

How the concept of totalitarianism appeared in late socialist Bulgaria: the birth and life of Zheliu Zhelev's book *Fascism*.

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How the Concept of Totalitarianism Appeared in Late Socialist Bulgaria: The Birth and Life of Zheliu Zhelev's Book *Fascism*

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**How the Concept of Totalitarianism
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Few would dispute the claim that the most significant political text—and political event—in the history of late socialism in Bulgaria was Zhelju Zhelev's *Fascism*. Completed around 1967 and published in 1981, the book was censored immediately after its publication for making implicit analogies between the fascist regimes and the political organization of the socialist states. Yet despite the state's attempts to limit its circulation, the book captured the political imagination of the generation of the 1980s, reordering political coordinates, eroding the legitimacy of state power, and triggering a political crisis of enormous proportions. Its author, Zhelju Zhelev, trained as a philosopher of Marxism-Leninism in the 1960s but during his graduate studies developed a liberal political perspective and became a harsh critic of the regime. Known as one of the most prominent dissident voices in the country, Zhelev took a trajectory similar to that of Václav Havel, becoming the first democratically elected president of Bulgaria after 1989.

This article traces the trajectory and political life of Zhelev's book, the only explicitly liberal political critique of state power written and published under Bulgarian socialism. The book presents Europe's fascist states as totalitarian regimes, reproducing Western Cold War right-wing and liberal frameworks that dominated the analysis of fascist and communist societies and their political institutions for most of the second half of the 20th century. In the socialist context, however, these arguments played out in a unique way, **[End Page 303]** tactically inverting some of the most central tenets of Marxism-Leninism. First, by seeing the state as a determining element of social relations, Zhelev undermined the primary status of economic and material relations with respect to the political "superstructure" and thus attacked the Marxist-Leninist base-superstructure model. Second, by pitting liberal democracy against fascism—and by analogy, against socialism—he radically destabilized the political coordinates of the Marxist-Leninist system, for which fascism constituted the most dangerous enemy, the

most stable line of opposition.

The publication of the book triggered a complex political response. On the one hand, it inflamed the repressive apparatus to such an extent that people began speaking of the next wave of re-Stalinization—in a certain way, it called into being or reignited what it aimed to expose. On the other hand, the reactions following its publication reveal a three-dimensional political spectrum that complicates any attempt to paint a picture of total domination, total subordination, and mass complicity in a top-down hierarchy—the very picture Zhelev puts forward in his analysis of the totalitarian state. The complexity of debates around the book calls into question widely accepted arguments about the tangential and inconsequential role of “official ideology” in political life during socialism, as well as arguments about the “apolitical” or “depoliticized” nature of the “official” public sphere, as opposed to the “private” one, in which politics are often presumed to have been lived and experienced.¹

After 1989, however, Bulgarian dissident intellectuals were blind to such nuances: they eagerly embraced totalitarianism as their favorite analytical framework, stubbornly resisting any approaches that might provide an alternative to the picture of “total ideologization,” top-down, ubiquitous control, and mass repression.² Ironically, just as Western scholars of Soviet and socialist history worked to undo the persistent legacy of the totalitarian framework and the way its theoretical and political assumptions influenced our understanding of the modern socialist era, Zhelev’s book introduced **[End Page 304]** totalitarianism into late socialist Bulgaria’s political and scholarly debates and shaped the liberal imaginary of critically minded communities.³

In the last decade, much has been written on the genealogy and use of totalitarianism as an analytical framework in Soviet studies and the way it has structured our notions of socialist subjectivity, struggle, and political agency.⁴ Yet scholars have mentioned the ubiquity of liberal and right-wing interpretations of the socialist era in post-socialist Eastern Europe only in passing or have ignored them altogether. How did liberal political categories such as totalitarianism, civil society, and civil and

Article

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ZHIVKA VALIIVICHARSKA

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