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“It will be a crime if such a person stays in the party and is given a responsible job” (the case of the “unreliable” archivist Maria Konstantinova)

Abstract: This paper traces the dramatic fate of Maria Konstantinova, who oversaw the Studios for Chronicles and Documentaries from 1949 to 1951. Her short activity in the archive of Bulgarian cinematography is outlined on the basis of documents from her professional dossier. Some of these documents were required for her appointment while others to provide information about her professional activities, or they are statements of her punishment. She was persecuted for revealing a “state secret” and negligence, delayed delivery of the film “The Long Way of a Cigarette” (dubbed in Russian), and the resulting “delayed production of a copy for the USSR”. Furthermore, in anonymous and signed reports, Maria Konstantinova was accused of financial abuse, immoral behaviour, a “grossly corrupt bohemian past”, “lesbian relationships with girlfriends”, “drunkenness and playing poker with men, and especially with women”...

Keywords: communism; Bulgaria; homosexuality; women artists; abuses

Słowa kluczowe: komunizm; Bułgaria; homoseksualizm; artystki; nadużycia

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1. The personnel files in the Bulgarian cinematography collection

In my attempts to write the history of the Bulgarian film archive, I came across hundreds of personnel files of employees of the Bulgarian cinematography. I found them in the Central State Archives in the archive fund of the “Bulgarian Cinematography” State Enterprise¹.

Without going into detail about the nature of the personnel files, it is important to clarify that for all new employees, they were created in the “HR” departments. If an employee changed the position, then his/her personal file was officially sent to the new position. As a rule, personal files included an official form, a curriculum vitae, three recommendations, information from public and party organizations, a proposal from the head of the HR department, and job characteristics². Service files were also mandatory for every new employee, but unlike the personal files, they were not sent with the employee if he/she left and moved to another institution. They included a job application, medical and criminal records, as well as copies of orders for appointments and changes in positions, and orders for punishments, awards, vacations, and dismissals. As part of the service files, the workbook was also kept, in which the dates of entry and exit, positions held, and government awards received were entered³.

The fact that the archive fund of the “Bulgarian Cinematography” comprises compactly preserved personal files is evidence that they did not go along with the individuals when they left the cinematography industry and went to work in another institution. As a result of this breach of rules, they are available to researchers and provide a rich resource of original and official documents. They are divided into three large groups: “Personal files of individuals in good standing”, “Personal files of individuals expelled from the Communist Party” and “Personal files with characteristics and information on the political unreliability of employees and creative workers”.

In the first group (individuals in good political standing) the personal file of Lalyu Prisadishki has been preserved. He was appointed as a film cataloguer in the film library of the Chronicle and Documentary Films Studio in May 1950. In October, he left of his own volition to continue with his studies. Consequently, a confi-

¹ CSA, F. 383, inv. 15, a.u. 421, sh. 411–426.

² N. Kamburova, *Kriterii po prakticheskata i nauchna tsennost na sluzhebnite i kadrov idosieta na lichniya sastav*, Arhiven pregled 1969, №1, p. 13.

³ Ibidem.

dential description was prepared by the head of the “HR” department, describing his activities before 9 September 1944, including the court sentence and his one-year stay in the Pleven prison. In the conclusion of the description, his devotion to the Communist Party was emphasized.

An example of the second group of files of employees, expelled from the Communist Party, is the personal file of Petar Iliev, an organizer at the “Chronicle” department. It is indicative of the Communist Party’s decisive assessment of everyone’s destiny and professional path, regardless of their speciality and professional skills. According to the report of the secretary of the Communist Party from the 9th district, he was expelled from the party as “domestically decayed”⁴. Attracted by the militia to investigate “loose women”⁵ but accused because he visited their homes and invited them to his home. The “sentence” was pronounced on 7 October 1949; in the report, the party’s secretary wrote: “Peter Iliev should not be given any job.” Perhaps another statement from 20 September 1949, found in his personal file, signed only with the initials HG contributed to the dismissal. The accusation is of holding an opinion that footage with Traicho Kostov⁶ from the film “He does not die”⁷ should not be cut, because the film is a historical document. The dismissal order was not long to come, it even came into effect retroactively, signed on 14 October 1949, but Petar Iliev was dismissed from the position of an organizer at the “Chronicle” department on 30 September 1949.

One example from the third group: personal files with characteristics and information on the political unreliability of employees and creative workers.

My attention was drawn to the personal dossier of Maria Konstantinova, head of the archive of the Chronicle and Documentary Film Studio from 1949 to 1951. She was one of the “politically unreliable” employees, declared to be hostile elements (“enemies of the people”, “hating communists”, “active fascists”, “politically unsuit-

⁴ “domestically decayed” – immoral.

⁵ A “loose woman” – having no morals.

⁶ Traicho Kostov Dzhunev (1897–1949) was an influential Bulgarian politician from the Bulgarian Communist Party, a member of the Politburo, and secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. He was a Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers in successive governments (1946–1949). An active participant in the repressions in 1944–1949 and one of the creators of the so-called People’s Court, Traicho Kostov himself became a victim of the regime and during one of the purges in the Communist Party, after an ostentatious political trial in 1949, he was sentenced to death and hanged on 16/17 December of the same year. He was posthumously rehabilitated.

⁷ A documentary (1949) directed by Boris Grezhov and Rumen Grigorov.

able”, “with hostile statements”, “hostile to the FF [Fatherland Front] and everything communist”, “could be used by the enemies”). Another common trait attributed to the majority of the “unreliable” was that they were “morally decomposed”, “morally unsound”, “prone to drinking”, “liked to drink despite being very poor”, “a big alcoholic who could not live without Mastika”, etc. Quite a few of individuals defined as unreliable had higher education or studied and completed a semester in law, ton-engineering in Germany, a pilot’s college... All of them were dismissed with orders which instead of the reasons for dismissal, read: “...due to going to the army to do military service” or “resigned from his post”, etc.

2. The dossier of an archivist

СЛУЖЕБЕН ЛИЧЕН ФОРМ

1. Име *Мария Константинова*
лично

2. Дата на раждането *25 VI 1916* 3. Ме
околия

5. Поданство *България*

8. Образование *VI клас*
(висше, средно, специ)

10. Членувал ли е и какви отговорни длъжности е заемал до 9
изации, Оф партии и други масови организации.

Слабо		Средно	
<i>малко</i>		<i>малко</i>	

В кои организации	К о г а		Къде: град, село, околия, държ
	от	до	

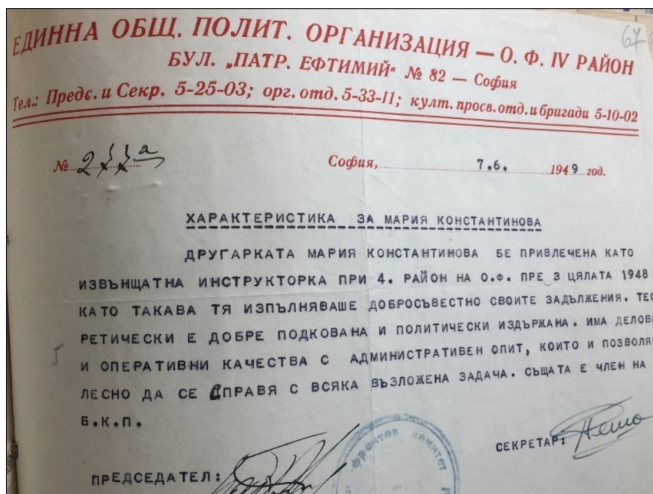
Maria Konstantinova’s official personal employment form, CSA, F. 383, inv.15, a.u. 421, sh. 68

A total of 14 documents are preserved in the dossier of the “unreliable” Maria Konstantinova⁸. Three of them were drawn up when she applied for the job of an archivist: an autobiography dated 1 June 1949; an official personal form, obligatory for all new recruits; and a description dated 7 June 1949 from the Fatherland’s Front organization in the area where she lived in Sofia⁹. The Fatherland Front was a politi-

⁸ CSA, F. 383, inv.15, a.u. 421, sh. 65–81.

⁹ Ibidem, sh. 68–69.

cal organization established on instruction from the Comintern and throughout its existence was under the Communist Party's control. Therefore, the required characteristic of the Fatherland Front by the place of residence was of great importance to the fate of everyone at that time.



Description of Maria Konstantinova by the Fatherland Front, emphasizing her good qualities and administrative experience, CSA, F. 383, inv. 15, a.u. 421, sh. 67

According to her handwritten autobiography, Maria Konstantinova was born on 25 June 1916 in Karnobat, her mother's hometown. Her father and all members of his family were merchants from and in Kavarna. Therefore, she defined her origins as petite bourgeois. The whole family lived in Kavarna (then in Romania) until 1928, when they returned to Bulgaria, to Karnobat. She was expelled from high school after she participated in a strike in 1933. In 1936, she went to Sofia to continue her education. Due to a lack of funds, she started working in "Rachev" knitwear factory, from which, according to her, she was expelled after only three months "because she did not meet the requirements"¹⁰.

In the same year, she was recruited by her relatives, owners of the magazine "Housewife and Mother", to paint models. Among them was probably Lili Masopust-Yanakieva, the editor and proprietor. An engineer by training, she was also the author of "Home and Society", "The Book of Etiquette in the Kingdom of Bulgaria", "My Kitchen", etc.

¹⁰ See the official personal form, sh. 69, where the reason for her expulsion is noted.

According to experts, the drawings, and painted models in “Housewife and Mother” magazine (1933–1940) were the author’s work, distinguishing it from most other magazines of the time where drawings adapted from Western European magazines prevailed¹¹. In the early years of the magazine, the cover and inside drawings were authored by Lily Masopust herself. A distinctive feature of her hand drawings is the presence of square and rectangular frames with graphic elements reminiscent of a cast shadow¹². Another individual approach in the drawings are the strokes that graphically express light shadows and emphasize folds in the fabrics. The conclusion is clear: the artist of “Housewife and Mother” had a distinguished style and was one of the first examples of a personal approach to drawing clothes in specialist press up to that period¹³. This artist enticed Maria Konstantinova to paint models in the magazine, defined as different, with an individual style and distinguished from all the others. Unfortunately, the drawings are not signed, and therefore it is not possible to distinguish Maria Konstantinova’s ones but without a doubt, she also contributed to this distinct and highly appreciated look of the painted models in “Housewife and Mother”.



“Housewife and Mother” magazines with models drawn by Lily Masopust, Personal archive

Afterwards, Maria Konstantinova was three times appointed administrator of “Woman and Home” (1938–1943), a magazine with a similar concept to “House-

¹¹ A. Gerginov, *Modnata ilyustratsiya v Bulgariya i po sveta (Kratak istoricheski obzor)*, Sofia 2021.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 68.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 69.

wife and Mother”, with the main theme of creating a model home according to the new utilitarian and health standards. Its editor-in-chief, Nella Slivopolska (1895–1956), applied a “working” recipe to housewife printing, focusing on varied, readable, and interesting information¹⁴. The magazine had the largest circulation at the time (ranging between 14,000 and 24,000) and was distinguished from other magazines by its emphasis on foreign fashion.

In 1939, Maria Konstantinova began publishing “Bulgarka”, a monthly magazine revolving around fashion, household, and domestic culture, which went bankrupt the following year. It had separate sections: “Fashion”, “Knitting”, “Handicrafts”, “Bulgarian embroidery and carpets”, “Cooking”, etc. A special emphasis was placed on the Bulgarian national costumes¹⁵.

For two months, she was a clerk at “Flame” publishing house, and from 1943 to January 1944 she was the chief administrator of “Home and World” magazine, edited by Elisaveta Konsolova-Vazova (1881–1965), one of the first Bulgarian women artists, portraitist and the first Bulgarian woman to paint a nude body. For more than a year – until late June 1945 – Maria Konstantinova remained unemployed and returned to Karnobat. From 1 July 1945 to 15 January 1949, she was the chief administrator of “Women’s People’s Voice” newspaper in the Bulgarian Women’s People’s Union, but as she noted in her autobiography, she left due to personal relations.

There is no doubt that she was talented and had a chance to work in the so-called household magazines, which in the 1930s had an emancipatory and modernizing function. They covered issues of hygiene, health, pedagogy, aesthetics, and habits, and thus accelerated cultural and social progress¹⁶. She studied for a year and a few months at the Academy of Arts but failed to graduate from it.

It is noteworthy that in her autobiography, she repeatedly stressed her allegiance to the Communist Party. She did not describe herself as active but involved in specific activities and maintaining links with comrades from the CP. More emphatically, and even somewhat exaggeratedly, she noted that she took “an armed part in the seizure and consolidation of the Fatherland Front’s power in Karnobat”. At the same

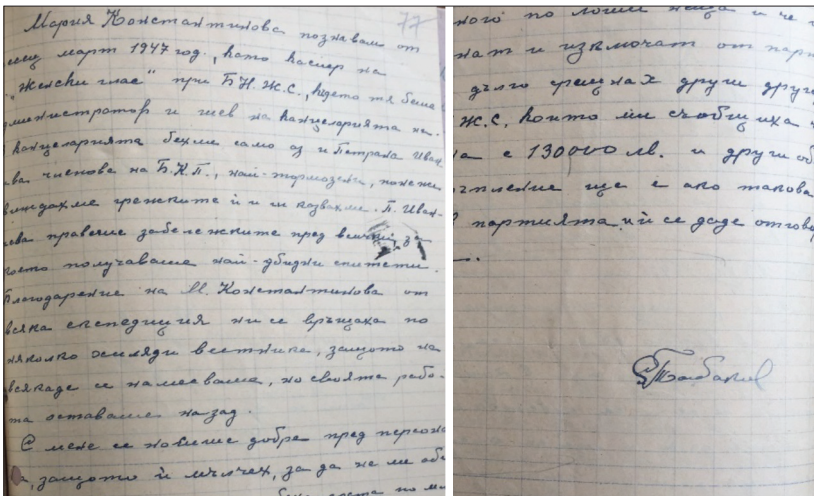
¹⁴ Z. Nazarska, *Kulturnata retseptsiya na zhenskiya periodichen pechat v Balgariya ((30–60-te godinina HH vek): Opit za rekonstruktsiya po danni ot chasten arhiv)*, [in:] *Iz istoriyata na balgarskat azhurnalistika*, Izdatel 2007, № 3–4, p. 14.

¹⁵ N. Stoyanova, *Modata v balgarskite modni spisaniya ot 1930-te godini: populyarni refleksii na mezhdvoennite kulturni tendentsii*, [in:] *Oblekloto i ezikat, Osobenosti na izvorite Sbornik s dokladi ot konferentsiyata v balgarskite zemi v minaloto*, provedena na 24–25.01.2020 g. S., 2020, p. 192.

¹⁶ Z. Nazarska, *Kulturnata retseptsiya*, p. 14.

time, she made no secret of the “decadent influence” exerted over her by university colleagues with whom she “acted bohemian and intellectual for several years”.

In June 1949, she was appointed head of the film library at the Chronicle and Documentary Film Studios, but on 28 September of the same year, the first document (denunciation against her) was submitted before the Cinematography Department, signed with a comradely greeting from Ivan Georgiev. In it, Maria Konstantinova was accused of misusing BGN 100,000 from the accounting office of the Bulgarian National Women’s Union, of rudeness towards her subordinates, and drinking alcohol in the office. The accusations were increasingly ruthless: ‘an immoral and perverted type’, ‘a sexually sick pathological type’, ‘expelled from high school for debauchery’, with a ‘violent debauched bohemian past’, ‘continues even now to get drunk and play poker with men and especially women at the houses of her friends in the district of Perlovets’¹⁷. The allegations reached their climax with ‘her lusts expressed themselves in lesbian relationships with her girlfriends’ and ‘on this basis were her intimate relations with Mrs. Maria Vladova and Tsvetana Kiranova (1892–1959)’. It was the intercession of Tsvetana Kiranova, a deputy in the Grand National Assembly, a teacher, an organizer of the women’s cooperative movement, and an anti-fascist, that was put forward as an argument for her appointment to the cinematography.



One of the reports on Maria Konstantinova written by her colleague in the Bulgarian National Women’s Union, ends as follows: “It will be a crime if such a person stays in the party and is given a responsible job”, CSA, F. 383, inv. 15 a.u. 421, sh. 77–78

¹⁷ CSA, F. 383, inv. 15 a.u. 421, sh. 70.

Although in a short job description, written in the same year, Maria Konstantinova was presented as hard-working, disciplined, active in the trade union, displaying organizational skills, correctly understanding the party line... soon she was to be punished. She was accused of not checking a film she had given to the director of photography, as a result of which he got hold of footage containing “state secrets”. Another misdemeanor was related to a delay in sending a negative that was to be copied for the USSR.

With the final, third order, she was dismissed from her position as head of the archives and film library at the Chronicle and Documentary Film Studios because of a transfer to another position, effective 19 May 1951. It can only be surmised that there was a relationship between the previous two punishment orders and the reports written against the dismissed archivist. It cannot be ascertained at present whether she was doing her job or not, whether she was dismissed because someone else aspired to the post, or whether the accusations of having links with “opposition farmers”, of having “hooligan behavior”, of “drinking in the pub on Rakovska Street and Tolbukhin Boulevard and on the corner of these streets kissing and pressing Maria Vladova in front of the former Zarzavatchia Kiro...” took the upper hand.

Nevertheless, Maria Konstantinova’s career as an archivist was over. It remains unknown, however, why she was fired – whether it was due to the violations attributed to her, or her homosexuality?¹⁸ Whether the verification of what was written in the denunciation against her confirmed that women should beware of her, because “as soon as she claps her eyes on a woman she likes, she does not leave her alone until, like a vampire, she expresses her lewd sexual nature” remains unknown.

These were the probable motives for the dismissal of Maria Konstantinova; at the same time, a draft decree on the state and tasks of Bulgarian cinematography was being adopted, which envisaged “a major purge of the services of talentless, reactionary, careerist and useless employees”¹⁹. The dismissal of Maria Konstantinova

¹⁸ More on the question of persecution of homosexuals, see M. Gruev, *Komunizam i homoseksualizam v Balgariya (1944–1989 g.)*, Spisanie Anamneza 2006, 1, pp. 88–100. “In this sense, homosexuals, however, without this being explicitly written down, fall first under the blows of the ‘Law on Labor Mobilization of Idlers’ adopted in 1946, affecting men under 50 and women under 45”. In connection with the implementation of the law, the Minister of the Interior A. Yugov sent a special instruction to the regional units of the militia and to the mayors of the municipalities, in which he demanded detailed lists to be made not only of the “habitually and morally decayed”, of the people “spending their time in aimless wandering around pubs, inns and cafes”, but also of “homosexuals or those who are convicted as such”.

¹⁹ The decree on the state and tasks of Bulgarian cinematography was approved on

coincided with the adoption of the new 1951 Criminal Law and preceded the 1952 Criminal Procedure Code, which established the legal framework for the persecution of homosexuals²⁰. “The penalty for sexual intercourse or sexual gratification between persons of the same sex was imprisonment for a term of up to 3 years”.

The persecution of homosexuals in Bulgaria after 9 September 1944 was nothing new but rather, a continuation of the persecutions from the early 1940s carried out under the rule of Bogdan Filov and the influence of national socialism in Germany. Yet under the new political power, it was not only more methodical but also followed the categorical position of the Stalinist regime in the Soviet Union²¹. Moreover, after 1956, when the political regime was somewhat weakened, the attitude towards homosexuals remained as firm as ever. Along with criminal laws (from 1951 and 1968) and organized trials against homosexuals, in the 1950s the State Security and Ministry of Internal Affairs were particularly active in the persecution and recruitment of homosexuals. Court trials, evictions, internment, various measures and forms of intimidation, placement in Labour-educational dormitories, labor mobilization – the list of forms of persecution of homosexuals and “protection” of society from them was long.

Therefore, it is no coincidence that many questions about the fate of Maria Konstantinova remain unanswered. The published research on homosexuality in Bulgaria during the communist regime is still quite limited. The cited publication of Mihail Gruev should be topped with “Historical sociology of penal policies in Bulgaria” by Martin Kanushev²², as well as a study of homosexuality in Bulgaria during communism, carried out in 2018–2019²³. According to the head of the team, Veronika Dimitrova, the latter is based on a considerable number of diverse sources – legal and medical publications, forensic medical expertise, sources from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the State Department on sexual promiscuity in the country, archival sources from prisons, etc. However, only one of the sources contains the

31.01.1952 under No. 91 and belonged to the Council of Ministers and the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party.

²⁰ See M. Gruev, *Komunizam i homoseksualizam*, “Article 176 of the Criminal Code states: “For sexual intercourse or sexual gratification between persons of the same sex, the penalty is imprisonment for up to 3 years”.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² M. Kanushev, *Istoricheska sotsiologiya na nakazatelните politiki v Balgariya*, vol. 1: *Pre-staplenie i nakazanie v natsionalnata darzhava*, Nov balgarski universitet 2015.

²³ V. Dimitrova, *Homoseksualnostta v Balgariya po vremeto na komunizma, izsledvane, provedeno prez 2018–2019 g. s podkrepata na European Cultural Foundation, poideyana-fondatsiya GLAS*, 2019.

testimony of a woman accused of being a lesbian. This lack of sources on female homosexuality is also due to the initially smaller social role of lesbianism and the relatively smaller number of homosexual women²⁴.

Another problem is that the main sources are limited mostly to official documents, created in the repressive structures and reflected only the viewpoint of the authorities.

Logically, the fate of Maria Konstantinova, who lived, studied, and worked in a bohemian and artistic environment in her youth in the 1930s, was turned around in the conditions of the post-September 9 regime. Even in the official documents left in her personnel file, her freedom-loving and bohemian nature, which seems to have been oblivious to the new political realities, shines through. Therefore, her assurances of party loyalty in the résumé with which she applied for the position of an archivist at the Cinematography do not seem completely convincing. Perhaps she drew some strength from high-ranking women and their protection, mentioned by unsavory informants in reports, and kept in her personnel file.

Maria Konstantinova was a victim of the times in which the boundaries between politics, work, and personal life were erased. Her case is not an isolated one but is a part of the prevailing social attitude and treatment, typical of the 1940s and 1950s²⁵. Later on, the subject of homosexuality became “invisible”, it was not discussed, as if otherness and difference were swallowed up and ceased to exist in the socialist society..

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²⁴ M. Gruev, *Komunizam i homoseksualizam*.

²⁵ Here I would refer to Kristina Popova's article: “BEZESNAFSKI HLENCH” *Parvite zheni v balgarskiya parlament – narodnite predstavitelki v 26-toto ONS i Velikoto narodno sabranie i debatite po sotsialnata politika na novata vlast / dekemvri 1945 – april 1946/*, [in:] *Terorizam i intelektualizam. Balkanski bezpokoystva*, Blagoevgrad 2005, pp. 146–163. Even from the parliamentary rostrum, qualifications and insults were spoken aloud against Elisaveta Pop (from Priest) Antonova: “slut; presbytera (!)”, which displace the arguments and the debate itself on such important issues related to social policy and the budget funds for its implementation.

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