abstract

This article investigates the ideas of correct and modern nutrition during the early communist period in Bulgaria and outlines their relationship to previously existing ideas and practices. The research reveals the multiple influences of pre-communist food ideologies, particularly those of the vegetarian movement that flourished in the country in the 1920s and 1930s. It questions the propaganda claim that the communist regime introduced a radically new understanding of and approach to nutrition. It also suggests that there were significant differences between the attitudes towards meatless diets in Eastern European communist countries. The hostility towards vegetarianism was not equally strong and consistent across the bloc, and despite the evident influence of Soviet teachings focused on meat-based, protein-rich diets, nutritionists introduced meatless diets “through the back door”.

KEY WORDS: History of food, Bulgarian food, communist nutrition.

communist regimes in 20th century Europe widely built their legitimacy on claims of radical reforms that stretched from state management to the everyday lives of their citizens. Communist officials regularly evoked contrasts with the pre-communist past or the Western world to emphasize the contribution of the new states to the modernization of societies and their social innovations. However, few studies have explored the limits of these claims: how radical the revolution actually was or how its various elements related to processes which had been evident in the respective societies prior to communism. The question is particularly applicable to Central and South-Eastern Europe, where the modernization of public nutrition — and shows their relationship to previous discourses changed upon confronting reality comprise the main bulk of the pre-war legacy of nutritional ideologies and discourses was approach by leading nutritionists in the new communist state. It also suggests that there were significant differences between the attitudes towards meatless diets in Eastern European communist countries. The hostility towards vegetarianism was not equally strong and consistent across the bloc, and despite the evident influence of Soviet teachings focused on meat-based, protein-rich diets, nutritionists introduced meatless diets “through the back door”.

Original vintage sport propaganda poster promoting good physical health and well-being at work. "Industrial gymnastics invigorates, restores and strengthens!" Bulgaria, 1958.

One of the goals of Bulgarian communist nutrition ideology was to feed a nation of healthy, efficient workers for the state-run industry, which was forcefully developed under Soviet pressure.

Reformers or Not Quite?

FROM VEGETARIANISM TO COMMUNIST NUTRITION IN BULGARIA: CONTRASTS AND CONTINUITIES (1925–1960)

by Albena Shkodrova

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While these policies were applied with varying degrees of success, the official discourses often presented them as a specifically communist achievement and as a clear illustration of the supremacy of Communism over Capitalism. Hence, they present a good opportunity to investigate how communist nutritional ideology related to or stemmed from earlier ideas or practices. Yet, these ideas and practices have hardly been explored in this sense. Historical research on nutrition in Eastern European communist countries in the 20th century is generally scarce. As studies have lately multiplied, they increasingly suggest that important similarities notwithstanding — national cases significantly vary.

Much of the existing research on communist nutrition is about how the application of ideas was constrained by economic limitations or complex political and professional struggles in communist administrative hierarchies. Studies on how ideologies changed upon confronting reality comprise the main bulk of works on the topic, including research on the concept and failure of the communist cannon networks in Bulgaria or, to some extent, the study of coastal restaurants as revealing a communist culinary utopia.

Nutrition in the pre-communist era has been even less studied, making it difficult to identify any potential legacy. Notable exceptions are the works of Ronald LeBlanc on the vegetarian movement in pre-Soviet and early Soviet Russia and Julia Malinka’s investigation of the vegetarian movement in Ukraine and the European parts of the former Soviet Empire. Both authors noted the hostile attitude among Soviet vegetarian intellectuals, who rejected meatless diets as foils and ostentatious and attempted to obliterate the vegetarian movement.

In Bulgaria, where the communist regime only took power after the end of the Second World War, a vegetarian movement had flourished in the 1920s as part of a pan-European trend, incorporating the teachings of Western European vegetarian activists such as Marcel Labbé, L. Pacsuault, Egoreny Loziniski, Mikkel Hindhede, Aleksandr Iasinovkskii, and the popular by then moralistic-religious school of thought of Lev Tolstoy and Tolstoizmut. After a period of significant success, the Bulgarian vegetarian movement took heavy blows from the post-communist political elites in the late 1990s and never fully recovered. Yet, vegetarianism remained popular in medical circles until at least the late 1940s.

When the communist regime came to power, the nutritional...
Science strongly emphasized the consumption of animal proteins. It seemed that meat was held in high esteem in the countries of the former communist bloc – this was certainly the case in Czechoslovakia. Yet recent research on the GDR shows that early 20th century teachings that promoted meatless diets lasted longer in some countries than others. Unlike the Soviet Union or Ukraine, Bulgaria was certainly under the heavy influence of Soviet nutritional science. So, did the communist cult of animal proteins rule out vegetarian or vegetable-based diets? How radical were the modifications of the nutritional discourses? The present study examines the similarities between Bulgarian communist nutrition – the dominant principles and ideas popularized by the most influential voices in the early communist period, and the dominant beliefs and practices of nutritionists in the pre-communist period. In particular it explores the potential legacy of the most influential nutrition movement from the pre-communist period – vegetarianism.

The study focuses on the level of discourses: the core ideas of nutrition published during the communist period, when the state held a monopoly over the publishing of cookery advice in Bulgaria since 1948. The title reads Meatless dishes, avoiding to use the term ‘vegetarian’ (Sofia, 1938).

The earliest cookery book for vegetarian cuisine, published during the communist period, when the state held a monopoly over the publishing of cookery advice in Bulgaria since 1948. The title reads Meatless dishes, avoiding to use the term ‘vegetarian’ (Sofia, 1938)

The Institute for Nutrition at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences in 1936. He began publishing nutritional advice in 1957 and was very active throughout the 1960s and the 1970s. His early works, which must have sought to strike balance between science and the politics of the communist state, have also been taken into account in this research. Finally, Nikolay Dzhanlev was also a doctor of nutritional science. He offered advice to the general public, mainly from the late 1960s onwards. Little is known about his career, which was not mentioned in his numerous published books, but he was presented as a “prominent, experienced specialist in the field of nutrition”. In 1956 he wrote an introduction on nutrition in one of the most popular cookbooks of the following decades, The Housewife’s Book (Izgova za domakinya) which was also included in this research.

Due to the lack of previous studies, pre-communist advice on nutrition has also been researched here in order to provide a basis for comparison. Most of the source material from this period comprises booklets published by the vegetarian movement. Important information was found in the prefaces to pre-war cookbooks, both vegetarian and mainstream. Cookbooks are a powerful historical source and conceal a wealth of information on everything from politics and economy to everyday life. Food historians have frequently emphasized the tendency of cookbooks to represent food ideologies rather than actual food practices. This could be seen as an advantage, considering the purposes of this research. The main limitation of the literature on nutrition in the 1930s as a source, then, is the very expression to very few individual voices.

This article is divided into four parts: The first part examines the ambitions of the communist regime to introduce public nutrition into everyday habits and looks at the background of these ambitions and the context in which they were promoted. The second one discusses the consumption of raw vegetables in Bulgaria and how they were incorporated in communist dietary advice. The third focuses on the idea of changing the nation’s food habits through a network of canteens. Finally, a more extensive focus is dedicated to the importance attributed to animal proteins by communist nutritionists and their attitudes towards vegetarianism.

A focus on correct, scientifically-based nutrition

A leading theme of early communist doctrine was to portray communist nutrition as being based on scientific grounds and that it was therefore more advanced than that of the capitalist world. Such dichotomous views were regularly expressed by nutritionists and authors of the state-published cookbooks in the 1930s and 1940s. Only socialist pol was considered a scientific society, because of their revolutionary planning system, could achieve proper nutrition among the population, asserted leading Professor of Food Sciences Ivan Naydenov. He wrote that capitalist systems, in contrast, create conditions for poor nutrition and that rational nutrition is “out of the question” under capitalism. As Franc concludes from his study on Checoslovakia, many nutritionists across the Eastern bloc saw the vision of a society managed by scientists as quintessentially socialist.

The idea to develop public nutrition on scientific and medical basis had deep roots in Bulgaria, where nutritional advice had predated the very dawn of written cookery advice (recipes) by one generation. Igiomova and Arbiygeris Sarantis was translated and published in 1845 and recommended modesty and diversity in nutrition some quarter of a century prior to the publication of the first printed Bulgarian cookbook by Slaveykov in 1872.

The chemical definition of the first vitamin marked the start of modern nutritional science in the Western World in 1912. With the Great Depression causing famine across the globe, there was a rush to find applications for scientific nutritional advice. Bulgaria did not miss a beat in joining the trend. The connection between medical and cookery advice strengthened in the 1930s when cookbooks introduced elaborate explanations about the preservation of nutrients during cooking and conservation and published tables with nutritional values and information on vitamins.

One of the earlier examples, A Handbook on Domestic Food Preservation (Rukovodstvo za domashno konservirane na ovostva (zrnicnata) by Assen Ivanov (1927) described the differences between the nutritional value of meat, fruit and vegetables by introducing the reader to a range of terms such as albumins, glycoproteins, minerals, glucose, sucrose, cellulose, organic acids and so on. Although the emphasis was on the chemical composition of the ingredients with calculating the nutritive value of the food, the cookbook. The authors discussed nutritional elements, the importance of vitamins (A, B, C, D, E) to the human body and offered dietary advice on the role of calorie usage depending on the reader’s lifestyle and occupation.

By the mid-1930s, medical advice was prominent in the mainstream cookery literature. With no centralized health care or state-organized social care available, women were expected to treat more basic health issues in the family on their own and were regularly advised about healthy and preventive diets. For example, the influential women’s newspaper Vomik za zdrata published more than a dozen books in the 1930s by Dr Nikolay Neykov, offering guidance on a wide range of issues: from rheumatism and hemorrhoids to sexual health. In his Dietary Gaiety (Zdravata Auhnya), physician Neykov dedicated ten pages to introducing housewives to nutrition and the necessity of counting calories and observing the intake of vitamins, fats and proteins. In his foreword to the 1937 Handbook on Domestic Food Preservation (Rukovod
and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, but most of all physicians, including prominent Ukrainian physician of Jewish origin Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Iasinovskii, French Professor of Physiology Dr Marcel Labbé of Paris, his colleagues Dr L. Pascault from Cannes and Dr P. Carton from Brévannes, as well as the Danish Minister of Health and nutritionist Dr Mikkel Hindshede. People educated in the medical sciences were also prominent among the Bulgarian writers (for example, dentist Michail Stoitsev) and members of the movement.

The impetus of the vegetarian movement on the involvement of medical doctors in nutrition was part of a global trend to utilize nutrition as medicine on a national, or even supra-national, level. Some European countries considered devising national nutrition strategies in the 1930s, and the pressure grew to seek supranational control over global nutrition problems. The League of Nations Health Organization (LNHO), which Bulgarian nutritionists attentively followed, supported the rapid development of research and internationally promoted the notion of minimum and optimum diets.

Thus, when the communist regime arrived in Bulgaria in 1944, promoting its ideas for a state-organized system of public nutrition — i.e. state-run production, trade, canteens and restaurants, at least some medical doctors thought that it opened new avenues for ideas that had been brewing for a long time. In 1945, while the communist regime was tightening its grip, a medical congress was held in Plovdiv under the title The Nutrition of our People. After the congress, two doctors summarized the discussions, along with their previous work, in a book of nutritional advice. The volume, authored by Ivan Mallev and N. Stanchev, addressed ‘mothers, housewives and managers of public canteens’, advising them to base their work on scientific grounds and help the new government to correctly feed the new generation of the working nation. Their ideas drew on the advice of medical nutritionists from previous years. This was certainly the case in a number of specific areas: increasing the consumption of raw and fresh vegetables; incorporating more dairy products into the Bulgarian diet; reducing the amount of salt in cooking; using as little meat as possible; using more honey; increasing rice consumption; replacing white bread with whole grain bread; completely avoiding the consumption of alcohol; and using public canteens to promote healthy nutrition. These were the quintessential scientific grounds for proper nutrition at the time, and were based on many of the tenets of vegetarianism.

The two authors never became renowned authorities on nutrition. They vanished from the world of food advice, in which in 1948 became a state monopoly and for more than a decade was occupied by one person: Ivan Naydenov. The ways in which Naydenov navigated around the ideas expressed by Maleev and Stanchev defined the nature of the Bulgarian communist nutritional science for years to come.

An explanation of what would appear to be two interrupted careers in public nutrition can be found in the observations of Ronald LeBlanc on the Soviet Union, where throughout the Stalinist years and beyond, vegetarian ideas were regarded with suspicion “as utopian fantasies and later with increasing scorn and censure as threats to the hegemony of the Marxist-Leninist doctrine.” As LeBlanc noted, vegetarianism was associated not with advanced ethical standards, but with class oppression and backwardness. However, in a study he laid out in one of his paragraphs above, the relationship between communist nutrition and vegetarianism was more ambiguous and complex than communist ideologues might have been willing to admit.

Many of the suggestions in Maleev and Stanchev’s book were deemed non-controversial and were adopted by Naydenov. The increased consumption of rice, milk, yogurt and honey became the quintessential scientific doctrine in the 1950s. The observed continuity of views on the consumption of fresh and raw vegetables and in the idea of employing canteens in the effort to change the people’s diet of particular interest for us, since before being introduced as part of the Marxist-Leninist ideology, they had both been incorporated into the Bulgarian foodways by the vegetarian movement.

Eat your (raw) vegetables!

A survey of early Bulgarian cooking advice shows that raw vegetables were not part of the Bulgarian dietary recommendations before the 1950s. Authors of cookbooks and textbooks for housekeeping schools described fresh vegetables as being second-rate source of beneficial proteins, but insisted that their consumption — fresh, preferably raw — was one of the pillars of proper nutrition. Bulgarian vegetable-based cuisine and production during Communism spread its influence across the borders of such food to digestion and vitamin intake. Serving raw vegetables with each meal, and preferring them over cooked vegetables, was one of the ten basic principles of a proper diet stipulated by Naydenov in his nutritional advice. Later, Naydenov’s advice was closely replicated by his colleague Tasho Tashev.

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Canteens

Developing a vast network of canteens across the country was one of the major tenets of post-revolutionary Soviets and was copied by the Bulgarian government which, in the first months after it came to power in September 1944, made it a statutory requirement for all employers in the country to open canteens for their employees. Naydenov became an outspoken proponent of the development of a network of public canteens and regularly endorsed canteen food as being more cost-effective and having better preserved nutrients. He constantly wrote about the canteens being a revolutionary innovation of the communist government, never acknowledging that the concept had been previously introduced in Bulgaria. Vegetarians were not pio-
neers in conceptualizing the canteen formula, but they were the first to popularize it in the country. In other parts of the world, canteens were first introduced as part of industrial models to improve workers’ welfare. However, in the late 1920s and early 1930s, Bulgaria was still in the early stages of industrialization and only a few canteens existed (for example, in the state-run mining company Atenino). To such an extent, vegetarianism as a utopian理想 and practically为导向的 movement for the country’s urban population.

In this endeavor, the vegetarians were following the model of similar vegetarian movements in other countries. In the context of the “European” referents of the Russian Empire, Malitska observed that vegetarians in Bulgaria created a “vegetarian master cuisine”, declared the 144

ALL THOSE ATTRACTIONS TO POPULATE A VEGETARIAN DIETARY REGIMES AND PRACTICES THAT WERE INTRODUCED IN BULGARIA BY THE VEGETARIAN MOVEMENT IN THE COMMUNIST NUTRITIONAL GUIDELINES.

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Growing meat a central place in the people’s diet

As Franco had previously argued about Czechoslovakia, communist nutritional science recognized meat as a highly valued source of protein and, hence, a central agent of human development. The protein-centric teaching popularized in the Soviet Union68 — remains unclear. The importance attributed by communist nutritionists to meat on public food culture,84 also remained within the traditional and nutritional advice that was used in the titles of cookbooks until the late 1950s. The concept of the ideal communist menu. The concern of Naydenov and other food experts about providing a healthy and balanced diet for the population was invariably and explicitly linked to the individual’s ability to perform their work duties for the communist state. “Only a well-fed nation is healthy, endures misfortune and can hope for great work achievements.” The attitude towards healthy food as being a high-quality gasoline for the engine of the human body’s abilities, ensures good workability, increases work efficiency and extends the lifespan”, taught Tashov.65

In the COSMOGNOM of communist nutrition, created to feed the bodily machine of the worker in communist industries, meat was seen as the purest, most efficient kind of fuel. Despite the potentially ecocentric personal views of people like Naydenov, communist nutrition ideology constrained meat as “fundamental”, “central” to the menu.75 They insisted that both meat and animal fats were crucial to health. Other as well-received cookbooks and culinary literature in early 1950s until the 1980s that meat was a “powerful food”76 to consume meat. But most of all, meat made an extraordinary important part of the food on offer.60 All these intentions and efforts echoed the practices of the vegetarian movement. The rationale behind their inspections to guarantee the diversity, quality and adequacy of the food on offer.60 All these intentions and efforts echoed the practices of the vegetarian movement. The rationale behind their nutritional experience made their work duties for the communist state. “Only a well-fed nation is healthy, endures misfortune and can hope for great work achievements.” The attitude towards healthy food as being a high-quality gasoline for the engine of the human body’s abilities, ensures good workability, increases work efficiency and extends the lifespan”, taught Tashov.65

In any case, a broad and unrecognized legacy of ideas and practices that were introduced in Bulgaria by the vegetarian movement in the communist nutritional guidelines. Beyond that, it was also a legacy of the industrial-era household utopia that had been developing across the old continent, Great Britain and the United States, since the 18th century, creating a broad base of public support for vegetarianism and dietary counseling, while being an element found in many forms of utopian urban projects in the 19th and early 20th centuries: from the United States to Brazil and from Australia to the Israeli kibbutz.66

In Bulgaria, the communist nutritional science made multiple appropriations from the legacy of the vegetarian movement, but its approach to the consumption of meat, alcohol and white bread made prominent exception in this regard. The most striking among them is certainly the key role, which was given to meat.
The ideological expectations at the time clearly played a role and he himself supported the arguments and Russian nutritional suggestions such as Ivan Petrovich Pavlov or Boris Ivanovich Soltsov, alongside Gustav von Bunge and Carl von Voit. But the importance which he ascribed to the abundant consumption of meat and animal proteins should be viewed in light of his concern about the diet of disadvantaged groups. “Bringing the cauldron to the field – with food cooked by a skillful cook, will rationalize the diet of our peasant population”, who had previously survived mainly on bread and onions, wrote Naydenov. Of course, these beliefs, possibly humanitarian by origin, subsequently happened to serve well the less-than-humanitarian communist understanding of people primarily as a working class.

In any case, as mentioned above, meatless diets were never completely ruled out. Naydenov, Tashiev and Duhelev all described situations in which such diets are beneficial: during old age or in a warmer climate and for lifestyles involving less physical effort, in which case Duhelev advised a meatless diet twice a week (but only in the 1962 edition of the Housewife’s Book). Of course, these beliefs, possibly humanitarian by origin, subsequently happened to serve well the less-than-humanitarian communist understanding of people primarily as a working class.

Towards the end of the 1950s, the understanding of a healthy diet as a combination of necessary quantities of amino acids, carbohydrates, fats, vitamins, minerals and water rapidly developed into a complex process involving tables and calculations. The process rendered irrelevant the debates about the pro vs. anti-vegetarian discussion: any ways to provide the body with the necessary components of nutritional elements were acceptable. This was already evident in the later works of Naydenov, in which neither plant nor animal food was discussed in normative terms, although the requirements for various nutritional elements were stated. The trend became even more prominent in the works authored by Tashiev and Duhelev in the 1960s and 1970s. Meat remained central to the suggested best diets, but the key was balance.

In this context, it is interesting to consider the findings of Trestev on the GDR, where vegetarian advice openly proliferated in the 1920s and 1930s. This was already evident in the later works of Trestev, in which neither plant nor animal food was discussed in normative terms, although the requirements for various nutritional elements were stated. The trend became even more prominent in the works authored by Trestev and Duhelev in the 1960s and 1970s. Meat remained central to the suggested best diets, but the key was balance. Moreover, and contrary to what transpires from previous research on the Soviet Union and the assertions that communist nutritional scientific denounced vegetarianism, various sources in Bulgaria suggest that vegetarianism was allowed back in “through short-term dietary adjustments” and not fully rejected. Influential experts were strongly influenced by pre-communist nutritional advice and always remained torn between these earlier teachings and meat-centered Soviet teachings.

This research has found some evidence of direct influence and borrowings, such as almost literal repetition of the wording of older texts on vegetarianism in the advice of leading communist nutritionist Ivan Naydenov. But even in cases where such direct borrowings are less evident, and ideas or practices might have arrived through different paths into the early communist nutrition ideology, they were generally already in place in the society. Moreover, they were introduced and practiced by movements like the vegetarian one, towards which the new system chose to be nominally hostile.

What the communist regime introduced was an attempt to scale up the reforms and the ability to invest much greater resources in them. Perhaps its most prominent input in the healthy diet was to attribute a central role to meat. Meat, as argued by Franc, was ‘‘essential for the communist nutrition regime’’ and not fully rejected. Influential experts were strongly influenced by pre-communist nutritional advice and always remained torn between these earlier teachings and meat-centered Soviet teachings.

The legacy of vegetarianism and the pre-war healthy diet project and ideas were widely present in the official nutritional advice of communist Bulgaria in the 1950s and 1960s. The official nutritional advice of communist Bulgaria in the 1950s and 1960s, even though it was never acknowledged. Moreover, and contrary to what transpires from previous research on the Soviet Union and the assertions that communist nutritional scientific denounced vegetarianism, various sources in Bulgaria suggest that vegetarianism was allowed back in “through short-term dietary adjustments” and not fully rejected. Influential experts were strongly influenced by pre-communist nutritional advice and always remained torn between these earlier teachings and meat-centered Soviet teachings.

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15 According to various testimonies, in 19th-century Bulgaria the staple diet, according to various testimonies...

16 Canteens

17 Noted that the milk consumption ratio in a population, which is important for the presence of osteoporosis in the later generation was also very high in Bulgaria, and this is associated with the type of diet...