



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.

RADICAL REFORMERS OR NOT QUITE?

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

by **Albena Shkodrova**

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 diet "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 that took place towards the end of the Second World War was more advanced than in Russia prior to the October Revolution (1917). This article examines one aspect of the attempted lifestyle revolution in communist Bulgaria – the ideas behind modernizing public nutrition – and shows their relationship to previous understandings and practices in the country. It explores how the pre-war legacy of nutritional ideologies and discourses was approached by leading nutritionists in the new communist state and how various elements were rejected or appropriated.

Early communist ideology paid significant attention to issues of nutrition. Historically, this interest was rooted in the malnutrition and hunger among Europe's poorer classes, whose circumstances Communism had vowed to improve. The communist regime was established in Bulgaria amidst the pan-European economic crisis and the rationing of food in the aftermath of the Second World War, which exacerbated the problem.

Thus, Bulgarian communist nutrition ideology² was promptly formed around several intertwined goals. One of them was to eliminate hunger and social injustice in access to food. Another was to feed a nation of healthy, efficient workers for the state-run industry, which was forcefully developed under Soviet pressure. Finally, scientifically-based nutrition became a matter of credibil-

ity: it was integrated into the ideal of an advanced communist lifestyle, informed by science and dominated by industrial production, which the communist world was striving to prove capable of achieving.³

These ideological goals defined the main policies of communist nutrition, such as removing the production and provision of food from the hands of profit-oriented capitalist businesses⁴ and entrusting them to the state, developing an extensive network of state-subsidized canteens, providing industrial foods as a substitute for home cooking⁵ and so on.

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.⁶ 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 limitations⁷ or complex political and professional struggles in communist administrative hierarchies.⁸ 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 canteen networks⁹ in Bulgaria or, to some extent, the study of coastal restaurants as revealing a communist culinary utopia.¹⁰

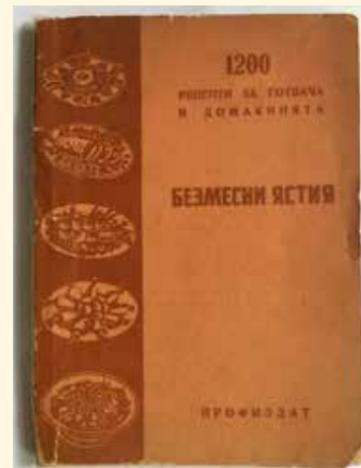
Nutrition in the pre-communist era has been even less studied, making it difficult to identify any potential legacy. Notable exceptions are the works of Ronald LeBlanc¹¹ on the vegetarian movement in pre-Soviet and early Soviet Russia and Julia Malitska's investigation of the vegetarian movement in Ukraine and the European parts of the former Soviet Empire.¹² Both authors noted the hostile attitude among Soviet nutritionist-ideologists, who rejected meatless diets as foolish and outdated 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. Pascault, Evgeniy Lozinskii, Mikkel Hindhede, Aleksandr Iasinovskii, 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 pre-communist political elites in the late 1920s and never fully recovered.¹³ Yet, vegetarianism remained popular in medical circles until at least the late 1940s.

When the communist regime came to power, the nutritional



Left: The cover of *The problem of nutrition* by Michail Stoitsev (Sevlievo, 1938). The extended title reads “Accessible lecture for those who wish to lead a more rational, healthy and long life in spiritual sophistication”. On the right: a portrait of dentist Michail Stoitsev.



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, 1958).

science strongly emphasized the consumption of animal proteins. It seems that meat was held in high esteem in the countries of the former communist bloc – this was certainly the case in Czechoslovakia.¹⁴ 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, in the GDR the idea of a diet that was predominantly based on raw vegetables proliferated throughout the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁵ Bulgaria was certainly under the heavy influence of Soviet nutritional science. So, did the communist cult of animal proteins ruled out vegetarianism or vegetable-based diets? How radical were the reforms promoted by communist nutritionists?

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 preceding period – vegetarianism.

The study focuses on the level of discourses: the core ideas of communist nutritionists on rational and modern nutrition and the strategies that were used to promote them. The article does not discuss their actual application, as do some of the above-mentioned works. Instead, it looks at the less considered aspects of potential legacies and adds depth to the understanding of the nature of communist reforms and the extent of their radicalism, which in popular discourses are all too often taken for granted and remain understudied.

Theoretically, the article is embedded in the historiography

on Eastern Europe, which views the communist regimes as non-monolithic systems, influenced and influencing multiple players. This literature treats the ideologies as important but inconsistent and inconsistently applied frameworks and has focused on leading individual voices, players or power groups and their impact on the modifications of the nutritional discourses.¹⁶

THE MAIN FOCUS of the study are the writings of the authorities on nutrition published in the early communist period – between 1944 and 1960.¹⁷ The most prominent and abundant work in this period is that of Ivan Naydenov, Professor of Hygiene, who between 1940 and 1970 authored dozens of leaflets, short monographs and chapters on nutrition in cookbooks, targeted at professional and domestic cooking. Naydenov was born in 1900 in Sofia and in 1947 became one of the founders and the first permanent director of the Institute for Hygiene at the Medical University of Plovdiv. In subsequent years he published a significant body of research and advice on the hygiene of nutrition, which was to become the foundation of the communist nutritional science. In 1957 he moved to Sofia, where he established the Faculty for Hygiene at the Institute for Specialization and Development of Physicians.

Until the late 1950s, Naydenov was the single voice of nutritional advice. Then, two more scientists joined forces: Tasho Tashev and Nikolay Dzhelepev. Tashev, who was born in 1909 and graduated from a French college in Plovdiv and the Medical Faculty in Sofia before the Second World War, became a leading specialist in gastroenterology. He is credited as being the founder of the Bulgarian Scientific Society for Gastroenterology in 1954 and the

Institute for Nutrition at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences in 1959. 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 Dzhelepev 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 works, but he was presented as a “prominent, experienced specialist in the field of nutrition”.¹⁸ In 1956 he wrote an introduction on nutrition in one of the most popular cookbooks of the following decades, *The Housewife's Book (Kniga za domakinyata)*¹⁹ 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.²⁰

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.²¹ This could be seen as an advantage, considering the purposes of this research. The main limitation of the literature on nutrition in the 1950s as a source is, that it gave 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 on scientific basis 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 section focuses on the idea of changing the nation's food habits through a network of canteens. Finally, a more extensive part 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 1950s and 1960s.²² Only socialist societies, because of their revolutionary planning system, could achieve proper nutrition among the population, asserted leading Professor of Food Sciences Ivan Naydenov.²³ He wrote that capitalist systems, in contrast, create conditions for poor nutrition and that rational

nutrition is “out of the question” under capitalism.²⁴ As Franc concludes from his study on Czechoslovakia, many nutritionists across the Eastern bloc saw the vision of a society managed by scientists as quintessentially socialist.²⁵

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: *Igionomia, i.e. rules to preserve our health (Igionomia sirech pravila za da si vardim zdraveto)*, by Greek author Arhigenis Sarantis²⁶ was translated and published in 1846 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 1870.²⁷

The chemical definition of the first vitamin marked the start of modern nutritional science in the Western World in 1926. With the Great Depression causing famine across the globe, there was a rush to find applications for scientific nutritional advice.²⁸ Bulgaria did not miss a beat in joining the trend. The connection between medical and cookery advice was strengthened in the 1920s 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 ovoshtia i zelenchutsi)* by Assen Ivanov (1925) described the differences between the nutritional value of meat, fruit and vegetables by introducing the reader to a range of terms such as albumins, glyco-gens, minerals, glucose, sucrose, cellulose, organic acids and so on. After the discovery of vitamins in 1926, Kasurova and Dimchevska's exquisite *Cookbook (Gotvarska kniga)* from 1933,²⁹ which targeted upper-middle class housewives, opened with a six-page introduction on the basics of nutritional science. “Medical science measures the nutritional value of ingredients with calories,” stated the cookbook. The authors discussed nutritional elements, the importance of vitamins (A, B, C, D, E) to the human body and offered diagrams 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 *Vestnik za zhenata* 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 Cuisine (Dietichna kuhnya)*, 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-*

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The covers of *Manual for conservation of fruits and vegetables*, authored by specialist in conservation of food K. Balabanov (Sofia, 1932).

stvo za domashno konservirane na ovoshtia i zelenchutsi) by Vlado Ivanov, university professor Assen Zlatarov recommended that a table showing the nutritional values of the most widely used ingredients should be found on the wall of every kitchen.³⁰

The level of involvement of the medical community in formulating nutritional advice in Bulgaria becomes particularly clear from the history of the vegetarian movement in the country. As mentioned above, it developed as part of a pan-European trend of basing nutrition and lifestyle advice on the moralist philosophy of Tolstoyism and Western European vegetarian advice at the beginning of the 20th century. The Bulgarian Vegetarian Union, which aimed to create broader social support for Tolstoyism,³¹ was established in 1914. The union opened numerous branches across the country and became very active in organizing talks and publishing health, nutritional and culinary advice.

THE BULGARIAN VEGETARIAN teaching was holistic and partially drew on religion: some of its ideologists saw themselves as “direct spiritual descendants” of the Bulgarian non-orthodox Christian denomination of Bogomils, whose worldview was “represented in its purest form” by Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy.³² But despite this connection to religion and radical ethical philosophy, vegetarianism in Bulgaria – just like the Tolstoyan activist vegetarians in 20th century Russia³³ – focused on the moral and humanitarian, rather than the religious aspects of vegetarianism. Most of all it sought legitimacy in modern medical science. At its peak between the 1920s and the 1940s, the Bulgarian Vegetarian Union published dozens of foreign and Bulgarian articles and pamphlets on vegetarianism. The book series *Vegetarian Library* featured works by Eastern and Western authors. Among them were key philosophers like Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, but most of all physicians, includ-

ing 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 Hindhede. People educated in the medical sciences were also prominent among the Bulgarian writers (for example, dentist Michail Stoitsev³⁴) and members of the movement.³⁵

The impetus of the vegetarian movement on the involvement of medical doctors in nutrition was part of a global trend to utilize medicine for public nutrition on a national, or even supranational, level. Some European countries considered devising national nutrition strategies in the 1930s,³⁶ and the pressure grew to seek supranational control over global nutrition problems.³⁷ The League of Nations Health Organization (LNHO), which Bulgarian nutritionists attentively followed,³⁸ supported the rapid development of new research and internationally promoted the notion of minimum and optimum diets.³⁹

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 1947, 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 Maleev 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.⁴⁰ 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, 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 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”.⁴¹ As LeBlanc noted, vegetarianism was associated not with advanced ethical standards, but with class oppression and backwardness. However, as the following paragraphs show, the relationship between communist nutrition and vegetarianism was more ambiguous and complex than communist ideologists 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 goals of the dominant nutritionist 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 is of particular interest for this research, 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 1920s.⁴² Authors of cookbooks and textbooks for housekeeping schools described fresh vegetables as being difficult to digest, unfriendly to the stomach and lacking in nutrients. Even cucumbers, tomatoes or lettuce were supposed to be boiled or pickled.⁴³ There was one reference to a fresh vegetable salad in *Domestic Cookbook (Domashna gotvarska kniga)* (1905) and one in *1200 Recipes (1200 Retsepti)* (1901), which was

a translation from French, although this category of food was not included in all the other many cookbooks published before 1917.⁴⁴ In that year, the first cookbook to feature salads – an entire section on them – was published: Bulgarian vegetarian cuisine.⁴⁵ From that point on, more and more recipes for fresh vegetable preparations were included, first in vegetarian literature and then for general cooking. The discovery of vitamins in 1926 clearly also gave a boost to the attention given to healthy diets. “More fruits, more vegetables – let this become the aim of every mother who cares for the health of her family”, wrote Arthur Gerlach in the foreword of Hristova’s 1926 book *Vegetables. 90 Recipes (Zelenchutsi. 90 retsepti)*, part of the mainstream culinary advice of the Economy School in Sofia.⁴⁶

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Communist nutrition appropriated this legacy seamlessly and – needless to say – without making any references to the innovations introduced by vegetarianism and pre-war non-communist nutritional science in Bulgaria. The relationship between vegetarianism and bourgeois society prior to the war, as well as certain religious links that formed part of Tolstoy’s and the Bogomils’ teaching were among the taboos that descended on society with the establishment of the communist regime. Arguments for the inclusion of fresh raw vegetables in the diet

were evident in the developing understanding of the importance 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.⁴⁷ Later, Naydenov’s advice was closely replicated by his colleague Tasho Tashev.⁴⁸

Naydenov and Tashev invariably described vegetables as a 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 and, according to the research by Martin Franc, it influenced the nutritionist and culinary advice being offered in Czechoslovakia, where it was regarded as a model of healthy foodways.⁴⁹

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.⁵⁰ 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.⁵¹ He constantly wrote about the canteens being a revolutionary innovation of the communist government,⁵² 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 in Pernik). In such an environment, vegetarian canteens were an innovation 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 parts of the Russian empire, Malitska observed that vegetarian canteens came into being largely as a result of the collective desire of vegetarian activists to "promote a vegetarian dietary regimen and worldview."⁵³ Their strategy was to allow their customers to try a variety of flavors and combinations of ingredients, originating in both local and European cuisine. A very similar pattern can be identified in Bulgaria, where the canteens were a key part of the visibility of vegetarian movement. According to historian Margarita Terzieva, several canteens operated in Sofia in the 1920s and more were subsequently opened in many of the larger towns: Plovdiv, Stara Zagora, Yambol, Burgas, Varna, Ruse, Pleven and Vratsa, for example.⁵⁴ These restaurants served as cultural centers for the movement, as they distributed literature, provided venues for public discussions and offered practical demonstrations of the vegetarian lifestyle: their plant-based food was offered in an environment free of tobacco smoke and alcohol consumption⁵⁵ – both exceptional for a Balkan restaurant in the 20th century.

IN ORDER TO DISSEMINATE the nutritional advice that was used in the canteens, members of the vegetarian movement published cookbooks. In his 1937 *The Newest People's Vegetarian Cookbook* (*Nay-nova narodna vegetarianska gotvarska kniga*), Krasimir Kadunkov, who described himself as a "vegetarian master chef", wrote that popular dishes from the vegetarian canteens had not reached household kitchens. "Many of our supporters and customers have asked for the recipes we use in our vegetarian canteens to be published. But for various reasons, everyone is keeping their art a secret", asserted Kadunkov. He stated that with his book he wanted to spread "his tasty dishes" across all households, thereby allowing a "bloodless diet to rule."⁵⁶

Numerous other leaders of the movement published cookbooks for home cooking. They did not possess Kadunkov's professional credentials but stated their ambition of offering scientifically-based advice. The earliest such cookbook, authored by chairman of the Bulgarian vegetarian movement Ilia Stefanov and his wife Rayna Manushova Stefanova, includes references to a

significant (and, exceptional for a cookbook) medical bibliography of some 14 publications, nine of which were authored by people with medical titles.⁵⁷

All these strategies to popularize nutrition ideology were reproduced by the Bulgarian communist regime, which quickly developed ambitious plans to feed the nation in a vast network of canteens and monopolized the publishing of nutritional and cooking advice. The food in the communist canteens was anything but vegetarian, but their concept echoed the ambition of vegetarian canteens to push through dietary reforms. The introduction of "dietary, prophylactic and rational nutrition" was one of the official goals of the canteen system.⁵⁸

"BROAD AND UNRECOGNIZED LEGACY OF IDEAS AND PRACTICES THAT WERE INTRODUCED IN BULGARIA BY THE VEGETARIAN MOVEMENT CAN BE FOUND IN THE COMMUNIST NUTRITIONAL GUIDELINES."

BOOSTED BY REGULATIONS and continuous efforts, the canteens in the country rapidly increased in number from 2340 in 1947 to 6500 by 1986.⁵⁹ From kindergartens and schools to factories and institutes, the nation was supposed to be fed healthily and with food prepared on scientific grounds in professional kitchens. The government increased its subsidies in the mid-1950s to make the food affordable. The canteens were also subjected to regular

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 public nutrition system in the 1930s was to serve "a rational and nutritionally rich diet in line with the latest science".⁶¹ Yet, all the references that the communist strategists made cited the Soviet post-revolutionary experience (see, for example, all the works of Hadzhinikolov, one of the main authors on the subject).⁶² The extent to which this was due to Soviet-style censorship and self-censorship in the country – or the controversial reputation of the vegetarian movement⁶³ – remains unclear.

In any case, a broad and unrecognized legacy of ideas and practices that were introduced in Bulgaria by the vegetarian movement can be found 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 long intellectual history of ideas about communal living. The history of the modern canteen began with the industrial settlements devised by paternalistic entrepreneurs for their workers. It was an element found in many forms of utopian urban projects in the 19th and early 20th centuries: from the United States to Brazil⁶⁴ and from Australia⁶⁵ to the Israeli kibbutz.⁶⁶

The Bulgarian 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.⁶⁷ The most striking among them is certainly the key role, which was given to meat.

Giving meat a central place in the people's diet

As Franc has previously argued about Czechoslovakia, communist nutritional science regarded meat as a highly valued source of protein and, hence, a central agent of human development.⁶⁸ The protein-centric teaching popularized in the Soviet Union largely dismissed vegetarianism as utopian lunacy on precisely these grounds. According to the recollections of prominent Soviet nutritionist Mikhail Gurvich, universities taught that vegetarianism had nothing to do with medicine and was foolish.⁶⁹

On the surface, Bulgarian communist nutrition ideology also expressed anti-vegetarian views. Nutritionists who developed careers during the communist era claimed to share this antagonism. In his 1950 booklet *Food and Nutrition (Hrana i hranene)*, Naydenov quoted Engels' criticism of the movement: "With all due respect to vegetarians, a human would not be a human without consuming meat".⁷⁰ These views persisted until at least the end of the 1970s, when Naydenov's successor Tashev was still dismissing the idea that an exclusively vegetarian diet could satisfy the human body's need for nutrients.⁷¹

But most of all, meat made an extraordinary important part 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".⁷² The attitude towards healthy food as being a high-quality gasoline for the engine of the communist people was echoed in all the cookbooks from the period.⁷³ "A correct diet allows the full development of the body's abilities, ensures good workability, increases work efficiency and extends the lifespan", taught Tashev.⁷⁴

IN THE COSMOGONY 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 eclectic personal views of people like Naydenov, communist cookbooks in Bulgaria routinely defined meat-based dishes as "fundamental", "central" to the menu.⁷⁵ They insisted that both meat and animal fats were crucial to health.⁷⁶ Other assertions repeated in cookbooks and culinary literature from the early 1950s until the 1980s were that meat is a "powerful food" ⁷⁷ that provides the body with essential amino acids, as well as easily absorbed proteins and vitamins.⁷⁸

The importance attributed by communist nutritionists to meat consumption was not solely based on an appreciation of food diversity. According to them, health depended on and was demonstrated by a good appetite, and an appetite was seen as the best stimulator of the salivary glands.⁷⁹ Meat, then, was seen as stimulating the appetite.⁸⁰ It was like Mark Twain's Painkiller – a cure for any disease. "Meat, this central foodstuff, is widely used in dietary cuisine", declared the *Book for Everyday and Every Home (Kniga za vseki den i vseki dom)* (1967).⁸¹

It could be argued that the important role of meat in communist nutrition was facilitated by the very logic of the social revolu-

tion. The communist regime sought legitimacy in improving the lifestyle of previously disadvantaged social classes, which greatly appreciated meat.⁸² The Soviet influence might have planted the seeds of the communist meat cult in Bulgaria, but here it fell on the fertile ground of an agrarian and not particularly wealthy society, a great part of whose rural population had little access to meat.

ANOTHER ASPECT related to the social revolution was that the new state allowed for unprecedented social advancement among previously disadvantaged groups.⁸³ The new leadership largely originated from such groups; and so their own preferences, which by means of the centrally run economy had a significant influence on public food culture,⁸⁴ also remained within the traditional food hierarchy, in which meat was seen as something festive and a privilege. Naydenov's writings certainly suggest that, to him, meat was at least initially a symbol of wealth.⁸⁵ It could also be the case that in Bulgaria, as Darra Goldstein⁸⁶ observes about the Soviet Union, regular food shortages contributed to preserving the perception of meat as a status symbol throughout the communist period.

In this context, vegetarianism remained an enduring taboo. Even the terms "vegetarian" or "vegetarianism" were not used in the titles of cookbooks until 1980. Yet a closer look at Naydenov's writing reveals that he was strongly influenced by the vegetarian movement and had appropriated at least some of their understandings of how meat affects the human body. He repeatedly stated that meat makes people wild, self-assured, stern, cruel, proud, arrogant and greedy for power, while plant-based foods pacify, calm people's passions, soften their behavior and make them more noble; moreover, they make workers obedient and quiet, but offer them longevity and lean bodies.⁸⁷ This understanding repeated earlier writings by vegetarian activists almost word-for-word.⁸⁸

Also, Naydenov never completely rejected the vegetarian diet. His work prior to the imposition of the communist regime seemed to be a fusion of eclectic ideas. On the one hand, acknowledging the omnivorous nature of humans, he was a proponent of the old belief in balanced, all-inclusive diets in which meat and plant-based foods represented the yin and yang of healthy food. On the other hand, he thought that vegetarianism reduced the risk of rheumatism, high blood pressure, arteriosclerosis and many other diseases. He even stated that it made the mind clearer and the intelligence livelier.⁸⁹ In his view, the problem with a vegetarian diet was its inefficiency: burdening the digestive system but providing little energy.⁹⁰

Importantly, Naydenov was generally concerned about the poorer classes of the country. He opened his 1940 work by stating that, according to a recent survey, the average Bulgarian consumed 920 grams of bread daily. Commenting on the Orthodox practice of fasting, he stated that it may be only beneficial to those who were tired of overindulgence and wild partying, while it would be no good for Bulgarian peasants, who were "vegetarian by default and anyway only occasionally eat meat".⁹¹ This understanding came close to the already mentioned Soviet idea of the vegetarian move-

ment as being oppressive and tailor-made for the wealthier classes.

Thus, if Naydenov evolved to expressly oppose vegetarianism as director of the Institute for Hygiene in the Medical Faculty in Plovdiv in the 1950s, he had at least two reasons for doing so. The ideological expectations at the time clearly played a role and he found himself quoting Engels and Russian nutritionists such as Ivan Petrovich Pavlov or Boris Ivanovich Slovtsov, alongside Gustav von Bunge and Carl von Voit. But the importance which he ascribed to the abundant consumption of meat and animal proteins should also 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.⁹² Of course, these beliefs, possibly humanitarian by origin, subsequently happened to serve well the less-than-humanitarian communist understanding of people primarily as a workforce.

In any case, as mentioned above, meatless diets were never completely ruled out. Naydenov, Tashev and Dzhelepov 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 Dzhelepov advised a meatless diet twice a week (but only in the 1962 edition of the *Housewife's Book (Kniga za domakinyata)*).⁹³

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 pro vs. anti-vegetarianism discussion: any ways to provide the body with the necessary combination of nutritional elements were acceptable. This was already evident in the later works of Naydenov,⁹⁴ in which neither plant nor meat-based diets were discussed in normative terms, although the requirements for various nutritional elements were stated. The trend became even more prominent in the works authored by Tashev and Dzhelepov 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 Treitel on the GDR, where vegetarian advice openly proliferated in the 1950s and 1960s. She associates the success of such advice with the regular shortages of butter, milk and meat. However, such shortages also existed in Bulgaria, where the idea of an entirely meatless diet was firmly rejected in the 1950s. The already quoted suggestion by Goldstein that communist food shortages strengthened the meaning of meat as a power symbol seems to be a counter argument. One possible explanation for the differences

observed between national cases could be the role of the personal factor. The degree of conforming to what were perceived as the ideological tenets of communist nutrition must have remained, at least to some extent, an individual choice, just like the ability to promote alternative views within the dominant discourses. Considering the small number of professionals, who published advice on nutrition, particularly in the 1950s, it seems inevitable that the dominant discourses were defined by the personal qualities and understandings of (only a few) individuals, along the tenets of abstract ideological requirements.

TO CONCLUDE, THIS RESEARCH suggests that communist nutritional advice embraced a much broader legacy from the pre-war period in Bulgaria than its authors cared to admit. Its ambition to improve the diet of the nation, which was promoted as radically reformist, echoed – and scaled up – ideas and practices that were not only already in place but had been introduced by movements, whom the communist ideology rejected.

Neither the idea to reform the national diet according to the latest scientific understandings of it, nor the methods to implement this plan via a system of canteens and cookbooks, were new. A significant group of medical experts and authors of cookery advice were promoting the latest advances in nutritional science in the period between the two world wars using accessible and diverse channels. They continuously updated the wide range of educational information and instructions, which aimed at housewives and professional cooks. They were promoting innovative practices, such as eating raw vegetables, following a diverse diet and understanding food intake in terms of nutrients and calories. Particularly active in the process was the Bulgarian Vegetarian Union, who used a network of canteens and cookbooks and other printed material to promote a diverse, healthy and ethical meatless diet. This research argues that the vegetarian movement was an important agent behind the introduction of raw vegetables/salads in the cooking advice in Bulgaria, which happened in the late 1910s and in the 1920s.

Thus, the legacy of vegetarianism and the pre-war healthy diet project and ideas were widely present in the

official nutritionist 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 Union⁹⁵ and the assertions that communist nutritional science denounced vegetarianism, various sources in Bulgaria suggest that vegetarianism was allowed back in “through the back door”: as a healing diet, and many leading authorities did not fully reject it. 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 literate 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 idea of healthy nutrition was to attribute a central role to meat. Meat, as argued by Franc, was and remained central to the communist nutritional cosmogony. It delivered essential proteins, which were easily appropriated by the body, and presented the best-quality source of energy for the body of the worker in the state economy. Due to the specific combination of relative poverty across the nation in the past and chronic shortages of meat during the communist period, meat also retained its character as a “status” food. Food consumption was often used in the official discourses as evidence of the nation’s economic progress.

However, the ideal diet was increasingly conceptualized as a combination of certain quantities of nutrients. How were they delivered to the body – weather through meat or other foodstuffs – became less important. This rendered the debate for and against vegetarianism irrelevant.

Thus, on the one hand, this article disputes previous assertions that communist regimes radically and consistently ruled out vegetarianism. On the other hand, it shows that at least some of the communist “innovations” were not that innovative, but were rather portrayed as such by the persistent propaganda. It challenges the claims of radical reforms through which early communist nutrition sought legitimacy.

This research contributes to the growing body of studies on the technocratic and scientocratic aspects of communist Europe, showing that there were significant variations across Eastern Europe in the extent to which local scientific discourses appropriated the dominant Soviet discourses. It also suggests that the individual characters and qualities of the leading scientists might have played just as important a role as the ideological framework in shaping these discourses. ❌

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- 14 Franc, “Physicians”.
- 15 Corinna Treitel, *Eating Nature in Modern Germany: Food, Agriculture, and Environment, c.1870 to 2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316946312>.
- 16 See Kristen R. Ghodsee, “Crashing the Party”, *World Policy Journal* no. 35 (2018), 70–74, <https://doi.org/10.1215/07402775-7085877>. In food studies, Martin Franc has researched the formation of communist nutritionist advice, examining how struggle for power between nutrition scientists, politicians and administration influenced national food practices in former Czechoslovakia. Treitel has shown how in the GDR one individual ensured the popularity of a diet, based on raw vegetables during the first decades after the Second World War. Nilgen convincingly argued that the staff of the most influential publisher of cookery books negotiated its publishing policy with its readers, hence not simply preaching, but negotiating its nutritional and cookery advice with its readers. Nilgen, Nancy, “Recipe for Compromise? The Negotiation of East German Foodways”, *Food and Drink in Communist Europe*, eds. Shkodrova, A., Scholliers, P., Segers, Y., *Food and History*, no.1 (2020), 99-114; Franc, “Physicians”; Treitel, *Eating*.
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