

# Cinema and Propaganda: An aspect of Bulgarian-Yugoslavian relations in the shadow of the Macedonian Question

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## Summary

*The purpose of the current article is to present a broad description of Bulgaria's stance toward the Macedonian Question after 1948; its objective is also to describe the upheavals in the Bulgarian- Yugoslavian relations in their efforts to secure as their own a large portion of the broader region's history. Bearing this in mind, the study will focus on the decisions of the Bulgarian Communist Party, during its plenum of March 1963, and the way it was linked to the ongoing battle of the two rival countries in a certain area, that of filmmaking. With the use of unpublished Bulgarian archival documents, it reveals an unknown, until today, incident between Bulgaria and Yugoslavia concerning a renowned film and nominee for Oscar award, the "Battle of Neretva".*

The course of the diplomatic relations between Bulgaria and Yugoslavia during the period 1948 – 1967, is characterized, more or less, by the continuous changes and, to a large degree, by the reflections on the Soviet – Yugoslavian relations. Simultaneously, although there was an ephemeral calmness and readiness for cooperation in their bilateral relations, nevertheless there was an ongoing conflict, both concealed and open, with a high stake: the claim on a large portion of the Balkan history and especially the one that it was directly connected to a part of the geographical area of Macedonia.

In a brief review of this particular period, it is quite obvious that there was a systematic effort exerted from the Bulgarian side to castigate the policy of "Macedonism", which was being conducted both in a brash and anti-Bulgarian basis. Furthermore, Bulgarians tried to reject the idea of a south-Slavic confederation, while pinpointing the unbroken bonds between the Bulgarian people and the "Macedonian" minority in the Pirin region of Bulgaria. Their main effort, however, was to deprive from the leadership of Socialist Republic of Macedonia the opportunity to usurp and misappropriate any historical event, which could become a potential threat, a vaulting horse for a renegotiation of the local History on an anti-Bulgarian basis.

Within the aforementioned scope and framework are also subsumed a series of actions, including the effort of restoring the prestige of certain personalities, such as Metodi Satorov, Gotse Delcev, Yane Santanski and Dimo Hatzidimov. The above mentioned personalities, which played a crucial role in different periods of the Bulgarian history, were set aside during the time of the approach with Yugoslavia, due to the reactions or claims pushed forwards by the latter.

Indicative of the policy that Bulgaria followed was its reaction towards those Yugoslavian publications that attempted to manipulate Bulgarian history. On the other hand the Yugoslavian policy was aiming both towards the country's interior, in the framework of the process of "macedonizing" the populace, as well as the exterior of the country, mainly towards Bulgaria. Eloquent example was a note sent on 2 October 1957 by the Yugoslavian embassy to Bulgaria's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in which the former asked for the retrieval of Yugoslavian cultural – historical relics, which were transferred by Bulgarian soldiers from various Serbian regions during the First and the Second World Wars. Among them there was a reference to the grave stone of Tsar Samuel, which was discovered in the village of Trebenista by Bulgarian soldiers, but also to the archives of important Slav-Macedonians. The response of the Bulgarian side was indicative of their stance. They rejected the requests on the basis that these items "were not taken from Yugoslavia".

Despite the reflexive reactions of the Bulgarian leadership, the enhancement of "Macedonism", the successful Yugoslavian propaganda in the region of Pirin and the Slav-Macedonian nationalism did not leave many margins of optimism to Bulgaria. The necessity of lining an independent policy towards the Macedonian Question, which would serve only the country's national interests, was becoming increasingly a one-way road, for reasons that had to do not only with Bulgarian–Yugoslavian bilateral relations, but also due to the international and surrounding changing conditions. Recent past was showing the way to the future. Within a decade Bulgaria was forced to change its policy towards Yugoslavia three times. In this frame the sixties were becoming one of the most crucial decades concerning the two countries policy towards the Macedonian Question.

Until the early 1963's, Bulgaria's foreign policy could be characterized as stringed to the corresponding Soviet, as following strictly the demands of the Soviet diplomacy. Bulgaria was the most obeying ally of U.S.S.R. and that often led the country to serious conflicts with its own interests. This was true especially with the Macedonian Question where the turbulences in the Soviet–Yugoslavian relations had an immediate impact on the corresponding Bulgarian–Yugoslavian ones. As a result Bulgaria, perennially and to a great degree, was let exposed to the attacks of the Slav-Macedonian nationalism, which was acting under the cover of the Yugoslavian expansionism. But this situation was bound to change.

In January 1963 Bulgaria's Prime Minister, Todor Zhivkov, made an official visit to Belgrade. For the first time, after Dimitrov's era, the Macedonian Question played a very important role in the conversations between the leaders of the two countries. Especially important were the actions of Zhivkov, who attempted to put the issue on a more realistic basis: *"I underlined that our party acknowledges the creation, immediately after WWII, in*

*Vardar Macedonian, of the People's Republic of Macedonia within the framework of the Confederation of People's Republic of Yugoslavia. We also acknowledge and agree that within the People's Republic of Macedonia has been created a Macedonian, national awareness*". The new policy was adopted officially during the Plenum of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party, which was held at 11-12 March 1963, and is considered a significant turn in the history of the Macedonian Question. Based on this policy Bulgaria would recognize the process of the Slav-Macedonian nation-building, not as a historical fact, but rather as an artificial structure, based on political aims which would be confined within the borders of Yugoslavia. In no circumstances would there be any official recognition of the existence of "Macedonians" within the borders of the region of Pirin. Thus, the census of 1966 clearly depicted the above mentioned policy through the record of only 8.000 "Macedonians".

The radical decisions of the BCP were taken during a period of calmness in the bilateral relations as an immediate effect of the betterment of Soviet-Yugoslavian relations. Nevertheless, after the March Plenum and despite the official policy of mild tones concerning the Macedonian Question, the rhetoric between the two countries resumed at a scientific level. Especially concerning Yugoslavia this particular period was characterized by a dense movement in the production of historical works, with the ultimate purpose of resolving specific "historical oddities", which caused trouble to the newly-born Socialist Republic of Macedonia. The leaders and the historians of the latter continued claiming part of the Bulgarian history, while Bulgaria refuted those attempts.

Public disputes, conducted basically through the press, but also the unseen ones bear proof that there were many different levels of confrontation. In the framework of seeking but also, at the same time, protecting those that were considered as historical footholds of the collective memories of the Balkan past, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia moved forward in a fierce confrontation concerning the national identity of many personalities. Moreover the Yugoslavian side, in its effort to establish the process of "Macedonizing" in rigid bases, did not hesitate to give a "Macedonian" identity to one of the greatest personalities of the Bulgarian medieval history, Tsar Samuel. This effort, which was strongly supported by the Yugoslavian propaganda, was only natural to extend in every possible aspect, even in that of the Seventh Art. Representative, in this aspect, is the example of the film the "*Battle of Neretva*" (1967), which was an Oscar nominee in 1968.

The movie was written by the brothers Stevan and Veljko Bulajic; the latter being also the director. It refers to the historical battle that took place in the river Neretva and was conducted between the forces of Axis, which were reinforced by their allies, and Tito's partisans. This particular battle was the peak of a German plan, which was executed in the beginning of 1943 and had as an objective the complete annihilation of the partisan forces.

Despite their goals and the means that undermined this effort, the Germans did not fulfill their objectives while the above mentioned battle gave immense prestige to Tito and his forces.

The movie drew the international interest as it was one of the greatest movies ever made by the Yugoslavian movie industry and as such many famous actors participated from both western and eastern countries. Among them were Sergei Bondarcuk, Yule Brynner, Curd Jurgens, Antoni Doson, Milena Dravic, Franco Nero and Orson Welles. Furthermore, indicative of the special interest that attracted the above mentioned film was also the drawing of the movie's poster from one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century greatest painters, Pablo Picasso. Nevertheless, this promising movie was also bound to become the unseen battleground of a furious confrontation. The conflicting sides were Bulgaria and Yugoslavia, whether the apple of discord was a part of the region's history and more specifically the geographical region of Macedonia.

In April 1967, while the Yugoslavian press was circulating articles about the movie, there were also references for movies that would entirely involve the life and actions of Tsar Samuel. In this context, the newspaper *Nova Makedonija*, which was issued in Skopje, published an article entitled "*Grand psychological spectacle*". The article included an interview of director Veljko Bulajic, who revealed that he had already proposed to the "Macedonian" movie industry, "Vardar – film", the creation of a movie entirely about Tsar Samuel.

In this context Georgi Karamanev, the man in charge of the Bulgarian movie industry, conducted, in the end of May 1967, a formal visit in Sarajevo as a guest of his Yugoslavian counterpart. During his staying, he had also talks about a possible Bulgarian participation in the making of the film "*Battle of Neretva*" by contributing economically, materially or in manpower.

In that particular period and despite the turbulences which had occurred in the bilateral relations between Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, for various reasons, their general state was relatively good. A vivid depiction but also a major contribution to the betterment of the latter was the cooperation which had been achieved during the making of the movie "*The Peach Thief*" (1964), which was shown to the film festival in Venice, but also in Yugoslavia. It is highly possible that it was due to this cooperation that the script of the movie "*Battle of Neretva*" was given to Karamanev, an act that although it was meant to fuel a new rapprochement, ended in a confrontation between the two countries, since there was a particular scene, which, according to Sofia, counterfeited Bulgarian history. To be more specific, the Bulgarian reaction was caused as a result of the following passage of the script:

*"A long column with wounded in stretches is passing. Some blind soldiers are on foot, one after another, being leaded.... by orderlies. The camera is focusing on the blind soldiers, which the orderlies are leading by their hands [...]" and suddenly "[...] From the fire two hands take out, incandescent, tongs. They lift them and carry them through the smoke. We see Byzantine soldiers. They wear heavy armor and shields, in which crosses and coats of arms can be seen.*

*The executioner with the tong goes straight to the eyes of the blindfolded soldiers of the Macedonian king Samuel. The tongs are closing in those, which*

*are shown with frightened eyes. The tongs once more are lifted, closing to the eyes of one of the Slav soldiers. There is one, second... third ..... fifth voice. In front of the fire, tight to each other, stand the soldiers of Samuel. On their side there are soldiers with breastplates and drawn swords, in front of which an officer is reading from a parchment words in the Greek language: - I, the king of Byzantium, Vassilios the Second order: the soldiers of Slav King Samuel to be blinded and in every 100 soldiers let it be just one eye and thus should be sent to the Macedonian King – so that no one can even think again about freedom[...]*’.

The presentation of Samuel and his soldiers as “Macedonians” and “Slavs” was bound to attract the interest of Karamanev, which expressed his bitterness by stating that the country which in the script was mentioned as Slavic: “*is called Bulgaria and in that Bulgaria the king is Samuel*”. On the same day, 2 June 1967, the man in charge of the Bulgarian movie industry instructed the Bulgarian ambassador in Belgrade who a day later sent a letter to the general secretary and Prime Minister of Bulgaria Zivkov. In his letter Karamanev described what had happened and asked for the complete removal of the above mentioned scene and that the U.S.S.R. embassy in Sofia to be informed as well.

The reaction of the Bulgarian side was not without thought. The fact that there was a participation of Soviet and western actors in the movie, which already had drawn the international interest, could be a possible source of threat. At the same time a part of the Bulgarian history was presented as Yugoslavian. There was a strong possibility that the movie could, both politically and diplomatically, enhance the Yugoslavian arsenal in the framework of the ongoing confrontation over part of geographical Macedonia and the overall region’s past. Consequently, the Bulgarian side, on the basis of its renewed policy, was not willing to succumb without giving a fight against actions that jeopardized its diplomatic position. Within the aforementioned framework Bulgaria’s first move was to try and gain the Soviet support.

On June 27, 1967 Tsentov, supervisor of the third sector in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria and subsequently responsible for the Bulgarian-Yugoslavian relations, had a meeting with Maslenikov, advisor to the embassy of U.S.S.R. During their talk Tsentov gave a detailed brief to the Soviet advisor about the incident that had occurred, and indirectly asked for the Soviets to put pressure on the Yugoslavian side. Tsentov underlined to Maslenikov that in case there was no change to the script, the U.S.S.R would essentially give support to an anti-Bulgarian movie, since there would be prominent Soviet actors participating in it. After the briefing Maslenikov stated that he was already aware of what had happened and asserted Tsentov that he would immediately inform the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Few days later, on June 29, Vasev, secretary of the Bulgarian embassy in Belgrade, visited the Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Yugoslavia. During his visit Vasev made clear that the movie did not refer: “*to the history of Croatia or Montenegro [...] but deals with Macedonia, which from that time is part of the history of the Bulgarian nation and this issue is*

*since then a Bulgarian issue*". In his conclusion Vasev asked to be informed about the measures that the Yugoslavian authorities had taken.

It was clear that the Bulgarians intended to apply international and bilateral pressure as well as personal. The Yugoslavian's response though was not that offensive. Instead, they adopted a method of postponement with its main aim to avoid the transformation of the movie to an issue of diplomatic confrontation. To that end they tried to lessen its importance firstly by a letter that it was sent August 11 and was addressed from the director of the movie towards Karamanev. In his letter Bulajic tried to defend his script by mentioning that:

*"In the prologue of this movie, by the authors view over the history of the Yugoslavian nations, you have read scenes, which speak about the battle of the Slovenian, Croatian, Montenegrin and Macedonian nation, a battle that has been given through an extract about Tsar Samuel. In this, through a text that was read by an executioner just before the blindness of Samuel's soldiers, it was said that the soldiers of Slav Tsar Samuel must be blinded and thus be sent to their Macedonian Tsar Samuel.*

*I tried to convince you that you don't have right to be angry and assert that Samuel is called Slav and Macedonian Tsar without basis, although I didn't think and even now I don't think that this is an insuperable problem between us.*

*Based on historical facts, which I found in Yugoslavia, as those in the "Encyclopedia of the Lexicographical Institute", I estimated that I can handle this particular fact as I did".*

Besides the fact that Bulajic tried to justify his presentation of Tsar Samuel by appealing to Yugoslavian scientific sources he went on revealing the actions that Bulgarian authorities had taken to eradicate the controversial scene. Towards this purpose he wrote:

*"With this letter I would also like to pinpoint in addition some of your actions, which turned out to be deliberate hostility towards the movie "Battle of Neretva", a product of the Yugoslavian community and Yugoslavian movie industry. During the festival in Moscow my collaborates were informed by Soviet comrades that you had asked from them not to cooperate with the Yugoslavian filming company in the movie "Battle of Neretva" after you had irrationally claimed that this is an anti-Bulgarian movie. The comrades from the Soviet embassy in Belgrade have informed us that also the Bulgarian side had taken actions towards this end".*

Based on the above it is clear that Bulgaria tried to use its bilateral relations with U.S.S.R. in order to force Yugoslavia to eradicate the controversial scenes. The escalation of the issue to a diplomatic confrontation appeared inevitable and forced Yugoslavia to give an official response to the Bulgarian authorities. On September 13, Stefan Stefanov, *charge d'affaires* of the Bulgarian Embassy in Belgrade, was summoned by Voukolic, the man in charge of the

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office within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs responsible for the relations with the socialist states. During their meeting Voukolic, in an effort to justify the film's script, mentioned, between others, the following:

*"1. The artistic team of the movie "Battle of Neretva" has based the content of the movie upon the history and the historical perspective of Yugoslavia. The people in charge of the movie and us don't see the need to correct the movie.*

*2. We think that the Bulgarian participation in the making of the movie might give the possibility for a broader cooperation. Co-production can process the historical issues even those that Bulgarian and Yugoslavian history disagrees".*

Judging by the answer that Yugoslavian authorities gave to their Bulgarian counterparts it was obvious that although the former did not want to come in a direct confrontation with the latter, they also did not want to back down from their claimants towards "Macedonian" history. They were moderate in appearance but steady in their goals. Towards this attitude Bulgaria kept on repeating its perspective.

*"Which is the undeniable historical truth?*

*From the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century until the mid of the second decade of the 11<sup>th</sup> century (more exact until 1014) Tsar of the Bulgarian state, where Ochrid was its capital, was Samuel. All historical documents from that era, regardless of its source, reveal squarely, precisely and without doubt, that in the battle of Belasitsa the Bulgarian Tsar Samuel, was crushed because of 'treason' and his soldiers were blinded by 'the Byzantine emperor Vasilios II', also called, in short, Bulgarian killer."*

It is obvious that there was an absolutely opposite way of approaching the issue. And it seems that it was another more link on the ongoing battle over the historical past, precisely that of the medieval times, where Bulgaria tried to defend and repel the claims of the newly born Socialist Republic of Macedonia with the assistance of Yugoslavia. In this tensed climate the movie could have lead to a significant deterioration of the bilateral relations between the two countries. But that was not the case. It seemed that the official Belgrade started to think more calmly over the whole issue and decided not to include in the movie the controversial scenes. This decision must have been the outcome of the pressure that was exercised by both the Bulgarian and the Soviet side. Besides, the main aim of the movie was to hymn the role of the Yugoslavian nations during WWII and their fight towards the power of the fascist and nationalist forces. The confrontation with Bulgaria over the Macedonian Question was in this case secondary and as such a further escalation would only be negative to the Yugoslavian purposes.

Undoubtedly, the case of the film "*Battle of Neretva*" and the subsequent Bulgarian reaction compose a characteristic view of the overall climate in the relations between the two countries after the decisions of the March Plenum (1963). The configuration of a fixed political and ideological stance, towards the Macedonian Question, reinforced Bulgaria, which tried,

within certain constraint framework, to create an external policy that would protect its national interests.

On the other hand it is clear that both sides were eager to use any means in order to defend or enforce their point of view. In this framework the products deriving from the Seventh Art were, beside their artistic or cultural values, just means to an end; the latter being a goal of the policy towards either the interior or the exterior of each country. As such, concerning the movie "*Battle of Neretva*", cinematography was subdued to the needs of the general Yugoslavian propaganda and not that of a particular one, as Slav-Macedonian was. Finally, the very ideology of communism proved to be nothing more than thin air, as the nationalist reflexes of both countries could not be overshadowed by ideology.

Almost one year later, the national orientated Bulgarian policy, found more footholds, when the Warsaw Pact invaded Czechoslovakia (August, 1968). Tito, Yugoslavia's leader condemned the invasion and gave moral support to the government of Czechoslovakia. This attitude was the cause for a renewed deterioration of the bilateral relations between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, and ultimately with Bulgaria.

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