

UTOPIAN BULGARIAS. LITERARY PROJECTS AND POLITICS

AVANT-GARDE AND ANARCHISM IN BULGARIA IN THE 1920s. PART 2: GEO MILEV AND GEORGI SHEYTANOV

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The early 1920s were related to the dying of symbolistic poetry and the coming of the wave of the so-called "-isms", the interwar avant-garde is connected to in our country. The most distinct presence is the Yambol avant-garde with journal "Crescendo", as it established the Dadaism (as part of futurism), and Geo Milev, considered to be the most vivid representative of expressionism (the 3rd stage in the modernism of Bulgarian literature). These important literary and cultural changes took place in the background of major political developments highlighting the period of the 1920s: the USSR was established after the October Revolution, fascism was established, and this period in Bulgaria was marked by the September Uprising of 1923 (riots of the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP) to overthrow the regime under the influence of the Communist International, a.k.a. the Comintern, and the bombing of the Church of St. Nedelya in 1925 (an act of terrorism by the Military Organization of the BCP). At the center of the changes, there were two important figures – one we have already mentioned – Geo Milev, the other one was the journalist and anarchist Georgi Sheytanov. Avant-garde and anarchism, speech and power, literature and politics – two sides of the same coin.

Georgi Sheytanov – the anarchist journalist

Georgi Vasilev Sheytanov was born on February 14, 1896, in Yambol – the cradle of Dadaism, so it is somehow not a coincidence at the end of his life he was directed to support literary activity, namely the publishing of the Plamak (Flame) Journal with Editor-in-Chief Geo Milev. He came from a family engaged in viticulture, agriculture and commerce. His mother, Pena, passed on her surname prefix (Hadji – the one who went on pilgrimage to Jerusalem) to her husband, Vassil, and their last name became Hadjigeorgiev. However, the name he was known by came from a story with his great-grandfather Georgi, he was named after and who managed to tame a violent Turkish horse. Then he received the nickname Sheytanov, that is, the Devil's. Later, when he went underground (and so was he for the rest of his life), Sheytanov visited Jesus' Tomb in Jerusalem and joked he was the first Shaytan to become a hajj pilgrim – Hadji Devil.

Ever since junior high, Georgi showed extreme self-love. He himself studied French and Russian. He read a lot – the Bulgarian revolutionary poet Botev, the Russian classics Gogol and Tolstoy, Chekhov, and the Bible, of course. He carried books even when he was fleeing illegally to the Balkan mountains, sometimes tearing away parts so they wouldn't weigh on him while running. Thus, the young Sheytanov shaped his revolutionary worldview – from books, from the great and brave fights of the Bulgarian revolutionaries, from the events around the time of the French Revolution, the Paris commune, etc. Very soon, in 1911-13, he became part of the clubs promoting left-wing ideas: narrow and broad socialists, anarchists. He took part in the arson of the Yambol Court in 1913 in regard with the destruction of documents against fellow revolutionaries. He was arrested for the first time, escaped from prison and never returned to legal life.

From 1913 onwards, his life took place on trips abroad and became a fugitive from the authorities. He established many connections in Bulgarian immigrant circles in Bucharest and Paris, but before the outbreak of the First World War he returned to Bulgaria. He found hot preparations for the inclusion of Bulgaria on the side of Germany. He created many illegal groups in Haskovo, Yambol and Kazanlak. He was attributed to murders – he did not actually commit – because of his anti-fascist activities and he was wanted by the authorities: the latter eventually dealt with him and our entire intelligentsia (intelligent, educated and prominent

people) in an extremely cruel way. He is accused of the murders of guards from Plovdiv, gained the fame of a terrorist and was locked up in the Plovdiv prison. He repeatedly raised riots there and then at Sofia Central Prison, where he plotted and carried out an escape from together with more comrades in 1917. New trips to Romania followed, after the Vladaic riots he returned to Bulgaria, engaged in the establishment of the periodicals "Rabotnicheska misal" ("Worker's Thought") and "Probuda".

His family's house became the center of revolutionary preparation. At that time (1919) he travelled mainly with Zhelyu Grozev. One day they decided to attack the postal car with the intention of supplying weapons using the stolen money from the car, but they were captured, taken to Yambol, and then to the Sliven Prison. Another escape followed. In the subsequent years, he established anarchist organizations for revolutionary activity, inspired women to join the anarchist work. In 1923, the so-called "Yambol events" happened when anarchist groups rose to riots over a government decree to seize all weapons from people's homes. This act, jointly with the bitterness of the September riots, the Vladaic events, the Ninth-June coup forced Sheytanov to go to Sofia, determined to establish an organization against this reaction. The Plamak journal started to be published, and according to Vladimir Sheytanov it was managed by Georgi Sheytanov in cooperation with Geo Milev. It is very likely Sheytanov really helped financially the journal, as he gave Geo Milev money for the endeavor in mysterious ways; he was the one who would later give funds to Mila Mileva the following year, but it would be too late to save the poet.

Anarchism as philosophy and work. Shaytanov's views

As already mentioned earlier, Sheytanov was actively involved in cultural circles, he published pieces in the periodicals, mainly in the "Rabotnicheska Misal" and the anarchist papers at the time. There were publications in Bulgarian newspapers and magazines even when he was abroad, so strong and uncompromising was his influence, so high was the respect for him because of his innovative views and sober assessments (although it is somewhat strange, considering the anarchist ideology he preached). In the memories of him, there was no one who did not claim Sheytanov was a trustworthy man, confident and active – qualities calling for trust in his followers and comrades. In one of his letters, Mila G. Mileva, Geo Milev's wife, wrote: *"Ever since the first visits of S. at our home, Geo was fascinated by him; and I myself felt he radiated some charm no one could resist to, and Geo himself gave a great succumb to it."* And a bit more: *"I valued G.S. as an extraordinary person who shone with all-round erudition and subjected everyone who came to know him"* (Mileva 2016: 137).

Anarchism as an ideology is rooted in the existence of a powerless society with no class division. Naturally, the state and the bourgeoisie hold all power, and Sheytanov wrote about them in a letter-of-appeal named the "Letter to anarchists": "The bourgeoisie is a "smart" plebeian. Its gypsiness is "genius." It considers it a feat to eat its brother while with the shirt on. This fat lady wearing fake diamonds around her neck, this pimp who doesn't squeamish about his craft – here's this creature the proletariat will have to throw away by grabbing them for the ears" (Sheytanov 2016a: 19).

An ideologist, Sheytanov learnt from, was Mikhail Bakunin, who formulated the postulates of classical anarchism of the 1860s and 1870s. Before that, anarchism was anarchic collectivism and anarchic individualism. That's why, in Sheytanov's views, it's as if we're discovering both. On the one hand, individualism, because of the infatuation of the "lone fighter" (Dobrev 1994) – characteristic of his other "teacher" – Hristo Botev). In the poem "Stranger," the lyrical Self resembles very much the one of Botev, though it also contained something of the symbolic poetry:

He's coming – poor (...) / He's coming – a bright stranger (...) In his bright gaze the Calvary is light (...) Rebellious crowds, follow him with rebel...) The voice of the crowds is carried by his voice" etc.

The chosen one, the Christlike, led the crowds, and here the other side was hiding – the collectivism and the belief change would come only through revolution, if not the working

class, that is, the proletariat, then at least of the peasantry. Sheytanov saw among the villagers that raw power, which was repressed, enslaved and working for the foreign man-pleasing. In his article "Peasants and Anarchism", published in the Anarchist newspaper, Sheytanov sharply criticized "the lenders, the state, the lords" (Sheytanov 2016b: 39), as well as the supposedly "rural" government of Stamboliyski, where "in association with rural lords they robbed the working peasants no worse than all other governments" (Ibid., 39). The main culprits for the unpaid rural labour are capitalists and governments, as each government "is a legalized suckery, theft of other people's work" (Ibid., 41). The construction of a new system, of that bright future not only anarchists aspired to, was rooted – according to Sheytanov – in stable moral foundations, and they could be set by the self-perfecting personality-strange-lead. At the end of the day, he decreed the ideal of anarchists: "*Anarchists want a free labour society, a society without government and capitalists, without casts, standing away from the production, without suckers-parasites*" (Ibid., 41).

"Plamak" and the friendship between Geo Milev and Georgi Sheytanov

The Plamak journal was published in 1924 and 1925 (only one issue). It collected poetry, prose, criticism, author portraits, reviews, translations of foreign literature, and as a layout it possessed vignettes, images, illustrations. It was defined as a "Monthly Art and Culture Journal" and for a while it indeed was a monthly periodical. However, the sixth issue was seized by the authorities and the journal stopped being published until November 1924, when issues #7-8 for Sep-Oct and #9-10 for Nov-Dec were released. In the first double edition, the poem "Septemvri" was published for the first time, and Geo Milev wrote on behalf of the journal the article "Police Criticism" in connection with the attempt to silence the author's voice and stop the printing of the "Plamak" in compliance of the SPL – the State Protection Law (Act), adopted by the government of Alexander Tsankov and entered into force on 23 January 1924. The basis of the State Protection Act became the "law for robbers" introduced by Stamboliyski, as it stipulated every "robber", that is, someone uncomfortable to the authority (completely subjectively, of course!), must surrender within five days, otherwise anyone might kill them without being criminally charged. The anarchists were "covered" under the umbrella of this law – as Nikola Milev, one of the founders of the People's Alliance (Naroden sgovor) party, said more or less as follows in his lecture: "*Gentlemen students,*" Milev said from the desk, "*Colleagues! The anarchists in our country, you know, are outlaws. And robbers,*" he added, "*should be killed like rabid dogs!....*" (Karastoyanov 2014: 261)

Over the years, the SPL was supplemented several times, but at its core remained a repressive law. On its basis, the "Plamak" was suspended by the authorities, and Geo Milev was sent to court for the publication of the poem "Septemvri". Combining social and literary criticism, the "Plamak" became an arena for both a change in aesthetic thinking and a change in society. In addition to the works of art, we also encounter articles related to public and political life, as stated in the first issue of the journal.

Georgi Sheytanov also published there – several poems, and mainly articles about art and the relationship between art and society (The "Art and Man" was his first publication in the Journal in issue # 2 from 1924), signing it as Georgi Vasilev or Georgi Sheytan. His other signatures were Georg, G.S., G.,V., Georges Satan's (making an excellent pun with his last name).

The contact points between Sheytanov and Geo Milev were not only in terms of their commitment to the "hottest gossips of the day" and their cultural attitude. They were available through the relationship between the ideas of anarchism and the postulates, the "Plamak" and Geo Milev as a name in Bulgarian literature in general set. The utopianism of the masses, made up of a well-soldered human workforce, was one of the ideals of that time, the people were mainly an actor where the individual forces of its composing parts were concentrated, yet individualism as a concept had been already shifted, although it gave the basis of anarchism. Probably it was here Geo Milev and Georgi Sheytanov got away with it at some point. From today's point of view, people like Sheytanov and Geo Milev are idealists. Faith in the bright

future through struggle has actually been the belief of most poets since Botev (even before him). Georgi Sheytanov and Geo Milev were also represented as utopians in Hristo Karastoyanov's novel "One and the same night". The unhappy sorder of these two fates was their tragic end, as to this day it remained unclear and unspoken, especially the death of Georgi Sheytanov. Both died, along with the cream of the intelligentsia, among them Hristo Yassenov and Joseph Herbst. They were killed in a particularly cruel way. Geo Milev was shot in the back of the head and thrown into a mass grave. His body was found and identified only because of the presence of his artificial eye he had (wore) after a projectile during the war blew almost half of his head. The date of Sheytanov's death is indicated as June 2, 1925. There are several versions of the place and the way his sentence was carried out. One says he was shot at Belovo station, along with 12-13 others by guards and soldiers. They were thrown into a mass grave, found in 1947, and Sheytanov's body was identified by the fact he was beheaded, possibly forcibly separated from the body. The second hypothesis is that Sheytanov was separated from the group and taken to Gorna Dzhumaya by Yonko Vaptsarov – Nikola Vaptsarov's father, where a court headed by the Military League and Ivan Mihaylov killed him for his professional activities, cuts off his head and buried him in Gorna Dzhumaya region. The other versions talk about him being killed separately in Gorna Dzhumaya, but he was buried with the others in Belovo, etc. The fact is the truth never became clear, the remains of Sheytanov's decapitated body from the mass grave in Belovo were buried solemnly and placed for worship in December 1947 in the Club of the Communist Party of Bulgaria. However, no one cared about the murders, no one was looking for those responsible for the deaths of some of the most significant individuals in the public-political and literary life in the 20th century – Geo Milev and Georgi Sheytanov.

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