of governance in which people are provided with a basic liberties and the chance to live as freely as possible. Such were the expectations of the Bulgarian people during the era of anti-communist rallies and pro-democracy demonstrations that swept through Eastern Europe, hoping to transform the political landscape and introduce democratic ideals. Such were the hopes of all those whom I interviewed and who participated in the protests for freedom and the communist resistance activities. The subjective interpretation of these participants reveals that they received very little of what they anticipated.

The general conclusion I retrieved from my interviews is that the people's ideas of democracy were not instituted during the time when Bulgaria and the rest of the former Soviet bloc claimed to be westernizing and democratizing. It appears that following the 1990 "democratic" elections, the communist leaders resumed their place in office and continued to govern a nation struggling to rid itself of the communist plague. The people were fooled into believing that their ideas of democracy and freedom would be fulfilled, however they soon saw this was not the case as Bulgaria continued to be ruled by the same communist leaders. The fact

that most respondents did not admit to there being the kind of democratic changes in Bulgaria which they expected is evidence enough of the failure of the country to bring the sense of hope and liberty which the people so desperately desired and fought for. My main finding is that the meanings and definitions that my participants associated with democracy were not properly instituted in the politics of the country.

The anti-communist movement in Bulgaria can thus be conceptualized as not yet being over, as the ultimate goal of the movement, to rid the nation of any trace of communism and institute real democratic changes, has not yet been achieved. In Bulgaria today, we see a resurgence of this movement, as thousands of modern day Bulgarian intellectuals are publishing material on the failures of the current political sphere. This can be seen as continuation of the loose threads which the 1989 movement left hanging, a revisiting of the problems of the past which continue to require answers and solutions. Perhaps today's generation can arrive full circle and complete what was already started.

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*“The minute you hear ‘freedom’ or ‘democracy’—watch out!
Because in a truly free nation, no one has to tell you that you’re free.”*

-Jacque Fresco

