

Literary Ferment in Bulgaria

By STEFAN MARINOFF

ON February 2, 1956, Radio Sofia, the official voice of the Bulgarian Communist regime, belatedly broadcasted to its listeners the text of a hitherto unreported but highly significant speech which Premier Vulko Chervenkov (since demoted as head of the government) had delivered five weeks earlier (December 28, 1955) at a closed conference of the Communist Party group within the Bulgarian Writers' Union.¹ The speech simultaneously made its first appearance in print in the weekly organ of the Writers' Union, *Literaturen Front*, and also was publicized in other principal party organs over the next two days.

While the regime's motives in suddenly baring a pronouncement which it had kept under wraps for more than a month were obscure, the importance of Chervenkov's speech itself was abundantly plain. First, it lifted the lid on the development, among hitherto loyal Bulgarian Communist writers, of mounting opposition to party shackles on literary freedom. Such opposition had found spasmodic voice in published articles during 1955, and had been tolerated by the regime; but at the December writers' conference it had—according to Chervenkov—assumed the proportions of a virtual anti-party revolt.

Second, in the face of this challenge, Chervenkov's speech bluntly warned that "petty bourgeois tendencies against the party line in literature must be strangled in the embryonic stage" and that any attempt at undermining, under the guise of "freedom to criticize," "the tested party principles of literary guidance by the Central Committee of the party" would not be tolerated. In short, the pronouncement served notice that the Bulgarian extension of the Moscow-originated "thaw" in literature will henceforth be kept strictly within bounds of innuendo.

¹ On April 8 the BCP Central Committee issued a statement condemning the "cult of the individual" built up "around the person of Comrade Vulko Chervenkov." Chervenkov resigned as premier April 16 and was replaced by Anton Yugov, former first deputy premier. Chervenkov remains a deputy premier.

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It is noteworthy and certainly not purely coincidental, that the eruption of discontent at the December conference came almost on the heels of a similar rebellion against party domination of literature in Bulgaria's fellow satellite, Hungary. Except for the fact that the Bulgarian affair was lent added weight by the direct, personal intervention of the chief of state, the essential elements and outcome of the two controversies were the same.²

The Assault on Literary Dictatorship

A common feature of both revolts was the launching by the rebels of a concerted attack on the leadership of the Writers' Union, the main instrument of party control in the literary sphere. At the December conference, Chervenkov's speech revealed, the Bulgarian insurgents had charged the union leadership, headed by Secretary General Khristo Radevski, not only with dictatorial conduct but with total incompetence. Ivan Rudnikov, Ivan Martinov and Ivan Burin, among others specifically named by Chervenkov, had decried these failings as the main cause of the unsatisfactory development of Bulgarian literature and had dared to demand the removal of the entire union leadership because it had accomplished nothing whatever of a positive nature.

Behind the facade of these attacks Chervenkov discerned an insidious attempt on the part of the insurgents to "weaken the party positions in literature and its leadership of the Writers' Union." Indeed, he declared, Rudnikov had had the impudence to accuse the party Central Committee itself of "bureaucratic direction" of the union, while Srebrov, another recalcitrant had dared assert that the Central Committee "meddled too much" in literature.

Chervenkov voiced particular displeasure at the fact that, when these "slandorous" accusations were made, none of the Communist writers present at the conference had protested or demanded that the authors back up their allegations with proof. On the contrary, judging by the applause which had greeted

² See Ferenc Kormendi's article dealing with the Hungarian writer's revolt elsewhere in this issue.

some of the charges, it appeared that many of those present approved and supported such anti-party views.

The proceedings, Chervenkov continued, could not be defended—as some writers had attempted—on the grounds of “freedom to criticize,” for they smacked more of an attempt to introduce “unhealthy moods and tendencies whispered by forces of darkness” than of concern for worthwhile criticism. He went on:

The Communist Party does not favor any kind of criticism. To its way of thinking, freedom is not an absolute concept, as the anarchists conceive it to be, which does not take account of reality. There is no absolute freedom. Freedom, like everything else, must be presented concretely and in a definite frame of reference. We Communists view the world from the standpoint of the working class. What benefits that class and promotes its triumph is right and we support it; what obstructs the working class we reject. We are for criticism which strengthens us; we are against criticism which seeks to undermine us.

The indiscriminate attacks made at the conference, declared Chervenkov, were clearly opposed to the party's concept of “creative criticism.” This was particularly evident since the attackers had used the union leadership only as a “practice target” while aiming their real shafts “higher up—in fact, at the Central Committee of the party.” Thus, for example, Rudnikov—who drew the premier's heaviest and most frequent fire—had charged that Secretary General Radevski was “surrounded by enemies.” Since Radevski's entourage embraced the Central Committee, it required little intelligence to see that Rudnikov was attacking the party leadership. Continued Chervenkov:

Are we to stand by and tolerate this in the name of freedom of criticism? No, comrades! Such freedom of criticism we do not recognize. . . . We are now forced to resist the petty bourgeois views which have infiltrated into the union; our resistance must be decisive.

Although Chervenkov assured the conference that “resistance” did not mean “choking off the comrades who here . . . expressed unhealthy tendencies,” his reference in the very next paragraph to Nikola Petkov, Bulgarian agrarian leader tried and executed by the Communists in 1947, had a clearly ominous ring. Petkov, he recalled, had voiced criticisms which contained some grains of truth but which could not be tolerated because they were intended to undermine “the foundations of our regime.” Rudnikov's criticism likewise contained grains of truth, but how—asked Chervenkov—“can we accept it when it is advanced under harmful slogans and undermines the foundations of party discipline?”

The Party Pall on Literature

TURNING his attention to developments prior to the December conference, Chervenkov vigorously condemned two other Communist writers who had used the columns of the union organ, *Literaturen Front*, to give vent publicly to “entirely unacceptable” and “erroneous” views. The first of these authors was Pavel Vezhinov, a member of the union leadership, who had also reiterated his opinions at the conference, thus furnishing ammunition to the Rudnikov group.

According to Chervenkov, Vezhinov's article in *Literaturen Front* had alleged that in practice Bulgarian writers enjoy no creative freedom nor right to make literary experiments, and that this was one of the main causes for the decline of Bulgarian literature. In Vezhinov's view, the works of contemporary Bulgarian writers resembled one another like so many eggs; the author's creative impulses had been stifled and a deadly uniformity had seized literature, resulting



Caption above: Book learning, that mighty power.

Caption below: Whose fault is it?

—From *Literaturen Front*, Sofia, January 14, 1954.

in stagnation. Chervenkov then quoted verbatim from the article:

The writer is beginning to lose faith in his ideas, his literary values and artistic methods. Thereby he is losing his style, his creative individuality and independence. . . . I can see this process going on within myself. . . . I have lost much of my writer's individuality . . . and in exactly the same way the differentiating characteristics of my colleagues are fading. Somehow all of us, without noticing it, have become lost in a gray, impersonal mass.³

But, asked Chervenkov rhetorically, who was responsible for such shortcomings, if not the writers themselves? No one had forbidden Vezhinov to write according to the dictates of his heart; no one had instructed him how to write, for the party "is against such tutorship and regimentation and fights them with all its force." Chervenkov's next words, however, were most revealing:

Obviously he [Vezhinov] is being devoured by some kind of mistrust as to the rightness of our cause. Or maybe it is hesitation or doubt . . . that is what his troubles come from. That is where the hesitations of other writers without a solid Marxist-Leninist ideology stem from.

The "creative freedom" demanded by Vezhinov, the premier continued, could become a mask for the infiltration of "formalism and other forms of decadent bourgeois art." And even if Vezhinov himself did not mean to ask for removal of party control over literature, his conclusions were obviously "pleasing to those who do want it."

Chervenkov went on to voice agreement with Secretary General Radevski's view that complaints about a lack of creative freedom for writers stemmed from "misunderstanding" and a tendency "to confuse propaganda shortcomings with party policy."⁴ Literature could not develop independently of the general party line and party propaganda, but various literary organs often took a narrow view of propaganda requirements and sought to restrict literary activity to guidelines which they conceived of as party directives. This led to a tendency among writers to gloss over unpleasant facts, to avoid tackling the shady aspects of reality and shun controversial subjects. Such distortion or schematic representation of reality, however, could not be laid at the door of the party, but was the result of a false interpretation of party directives.

Despite this protestation of party liberality, Chervenkov proceeded in the next breath to launch a

³ Vezhinov's article appeared under the title, "About the Creative Freedom of the Writer," *Literaturen Front*, April 7, 1955.

⁴ Radevski had taken this line in an article published in *Literaturen Front*, September 15, 1955.

vitriolic attack on another writer, Gotcho Gochev, who had published an article in *Literaturen Front* emphasizing the writer's function as a critic of the negative phenomena of socialist reality.⁵ Denouncing the article as a "panegyric on the role of the writer as an exposé only of that which is negative in life," Chervenkov asserted that, according to Gochev, the writer would supplant the party as the conscience of the people. As an example of Gochev's negative approach, he cited the following passage:

When I see the gigantic reservoirs which irrigate the fields, when I see the hundreds of drills boring deep into the earth, I understand why we are still lacking in everything, why our people suffer from privation. I hear the grumbling of the people and understand why they have to tighten their belts so that they may have a better tomorrow.

Chervenkov denounced Gochev's reference to privation as a misrepresentation of fact on the highly dubious ground that only 20 percent of the national income was being allocated for capital investment and the remaining 80 percent for current expenditure.⁶ But worse than this, he added, was Gochev's allusion to popular discontent:

Where did Comrade Gochev get the notion that the people are grumbling against the policy of the party? With what right does he, the Communist critic, appeal to writers to depict this grumbling in their works?

The writer of socialist realism, declared Chervenkov, must be an active fighter in the building of socialism. He cannot fulfill this role if he opposes the party spirit in art and literature. Real artistic creativeness can be achieved only "when based on the party line and on a Marxist-Leninist outlook which has been well assimilated. We want a truthful and artful recreation of our reality which will serve as a militant weapon in the struggle for communism."

The contradiction evident in this last statement emerged even more blatantly in Chervenkov's concluding remarks. On the one hand, he declared: The party spirit in literature has nothing in common with dogmas, schemas and canons; it is organically linked with the greatest creative freedom.

And:

The party has never laid down any prescriptions for the artistic creations of writers; it has never exercised supervision over creative minds or subjected them to control.

⁵ Gochev, "The Writer as an Active Social Builder," *Literaturen Front*, September 15, 1955.

⁶ These figures represent the planned allocations under the State Plan for 1956, as announced by Vice-Premier Georgi Chankov on December 13, 1955 (*Rabotnichesko Delo*, December 14, 1955). They indicate only a slight reduction in the proportion of national income to be spent for capital investment of all kinds, including both industry and agriculture, as compared with 1955.

On the other hand:

Communist writers must be united on matters of the Communist line in literature. They must also be united in applying party decisions in literature. . . . We are not a group of free thinkers; we are a militant group of uniform thinkers.

Sidelights

OF considerable interest in connection with the turbulent developments revealed by Chervenkov's speech was the publication in January, in the Belgrade newspaper *Politika*, of a commentary by the Yugoslav writer, Dushan Kostich, on the current state of Bulgarian literature.⁷ Kostich had recently returned from a two-week visit to Sofia with a delegation of Yugoslav writers, and his views showed the impact of conversations he had had with some of the Bulgarian writers denounced shortly thereafter by Chervenkov at the December conference—notably, Pavel Vezhinov.

Kostich complimented the good work of several individual writers such as Dimiter Dimov, Dimiter Talev and Emilian Stanev, but in general he viewed Bulgarian literature as suffering from stagnation, lack of color, uniformity and schematism. Citing statements by Vezhinov and others not specifically named, he ascribed this deterioration to the fact that intellectual freedom was lacking in the Bulgarian People's Republic and that the party apparatus exercised too rigid a control over literary activity. As a result, there was a loss of creative individuality, and the "positive heroes" in contemporary Bulgarian literature were drawn according to a uniform pattern which made individual profiling impossible.

This leaking-out of the views of the dissatisfied Bulgarian Communist writers in the press of neighboring Yugoslavia very probably was a factor which influenced the decision in Sofia to give belated publicity to Chervenkov's harsh and blunt declarations at the December conference.

In view of these declarations, coupled with the signs of a parallel retreat in Hungary away from the slight liberalization which seemed to be getting started in 1955, it would appear that the "thaw" in Communist literature and cultural activity, so far as these two satellites are concerned, has had a short and not too happy life.

The import of the reversal is plain: The writer's cry for greater freedom is inevitably construed as an

⁷ Dushan Kostich, "Razgovori u Sofiji" (Conversations in Sofia), *Politika*, Belgrade, issue for January 1-3 (published January 1, 1956), p. 12.

attack on the party. For, under communism, literature's only role is to serve as a vehicle of party propaganda. Away, then, with the fleeting illusion that the Communist writer can ever aspire to real freedom of intellectual creation.

As an illustrative footnote to what the Communist concept of creative freedom, reaffirmed by Chervenkov, means in practice, and to the sometimes devious ways in which it is enforced upon the writer, the case of Dimiter Dimov, most gifted of Bulgaria's younger authors, is still enlightening despite the lapse of two years since its culmination.

In 1951 Dimov published his second novel, *Tyutyun* (Tobacco), a story centering around the conflicts between two brothers, one of whom becomes a great tobacco tycoon and the other a Communist partisan leader in wartime Bulgaria. A work distinguished by genuine realism and unusual artistic power, it was an immediate success. The first edition was quickly sold out, and Dimov was rewarded with the Dimitrov prize for 1951.

In the spring of 1952, however, *Literaturen Front* suddenly came out with an article condemning the entire book on the ground that its "negative" (non-Communist) characters were pictured in too sympathetic a light while the "positive" (Communist) figures in the story did not fare well enough.⁸ This attack was curiously followed by a defense of Dimov's work in the official party daily, *Rabotnichesko Delo*, which in turn produced a quick change of tune by *Literaturen Front*.⁹ The ludicrously transparent comedy which ensued showed that this was but window-dressing to demonstrate the party's respect for literary freedom.

The Communist press proceeded to publish a voluminous number of patently inspired "letters from readers" commenting on *Tyutyun*. Shock workers and *kolkhoz* farmers, taking *Rabotnichesko Delo*'s defense of Dimov as their point of departure, penned warm praises of the artistic worth of his novel but at the same time suggested, with rather striking unanimity, that certain defects might well be eliminated in future editions. These defects bore close resemblance to those for which *Literaturen Front* had initially condemned *Tyutyun*.

It was now the author's turn. Dimov, in a published statement, expressed gratitude for the "well-

⁸ Panteley Zarev, "Concerning Full Victory over Anti-realistic Influences," *Literaturen Front*, March 6, 1952.

⁹ Editorial in *Rabotnichesko Delo*, March 1, 1952; Khristo Radevski, "About the State of Our Criticism," *Literaturen Front*, April 22, 1952.

founded criticisms of the masses," which he would certainly take to heart. That he did so was fully apparent when, after the lapse of more than a year, the second edition of *Tyutyun* finally appeared in December 1953. Transformed according to the principles of "socialist realism," the book was scarcely recognizable.

The capitalist tobacco tycoon, who was the principal "negative" figure in Dimov's story, had been repainted in "more objective"—that is, darker—colors. The "positive heroes"—Communist partisan fighters and workers—displayed commendable traits of character far more conspicuously than before, and

a half dozen new heroes had been added.¹⁰ The individuality and verve of the original were gone. A brilliant novel had been reduced to a stereotyped, mediocre piece of party literature.

Such is the practical meaning and effect of the "freedom of creation" and "non-interference of the party in literature" so ingenuously boasted by Chervenkov in the same breath that he admonished the December writers' conference to toe the party line, or else. . . .

¹⁰ The newly added "positive heroes" were workers, partisans or peasants and included a woman worker who rises to membership of the Central Committee of the BCP.

WESTERN EUROPE

The Italian CP

Part II: The Road Toward a Dilemma, 1945-56

By GIORGIO GALLI

EVER since its re-emergence at the close of World War II, the PCI (Partito Comunista Italiano) has consistently hewed to the tactical line laid down by its leader Secretary General Palmiro Togliatti, upon his return to Italy in April 1944. Under that line, the party has soft-pedalled, almost to the point of repudiation, its originally proclaimed role as the avant-garde of proletarian revolution in Italy. It has turned its back on its beginnings as a sect of insurrection-minded agitators and instead, except for a few fleeting lapses, behaved like an eminently respectable mass party seeking to make its influence felt in national affairs through the normal democratic processes of the ballot-box and parliamentary maneuver.

This tactic, which strives to create a broad block of "people's democratic forces" dedicated to promoting Soviet foreign policy objectives, is certainly nothing new in Communist practice and has been followed, in

varying degrees, by all Communist parties in free world countries in the post-war period. But the PCI, under Togliatti, has pursued it further and with greater persistence than any of its counterparts.

There is no question that the Togliatti line has achieved a considerable measure of success in broadening the popular base of the PCI. In the June 1953 national elections, the party obtained over six million votes, almost two million more than it received in the first post-war elections of 1946. Moreover, in conjunction with its ally, the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) under Nenni, the PCI won control of more than one-third of the seats in the Italian Chamber of Deputies, giving it easily the strongest strategic position of any European Communist Party outside the Soviet orbit.

But the moderate tactical line has had its minus side for the party, too. For the sake of gaining the support of the southern peasantry and disgruntled middle-class elements, the PCI leadership has been obliged to keep a firm brake on working class demands and action and to tone down its economic program. As a result there has been a significant decline in the party's influence and prestige among the industrial

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