

THE GENESIS OF AGRARIANISM IN BULGARIA

Although the Liberation of 1878-1879 led to the confiscation and distribution of *chiflik* lands, making Bulgaria a nation of smallholders¹, it was not followed by a significant improvement in the peasant's situation. On the contrary, the enduring backwardness of Bulgarian agriculture, the worldwide decline in grain prices, and the rapid growth of population, unrelieved by industrialization or urbanization, caused a steady deterioration of rural living standards during the following two decades². Moreover, urban-based political parties, made up of an educated, politically-active elite, ignored the peasantry except as a source of revenue. «Corporations formed for the exploitation of power», in the phrase of Dimo Kazasov³, the parties relied on peasant ignorance, election «technicalities», and a network of village bosses that made a mockery of the democratic Tŭrnovo Constitution⁴. Mounting tax

1. On the Liberation as a land reform, see N. G. Levintov, «Agrarnye otnosheniia v Bolgarii nakanune osvobodzheniia i agrarny perevorot 1877-79 godov», *Osvobodzhenie Bolgarii ot turetskogo iga, sbornik statei*, Moscow, 1953, pp.186-99; Goran D.Todorov, «Deinostta na vremennoto rusko upravlenie v Bŭlgariia po urezhdane na agrarniia i bezhanskiia vŭpros prez 1877-79 gg.», *Istoricheski pregled* XI, No. 6 (1955), 27-59; Y. G. Kovatcheff, «Agrarian Reform in Bulgaria», *International Review of Agriculture* XXV, (1934), E 441-50; Liuben Berov, «Agrarnoto dvizhenie v Istochna Rumeliia po vreme na osvobodzhenieto», *Istoricheski pregled* XII, No. 1 (1956), 3-35.

2. Between 1880 and 1910 the proportion of the population in towns of over 2,000 actually declined slightly. Kiril Popoff, *La Bulgarie économique 1879-1911*, Sofia 1920, p. 11. A comprehensive survey of Bulgarian agriculture and its development is Iu. G. Mollov, ed., *Pogled vŭrkhu sotsialno-ikonomicheskata struktura na bŭlgarskoto zemledelsko stopanstvo*, published as *Trudove na Statisticheskiiia institut za stopanski prouchvaniia pri Sofiskiiia dŭrzhaven universitet*, Nos. 2-3 (1936). See also: Dimitŭr Kosev, «Selskoto dvizhenie v Bŭlgariia v kraia na XIX v. Osnovavaneto na BZNS i otnoshenieto na BRSDP kŭm selskiiia vŭpros», *Istoricheski pregled* No. 5 (1949), 549-55; Vladislav Topalov, «Osnovavane na Bŭlgarskiiia zemedelski sŭiuz», *Izvestiia na Instituta za istoriia* VIII(1960), 154-65. Bulgaria's failure to overcome her economic backwardness is the theme of Alexander Gerschenkron's essay «Some Aspects of Industrialization in Bulgaria, 1878-1939» in his *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective*, New York 1962, pp. 198-234.

3. Dimo Kazasov, *Ulitsi, khora, sŭbitiia*, Sofia 1959, p. 200.

4. On the degeneration and corruption of Bulgarian politics see T. Tchitchovski, «Political and Social Aspects of Modern Bulgaria», *Slavonic and East European Review* VII, No. 20 (1929), 272-87. The pattern of Bulgarian politics was, of course, far from unique. It may even be considered typical of countries in which the constitutional structures of Western Europe were superimposed on an underdeveloped society.

burdens forced the peasantry to turn to «Godless usurers», often the very bosses that dominated the village politically. One study found that in 1901 there were 301 villages in the country «completely ruined» by usury, and 470 «very nearly ruined»¹.

This already unhappy situation worsened rapidly when a poor harvest in 1897 was accompanied by an outbreak of distomiasis, taking a heavy toll of livestock, and followed by a drought and disastrous harvest in 1899. Severe hardship visited the entire countryside, and actual famine existed in some districts². More concerned with its own financial crisis and a speculative outflow of gold than with the state of the countryside, the government ignored the peasants' clamorings for relief and took advantage of the scarcity-induced soaring of prices to replace its land-tax, paid in money, with a «tithe» on agricultural production that had to be paid in kind³.

By this callous, and typical, disregard for rural welfare, the government created a climate of opinion in the Bulgarian village that was responsive to the idea of peasant organization. Many studies of peasant societies in transition have shown, however, that political initiative is rarely taken by peasants acting alone⁴. The Bulgarian case was no exception, for the idea of forming a national organization of peasants came not from the peasants themselves, but from members of the country's intelligentsia, and the actual founding of the Agrarian Union in 1899 was less a response to the immediate crisis than it was the outgrowth of a general turn toward radical doctrines and movements that took place among the intelligentsia in the 1890's.

Bulgaria possessed, in fact, two intelligentsia. On the one hand, there was the intelligentsia of the state bureaucracy and the political parties. Owing to the venality and corruption prevailing in its ranks, it was often referred to as the «partisan», or even «parasitic», intelligentsia⁵. On the other hand,

1. N. Konstantinov, «Likhvarstvoto», *Spisanie na Bŭlgarskoto ikonomicheskoto druzhestvo* XIV, Nos. 3-4 (1910), 175.

2. Vladislav Topalov, «Stopanska kriza v Bŭlgariia prez 1897-1900 gg.», *Izvestiia na Instituta za istoriia* XII (1963), 47-72.

3. The «tithe» (*desiatŭk*) was a tax that dated from Turkish times. It had been abandoned by the government in 1883 in favor of a land tax. N. Piperov, «Danŭtsite v Bŭlgariia», *Misŭl* XI, No. 3 (1901), 200-204. Because the amount of the «tithe» was calculated on the basis of the crop in the field, it actually took one-quarter to one-third of the peasant's harvest. Dimitur Dragiev, *Triabva li zemledeltsite da plashtat desiatŭk?*, Stara Zagora 1899, pp. 12-13.

4. Eric R. Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century*, New York 1969, pp. 285-90; Angus Stewart, «The Social Roots», in Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner, eds., *Populism: Its Meaning and National Characteristics*, New York 1969, 180-95.

5. Kiril Krŭstev, «Bŭlgarskata intelligentsiia», *Misŭl* VII, No. 1 (1898), 9.

there were a number of educated men who were farther removed from the centers of power. They were usually teachers, writers, journalists, low-ranking civil-servants, doctors, priests, or specialists in some technical field¹. These men, above all those who worked in the villages, formed a bridge between traditional peasant society and the outside world. The country's public-school teachers, numbering about 6,000 in the late 1890's², were the most influential segment of this branch of the intelligentsia. They were poorly paid, closely watched by the local authorities, and possessed very little job security. Most of them were confronted every day by the disparity between the reality of life and the idealism of their school days. Thus, it should occasion no surprise that the leaders of Bulgaria's radical parties and movements were drawn largely from their ranks. Todor Vlaikov, leader of the reformist wing of the Radical Democratic Party, Dimitŭr Blagoev, Khristo Kabakchiev, and Ianko Sakŭzov of the Social Democratic Party, and nearly the entire leadership of the Agrarian Union began their careers as teachers in the public schools.

By the 1890's this segment of educated society was aware that Bulgaria had not made the progress that had been so confidently expected at the time of the Liberation. Political corruption, economic stagnation, and the increasingly desperate situation of the peasantry were profoundly disillusioning to those who had been nurtured on the dreams of the revolutionary generation. In response, many of them turned to radical or reformist movements, the most important of which reflected the influence of populism or socialism. Some joined in the movement for trade-union organization, particularly in the creation of the Bulgarian Teachers' Union. All of these tendencies made significant contributions to the formation of the Agrarian Union.

Populist ideas entered Bulgaria from Russia. Before the Liberation many Bulgarians who studied in Russian schools or who lived in the Bulgarian communities in Russia absorbed the ideas of Herzen and sought to glorify the peasant and his traditional way of life. In the late 1880's Spiro Gulabchev, a teacher, formed the secret society *Siromakhomilstvo* (Pauperophilia), which copied the conspiratorial organization of the People's Will. Advocating a form of primitive Christian communism, *Siromakhomilstvo* formed a number of study clubs, but never achieved a large following³.

1. Tchitchovski, pp. 277-278; L. N. Chastukhin, «Krest'ianskoe dvizhenie v Bolgarii v 1899-1900 gg. i vzniknovenie Bolgarskogo zemledel'cheskogo soiuza», *Voprosy istorii* No. 9 (1956), 93.

2. Kiril Lambrev, *Rabotnicheskoto i profesionalnoto dvizhenie v Bŭlgariia 1893-1903*, Sofia 1966, pp. 95-96.

3. Marin Pundeff, «Marxism in Bulgaria before 1891», *Slavic Review* XXX, No. 3 (1971), 545-546.

After the fall of the dictatorial Stefan Stambolov in 1894, the Bulgarian government was far less repressive than Russian tsarism, and the Bulgarian populists were not an elite «conscience-stricken nobility». These two factors meant that the Bulgarian environment was particularly well suited to the evolutionary doctrines of Mikhailovski and Lavrov, and by the late 1890's they dominated the populist movement¹. Central to Bulgarian populism at this time was the concept of the duty of the intelligentsia to raise the intellectual and moral standards of the common people. The populists believed that the roots of Bulgaria's political and economic failure lay in the ignorance and backwardness of the peasantry. It became their goal to make the peasant a more efficient and prosperous producer and to educate him to the duties of citizenship in a democratic state². To achieve this goal the populists most often turned to journalism, and the 1890's saw the appearance of numerous journals directed toward the peasantry. Their program called for devotion to labor on the part of the peasant and the expansion of knowledge and education. *Tselina* (Virgin Soil), one of the first and most influential of the populist journals, stated its position simply: «Learning is light and inactivity darkness, knowledge is strength and labor riches»³.

Convinced that the life of the peasant could be bettered only through the moral and intellectual improvement of the peasant himself, the populists created no organized political movement of their own, nor did they aim immediately to involve the peasantry in the political life of the nation. The founding of the Agrarian Union as an «educational-economic», and non-political organization testified to the strength of populist ideas in the early Agrarian movement. But when a majority in the Union rejected the non-political approach and began to argue that it was the political structure of the country that kept the peasant in darkness, many populists stood by their old faith and abandoned active participation. Populism retained its original vitality only in literature. Nevertheless, the influence of populism on the development of the Agrarian movement should not be underestimated. By calling attention to the problems of rural life and by involving the rural intelligentsia in efforts to improve the peasant's condition, populism was the most important influence on the Agrarian Union at the time of its formation.

Socialism, especially the Russian variety imported by Bulgarians who had come into contact with the revolutionary circles in Russian schools and

1. Vivian Pinto, *The Narodnik Movement in Bulgarian Literature*, unpub. dissertation, University of London, 1952, pp. 61-69, 100.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 137-38.

3. *Tselina*, I, No. 1 (1892), 1.

universities, and which encompassed a wide range of radical ideas, had long played an important role in Bulgaria's political and intellectual life. Commonly, not only members of the radical opposition, but nearly all prominent statesmen, including the most conservative, passed through a period of infatuation with some form of socialism in their youth¹. In the 1890's the introduction of «scientific» Marxism and the founding of the Social Democratic Party narrowed the focus of socialist activity. Organized socialism concentrated on the problems of industry, the creation of a politically-conscious working class, and the maintenance of ideological purity among the intellectuals who made up the bulk of party membership. In 1903 Dimitŭr Blagoev, the leader of the «Narrow» faction, preferred to split the tiny party rather than dilute its class purity by encouraging the membership of peasants. Even Ianko Sakŭzov, leader of the «Broad» faction, viewed non-proletarians only as auxiliaries to the workers' movement and did not attempt to make their problems a prime subject of the party's program².

In a country eighty per cent of whose population was made up of peasants, and which possessed only a few thousand workers, the appeal of this doctrinaire form of socialism was obviously limited. The appearance of Marxism in Bulgaria did, however, stimulate and radicalize numerous educated men, most notably Tsanko Bakalov Tserkovski, who were to become prominent in the Agrarian Union. And while it is an exaggeration to maintain that «Socialism was the school in which the peasants learned to organize»³, the efforts of the Social Democratic Party on behalf of trade-union organization in general and the Bulgarian Teachers' Union in particular certainly helped to raise the question of the organization of the peasantry.

While the growth of socialism and populism in the 1890's created an intellectual climate favorable to the development of the Agrarian movement, it was the success of the Teachers' Union that provided the immediate stimulus for the formation of a peasant organization. The public-school teachers had made several attempts to organize in the 1880's, but they were unable to overcome the hostility of the government. After the fall of Stambolov, trade-unionism revived, and in the beginning of 1895 the printers carried out the

1. Joseph Rothschild, *The Communist Party of Bulgaria*, New York 1959, p. 3; Cyril E. Black, «Russia and the Modernization of the Balkans», in Charles and Barbara Jelavich, eds., *The Balkans in Transition*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1963, p. 155; Pundeff, pp. 523-550.

2. Rothschild, pp. 31-32; *Istoriia na Bŭlgarskata komunisticheska partiia*, Sofia 1972, pp. 70-73, 80-94.

3. Prokopi Kiranov, *Bŭlgarskoto zemedelsko dvizhenie: idei, razvitie i delo*, Sofia 1927, p. 18.

first mass strike the country had seen¹. In January, 1895, the teachers of Varna Province published an «Open Letter to the Public-school Teachers of Bulgaria» calling for the formation of a national teachers' union. In July such an organization was actually created by a congress of teachers held in Sofia². Despite the fact that within two years the Teachers' Union split over the question of involvement in politics, the same issue that was later to vex the Agrarian Union, it achieved considerable improvements in salary and job security for its members, and succeeded in drawing most of the country's teachers into its ranks³. It was natural that those teachers in the village who were concerned with the problems of the peasantry would draw inspiration from it. Their various attempts to extend the idea of organization to the peasantry led directly to the creation of the Agrarian Union.

No single individual or group founded the Bulgarian Agrarian Union. Rather it came about through a coalescence of local movements inspired by men who shared no common ideology, program, or purpose, save the belief that «organization» would benefit the peasantry. They were particularly divided by the question of involvement in politics, which was not finally decided until the Union's third congress in 1901.

The foremost proponent of direct political action was Iurdan Pekarev of Varna Province, who was born in 1865 or 1866 in the southern Dobruja, the son of a baker. After completing secondary school in Varna he took an advanced course in agricultural science and settled in one of the province's rural districts as a teacher. He first became involved in politics in 1893 when he helped to organize resistance to the Stambolov regime among the teachers. After the fall of Stambolov, he was elected vice-president of the teachers' association in Varna Province which initiated the formation of the Bulgarian Teachers' Union⁴.

Pekarev lost his post as a result of his union activity, but he was already beginning to plan a new career for himself as a peasant organizer. His experiences as a village teacher awakened him to the hardships of peasant life and he had come into contact with a populist circle of agronomists, officials, and landowners, who sought to improve rural education and to disseminate agricultural information. In the spring of 1896 they formed the «First Bulgarian Agrarian Society» to sponsor a journal, *Seiach* (The Sower), with Pekarev

1. Lambrev, pp. 72-73, 80-89.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 96-98.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 100; Zheko Atanasov, «Iz istoriia na narodnoto uchitel'sko dvizhenie v Bŭlgariia v kraia na XIX vek», *Istoricheski pregled* XIII, No. 1 (1957), 92.

4. Iurdan Pekarev, *Moite politiko-obshtestveni spomeni*, Sofia 1929, pp. 5-96.

as editor. This project lasted less than a year, for Pekarev soon quarreled with his colleagues. He could not accept their gradualist, non-political program, and they were disturbed by his attacks on government policies and personalities and by the anti-Semitism that frequently appeared in his editorials¹.

Following his withdrawal from the society, Pekarev visited the largest villages in the province, distributing material urging the creation of an «Agrarian Party». His leaflets stress the sacrifices the peasants made for the state and the few benefits they received in return.

We, who fill the state treasury, receive the gendarme's whip on our bended backs for thanks; we, who feed and clothe the world, are hungry and naked, we, who fill the barracks to protect the lives and possessions of the tsar, the state, the lawyers, usurers, and *chorbais*, have no one to protect us from them. And how long will this go on? As long as we are quiet, patient, and indifferent — as long as we do not unite and organize our forces in an organization of our own. There is no other way!²

Pekarev looked for support among his friends, the teachers. In January, 1898, fifteen of them joined him to form the «First Constituent Committee». They decided as an initial step to set up village *druzhini* (battalions) modeled on the village associations of the Liberal Party, and by the end of the year they had created over sixty³. In December Pekarev started a new journal *Nova borba* (New Struggle), whose name was soon changed to *Zemledelska borba* (Agrarian Struggle). It bore the motto «The moral and material improvement of the peasantry is the business of the peasants themselves», and combined criticism of the government with appeals for peasant organization. It is considered to be the first political journal of the Agrarian movement in Bulgaria⁴.

In January, 1899, the government resigned, new elections being set for April 25. Pekarev called for the village *druzhini* to send delegates to consider a charter and program for the new party. The meeting was held on March 21 in the village of Baladzha with approximately 850 delegates in attendance. It approved the idea of creating a new party and elected a committee of twenty-six, headed by Pekarev, to work out the details. One week later the committee

1. *Ibid.*, pp. 104-108.

2. Iordan Pekarev, *Istoriia na zemedelskoto organizirano dvizhenie v Bŭlgariia*, II, Dobrich 1945, p. 311.

3. Pekarev, *Spomeni*, pp. 139-40; Marko I. Turlakov. *Istoriia, printsipi i taktika na Bŭlgarski zemedelski naroden sŭiuz*, Stara Zagora 1929, p. 52.

4. D. P. Ivanchev, *Bŭlgarski periodichen pechat, 1844-1944*, II, Sofia 1966, p. 65.

accepted Pekarev's draft program calling for reduced taxes and the introduction of a progressive income tax, a shortened term of military service, free administration of justice, free medical care, expanded free education, and a limit to the number of state officials. It also debated the question of restricting membership in the party to peasants or even to poor peasants exclusively. The formula adopted, however, stipulated that anyone who supported the party was eligible for membership, and that individual *druzhini* should make the final decision¹.

On the eve of its first election campaign, the Agrarian Party was deprived of its leader. The meeting in Baladzha had brought Pekarev to the attention of the authorities who, using the excuse that he had abandoned teaching, took away his draft deferment. He was conscripted and confined to barracks until the elections were over. Without his leadership many of the *druzhini* failed to make an intensive election effort and some fell under the influence of other parties. Nevertheless, the Agrarian Party won in one district and made a good showing in the two others in which it had entered candidates². If Pekarev had been free to follow up this success, his group would probably have been the first to form a national organization.

Dimitŭr Dragiev of Stara Zagora was another advocate of political involvement. The youngest of the peasant organizers, Dragiev was born in the village of Radnevo, twenty miles southern of Stara Zagora, in 1876. After completing his secondary education in the provincial capital, he returned to teach in Radnevo, where he met Petko Palev, «an erudite Socialist», who had also settled in the district as a village teacher. The two men became close friends, and their wide-ranging discussions helped to awaken Dragiev's social conscience. Marxism, however, was foreign to his temperament, and by a process that is today unclear he became a zealous convert to evangelical Protestantism with a strong admixture of Tolstoyan ideas. With an arrogance born of new-found humility he sought to accomplish both the economic and moral regeneration of the peasantry. In May, 1899, he began to edit a journal, *Spravedlivost* (Justice). Bearing the motto «You must be born again!» it printed articles on scientific agriculture and the peasant's moral and religious duties, and advocated the formation of local peasant associations to press for reform on the village level³.

1. *Zemledelska borba*, I, No. 13 (March 24, 1899), 1; Pekarev, *Spomeni*, pp. 164-168.

2. Pekarev, *Spomeni*, p. 172; Topalov, «Osnovavane», 174.

3. Alexander S. Penchev, *Poznavate li pŭrvoapostolite - zidari na BZNS? Veliko Tŭrnovo* 1946, p. 28; Mikhail Genovski, *I v smŭrtta sa zhivi*, Sofia 1945, p. 33; Konstantin D. Spissarevski, *Zemledelskoto dvizhenie v Bŭlgariia: poteklo i razvitie*, Sofia 1923; Todor

Dragiev was outraged by the government's plan to reintroduce the tithe. In *Spravedlivost* he urged the peasants to forget the old political parties and to organize to prevent the collection of the tax. He also wrote an inflammatory pamphlet, *Must the Peasants Pay the Tithe?*, that was widely circulated and made him well-known in spite of his youth. He wrote that the tithe placed an unduly heavy burden on the peasantry, that it would require a new bureaucracy to collect it, and that it would actually take one-quarter to one-third of the peasant's crop. He blamed this «heavy, unjust, criminal, Godless tax» on the politicians, «Turks in Bulgarian caps», who held a «partisan knife at the throat of true self-government», and he urged the peasantry to organize itself to end these abuses¹.

A less political approach characterized the «Pleven Group», a circle of teachers and agronomists centered around the State Experimental Farm in the Russe District and the State Vinicultural Institute in Pleven. The leader of this group was Ianko Zabunov, head of the Vinicultural Institute, who was to serve as president of the Agrarian Union during the first three years of its existence. Born into an impoverished peasant family in the village of Küzüklisa in southeastern Bulgaria in 1868, Zabunov ran away from home at the age of seven. He was taken in by the Church of St. Dimitŭr in Sliven where the priests gave him room, board, and an elementary education. At fifteen he entered the agricultural school in Sliven where his ability won him a scholarship from the district authorities. After finishing the three-year course, he taught in Ĭambol until 1890 when he received a government fellowship to study viticulture in Austria. Upon his return to Bulgaria, he was appointed head of the Vinicultural Institute in Sliven and made an editor of *Oralo* (The Plow), a state-supported journal of agricultural information. In 1896 he was appointed overseer of the royal vineyards at Evksinograd, but he was bored by this work and resigned. Moving to the State Vinicultural Institute in Pleven, he was soon appointed its director. Here his lectures on the necessity for peasant organization won over many of the students, including the young Alexander Stamboliski, who was ultimately to lead the Agrarian Union to power².

In 1899 Zabunov held a number of secret meetings with teachers and agronomists from Pleven, Sadovo, and the Russe State Experimental Farm to discuss the declining state of the peasantry. They decided to undertake the

G. Vlaikov, «Bŭlgarskiiat zemledelski naroden sŭiuz», *Demokratičeski pregled* VII, No. 7 (1908), 709-710.

1. Dragiev, *Desiatŭk*, pp. 3-23; *Zemledelska zashtita* I, No. 36 (Aug. 25, 1900), 2-3.

2. Paun Genov, *Ianko Zabunov: pŭrvoapostolŭt na zemedelskoto sdrŭzhavane*, 7, 1948, pp. 5-8; Penchev, pp. 14-16.

publication of a journal free from government influence and censorship. Although the teachers from Sadovo backed out at the last minute, on June 12 the rest signed an «Agreement», according to which the new journal was to have the following goals:

a) to acquaint the peasant with his rights and duties to the end of creating an agrarian current among us that will be free of all petty partisanship; b) to spread knowledge in all branches of agriculture; c) to examine dispassionately all ideas for the improvement of agriculture no matter what their source; d) to review agricultural literature; e) to review in general all foreign political-agricultural events and problems touching our own economic life.

The signers of the «Agreement» promised to make monthly contributions of ten *leva* each for the support of the journal until it could be published without loss. In the event that its editor lost his position, they also pledged to provide for his support. Zabunov was chosen to be the responsible editor, and the first issue of the new journal *Zemledelska zashtita* (Agrarian Defense) appeared on September 6. With relatively substantial resources to draw on, *Zemledelska zashtita* was published three times monthly and soon achieved a circulation of 2,500¹.

By the term «agrarian current» the Pleven Group had in mind the populist goals of education and gradual economic improvement. The first issue of *Zemledelska zashtita* warned the peasant that he could not find a quick solution to his problems through politics². Although one of Zabunov's colleagues, Nikola Kormanov, a veterinarian at the Russe Model Farm, favored working with individual political figures who were sympathetic to the peasantry, even he believed that the principal effort had to be made in the fields of education and farming techniques. When, in the fifth issue of *Zemledelska zashtita* the editors printed Tsanko Bakalov Tserkovski's proposal for a congress to form a national peasant organization, they did not see this as the beginning of a political movement, and they even expressed the hope that it would receive the support of the government³.

The intellectual odyssey of Tsanko Bakalov covered the entire map of Bulgarian radicalism before ending in the camp of the Agrarian Union. Bakalov was born in 1869 in the village of Biala Cherkva in the Tŭrnovo District. His family was one of the most prosperous in the village and his father possessed local fame for his part in the pre-Liberation struggle against the

1. Nikola Kormanov, *Zemledelskiiat sŭiuz: Osnovavane, demagogiia, deistvitelnost*, Sofia 1923, pp. 2-4; *Zemledelska zashtita* I, No. 36 (Aug. 25, 1900), 2-3; Ivanchev, I, p. 317.

2. *Zemledelska zashtita* I, No. 1 (Sept. 6, 1899), 1.

3. *Zemledelska zashtita* I, No. 5 (Nov. 10, 1899), 1-3.

Turks. In his youth he was an indifferent student, although he read widely and managed to qualify himself as a teacher in 1891. By this time he had fallen under the influence of Marxism and joined the newly-formed Social Democratic Party. Adopting the pseudonym «Tserkovski», by which he became generally known, he made his literary debut with a series of militant poems and songs¹.

From 1894 to 1897 he taught school in the «Musina Republic», a village near Tŭrnovo widely known for the political and social radicalism of its teachers and other members of the intelligentsia. While in Musina he assisted the Socialist Geno Nedialkov who edited the journal *Selski vestnik* (Village Herald). When Nedialkov was elected to parliament in 1895, he became its editor-in-chief².

It was as a writer that Tserkovski first felt dissatisfaction with Marxism. Vaguely sensing that the doctrine conflicted with his own view of reality, he began to rethink his ideological assumptions. He contrasted Marx's picture of society with his own surroundings and concluded that Marxism, so overwhelmingly concerned with the industrial proletariat, could not play an immediately useful role in agricultural Bulgaria. Marxist theory postulated a long process through which the peasantry would be transformed into a proletariat by the growth of industry. Although Tserkovski knew that this might bring about a working-class revolution in the distant future, he was coming to believe that the need for immediate reform in the village should not be ignored. It was obvious to him that the peasants were already enemies of the existing society. He concluded: «The village is strength. It has every objective moral and material strength to become a mighty political and social factor»³.

Still believing himself to be a Marxist, and finding support for his ideas in the writings of «Kautsky, Bernstein, and Eduard David», Tserkovski began to develop the idea of a «new course», that of peasant organization, which was to be the next «inevitable, politico-economic step» in the evolution of Bulgarian society⁴. Although his «discovery» of the peasant evoked no sympathy from his Socialist comrades, he did not yet contemplate a break with the Party. He did not believe that Marxism was wrong in the long run, only that

1. Tserkovski's own memoirs, written on the occasion of the celebration of his thirtieth year in literature, are included in Nikola Atanasov, *Tsanko Tserkovski*, Sofia 1921. See also: Kŭniu Kozhukharov, *Tsanko Tserkovski, biografichen ocherk*, Sofia 1956, pp. 3-7; Zhak Tadzher, *Nova Bulgariia*, Sofia 1922, pp. 580-585; Pinto, pp. 83-84.

2. D. R. Dimov, *Tsanko Bakalov Tserkovski*, Sofia 1968, pp. 30-32; N. Atanasov, p. 45.

3. N. Atanasov, p. 46.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 48, 59.

the desperate situation of the peasantry demanded immediate attention. In his mind the «new course» involved the organization of the peasantry as a pressure group, analogous to a trade-union or benevolent society, not as a political party that might compete with the Social Democrats. Even after the formation of the Agrarian Union, he attended the 1900 Congress of the Social Democratic Party as a delegate¹.

Tserkovski limited his plans to the sphere of theory until 1897, when he gave up teaching and returned to his native Biala Cherkva to farm and open a bookstore. During the winter he formed the «Young People's Educational Society», which had as its goals «education, economic progress, and political consciousness for the peasants of this village and for every peasant and artisan² in Bulgaria». The society presented musical and theatrical events and political discussions. At the latter Tserkovski presented arguments for the creation of a peasant organization and received an encouraging response³.

Hoping to find a larger audience for his ideas of peasant organization, he began to compose an «Appeal to the Peasants of Bulgaria» in 1898. He rewrote the «Appeal» many times, searching for the peasant's own idiom, so that it would be comprehensible to every villager.

A simple style and tone — clear ideas. I felt this to be most necessary in view of the minimal consciousness of the peasant masses with whom I sought to work. I considered it most necessary to avoid all troublesome questions in which party feeling would be aroused . . . Forgiveness to all for time spent in this or that party group, and the fraternal hand in the name of our [mutual] occupational interests — that was what I wanted to achieve in the «Appeal»⁴.

Tserkovski began the «Appeal» with a description of the backwardness of Bulgarian peasant agriculture, which contrasted so unfavorably with farming in America and Western Europe. He pointed out that the Bulgarian peasant still cultivated his fields with «Adam's wooden plow» while ever-increasing demands were being made on his income. He contrasted the present-day village with that existing only a few years earlier. Whereas previously the village could scarcely support one tavern, it was now required to support «four or five taverns, grocers, cobblers, makers of *boza*, tinsmiths, a mayor, a clerk, four teachers, a priest, and several usurers». But, he continued, these people could not be eliminated, for they were the result of the new life coming

1. V. Mavrikov, *Iz moiaa zhivot*, Sofia 1955, p. 12.

2. The inclusion of artisans was intended to forestall criticism from Tserkovski's Socialist comrades: *Ibid.*

3. N. Atanasov, pp. 55-56; Kozhukharov, pp. 9-10.

4. N. Atanasov, p. 61.

into existence and they fulfilled real needs. The peasants had to realize that in the new life they would not be able to reduce their expenses, they would have to find some way to increase their incomes.

In the past, he wrote, self-centered politicians misled the peasants by convincing them that a political solution was possible — that if they would elect this or that party, all their problems would be solved. But after this torrent of «newspaper tears» what did the peasant receive? «Fighting, murder, prisons — and they, power». The politicians were interested in the peasant only as a voter.

We are a ladder that those who weep for us and call us «brother» climb to power. They need this ladder to go up and down and for much else besides. Yes, they have no other work, no other occupation. Their occupation is to fill their pockets when they are in power and to cry to God before us peasants when they are driven from power. There is no doubt that people who have been in such a warm place will cry out when they are thrown into the cold, but what do we farmers have in common with people who have no other work than that?

He argued that the peasants should unite in their own organization for the improvement of agriculture and leave politics to the professional politician:

We must unite and help ourselves because however much others may weep for us, they weep with fat jobs and full bellies. Everyone knows that on someone else's back a hundred blows are little. Only the hungry know what it is to be hungry; only the very sick know what a serious illness is. Only we farmers know how a field can be killed by hailstones or how vines can be withered by phylloxera. And only we, who know our situation, can improve it.

Tserkovski went on to describe the successes of the Teachers' Union and of other professional organizations that had been formed previously. Finally, he urged the peasants to elect village committees to send delegates to a congress to form a national peasant organization¹.

When he was satisfied with the «Appeal» he visited the principal villages of the Tŭrnovo District to spread his ideas and to seek support. Ivan Nedelchev, a teacher in the village of Emin, and Pop Petŭr, a priest in the village of Dŭskot, were especially enthusiastic and volunteered their help. They decided to call an assembly of peasants of the district in Musina to discuss the question of inviting all the peasants of Bulgaria to unite in a national professional organization, and they wrote «countless letters» to friends and acquaintances in the district, enclosing copies of the «Appeal»².

1. *Zemledelska zashŭita* I, No. 5 (Nov. 10, 1899), 1-3. My translation of the complete «Appeal» will appear in the documents section of the third issue of *Southeastern Europe*, scheduled for publication in the spring of 1975.

2. N. Atanasov, p. 62.

The assembly, held on April 28, 1899, was attended by «several hundred» peasants. Tserkovski's plans were approved with enthusiasm, and it was voted that a national congress of peasants be held in Plevén, «a central place whose public library contains a large auditorium». Finally, a provisional committee, with Tserkovski as president, was elected to prepare for the congress, and all of its members added their signatures to the «Appeal»¹.

Although the Plevén Group endorsed the «Appeal», its members were apprehensive of Tserkovski's Socialist connections and reputation. They feared that the new peasant organization would fall under the influence of the Social Democratic Party, and to forestall this they decided to take the initiative in the organization of the congress. Because they would be acting as hosts, they could expect that their plans for its proceedings would be respected.

On November 4, 1899, *Zemledelska zashtita* proposed that the congress be held on the 28th, 29th, and 30th of December. The time between Christmas and New Year's Day was selected because the peasants would be free from work in the fields and the teachers would be on vacation. The paper also proposed the following agenda. On the first day the congress would be opened by the «oldest and most worthy peasant in the hall», and a bureau would be elected to administer the congress and to prepare a draft charter for consideration by the delegates. Papers would then be read on the general condition of Bulgarian agricultural credit, and cooperation. On the second day the congress would continue with papers on agricultural education and livestock, and proceed to take up any miscellaneous business. On the third day the Agrarian Union would formally be founded. Those invited to the congress were «representatives from peasant *druzhini*, all peasants, village teachers, village priests, and agricultural specialists in close contact with peasant life»². The following issue warned that the Union would not become a part of any political party, and that only real peasants, «employing hoe or pen», would be allowed to participate³.

Delegates to the congress began to arrive in Plevén on the 26th and 27th. When the congress began its sessions, approximately eight hundred delegates from forty-five of Bulgaria's seventy-one districts were present, the majority coming from Plevén, Tŭrnovo, and Varna Provinces. The group from Varna, which was the largest single delegation, was led by Pekarev, who had been discharged from the army after the National Assembly elections. In addition

1. *Ibid.*, pp. 62-64.

2. *Zemledelska zashtita* I, No. 11 (Nov. 4, 1899), 1.

3. *Zemledelska zashtita* I, No. 12 (Nov. 19, 1899), 1-2.

to the delegates there was a large number of peasant observers, reporters, and representatives of the political parties who had come to watch and, if possible, influence the congress. In all, about 1,500 people were present, with the observers seated in the balconies above the hall and the delegates below¹. The attitude of the Pleven authorities was «strict and correct», and the local population had been asked to open their homes to those who had not been able to secure space in the hotels or find other accommodation².

The largest of the «foreign delegations» to attend the congress was that of the Social Democrats, about 150 persons led by Ianko Sakūzov and Nikola Gabrovski. The congress presented an important opportunity for Sakūzov who was at this time formulating a program calling for the unity of «all producing strata» around a democratic and reformist platform. The awakening of the peasantry demonstrated by the congress offered good prospects for the «broad» form of socialism to which he was committed³. That his group failed to move the congress —and, in a larger sense, that Socialism could not provide the underpinnings of the Agrarian movement— may be attributed to the fact that to most peasants «socialism» meant simply the abolition of private property. Moreover, the leaders of the congress were either hostile to socialism or desirous of a non-political and purely peasant organization. Even Tserkovski, although he was accused of it, had no intention of trying to tie the Agrarian Union to the Social Democratic Party. Thus, the Social Democrats shared the fate of the other party delegations to the congress, and the idea of worker-peasant-artisan unity remained dormant until revived in a new form by Stamboliski on the eve of the Balkan Wars.

Although the agenda prepared by the Pleven Group was focused on the economic problems of agriculture, the task of choosing the «oldest and most worthy peasant in the hall» thrust the question of politics on the congress even before it was properly under way. During the afternoon of the 27th, the Pleven Group held a preparatory meeting at the Vinicultural Institute. Their intention was to prevent control of the congress from falling into the hands of Tserkovski, who was not invited⁴. At the gathering Kormanov and Zabunov invited Mikhalaki Georgiev to make the opening speech as honorary «oldest and most worthy peasant». In addition to being a close friend of Kormanov, Georgiev was a well-known populist writer, a deputy in the National Assembly, and a prominent member of the National Party⁵. Tserkovski,

1. Spissarevski, p. 46; Topalov, «Osnovavane», 184.

2. *Zemledelska zashtita* I, Nos. 13-14 (Jan. 1, 1900), 1; Topalov, «Osnovavane», 182.

3. *Obshto delo* I, No. 1 (Sept. 18, 1900), 2-4; *Istoriia na BKP*, pp. 80-83.

4. Pekarev, *Spomeni*, pp. 193-194; N. Atanasov, p. 65.

5. Pinto, pp. 100-102.

informed of this move by one of his supporters, was incensed by this attempt of the Pleven Group to control the congress and to impose their own people on the assembled peasants. With the help of his friends he decided to prepare an unpleasant welcome for the speaker¹.

By nine o'clock on the morning of the 28th, the delegates and observers were gathered in the auditorium of the Pleven Public Library. Tserkovski, and Zabunov and Kormanov of the Pleven Group along with Georgiev were on the stage. Pekarev was seated in the front row². The congress was opened with a prayer, and Kormanov rose to welcome the delegates. After a few words on the importance of the congress, he gave the floor to Georgiev for the opening speech. When Georgiev reached the podium the delegates erupted. Tserkovski's supporters had correctly gauged the mood of the congress. The peasants were not willing to listen to any politician, still less to accept him as the «oldest and most worthy» of their number. For several minutes Georgiev attempted to speak, but was unable to be heard above the uproar. Atanas Kraev, another political figure and former Vice President of the National Assembly, came forward to try to quiet the delegates, but his intervention only increased the disturbance³. The peasants then began to chant: «We want the 'Appeal!'» This, of course, was a call for Tserkovski, who came forward and managed to quiet the assembly, thus gaining an impressive personal victory⁴.

The demonstration settled the question of the Agrarian Union's relation to politics. It was not simply due to Tserkovski's preparation. It reflected the peasants' deep hatred and distrust of party politics. As Dragiev wrote in his account of the congress, the peasants' shouts were not against Georgiev personally, for he was widely known to be a defender of the peasants' interests, but against him as a symbol of the system that repeatedly promised so much, yet did so little⁵. This continued to be the mood of the congress throughout its sessions, as speaker after speaker rose to denounce the political system and the party representatives in the galleries. Under these circumstances it was impossible to advocate that the Union itself engage in politics. It was even decided to change the name of the village unit of the Union from

1. N. Atanasov, p. 65.

2. Pekarev, *Spomeni*, p. 194.

3. Kraev was a member of the Liberal Party. He had come to the congress hoping to be named president of the new organization. Topalov, «Osnovavane», 185.

4. Pekarev, *Spomeni*, p. 194; N. Atanasov, pp. 65-66; Topalov, «Osnovavane», 183-185.

5. *Spravedlivost* I, No. 34 (Jan. 17, 1900), 1-2.

druzhina to *druzhba* because of the association of the former term with the political parties¹.

Tserkovski resolved the «oldest and most worthy peasant» question by calling on «Uncle» Kostadin of the village of Kara-arnaut (Goliam Izvor) Razgrad District in northeastern Bulgaria. «Uncle» Kostadin was certainly one of the oldest, if not most worthy, peasants at the congress, and he was acceptable to the delegates. He improvised a «good village speech» comparing the present situation of the peasantry to life under the Turks. He stated that taxes had been lower in Turkish times, and that for all practical purposes the peasants were still enslaved. In conclusion, he expressed the hope that the congress would find a way to improve matters. The speech was punctuated by applause and cries of «That's right!»²

The next order of business, the election of a bureau to administer the congress and prepare a draft charter, immediately revived the contest between Tserkovski and the Pleven Group. Kormanov proposed that the bureau consist of all those who had initiated the congress. This proposal, which would have given the Pleven Group a majority, was voted down, and the congress turned to the election of individuals. Tserkovski was nominated and elected unanimously. On his recommendation Pekarev was also elected. Then Ianko Zabunov was nominated and rejected, after which Ivan Nedelchev, another of Tserkovski's associates, was elected. Kormanov then rose to criticize the delegates for not appreciating the work of the Pleven Group. He pointedly warned that without the support of *Zemledelska zashtita* the Union would forfeit much of its influence. The delegates were moved by his arguments and elected him, Zabunov, and Todor Dinov, also of the Group, to the bureau. Finally, Ivan Voivodov of Tatar Parardzhik was elected to give representation to the delegates from southern Bulgaria³.

At about eleven o'clock Constantine Malkov, a teacher in the State Practical Agricultural School in the Russe District, and one of the original members of the Pleven Group, rose to read the first paper on the condition of agriculture in Bulgaria. He blamed the prevailing hard times on three factors: the declining world market price of grain, caused by cheap American, Argentine, and Australian wheat, the inequitable taxation policies of the government, and «Godless usury»⁴.

When the delegates returned from the dinner recess, it became obvious

1. Turlakov, *Istoriia*, p. 52.

2. *Zemledelska zashtita* I, Nos. 13-14 (Jan. 1, 1900), 2; Pekarev, *Spomeni*, p. 194.

3. *Zemledelska zashtita* I, Nos. 13-14 (Jan. 1, 1900), 1-2.

4. Malkov's paper was published in *Zemledelska zashtita* I, Nos. 15, 16, 17 (Jan. 20, Feb. 1, 10, 1900).

that they were in no mood to listen to reports on technical agricultural subjects. Malkov's report continued to be the subject of discussion as delegate after delegate took the floor to provide illustrative examples and to denounce the government, the practice of usury, and the political parties, including those party representatives who were at the congress as observers. It was decided to abandon the other papers that had been prepared, and the first day's meeting was adjourned without further progress.

On the second day, the congress continued to witness stormy debates and demonstrations. Little order was maintained as one orator after another strove to express the feelings of the delegates. Most successful was Dragiev, who made an «evangelical» speech urging peasant unity and non-cooperation with the political parties. He furiously denounced the party representatives in the galleries:

You, gentlemen, representatives of the blood-sucking parties, and you, Socialists, who deny the right of private property, you have come as uninvited guests to take over the organization whose representatives have gathered here to judge their own situation and their own great destiny. Before coming here you should fall on your knees as if you were entering a church so that you might not profane this sacred hall where the agrarian people conduct their holy proceedings¹.

The issue that dominated the day's meeting was that of the government's intention to replace the land tax with the tithe. The speakers condemned this measure and demanded that the Union take steps to prevent its application².

On the morning of the 30th, the bureau presented the congress with a provisional charter that was to remain in force until the next congress one year hence. It reflected the anti-political orientation of most of the delegates and was accepted with almost no debate. According to the charter, the Bulgarian Agrarian Union³ was to have as its goals «the intellectual and moral betterment of the peasant and the improvement of agriculture in all its branches». The means chosen to achieve these goals were:

- a) to study all aspects of the peasant's situation;
- b) to spread knowledge among the peasants by lectures, discussions, meetings, newspapers, journals, etc.;
- c) to work for the establishment of mutual savings banks and the expansion of markets for agricultural products;

1. Chastukhin, «Krest'ianskoe dvizhenie», p. 95.

2. N. Atanasov, pp. 67-70.

3. The name was changed to Bulgarian Agrarian *National* Union at the third congress in 1901 when the decision to enter politics was made.

d) to work for the creation of easily-available, cheap credit from the government;

e) to promote the creation of cooperative granaries as a means of credit;

f) to comment on questions of a legislative character which affect the interests of the peasants and relate to their property;

g) to promote the amalgamation of parcellized holdings;

h) to work for the peaceful resolution of disputes between members of the Union;

i) to promote the introduction of professional education;

j) to urge that cooperative labor and capital be devoted to building green-houses, populating unsettled areas, providing farm tools, etc.;

k) to act for the creation of Agrarian *druzhti* where there are now none¹.

The journal *Zemledelska zashtita* was selected to be the Union's official organ. The basic unit of the Union was to be the village *druzha*. The important question of who might belong to the Union was left open. It was decided that «Members . . . are to be peasants, teachers, priests, and other persons that the *druzha* desires to admit»².

When the charter had been adopted, the delegates turned to the election of a committee to administer the Union until the next congress. The members of the Pleven Group had campaigned hard against the «Socialists» of Tserkovski, and they were fortunate in that most of the delegates from Varna Province were forced to board their train before the balloting began. They also succeeded in having the vote take place by districts rather than by individuals. As a result, Zabunov, Kormanov, and K. Iliev of the Pleven Group were elected easily. They were joined by Pekarev and Nikola Kholevich of Varna, Tserkovski, Dragiev, and Ivan Voivodov. The committee thus included the leaders of all the pre-congress agrarian organizations³.

The first act of the Union was the drafting of a resolution presenting the demands of the peasants to the President of the National Assembly:

The first Agrarian Congress, gathered in the town of Pleven on the 28th, 29th, and 30th of December, 1899, realizing that the economic situation of the Bulgarian peasant is worse than intolerable, and that the principal causes of this situation are:

1) the bad tax system by which not only the income of the peasant is taken, but his capital as well;

1. *Zemledelska zashtita* I. Nos. 13-14 (Jan. 1, 1900), 3-4.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

2) the absence of easily-available, cheap credit which could eliminate the existing scarcity of capital for agricultural production and Godless usury at the same time;

3) the absence of well-ordered, professional education which could raise the productivity of agricultural labor;

Resolves:

1) to protest most energetically against the tithe and to seek a lowering of the existing land tax;

2) to seek the creation of cheap and easily-available credit;

3) to seek the creation of a well-ordered school system for the spreading of knowledge in all important branches of the agricultural economy¹.

After the adoption of this resolution the first congress of the Bulgarian Agrarian Union was adjourned.

The organization created in Pleven in the last days of the nineteenth century was far from being the powerful, crusading Union that Alexander Stamboliski was to lead to power in 1919. Over the next two decades the Union still had to lose its aversion to politics and gain a comprehensive and original ideology that would allow it to compete successfully with Socialism and the Bulgarian forms of liberalism. Nevertheless, the Pleven Congress did provide an institutional link between the aggrieved peasantry and radical members of the rural intelligentsia, and it was precisely this that made the Union's later advances possible.

*Dept. of History, UMBC
Baltimore, Maryland*

1. *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.