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The mythmaking of children heroes during the communist regime in Bulgaria – the case of “the heroes of Belitsa”

Abstract: The paper presents the constructing of the image of “child heroes” in the memory policies imposed by the communist regime in Bulgaria after 1944. The Bulgarian case of establishing patterns of child heroism during the communist regime followed the Soviet examples of policy on the youngsters. In pursuing its own ideological goals, after 1944 the political regime in Bulgaria imposed new content of child education and turned children into an instrument and object of the propaganda of new heroism. The biographies of the “child heroes” were turned into examples of education and identification for the young generations. Despite the fact that several local cases existed, the cases of Mitko Palauzov, the “six children from Yastrebino” and the “heroes of Belitsa” – Vasil and Sava Kokareshkovi were presented as the national heroic patterns for the youngsters. The specific case of Vasil and Sava Kokareshkovi has been followed in the paper.

Keywords: Bulgaria; communist regime; children heroes; cultural memory

Słowa kluczowe: Bułgaria; reżim komunistyczny; dzieci-bohaterowie; pamięć kulturowa

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1. Childhood, heroism and the biographical canon in Bulgaria after 1944

The communist youth ideology produced a set of images of how young people should be and how they should lead their lives, from neat appearance to social behaviour¹. These images – representations of a desired youth identity – were produced through party discourse (political and scientific texts), the media, in schools and by youth organisations, and so forth². In pursuing its own ideological goals the political regime in Bulgaria after 1944 imposed new content of children education and turned children into an instrument and object of the propaganda of new heroism. The normative frame of “creating a new child” was considered the main task of the Young Pioneer organisation “Septembrist”³. To “child heroes” and the memory of them, an important role was assigned of an “iconostasis” of the new communist “martyrdom”⁴. Their biographies were turned into examples of education and identification for the young generations. Despite the fact that several local cases existed, the cases of Mitko Palauzov, the “six children from Yastrebino” and the “heroes of Belitsa” – Vasil and Sava Kokareshkovi were presented as the national heroic patterns for the youngsters.

The construction and representation of the biography of “a child hero” in the public space followed and adapted the already elaborated Soviet model. In it, a key

¹ One effect of the monopolisation of knowledge and modes of representation was that communist ideology was often perceived as a highly restricted field of discourse, closer to a system of beliefs. Ferenc Fehér, for example, equated Soviet ideology with a dogma. See: F. Fehér, A. Heller, G. Markus, *Dictatorship over Needs. An Analysis of Soviet Societies*, Oxford 1984, p. 188.

² K. Taylor, *Let's Twist Again: Youth and Leisure in Socialist Bulgaria*, Münster 2006, p. 42.

³ At age seven, a blue scarf was ceremoniously tied around the neck of each Bulgarian child who entered the *Čavdar* section of the Young Pioneers organisation /The Young Pioneer ‘Septembrist’ organisation/. This was the beginning of a career that for most children would lead through two subsequent phases of youth organisation membership. At the age of ten, pupils joined the ‘Pioneers’ and received a red neckscarf. Having reached their fourteenth birthday, they could apply for admittance to the communist youth league, commonly know as *Komsomol* after its Soviet equivalent. See: K. Popova, “*Priyatel, koyto shte sazdate ot obiknovenoto dete septemvriyche...*” *Druzhinnite rakovoditel(k)i v ideologiyata i deynostta na pionerskata organizatsiya, Detstvoto prez sotsializma*, eds I. Elenkov, D. Koleva, Sofiya 2010, pp. 21–23; K. Taylor, *Let's Twist Again*, p. 94.

⁴ M. Angelova, *(Ne)spodelenata pamet na kasniya sotsializam: Dvizhenieto “Narodnata pamet razkazva” (1983–1989)*, Sofiya 2010, pp. 9–10.

role was played by the figure of Pavlik Morozov who (according to the official version) during the collectivization exposed the “kulaks” (in this case his father and grandfather) as “class enemies” and died in the name of his devotion to the party line of thinking⁵. At the XII congress of the Soviet Komsomol Organization in 1954, an official list of the Soviet “pioneer – heroes” was elaborated, issued in the so called “Book of Honor of Soviet Pioneer Organization in the name of V. I. Lenin”. Under № 1 was ascribed Pavlik Morozov, followed by Kolya Myagotin – also killed by a “class enemy”. This series included Grisha Akopyan considered lately as a fully fictional personage. The sequence continued with the names of the youngsters who died in the “Great Patriotic War” (1941–1945): Volodya Dubinin, Marat Kazey, Valya Kotik, Zina Portnova and others⁶.



A Pioneer tells the truth and treasures the honor of his unit, [in:] U. Bronfenbrenner, *Two Worlds of Childhood: U.S. and U.S.S.R.*, New York 1970, pp. 45

⁵ K. Catriona, *Comrade Pavlik: the rise and fall of a Soviet boy hero*, London 2005; S. Maslinskaya, “Be Always Ready!”: *Hero Narratives in Soviet Children’s Literature*, [in:] *A Companion to Soviet Children’s Literature and Film*, ed. O. Voronina, Brill, 2020, pp. 250–302.

⁶ S.G. Leont’eva, *Zhizneopisaniye pionera-geroya: tekstovaya traditsiya i ritual’nyy kontekst*, [in:] *Sovremennaya rossiyskaya mifologiya*, M.V. Akhmetova (ed.), Moskva 2005, pp. 89–123; A. Livschiz, *Children’s Lives after Zoia’s Death: Order, Emotions and Heroism in Children’s Lives and Literature in the Post-War Soviet Union*, [in:] *Late Stalinist Russia: Society between Reconstruction and Reinvention*, J. Fürst (ed.), London–New York 2006, pp. 192–208; M.A. Litovskaya, *Voyuyushchiye deti v russkoy literature pervoy poloviny KHKH veka, – Homo militaris: Literatura voyny i o voyne. Istoriya, mifologiya, poetika*, Kaluga 2010, pp. 93–99; K. Catriona, *Children’s World: Growing Up in Russia, 1890–1991*, New Haven 2007.

Of course, the discovery and use of a “child hero” as a propaganda figure is not a Soviet invention. The earliest example of a similar construction is the story of a thirteen-year-old drummer, Josef Bara, who died in a battle in 1796 during the French Revolution⁷. Similar is the case of Giovanni Battista Perasso – Balilla (1735–1781), a legendary boy from Genoa, turned into a national Italian pattern of child heroism. During the regime of Mussolini, he was an emblem of the children fascist organization named after him⁸. At the turn of the 19th century, literary representations of child heroism rarely referred to acts of real individuals, except for the early chapters in the biographies of great men written for the young. This impersonal heroism acquired factual biographic features only by the early 1930s, when stories about heroic Soviet children became both politically indispensable and popular⁹.

The Bulgarian case of establishing patterns of child heroism during the communist regime followed the Soviet examples of policy on the youngsters. The cult of child heroes and the use of their biographies in the fictional literature started in 1946–1948 with the “Small Partisan” – a poem of Mihail Lakatnik¹⁰, and the “Small Supporter” of Ivan Martinov¹¹. These were the first literature works directed to youngsters which outlined the beginning of the heroization of child participants in the partisan guerilla fighter movement.

In 1946, Angel Todorov edited a collection in which together with the story of Kamen Kalchev (“The Lad from the Brigade”) and the translated Russian comedy “Dear Guest” by T. Novikova, a “partisan stage play” was included, written by Ivan Hadzhimarchev and called “The Hero Kalitko”¹². In the same year, Ivan Hadzhimarchev succeeded to publish a novel on the same story¹³. His “Shepherd Kalitko” was the first large-scale narrative that connected with the matrix of the heroic-martyr child template of the époque. It is significant to note that up to this moment, fully fictional personages had been used. Narratives on the biographies of existing persons followed suit a bit later. Up to 1989, “The Shepherd Kalitko” had 13 editions

⁷ J.-Cl. Martin, *Violence et Révolution. Essai sur la naissance d'un mythe national*, Paris 2006.

⁸ G. Oliva, *Balilla*, [in:] *I luoghi della memoria. Simboli e miti dell'Italia unita*, M. Isnenghi (ed.), Roma–Bari 1996, pp. 391–401.

⁹ S. Maslinskaya, *Be Always Ready!*, pp. 251.

¹⁰ M. Lakatnik, *Malkiyat partizanin: detska poema*, Sofiya 1946.

¹¹ I. Martinov, *Malkiyat yatak*, Sofiya 1948.

¹² *Momakat ot brigadata; Geroyat Kalitko: Partizanska pieska; Skap gost*, A. Todorov (ed.), Sofiya 1946.

¹³ I. Hadzhimarchev, *Ovcharcheto Kalitko. Malkiyat partizanin*, Sofiya 1946.

with an industrial number of copies¹⁴. In 1954, “People’s Enlightenment” publishing house distributed the novel in Turkish¹⁵. Only three years later, the “Black Turned into White” trilogy was published. The main personage was “a gipsy partisan” Bango, invented by the author, Nedyalko Mesechkov¹⁶. In 1957, the first edition of the novel “Lenko” by Georgi Karaslavov was published – again a collective personage of communist “small hero and associate” of partisan guerrilla fighters was presented¹⁷.

The case of Mitko Palauzov from the town of Gabrovo was turned into a leading example of heroic biography of an existing child who died in the “fight against fascism and capitalism” in the early 1950s. He was 12 year old when he joined the partisan unit together with his parents. During an action of the gendarmerie on 1 April 1944 in a partisan dugout where several partisans were sheltered, bombs were thrown and 4 persons were killed, among them Mitko and his mother¹⁸. Among the children in the heroic pantheon of the new authorities, Mitko Palauzov was considered “class conscious”. The fact that he was a real partisan (not only an innocent victim) earned him the highest position among the child heroes of the époque.

In 1951, Marko Marchevski (one of the most often published Bulgarian writers of child heroic fiction) – wrote the first biographical novel about Mitko Palauzov¹⁹. The choice of Marchevski was anything but accidental. Before 1944, the author lived 8 years in the Soviet Union and was well acquainted with the Soviet didactic literature for children and the model of constructing heroic characters²⁰. The novel about Mitko Palauzov was immediately included in the list of compulsory school literature and had 17 editions until 1989. In 1972, another biography of the small hero was published by Trifon Palauzov, Mitko’s father²¹. Aside of Marchevski, other

¹⁴ Idem, *Ovcharcheto Kalitko*, Sofiya 1989.

¹⁵ I. Hadzimarcev, *Coban Kalitko*, Sofia 1954. More about the history of reception of Bulgarian literature translated into Turkish, the motives and ways of publishing ideological and political books, see: Z. Zafer, *Balgarskata literatura v syankata na politikata i propagandata (Prevodite v Turtsiya prez vtorata polovina na 60-te i 70-te godini)* – *Dzhalo*, god VII: 2019, no. 10–21, br. 15], http://www.abcdar.com/magazine/XV/7_Zeynep_Zafer.pdf [accessed: 11.11.2023].

¹⁶ N. Mesechkov, *Bango*, Sofiya 1957.

¹⁷ G. Karaslavov, *Lenko*, Sofiya 1957.

¹⁸ N. Yaneva, S. Bakalova, *Bezsmartnite cheda na Balgariya: detsa i yunoshi zaginali v borбата protiv fashizma i kapitalizma*, Sofiya 1971.

¹⁹ M. Marchevski, *Mitko Palauzov*, Sofiya 1951.

²⁰ I. Marchevska, *Tayniyat zhiivot na Marko Marchevski: memoari*, Sofiya 2017.

²¹ Tr. Palauzov, *Mitko – sinat na otriyada*, Sofiya 1972.

representatives of the so called “artistic intelligentsia” – Nikolai Zidarov²², Georgi Avgarski²³, Maria Grubeshlieva²⁴ and others were engaged.

In the early 1960s, Mitko Palauzov was the only “child hero” whose house was turned into a museum. The burned house of the Palauzov family was “restored” and opened as a museum in 1962, one of the main objects attracting pupils from all over the country. His father, who had started a new family, was made to meet with visiting members of Bulgaria’s Communist youth organisations and tell and retell the gory details of the last hours of his son on a daily basis. Just before the opening of the museum, on the main square close to Mitko’s school, a monument was raised presenting him with a pistol in his hand²⁵. In 1964, “Unfinished Games” – a movie devoted to Mitko – was screened²⁶.



The monument to Mitko Palauzov holding a gun in the town of Gabrovo, [in:] *A House-museum of Mitko Palauzov in the city of Gabrovo*, <https://gabrovodld.weebly.com> [accessed: 10.03.2021]

²² N. Zidarov, *Balada za partizancheto s rusi kosi*, [in:] *Hilyada i trista proleti: Stihove za detsa i yunoshi*, ed. N. Zidarov, Sofiya 1980.

²³ G. Avgarski, *Mitko Palauzov*, Ts. Petrov, *Mitko Palauzov*, Sofiya 1971.

²⁴ M. Grubeshlieva, *Mitko Paluzov: Poema za detsa*, Sofiya 1967.

²⁵ M. Dimitrova, *Semeystvo Palauzovi – nedolyubvani i pri sotsializma, i pri demokratsiyata*, http://www.bgsever.info/br-03_2009/stranici/str-11.htm [accessed: 12.10.2022].

²⁶ *Unfinished Games* (1964), directed by Simeon Shivachev.

If Mitko Palauzov was an “exemplary” child personage of the communist propaganda about a class conscious “child hero”, the case of the “six children from Yastrebinno” is an example of the regime’s glorification of children – innocent victims of “fascist cruelty”. On 20 December 1943, near the village of Yastrebinno, 18 people were shot, among them 6 children aged 7 to 13. The martyr image of the “Six children from Yastrebinno” was created later than that of Mitko Palauzov. In the early 1960s, they were known on a regional scale: poetry and prose about them was published by the District Museum and the District Library in the town of Targovishte²⁷. Only in 1969, the novel “Bullets are Singing in Yastrebinno” by Bogdan Gloginski contributed to the nationwide memory of the childvictims²⁸. Gradually, they were turned into another emblem of child heroism. In 1975, “The Children of Yastrebinno”, a ballade cantata in 8 parts e was composed, using the verses of the famous Nikolay Zidarov²⁹. By the late 1970s, the National Memorial Pioneer Complex “Yastrebinno”, devoted to child heroes, was established. The opening of the complex was related to the 35th anniversary of the Young Pioneer organisation³⁰. The complex turned immediately into a place of active ideological and educational activity targeted at the Pioneers and Komsomol members³¹. A year later, the destiny of the children from Yastrebinno was recreated in a movie “Fists in the Dust”, starring famous Bulgarian actors³².



Todor Zhivkov at the opening of the Six Yastrebinno Children Memorial, 1979, [in:] *168 hours /newspaper/*, <https://www.168chasa.bg/article/9594725> [accessed: 10.03.2021]

²⁷ M. Gaydarova, Y. Bobeva, *Bezsmartie: Stihove i razkazi za sheste yastrebincheta*, Targovishte 1968; M. Ovcharova, Hr. Stanev, *Kogato izgryavashe zorata: Razkaz za selo Yastrebinno i sheste razstrelyani detsa*, Targovishte 1962.

²⁸ B. Gloginski, *V Yastrebinno sviryat kurshumi: Zapiski za edna esen, za edna zima i za edin razstrel v Tuzluka*, Sofiya 1969.

²⁹ D. Petkov, *Detsata na Yastrebinno: baladichna kantata v 8 chasti*, Sofiya 1975.

³⁰ T. Zhivkov, *Dostoyni naslednitsi i prodalzhiteli na veliko delo*, Sofiya 1979.

³¹ Hr. Stanev, *Natsionalen pionerski kompleks “Yastrebinno”*, Sofiya 1984.

³² *Fists in the Dust* (1980), directed by Milen Getov.

It did not mean that in the ideological construction of the biographies of “the child heroes” or “child victims”, a strict sacred canon was followed: they had to serve as a worthy example for the youngsters of the People’s Republic of Bulgaria, as “martyrs” of the class. One of the most important ideological tasks was turning youngsters into “worthy sons of the class”, as a popular slogan said. Together with the case of Mitko Palauzov and the children of Yastrebino, two cousins – Vasil and Sava Kokareshkovi from the village of Belitsa were an example of representative child heroism related to the canon of ideological death.



The most popular photo: a collage of Vasil and Sava Kokareshkov, [in:] *Pirinsko delo / newspaper*/, 12.04.1967, p. 3

2. “The heroes of Belitsa” – constructing the memory about Vasil and Sava Kokareshkov

Vasil and Sava Kokareshkov came from the village of Belitsa (today a town). During the partisan movement, the basic part of the partisan unit “Nikola Parapunov” was formed by the residents of Yakoruda, Razlog and Belitsa.

The political establishment after 9 September 1944 turned the biographies of the partisans into important social capital. The “fighters against fascism” turned into a privileged caste in a socialist society, egalitarian by definition³³. In the search of possibly more heroic trajectories of their own biographies, they actively founded and sustained the new heroic cult. For them, the death of “brothers in arms” or relatives often provided a possibility for a better biography and a higher social position in



The book: “The Heroes of Belitsa” 1970

³³ M. Angelova, *Savetizatsiya na pametta. Sayuzat na boytsite protiv fashizma i proizvodstvo na pamet (1945–1951)*, [in:] *Balgarskiyat sotsializam: ideologiya, vsekidnevnie, pamet*, eds A. Luleva et al., Sofiya 2021, pp. 289–302; P. Vodenicharov, M. Angelova, “Partiyata–mayka” i neynite “geroichni sinove”. *Rolyata na antifashistkiya diskurs v edno klientelistko balkansko obshtestvo*, *Balkanistichen forum* 2008, 1–2, pp. 240–250.

the communist society. Officially, 59 guerrilla fighters from Belitsa were acknowledged as “fighters against fascism”; more were supporters of the partisans and those who “suffered as a result of fascism”³⁴. Along with the eternalizing of the memory of the heroes – the partisans from the region in 1942–1944: Ivan Kozarev, Nikola Parapunov, Asen Lagadinov and others – Vasil and Sava Kokareshkov, the cousins from Belitsa, were included into the regional heroic pantheon of the “Resistance” –. Soon, their biography together with the biography of Mitko Palauzov became known to every child in the Republic, while they were identified as “the heroes of Belitsa”.

The officially replicated biography of the two children was presented in “Remember their childhood”, a collection for children³⁵. Sava Nikolov Kokareshkov was born on 30 August 1928 in the village of Belitsa, in a “poor working-peasant family”. Emphasized was the fact that his father was a volunteer in the Macedonian-Edirne revolutionary movement since 1912 and took part in the siege of Edirne during the Balkan War³⁶. This is an important ideological content because, in exactly two sentences, the boy was marked by inherited heroism. It was pointed out that Vasil Nikolov Kokareshkov was born on 9 January 1928 in the village of Belitsa, and his parents were not interested in politics.

The two boys were second cousins and the official biography pointed out that they were inseparable – in the winter they used to go to school, in the summer they shepherded sheep. Since young age, “ecstatic, they were listening to the stories of grandpa Timcho (Vasil’s grandfather) about the misery and misfortunes of the Bulgarian people under the Turkish rule [...]. They absorbed the love to Russia and the Soviet Union”³⁷. According to the matrix of this type of biographical story, at school this love was transfer on Russia and the Soviet Union. They often argued with “the wealthy children at school that Russia is our liberator and it is the biggest and the most powerful country in the world”. It was pointed out that they were dismissed from the primary school because of their biased statements about the Soviet Union in a geography class in 1942. In the same year, they met for the first time Ivan Kozarev (Balkan), known as the first partisan in Bulgaria³⁸. This moment played a key role in their way to heroism: “During this meeting he told him about the cause the

³⁴ State Archives (SA) – Blagoevgrad, collection (coll.) ЧП16Б, pp. 1–4.

³⁵ “Remember their childhood!” is a collection of essays about children and teenagers who died in the antifascist struggle. It enjoyed 8 editions after its first publishing in 1959.

³⁶ Sl. Dzherekarova, *Nezalichima sleda*, [in:] *Pomni tyahnoto detstvo: Ochertsii za detsa i yunoshi, zaginali v antifashistkata borba*, ed. V. Filipova, Sofiya 1984, pp. 74–102.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 78.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 83–84.

partisans were fighting for, about their life in the mountains, about the misfortunes and the victories of the Red Army. Since that very day, Vasil and Sava Kokareshkov became supporters of the Rila – Pirin partisan unit”³⁹.

They supplied food for the partisans, informed them about the actions of the police in the village etc. To bridge their image with that of the Soviet hero Pavlik Morozov, in their official biography the element of sacrificing their loyalty to a relative was introduced – they stole bullets from the house of their uncle, a policeman, and gave them to the partisans.

A meeting held in a place close to the village on 15 June 1944 was of consequences to the cousins, where a “partisan conference” was held. After returning from the meeting, the cousins were arrested and interrogated. Not admitting anything about the partisans, the cousins were brought to the village “tied up and beaten”. In the police station of Belitsa and later in Razlog, the interrogations and brutal tortures continued but the children kept silent and denied any connections with the partisans⁴⁰. In “The small heroes of Belitsa”, an essay by K. Madolev, the admissions of “one of the gendarmes” were quoted for authenticity. During the “People’s Court” (1945)⁴¹, after the communist take-over, he signed admissions that during the interrogations of the two shepherds, “such unhuman methods of torture were applied that elderly men could hardly have survived”⁴². The circumstances of his admissions remain an open question.

The official version of the biographies of the two boys continued with their severe death, slain in the police station and thrown to the dogs. This version is based only on the admissions of captain Nikolchev, admissions granted again during a “People’s Court”. He was shot immediately after signing the witness testimony; later a death sentence was issued. The captian’s words are usually = quoted word by word in the biographies of the boys: “We were fast in killing the two boys, Vasil and Sava Kokareshkov. One of the gendarmes entered the room where the boys were arrested and slain them. We were afraid that their bodies would be discovered

³⁹ Ibidem, p. 84.

⁴⁰ Ibidem, p. 87.

⁴¹ “The People’s Court” – a special court of Communist Bulgaria, established after the communist coup in Bulgaria in 1944 and set up outside the constitutional law. A total of 9,155 people were sentenced. Of these 2,730 to death, and 1,305 received life sentences. It remains unknown how many executions were carried out: I. Znepolski et al., *Bulgaria under Communism*, London 2018, p. 73.

⁴² K. Madolev, *Malkite geroi na Belitsa: ocherk*, – *Arhiv na Muzeyna istoricheska sbirka kam chitalishte “G. Todorov”*, Belitsa 1974, manuscript.

and since they were underaged, we killed them without a court sentence. That is why I ordered no traces of the killing to be left. Later I received a report from the gendarmes that the dogs were fed by the bodies of the boys for a week. This is how no single trace from the partisan supporters was left”⁴³. In this way, according to the circulated biographies, “the short but heroic lives of the two youngest supporters of the partisans of »Nikola Parapunov« unit ended”⁴⁴.

After more than 70 years of repeating the canonic martyr course of their lives. In the time of communism filters, any alternatives and any attempt at counter-memory were repressed; the ideologized canon was guarded very strictly until now.

The heroization of Vasil and Sava Kokareshkov on a regional level started in early 1945. “Pirin’s Mission”, a newspaper printed on 3 September 1945 the first big article, entitled “Our Comrades – Heroes”⁴⁵. It was again Marko Marchevski who made their biographies famous nationwide. In 1950, shortly before the novel “Mitko Palauzov”, the first edition of “The heroes of Belitsa” was published⁴⁶. The novel enjoyed 9 editions until 1985 in immense circulations; it was an item on the compulsory literature list for the pioneers in the whole country⁴⁷. The biographies of the Kokareshkovs were included in the following editions: “Children forever”⁴⁸, “The Red Primer”⁴⁹, “Remember their childhood”⁵⁰, “Child Battle Units”⁵¹ and others.

The heroic topography of the “partisan” town of Belitsa was designed back in the 1940s. Memory of the boys was honored as they became patrons of working collectives and pioneer units. The street that hosted the house of Sava Kokareshkov was named after Vasil and Sava Kokareshkov⁵². The young partisans and their supporters gave names to streets, schools, enterprises.

⁴³ Ibidem, p. 12.

⁴⁴ Пиринско дело [Pirin’s Deed], 78, 8.07.1969, 4.

⁴⁵ Пиринско дело 23, 3.09.1945, 4.

⁴⁶ I. Marchevski, *Geroite na Belitsa*, Sofiya 1950.

⁴⁷ The last edition in 1985 together with “Party secret” in 160,110 copies (I. Marchevski, *Geroite na Belitsa; Partiyina tayna*, Sofiya 1985).

⁴⁸ N. Yaneva-Petrova, *Na detstvoto vechni vrasnitsi: Detsa i yunoshi, zaginali vav vaorazhenata borba na balgarskiya narod protiv fashizma 1941–1944*, Sofiya 1984.

⁴⁹ *Chervena chitanka: Detsa i yunoshi, zaginali v antifashistkata borba*, ed. I. Dinkov, I. Angelov, Sofiya 1988.

⁵⁰ *Pomni tyahnoto detstvo: Ochertsy za detsa i yunoshi, zaginali v antifashistkata borba*, ed. V. Filipova, Sofiya 1959.

⁵¹ B. Gloginski, M. Nikolov, *Polkovete na detsata: Dokumentalen roman*, Sofiya 1981.

⁵² K. Madolev, *Malkite geroi*.

The idea of putting up a monument to the child heroes was originated in Belitsa in the early 1950s⁵³. It was not until 1962 when specific measures were taken. A national student campaign for gathering funds was announced. Nikolay Vladov-Shmirgela, a famous sculptor, was entrusted with erecting the monument. The monument was officially unveiled on 17 June 1967⁵⁴.



The monument of Vasil and Sava Kokareshkov in Belitsa, Private archive (Milena Angelova)

Back in 1954, in the school of Belitsa a special “room of the heroes” was organised. The room housed the portraits of the Kokareshkov cousins, their pouch and political map of the world were hanged on a wall. On the children’s school desk their names were engraved, accompanied by their photos. A special rule was elaborated: only the class of the best and most disciplined pupils was allowed to study in that room, and only brilliant students could sit at the desk of the heroes⁵⁵.

⁵³ SA–Blagoevgrad, collection (coll.) 55, inventory (inv.) 3, archival unit (a.u.) 1, p. 51.

⁵⁴ *Pirinsko delo* (Pirin’s Deed) 71, 20.06.1967, 3.

⁵⁵ *Rabotnichesko delo* (Worker’s Deed) 306, 2.09.1979, 4.

Meanwhile, the monument and the square in front of the school were turned into space of organized children's rituals: the annual initiations of the students into the Young Pioneer organization and visiting Pioneer groups from all over the country. During these rituals, meetings with relatives of the young heroes and former partisans who knew them were held. Almost weekly, their biographies and the scaring details of their martyr death were narrated. These meetings were held since 1953; the first one was attended by Nikola Kokareshkov, the father of Vasil Kokareshkov. This was common practice, be it the father of Mitko Palauzov or the father of the famous partisan Vela Peeva⁵⁶ and others.

No special museum was founded for the "heroes of Belitsa", as it was the case with Mitko Palauzov. When the local museum was established, a part of its collection was devoted to Vasil and Sava Kokareshkov. In it, a few of the surviving objects owned by the boys were shown: a shepherd's bag, a winter hat, Vasil's birth certificate, the children's medals, awarded posthumously. Photos of celebrations and initiatives of the Pioneer units in Belitsa were also on display. In a showcase, different editions of "The Heroes of Belitsa" were shown.

Conclusion

In Bulgarian communist culture, the figure of a heroic child is a "widespread phenomenon". Bulgarians born in the early 1980s or earlier know at least ten names of "Pioneer heroes"⁵⁷. They had to learn about Pavlik Morozov, Zoja Kosmodemjanskaja, Volodja Dubinin, Mitko Palauzov, since their biographies were a part of the school curriculum and an essential foundation of many extracurricular activities.

It is difficult to identify the extent to which the legendary image of the communist child-hero is related to reality. The children's biographies share similar and often repeated information revolving around the same template where the heroic-martyr rhetoric abounds. The moments in the process of heroization are the same; the titles of the chapters are cliché phrases, without exception. In all the cases, possible over-exposition of the most sinister elements of their heroic biographies are checked. In the mythmaking of child heroes, they were assigned qualities and virtues that they did not suspect to have, including class consciousness. Eventually, the tragedy of real child victims in non-child conflicts is surveyed. Later, they were turned into

⁵⁶ M. Angelova, *Muzeyat na Vela Peeva – "zvezdnata" zhenska geroika na komunizma i lokalniyat "rezervat" na pametta*, Balkanistichen forum 2017, 2, pp. 20–36.

⁵⁷ S. Maslinskaya, *Be Always Ready!*, pp. 250–302.

a propaganda symbol and a part of the pantheon of heroic-utopian figures of one political regime.

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