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Interrupted biographies: six distinguished female figures between repressions and survival during the communist regime in Bulgaria

Abstract: The paper presents the interruptions to the biographical trajectories of six women persecuted in different periods during the communist regime in Bulgaria in order to outline the common features as well the specificity of their cases: two former leading feminists: Julia Malinova (Julia Jakovlevna Schneider – President of the Bulgarian Women’s Union until 1926, Dimitrana Ivanova, President 1926–1944), two members of the Oppositional (Nikola Petkov’s) Bulgarian Agrarian Party (Rayna Lapardova and Tsvetana Tsacheva), two scientists from the Turkish minority in Bulgaria Mefkure Mollova and Hayriye Memova). The paper presents the documentation on these women and their political and academic activities, and the deficits of information, as well as the radical interruptions to their lifestyles, careers, family life, and social ties, and social integration of these women. The research is based on documents from personal finds, the women’s publications, documents from the secret archives of the State Security, memories, and personal testimonies.

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Słowa kluczowe: bułgarski feminizm; kobiety w nauce; represje polityczne; kobiety z Partii Agrarnej; społeczność turecka w Bułgarii; reżim totalitarny; Julia Malinova; Dimitrana Ivanova; Rayna Lapardova; Tsvetana Tsacheva; Mefkure Mollova; Hayriye Memova

As Claudia Dobre has written, the memory of communism is marked by a lack of gender sensitivity¹. In the dominant male discourse, women were victims of the regime which controlled them through various policies, especially the female body through reproductive policies. Generally speaking, there is no public female account of communism and the repressions. The male-oriented narrative has shaped the collective memory.

In Bulgaria, there are single studies of women who survived political persecutions or took part in the resistance to the communist regime. Some of them focused on larger groups (e.g. former labour camp detainees like Luleva)² where, according to statistics, out of 23,531 people, 2,033 were women); others concentrate on individual cases of persecution and repression³; Muslim women of resistance like Zeinep Zafer⁴. Political and civic activists also collected and published memoirs

¹ C.F. Dobre, *Women Remembering Communism in Romania: Former Political Detainees Perspectives*, [in:] *Women and minorities archives*, 3, eds K. Popova, N. Muratova, Subjects of Archiving, Blagoevgrad 2011, pp. 42–58.

² A. Luleva, *Women Campers. On the collective memory of a generation*, [in:] *Gender and Transition*, eds K. Daskalova, T. Kmetova, Sofia 2011, pp. 142–152.

³ G. Nazarska, *(Self) imposed Silences: "Rewriting" of Biographies of Bulgarian Women Intellectuals after 1944*, *Balkanistic forum* 2015, 2, pp. 176–184; D. Koleva, *Remembering Socialism, Living Postsocialism: Gender, Generation and Ethnicity*, [in:] *Peripheral Memories: Public and Private Forms of Experiencing and Narrating the Past*, eds E. Boesen, F. Lentz, M. Margue, D. Scuto, R. Wagener, [Histoire 36], transcript Verlag, 2012, pp. 219–237; P. Vodenicharov, *Behind the facade of the state feminism. The silenced women in the newspaper "Workers' mission" 1976*, *Balkanistic Forum* 2015, 2, pp. 185–192; A. Pashova, *Tolerance of difference*, Blagoevgrad 2002; M. Angelova, *Bulgarian Women Scientists "Removed" from the Collective Memory in the Communist Times – the Case of Kostadinka Tvardishka (1907–1963)*, *Balkanistic forum* 2022, 1, pp. 173–201.

⁴ Z. Zafer, *Women and resistance to forced assimilation in Bulgaria*, *International Journal of Social Sciences* 2/2 Fall, 2018, pp. 1–11; Idem, *The Fight of Women from Northeast Bulgaria Against Compulsory Assimilation*, [in:] *International 30th Anniversary of the Forced Migration from Bulgaria to Turkey*, İzmir Kâtip Çelebi Üniversitesi Yayınları, İzmir 2020, pp. 51–63.

and research⁵ which rekindled memory in the transition years. Until recently, there was no comprehensive study of women's memory in the context of the repression suffered from the communist regime⁶. Luleva and Muratova have also raised the question of the hierarchies of the memory groups, including the gender hierarchies.

Ana Luleva argues that the women – former camp inmates – represent a silent group, with a suppressed memory, subjected to humiliated silence. This conclusion fits not only former camp inmates but also much larger groups of women who suffered direct repression or so-called dispersed marginalization: displaced, deprived of their homes, deported, laid off and subjected to permanent unemployment, excluded from high schools, vocational schools and universities, systematically denied access to education and professional development or subjected to other forms of humiliation.

The statistics of gender division of the persecutions are often misleading. The communist repression seems to have been aimed primarily at men while in fact the main pressure was exerted on the families, with women facing the great challenge of ensuring the survival of their children and relatives. While the number of repressed women was much higher than that of men, the fact was not recognized and a huge group of women was not only condemned to silence⁷ but developed the skill of remaining silent⁸. Central to this is the question of non-existent female collective memory of the communist repression. The question is not in the opposition or juxtaposition of female and male memory, but in the fact that without the experience of women, the extent of the repressions under communism cannot be fully pictured.

In this paper we focus only on representatives of some groups of the female victims because of their own activity, and not as part of the families of repressed men. These were women of several generations (born in the 1860s to the 1930s), with different social and professional backgrounds: feminists, political activists and scientists representing minorities. They had different social backgrounds but they all were highly educated, had leadership qualities, they were visionaries and pioneers in the field of the respected public and professional activity, women of considerable reputation, recognized in their fields of activity. Each of these groups of women and each

⁵ G. Tancheva, *Petko Frangov*, Biyalacherkva 2013.

⁶ N. Muratova, *Women Beyond Her Archive*, Blagoevgrad 2021.

⁷ They include wives, widows, daughters, sisters and other relatives of the killed, convicted and imprisoned.

⁸ See Anatoly Kleshchenko, But it is not a sign of consent! We learned to keep our mouths shut... <https://bessmertnybarak.ru/about/> [accessed: 11.11.2023].

individual can be the subject of a separate study. Among these groups of women, the pioneers of the women's liberation movement in the late 19th century stand out.

1. Feminism: Julia Malinova (1869–1955) and Dimitrana Ivanova (1881–1960)

The women's movement was one of the most important and lasting sources of civic activity in Bulgaria in the first half of the 20th century. The Women's Union (BWU) was established in 1901 as a feminist organization in Bulgaria, on the basis of women's societies operating since the mid – 19th century. It existed until 1944 when it was dissolved and replaced by the BPWU (Bulgarian People's Women's Union) as a non-feminist and communist organization. With small interruptions, until 1926 the chairwoman of the BWU was Julia Malinova, and from 1926 to 1944 – Dimitrana Ivanova. It was under their leadership that the BWU was established as a party-neutral feminist organization promoting political equality, women's full civil rights, the right to vote in the municipal government and the National Assembly in the spirit of the international women's movement, while developing a well-established social support network of orphanages, kindergartens and other charitable initiatives, and maintenance of female household schools. After 1944, Dimitrana Ivanova was arrested, Julia Malinova and Dr. Vyara Plocheva were evicted, and others lost their jobs.

As early as in 1899, Julia Malinova was among a small group of women who propagated women's rights in 'Women's Voice' newspaper and the association of the existing women's societies in a Union. She was elected to the board of the union established in 1901, and from 1908 to 1926 she was its chairwoman, and later on an honorary chairwoman. Born in Odessa in a Jewish family as Julia Schneider, she received university education in Switzerland and France. She married Alexander Malinov, a young lawyer who was later Prime Minister of Bulgaria several times and leader of the Democratic Party. Names of prominent women are often associated with the positions of their husbands, but Alexander Malinov and Julia Malinova began their political and social activities at the same time. When Julia Malinova joined the leadership of the BWU, Alexander Malinov was not yet among the leaders of the Democratic Party. From 1899 to 1900, together with Ana Karima she edited 'Zhenskiglas' (Women's voice) and became its editor-in-chief. Under her leadership, the BWU became a member of the ICW⁹ in

⁹ The International Council of Women (ICW) was established in 1893. Its first President was Lady Ishbel (Isabel) Aberdeen.

1908 and took part in international congresses (e.g. Stockholm in 1911) that were truly feminist, transcending classes and parties, incorporating the ideology and agenda of the international women's movement, incl. political and civil rights of women, equal education, access to all professions¹⁰. In the second half of the 1920s, attacks on Julia Malinova as a "foreigner" intensified by nationalist circles and she withdrew from the leadership of the BWU, but was elected honorary chairwoman and launched a number of BJU initiatives in the 1930s: founding a young girl's home, and an old women's home that bears her name¹¹. She represented the Bulgarian women's movement in the International Council of Women (ICW). The president of the International Council of Women, Lady Ishbel Aberdeen (1857–1939) who visited Sofia in 1927, wrote in her memoirs: "We felt our reception was a tribute to Mme. Julie Malinoff, who founded the Bulgarian National Council in 1901, and who had been its President for twenty-five years, and who on this occasion gathered representatives of the different affiliated societies to give us most interesting records of the good work each was doing under very great difficulties and some of which we also had the privilege of visiting"¹².

In 1931, for her work Julia Malinova was awarded with the sign of honour of Sofia¹³. Her contributions didn't save her from the consequences of the persecution of the Jews after 1941. When the Bulgarian Women's Union was dissolved in 1944, the PF government tried to attract her, but she refused to cooperate. At the same time, she defended and wrote a letter in support of Dimitrana Ivanova, who was arrested¹⁴. Nearly 80-year-old Julia Malinova was deported from Sofia to the village of Tulovo,

¹⁰ K. Daskalova, *Julia Malinova*, [in:] *Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms: Central, Eastern, and South Eastern Europe, 19th and 20th Centuries*, eds F. De Haan, K. Daskalova and A. Loutfi, Central European University Press, 2006, pp. 293–294.

¹¹ Julia Sch(n)eider-Malinova (1869, Odessa – 1955, Sofia) – studied dentistry in France, she was a translator and a journalist. Member of the Bulgarian Women's Union, Bulgarian Red Cross, "Obstestvena podkrepa" (Public support) Union, the "Zhenskitrud" (Women's Labor) Bureau, societies "Saznanie" (Consciousness), "Zdravets" (Geranium), "Milosardie" (Compassion) and "Mayka" (Mother) – Sofia, "Samaryanka" (Samaritan Woman), the "Prince Boris of Tarnovo" Orphanage, and the "Julia Malinova" Shelter for educated solitary women. See G. Nazarska, *Women Honorary Citizens in the Social Space of Sofia (First Half of the 20th Century)*, [in:] *Cities in the Balkans. Spaces, Faces, Memories*, ed. R. Preshlenova, Bulgarian Academy of Science, 2021, pp. 305–322.

¹² J. Aberdeen, I. Aberdeen., *More Cracks with 'We Twa' Reminiscences of Lord and Lady Aberdeen*, London 1929, p. 164.

¹³ G. Nazarska, *Women Honorary Citizens*, pp. 305–322.

¹⁴ Bulgarian Historical Archive (BHA), F. 584, 201 – Letter from Julia Malinova, March 12, 1946, Sofia.

Kazanlak region, where she spent the last years of her life in financial difficulties and isolation. During this time, her family was deported to another village of Vrachesh, and her son and grandson were sent to a labour camp. From Tulovo, she wrote to her friend from the early years of the women's movement, Jeni Pateva (1878–1955) a bitter letter of how isolated she was and how she worried about her children: "I always knew that ageing is sad, but that my personal destiny would be to be thrown away from life and still continue to live...my children have also to suffer and I am very sad because of them"¹⁵.

This is how Julia Malinova, one of the founders of the women's movement in Bulgaria, ended her life. Her archive has also been lost. Now her life is included in the biographical dictionary of women's movements in Eastern Europe, but the repression against her and her family is not mentioned.



Bulgarian Women's Union, 1905. Julia Malinova (centre), Central State Archive (CSA)

Dimitrana Ivanova was the leader of the BWU for almost two decades with the greatest contribution to the international recognition of the BWU and its perception as an important factor in political life. A graduate of pedagogy in Zurich and

¹⁵ State Archive (SA) – Burgas, F. 814k, 1, 370, 2.

law at Sofia University, she wrote also a Ph.D. thesis on the situation of women at work in European countries. She also initiated the Higher Social School for Women, the first college for social workers in the Balkans. She was editor of 'Zhenski Glas' (Women's Voice) newspaper and author of hundreds of papers. She defended the Jews during their persecution in 1942–1944. On 9 September 1944 she was arrested and imprisoned for several months; later on she was evicted from Sofia for a while. She was accused of pro-Nazi activities as the leader of the BWU but she avoided a death sentence. The compulsory end of her public activities marked the end of the autonomous women's movement in Bulgaria¹⁶. In prison, her health deteriorated, putting an end to her public activities. Towards the end of her life, she managed to write her memoirs, which are among the most valuable sources on the history of women's movement.



Dimitrana Ivanova (centre), Bulgarian Historical Archive (BHA, F. 588)

¹⁶ K. Daskalova, *Dimitrana Ivanova*, [in:] *Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms: Central, Eastern, and South Eastern Europe, 19th and 20th Centuries*, eds F. De Haan, K. Daskalova and A. Loutfi, Central European University Press, pp. 182–184.

2. The women's Agrarian political movement: Raina Lapardova (1904–1980), Nevena Elmazova (1895–1981) and Tsvetana Tsacheva (1896–1974)

The women's Agrarian movement was established in the 1920s when women were still not allowed to be members of the Agrarian Party. Founded in 1899–1901, the Agrarian Party was the largest Interwar political party. Gradually, the Women's Agrarian Union established its position and pursued its own political and charitable activities. It became more active after 9 September 1944. The most prominent activists: Nevena Elmazova, Raina Lapardova, Sevdalina Bakalova, and Svetla Daskalova, participated in public meetings, gave speeches, wrote articles. The Agrarians believed that, as the biggest party in Bulgaria, it would take the leading positions in the left-oriented Patriotic Front but very soon they were isolated by a decision made in the PF. When in 1945, the Agrarian Union became opposition led by Nikola Petkov, most of these women supported Petkov. Almost all of the leading Agrarians supported the opposition, and only a small part stayed in the PF. Almost all of the opposition women and their families were persecuted by the regime in the following years – sent to labour camps, monitored by the Secret Services etc.



From left to right: I. Yaneva, N. Elmazova, N. Daskalova, S. Bakalova and Raina Lapardova, Central State Archive, F. 1265κ, Op. 1, a.e. 61

Raina Lapardova (1904–1980)¹⁷ graduated from the American College in Samokov and the diplomatic and consular department of the Free University in Sofia. She was among the first female graduates of Diplomacy. From 1927 to 1931 she held almost all positions in the Agrarian Youths – she was a secretary, a cashier, an editor, and an organizer. In 1931, with her participation, the Bulgarian Women’s Agrarian Union was restored, and she became a member of the Management Board. She was the organization’s secretary until the military coup *d’état* of 1934.



Rayna Lapardova, Central State Archive (CSA, F. 1265k)

In 1933–1934, Rayna Lapardova worked in the Social Assistance Department, but after the coup of 19 May 1934, she was fired as politically disloyal to the new government and lost her job for 8 years. Before 9 September 1944, when the Patriotic Front led by the Communist Party took the power, she was a member of numerous anti-fascist organizations and societies. The preserved manuscripts of her essays and speeches testify to a politician with democratic views, and with deep awareness of women’s rights.

After 1944, Rayna Lapardova was politically very active and after the split of the Patriotic Front in 1945, she joined the Opposition led by Nikola Petkov. She was nominated for a leading position in the Agrarian Party as the Opposition’s candidate for the Parliament elections in 1946. In the next three years, until the repression and the liquidation of the opposition parties, her life was documented by the regime’s repressive apparatus.

In July 1948, by order of Minister Anton Yugov, her entire family was deprived of the right to reside in Sofia. On 29 April 1951, Raina Lapardova was arrested and on 5 June 1951 she was sent to a labour camp on the Danube island near Belene. She was released in September 1953 to be transferred from Belene to a labour camp of Nozharevo where her health failed. After the labour camp, together with her family she was evicted and remained under political surveillance. In the last years of her life, she was allowed to live in the capital city.

¹⁷ See Central State Archive – Sofia, F. 1265K and State Security Archive, III-10735–8873.



Tsvetana Tsacheva (1896–1974)¹⁸ was born in Gorna Dzhumaya. After graduating from Thessaloniki High School for girls, she became a teacher. During WWI, as a Samaritan woman she cared for sick and wounded soldiers and officers in Gorna Dzhumaya where she met a young teacher from the village of Byala Cherkva, and married him. Agrarian ideology, s very strong in this area and in the village where she worked as a teacher, attracted her and she joined the local women’s Agrarian Party society. After 9 September 1944, she joined Nikola Petkov’s opposition. On 23 September 1947, Tsvetana Tsacheva was imprisoned in a camp in Nozharevo and thus began her long “camp career”. After leaving the camp in 1950, she was arrested again and accused of leading an illegal group. She was imprisoned again for 12 months in Nozharevo and Belene. A woman from the camp remembered her as being called the “mother of the detainees” because she took care of everyone. When Tsvetana Tsacheva left the labour camp, her husband had been dead, and her two daughters had lost their jobs. In the next years, it was very difficult for them to earn their living. One of them was a teacher, the other one a pharmacist, but they managed to find only casual work. Until the end of her life, Tsvetana Tsacheva was deprived of her pension and lived together with her daughters and her grandson in very bad conditions.

Like other women of the opposition, despite of their contributions to the struggle for democracy, both Rayna Lapardova and Tsvetana Tsacheva have slipped into oblivion.

3. Women of Science: two Bulgarian researchers into the Turkish studies of Turkish origin

One of the most important forms of repressions against women is related to the policy towards the Muslim population in Bulgaria, especially in 1960–1989, when it escalated into brutal violence against the rights of Muslims.

¹⁸ See State Security Archive, T. 2, F. II, a.e. 275.

Initially, after 9 September 1944, greater tolerance was demonstrated towards the Muslim population (Turks, Tatars, Pomaks, Roma) which represented about 10–15% of the country's population. Turkish-language schools, publications, and theatres were opened to present the Bulgarian Communist Party in a good light with respect to its minority policy, and socialism as a counterpoint to the neighbouring capitalist Turkey. With this ideological goal, the major of Turkish Studies Philology was established at Sofia University in the early 1950s with personnel for Turkish schools and cultural institutions in mind. Very soon, however, a policy was introduced of increasingly restricting the rights of Muslims in various forms. The teachers were under constant surveillance of the Secret Services.

Mefkure Mollova (1927–2009)¹⁹ was born in 1927 in the town of Dobrich. She came from a family of Crimean Tatars. Her father was a Turkish language teacher at the Turkish school in Dobrich. She graduated from the “Saint Andre” French Catholic College in Varna, one of the most prestigious schools in the city, which educated girls of different nationalities: Bulgarian, Armenian, Greek, Jewish, and Turkish, also from the region of South Dobrudzha. She later graduated in French Philology from Sofia State University. She entered the Department of Turkish Philology in late 1953, where she began teaching Turkish dialectology under the direction of Professor A. Shiraliev from Azerbaijan. Her career as a university lecturer was very short. In 1961, she was suddenly fired from the university together with her husband Riza Mollov. Afterwards, she never worked for any scientific institution and remained a “housewife” (as all the official documents state) for the rest of her life. Between 1953 and 1960, Mefkure Mollova was one of the founders and first lecturers of Turkish Philology at Sofia University. At that time, there was a shortage of experts in Turkish studies and the major began with two ethnic Turkish philologists, well-known scientists, attracted from Azerbaijan, and who transferred the experience of the Soviet Turkish Studies School. In these first years, Mollova established herself as a scientist in the field of Turkish dialectology, after numerous expeditions to Turkish villages throughout Bulgaria, together with Azerbaijani guest professors and Bulgarian colleagues. Although she was expelled from the University, in 1973 she managed to



¹⁹ See State Security Archive, F. V0, a.e. 78255.

defend her dissertation at the Institute of Linguistics of the Russian Academy of Sciences, and her scientific supervisor was again the famous Prof. A. Shiraliev from Baku. This was the first Turkish dialectology dissertation defended in Bulgaria. Until the end of her life, as a “housewife”, she was involved in science and published articles and studies in Bulgarian, French, Russian, and Turkish in foreign journals – in Poland, the Soviet Union, Turkey, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Romania, Denmark, and other countries. She published over 100 studies in the field of Turkish Studies. She made a name for herself and her works have been cited to this day. It is still impossible to say how many of her academic works remained unpublished and in which institutions and private archives they are stored.

Four years after Mefkure Mollova was expelled from the University, one of her first students, **Hayriye Memova-Suleymanova (1938–2018)**²⁰, was appointed to the Department of Turkish Studies at Sofia State University after a competition in 1964. She also fell victim to the confiscation and squandering of her academic archives. She was from the first class of Turkish Philology, and the first Turkish woman to have later started working in the same department as a lecturer. She worked there from 1964 to 1981, when she was also forcibly removed. After that, her academic career in Bulgaria continued at the Institute of Balkan Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences from 1985 until her departure to Turkey in 1989.



However, documents about Hayriye Memova-Suleymanova cannot be found in the institutional archives, where she worked, due to the erasure of traces of the forced assimilation of Turks, which also affected the documentary heritage. There is no trace in the archives of Sofia University of Hayriye Memova’s almost 20 years of work. Only in the University Almanac, published in 1988, is there a short article about her under the name Irena Yuliyanova Yassenova – a name given to her by force and not corresponding to her publications, which, among other things, automatically made her anonymous for science. In the same way, although there is no personnel file, in the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences’ archives, there are still documents about her work, as her name has been changed.

²⁰ See State Security Archive, III-35711, № 19865.

Hayriye Memova was a part of an entire period of institutional scientific and educational infrastructure of Turkish Studies in Bulgaria from 1952 to 1989. Her biography – academic and personal – is an example of the mechanisms of control and arbitrariness of the repressive apparatus over scientific institutions. Hayriye Memova graduated from the Faculty of Turkish Philology in 1956, and in 1964 became a full-time lecturer in practical Turkish. She embarked on her academic career enthusiastically and with high hopes. For several years, she was involved in expeditions with students in Turkish villages and collected linguistic material. She also collected a large body of material from the Gagauz. Meanwhile, the State Security opened a “Fox” Case for Operational Inspection (COI) of Hayriye Memova-Suleymanova for pro-Turkish nationalism, led by the Sixth Department of State Security. The persecution continued for 7 years. The official reason was her Bulgarian-Turkish thematic dictionary published in July 1981. According to her memoirs, the dictionary was confiscated in the University Printing House, and a commission for burning thereof was formed. In addition, according to her, officials seized the original of an unpublished Turkish-Bulgarian dictionary, which she had prepared for publication. Thus both dictionaries were destroyed. The investigation of the State Security against Hayriye Memova was conducted by 19 agents and trustees, and for this purpose, six hidden places for meetings were used. From the investigation documents, it became clear that these were her colleagues, students, relatives, former classmates, fellow students, and acquaintances. A full arsenal of events from the conspiratorial work of the State Security was attached: telephone eavesdropping, microphone eavesdropping, control of personal correspondence etc.

Despite surveillance and political persecution, unemployment, name change, confiscations and surveillance, Mefkure Mollova and Hairie Memova continued their creative work in the field of Turkish studies. They are an example of academic dedication that helped them maintain their personal dignity as scholars in the most difficult times.

In lieu of conclusion: All the presented women lived with the consequences of repression for the rest of their lives. The course of these women’s lives, their everyday routine, career, family ties, social integration, health, and personal wellbeing were radically interrupted and changed for a long time as a result of the persecutions. Their families suffered even more. The traces of these women’s lives were scattered and the memory of them blotted out, rendering the related research very difficult.

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