

THE DECLINE AND FALL OF PLOVDIV TYPEWRITERS: MEMENTO CORRUMPI AND THE CONTEMPORARY LEGACIES OF “ROBBER-SWINDLER” PRIVATIZATION IN BULGARIA

Kristen Ghodsee, University of Pennsylvania

On a Saturday, the second day of June 2018, just a few hours after the air raid sirens wailed for two full minutes in their annual homage to the great Bulgarian revolutionary poet Hristo Botev, I found one. I had spent much of the previous week searching in junk shops around Plovdiv, asking various hipsters in the galleries of Kapana where I might find a machine in good condition. When I struck out in Plovdiv, I woke up early and hunted through the Bitaka flea market across the Vladaya River in the northeastern part of Sofia. But no one had what I wanted. I was resigned to continuing my search online when I decided to try the small, overpriced flea market in front of the Alexander Nevski Cathedral.

And there it was: a pristine Maritsa 11 with a Cyrillic keyboard. Its dark vinyl case with its red-and-black-checked interior was in almost perfect condition. I pulled a piece of blank paper from my bag and asked the vendor, an older man in his mid-60s, if I could test the machine. He nodded, and I proceeded to feed the paper around the platen, set my margins, and type out a few sentences to check for sticky or misaligned keys. The carriage glided smoothly to the left and gave a cheerful ding when I reached the end of the line. The ink was faint because of the dry ribbon, but the space bar felt springy and the key tension firm.

The man watched me type and surmised that I was not interested in buying the typewriter for decoration. “That machine was made in Plovdiv,” he told me, “back when Bulgaria was a real country [*istinska dŭrzhava*] that manufactured things.”

He sighed. I exhaled heavily as if to express my sympathies. I had shared many versions of this particular conversation with a wide variety of Bulgarians over the last week of my quixotic search for a well-preserved Maritsa 11.



Figure 1

In Plovdiv, almost every inquiry about the machine sparked a small monologue about the chaos of the 1990s and the corrupt privatization of the Plovdiv Typewriter Works, which had once employed over 2,500 people in the city. Older Plovdiv residents would boast that “our typewriters” (*nashite pisheshti mashini*) had once been sold in the United States, Japan, and West Germany, while younger ones bemoaned the pillage (*ograbvane*) of their city after 1989.

Just my mention of the Maritsa typewriter seemed to invoke the acknowledgement of a collective wound. In the Russian context, the anthropologist Serguei Oushakine called this shared melancholy the “patriotism of despair,” a collective misery at the memory of the transition from state socialism to free market capitalism in the 1990s: “Telling personal stories about dramatic changes, losses, or violence in one’s own life involved the construction of

both a general framework within which these stories could make sense and a potential audience for these narratives” (Oushakine 5). In this article, I am interested in how shared narratives about the socialist past emerge from material objects, particularly the typewriters once made in the city of Plovdiv. My hope is to understand why the simple Maritsa typewriter has become one host for collective memories of trauma and injustice, a kind of touchstone for Oushakine’s “communities of loss” (5). In Bulgaria, a portable Maritsa 12 discovered in a grandmother’s closet or a boxy electric Hebros 300L still kept in an office of the city library serve as physical mementos of a squandered industrial past.

The ghosts of failed industries and shady privatizations can inhere in the material remains of socialism and may serve as a reminder that corruption is unavoidable, something I propose to call a *memento corrumpi*. Since antiquity, various objects and images once served as *memento mori*, symbols that reminded people about the inevitability of death. The Latin phrase “memento mori” translates as “remember that you must die.” Skulls or images of skeletons or bones adorned rings or goblets or were incorporated into paintings as a constant reminder to men and women that their lives were fleeting and that they should enjoy each day as if it were their last. In the contemporary city of Plovdiv, machines from the former Typewriter Works often remind people that corruption is pervasive and that everyone must fend for themselves in a society where wealth and power flow to those most willing to behave in a corrupt manner.

Objects of Nostalgia

Since 1989, scholars have investigated a wide variety of phenomena associated with what has been called “red nostalgia” (Ghodsee, “Red Nostalgia?”) or “communist nostalgia” (e.g., Boym; Velikonja; Todorova; Todorova and Gille; Luthar and Pušnik). From a commercial perspective, certain brands and objects that invoke memories of the lost state socialist past can inspire consumer loyalties in overcrowded markets saturated with Western imports. In the German context, for example, the Amazon.de marketplace annually offers nostalgic Christmas gift boxes featuring an assortment of old food and drink products from the German Democratic Republic, including *Rotkäppchen Sekt*, *Spreewald Gurken*, *Pfeffi Likör*, and *Krügerol Halsbonbon*.¹ These GDR-themed giftboxes use what the Germans call *Ostalgie* as clever marketing ploys to commodify the longing for products associated with one’s youth, but also allow former East Germans to express their disappointment with the failed promises of reunification as well as their critique of the rapaciousness of contemporary neoliberal capitalism. According to the anthropologist

1. To see examples of these boxes, type “DDR geschenkbbox” into the search bar of www.amazon.de.

Daphne Berdahl, *Ostalgie* “does not entail an identification with the former GDR state, but rather an identification with different forms of oppositional solidarity and collective memory. It can evoke feelings of longing, mourning, resentment, anger, relief, redemption, and satisfaction—often within the same individuals” (Berdahl 204).

Similarly, in the case of Bulgaria, objects from the recent past can also have agentic powers to evoke a wide range of human emotions: nostalgia, sorrow, loss, national pride, and political frustration with the present, to name but a few (Bennet; Coole and Frost). One excellent example of this was the exhibition and subsequent publication of *The Inventory Book of Socialism* in 2006 (Genova and Gospodinov). In the absence of an official museum to reflect upon Bulgaria’s socialist history, Iana Genova and Georgi Gospodinov gathered together an assortment of 502 Bulgarian-made things from the years 1956 to 1989. These included objects like a tube of Rila glue, pages from the illustrated children’s magazine *Dŭga*, a paper fruit-and-vegetable bag from the NarMag store, vinyl records from Balkanton, a Femina cigarette package, and a well-loved paperback copy of the Bulgarian translation of the East German book *Man and Women Intimately* (*Mŭzhŭt i Zhenata Intimno*).

Collected haphazardly from basements and closets, *The Inventory Book of Socialism* sought to preserve the materiality of a recent past as one set of Bulgarian-made objects quickly found itself replaced by the material overproduction of globalized capitalism. This shift in the quality, quantity, and character of the things of everyday life—the sudden replacement of *Fin Mlechen Shokolad* and *Detski Shokolad Veselka* with Milka Bars and Kinder Surprise, the substitution of *Bŭlgarasko Pivo* and *Bira Galata* with Heineken and Stella Artois, or the replacement of *Bŭlgaraska Rosa* and *Rubella* cosmetics with Nivea and Loreal—was an almost universal experience for those who lived through Bulgaria’s transition to a market economy in the 1990s. As new goods and products flooded Bulgaria’s markets from Western Europe, the United States, and China, the ordinary objects of everyday life under socialism seemingly disappeared. Summarizing their project in English, Genova and Gospodinov explained:

We started this book because of an obvious deficiency, a missing aspect in the way we reflect upon Bulgarian socialism nowadays. Everyday socialist culture and consumer items—appliances, detergents, cigarettes, food products and the like—are denied a place in the archives, inventories, virtual and real museums of socialism. Political scientists, professional analysts and historians normally do not (or at least until recently did not) lower their gaze towards these artefacts. They remain out of sight, small and unnoticed, slipping through the net of grandiose constructions and expert accounts.... This Book of Assets is an attempt to make an inventory of all that is dropping out of sight and to visualize the disappearing daily life of socialism. (160)

For the purposes of this article, what is fascinating about the *Inventory Book of Socialism* exhibition and its published catalogue was its emphasis on objects as things capable of evoking emotions from visitors to the exhibition

or readers of the book. This was self-consciously not a curated exhibition of socialist-era design for aesthetic appreciation, but rather a collection of material objects still powerful with meanings and memories that haunted (and perhaps still haunt) Bulgarian society. In his study of museum cultures in Bulgaria, the ethnologist Nikolai Vukov reflected on the importance of the Genova and Gospodinov project after viewing the exhibition:

For many viewers the objects are easily recognizable as things they once used, saw, or were in contact with; objects that they had heard about; or objects that are still part of today's households. Despite the variations of age and lived experiences among the visitors to the exhibition (and readers of the book), and despite the differences in taste and attitude toward these objects, the Inventory Book serves to unveil memories about a material life that surrounded people and exercised a lasting impact on their senses and perception. The memories are retrieved and retroactively extracted, but they are also created, constructed, and implanted. (326)

Perhaps not surprisingly, *The Inventory Book of Socialism* featured machines from the Plovdiv Typewriter Works: a Cyrillic Maritsa 30 with its case as item number 373 and a Hebros 300L as item number 382. Similarly, in Georgi Gospodinov's 2011 novel *The Physics of Sorrow* (*Fizika na Tūgata*), he pauses his narrative and asks readers to observe a moment of silence for the "souls" (*dushi*) of various inanimate objects from the recent past: record players, VCRs, cassette tape players, etc. (110), emphasizing the importance of inanimate objects in evoking memories of the past. In a parenthetical following his mention of typewriters on this list, for instance, Gospodinov writes: "[A]llow me to add a personal farewell to my Maritsa, filled with cigarette ashes and coffee from the '90s."² Indeed, Gospodinov's novel is liberally sprinkled with objects that act as vehicles or containers for melancholy and despair (Selvelli 253). In addition to sorrow, loss, or nostalgia, however, I argue that the Maritsa typewriter is also an object capable of inspiring anger, bitterness, and ultimately disgust at the injustices of the early transition period, particularly in Bulgaria's second largest city, Plovdiv. These are feelings actively "created, constructed, and implanted" by the physical or virtual presence of objects from the socialist past.

Typewriters behind the Iron Curtain

Bulgaria was not the first Eastern Bloc country to build a domestic typewriter industry, and, in fact, it was rather late to the scene and largely relied on West German and French technology and licenses. The Plovdiv Typewriter Works resulted from the sixth five-year plan and a decision made by Bulgaria's socialist central planners to develop the country's domestic fine machine and electronics manufacturing sector (Atanasov 21).³ The produc-

2. Quoted from Angela Rodel's English translation. Unless otherwise noted, other translations from the Bulgarian are the author's own.

3. All Bulgarian print sources were consulted in the Ivan Vazov National Library periodical reading room.

tion of typewriters and associated electronics required very fine machine works, skilled labor, and strict quality control (Dingwerth 8). The soldering of letter plates to the typebars, the exact placement of the typebars to prevent sticking keys and produce a uniformity of type pressure, the delicate placement of the carriage, and the correct calibration of the return bar therefore initially required tooling imported from the West. Construction on the large factory began in 1967, and limited production began in 1968. The Plovdiv Typewriter Works had its official opening ceremony (*otkrivane*) in 1971.

The first Maritsa typewriters were identical to the West German “Princess” portable models manufactured in Augsburg by Keller & Knappich GmbH, a company founded in 1898 (operating today under the name KUKA). Introduced in 1948, the Princess found a large market because of its modern design, excellent quality, and relative portability (Casillo 190). Its low profile (sixty-four millimeters in height), tight-fitting lid, and relatively light weight made it easier to carry than other machines available at the time, especially for women. But Keller & Knappich—after a strategic decision to refocus its production capabilities on industrial robotics—sold the licenses and tooling for their entire line of office machine products to Bulgaria in 1967; West German production of the Princess machine ceased that same year. Simultaneously, the new Bulgarian factory was also contracted to make electronic typewriters for the Japi office machine company in France due to ongoing labor unrest there.

The Bulgarians renamed the Princess “Maritsa” after the river that runs through Plovdiv and down through Greece. Its ancient Greek name was Evros, or Hebros, which is why later models of Bulgarian typewriters had this name.⁴ By the 1968 International Plovdiv Trade Fair, the Plovdiv Typewriter Works displayed eight different models: six manual and two electric typewriters (Atanasov 21). The Maritsa 11 was the basic Bulgarian version of the Princess 300, and the Maritsa 21 was the Princess 300 with an adjustable tab stop (a fixed location where the carriage return would stop for documents with columns). The Maritsa 12 and 13 were non-tab machines that were larger and heavier than the Maritsa 11 and based on the Princess 500, and the Maritsa 22 and 23 were the same machines but with tabs (“Novi Modeli Pisheshti Mashini”). The Maritsa 31 and 41 were electric models based on the French Japi license, with the latter having decimal tabs. The Maritsa 30, based on the Japanese Silver-Seiko, was a very popular portable introduced a few years later. As demand for electric models grew, the Hebros 300 and 300L were also introduced.

The Plovdiv Typewriter Works could manufacture between eighty and one hundred machines a day in 1968, but by the mid-1970s production increased

4. In Greek mythology, the female followers of Dionysus murdered the musician Orpheus and threw his severed head and lyre into the body of water called “Εβρος Ποταμός.”

to about two hundred machines per day (Atanasov 22). The factory eventually employed between 2,500 and 3,000 skilled workers from the city of Plovdiv and its immediate environs (Prodanova 172). The vast majority of its output was for export, by some estimates around 90 percent of all production. Like the Czechoslovak firm Zbrojovka Brno (which manufactured Consul typewriters) and the VEB Optima Büromaschinenwerk in the German Democratic Republic (which manufactured the ubiquitous Erika typewriter), Bulgarian machines eventually found a large export market for their products because they were both inexpensive and reliable. One source (Ianev) claims that the Plovdiv factory exported fifty thousand machines to Europe and thirty thousand machines to the United States per year, and this does not include exports to Australia or to the countries of the Global South (Ekip Maritsa).

Maritsa typewriters found their way to about forty-five countries around the globe and brought Bulgaria valuable hard currency. All of the contracts with capitalist countries were negotiated through a state trade agency specializing in Bulgarian electronics: Isotimpex. This agency negotiated large contracts for Bulgarian technologies, including typewriters. Bulgarian goods captured market share through relatively low pricing and a willingness to sell their goods under established Western brands (Dimitrov and Porter). The machines were often sold in Western countries through department stores like Sears in the United States, Neckerman in West Germany, and Argos in the United Kingdom. Some online collectors have traced typewriters sold under the name of Montgomery Ward (a now-defunct US department store) back to Bulgaria: the Montgomery Ward Model 101 was a Maritsa 11 (“Another Unusual Bulgarian-Made Portable”). Similarly, in the United States, Bulgarian typewriters were mass imported and rebranded by the country’s largest typewriter reseller, Bundys Typewriter Co. of Philadelphia, either under the name “Bundy” or “Omega” (“About Bundy’s”; “Obscure Brands”). Similarly, the Pacific Typewriter Company of Melbourne “flooded the Australian market with cheap, re-labelled East European machines, mostly from Maritsa but also from Consul of Czechoslovakia” (“Bulgarian Typewriters”). The Maritsa 11 and 30 were exported and often relabeled and sold in the West as “Omega,” “Lemair,” “Pacific,” “Crown,” or “Waverly” typewriters (Typewriter Database). In the National Museum of American History, for instance, one can still find an old Bulgarian Isotimpex catalogue featuring the Maritsa typewriters available for export (“Trade Catalogs from Isotimpex”).

Domestically, as early as 1968, two thousand Bulgarian typewriters were available in stores (Tanev 1601), and roughly 10 percent of production was sold to Bulgarians each year. In 1988 alone the Plovdiv Typewriter Works reportedly made 170,000 manual typewriters and 5,800 electric models, which means the domestic market received about 1,750 machines (although rumors suggest that these were often machines that had not passed the quality control standards required for export). Nevertheless, by the end of the



Figure 2

socialist era, most enterprises, educational institutions, libraries, and cultural centers were equipped with Bulgarian-made typewriters, and at least a decent swath of the Bulgarian population (particularly in the cities) either owned or had access to a Maritsa or Hebrus typewriter manufactured in Plovdiv.

Obviously, the sunset years of socialism coincided with the introduction of the personal computer, including the Bulgarian-made Pravets IMKO-1 and IMKO-2, inspired by the Apple II+. For a short while typewriters coexisted with computers (due to the prohibitive price of the latter), but in the West the typewriter was quickly becoming an obsolete technology. Western companies eagerly transferred production to countries where labor costs were cheaper.

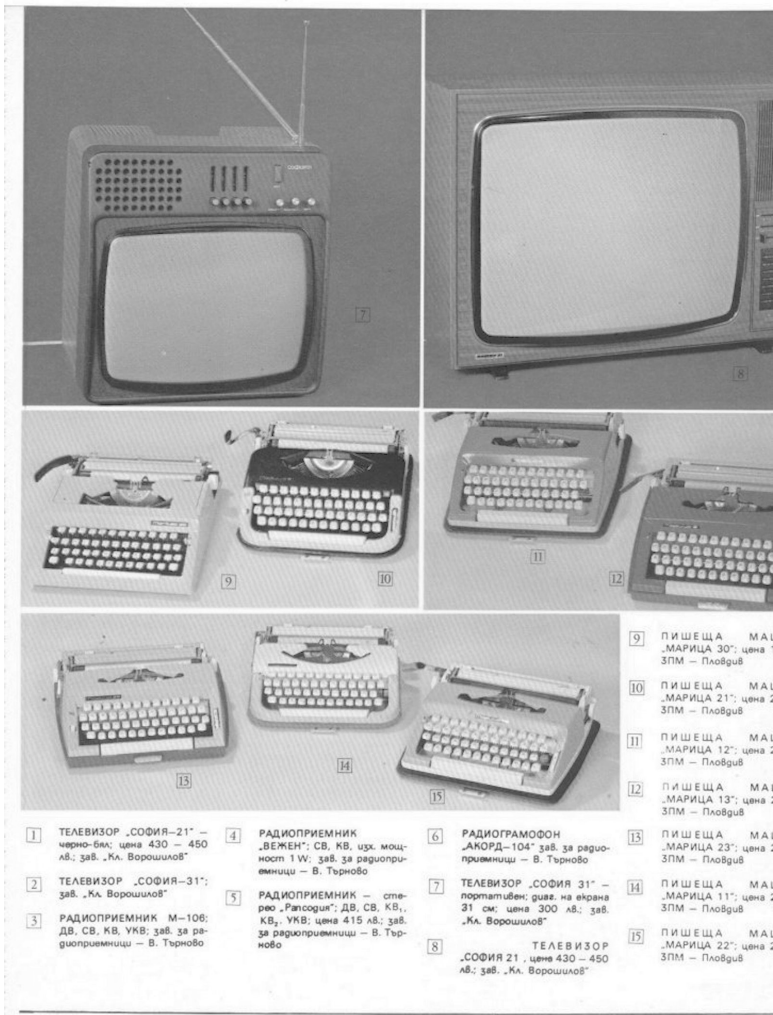


Figure 3

From the early 1980s, the management of the Plovdiv Typewriter Works began diversifying its product lines and seeking new partners abroad through Isotimpex (Dimitrov and Porter). Beginning in 1983, the factory began producing electronic word-processing machines with built-in memory chips (Binder). In 1986, it concluded contracts with Rank Xerox to make the photocopy machines RX1025 and RX1050 and launched the production of the domestic Bultex copy machines and the Bultext-20 word processor (Prodanova 175).



Figure 4



Figure 5

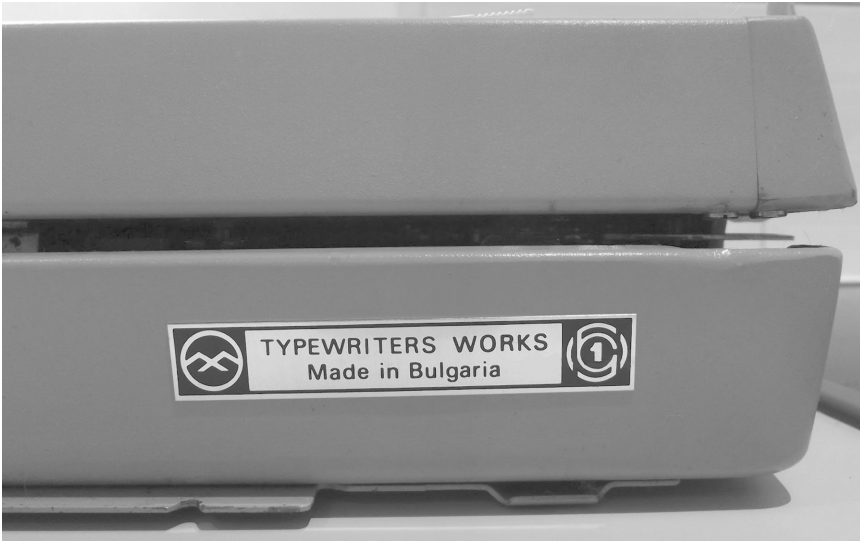


Figure 6 (photo courtesy of Robert Messenger at OzTypewriter)

The Plovdiv Typewriter Works was well positioned to do outsourced contract work because of its proximity to Western markets (Pekhlianov 4). Beginning in 1989, the factory was in negotiations with the West German firms Olympia and Adler and the Italian firm Olivetti to manufacture printers, scanners, and banking machines. Indeed, between 1989 and 1991, the factory had a contract with Triumph-Adler worth thirty thousand West German marks per month to produce the portable electronic typewriter Gabrielle 100 (Prodanova 175). With the dissolution of the COMECON⁵ in 1991, Isotimpex lost about 90 percent of its export markets in Russia and the former Soviet Republics, and its director, Ilia Naumov, reported that he tried to make up for the losses by exporting more typewriters to the American market (Longworth). As late as 1994, the Bulgarians were still expanding their export markets for manual and electronic typewriters in the Global South, concluding a new contract with Thailand for machines with Thai keyboards (Emanuilova 4). In 1995, the Plovdiv enterprise was looking for potential partners in Russia (Doikova 2). The Typewriter Works owned valuable tooling, occupied expansive premises in Plovdiv's industrial zone, and employed a battalion of relatively skilled industrial workers. Its potential for lucrative contracts with the West made the enterprise an attractive target during Bulgaria's postsocialist privatization process.

5. The Council for Mutual Economic Exchange—the socialist bloc free trade agreement.



Figure 7

Privatization and its Discontents

The unexpected fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and the subsequent democratic revolutions throughout Eastern Europe precipitated the restructuring of all centrally planned economies. Economic advisors from the West, particularly from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund as well as the European Union and the United States Agency for International Development, often conditioned foreign aid on the privatization of all state-owned enterprises, even successful ones, and the Plovdiv Typewriter Works found itself caught up in the chaos of the economic transition process. To understand what happened to the Plovdiv factory, it is essential to step back and consider the larger historical context of privatization.

Bulgaria was a relative latecomer to the process of economic reform and political change. Throughout the 1980s as *perestroika* and *glasnost* spilled over into other Warsaw Pact countries, Bulgaria made few market-oriented economic adjustments (Raichev and Stoichev). In the last year of socialism, the Bulgarian state still controlled 95 percent of the Bulgarian economy (Mladenova and Angresano 495). The first real economic reforms were not implemented until February 1991. Bulgaria was the last Central and Eastern European country to pass a privatization law (Elster et al. 156). Unfortunately, Bulgaria had accumulated a large hard currency debt. Between 1985 and 1989, Bulgaria's gross foreign debt grew from 3.9 billion dollars to 10.2

billion dollars with little to show for it (Jackson 206). The end of the COMECON crushed Bulgaria's export markets (Medarov and Tsoneva). The country's lack of hard currency reserves sparked a severe debt crisis, which led the Bulgarian government to declare a moratorium on its foreign debt repayments in March 1990.

Fearing the prospect of a Bulgarian default, international financial institutions began pushing for the rapid privatizations that would allow Bulgaria to service its debt to Western creditors (Mladenova and Angresano 496). Unlike Czechoslovakia, which had little external debt and could afford to implement a privatization program based on the essentially free distribution of shares in the state's assets to the population at large (Jezek 478), Bulgaria had little choice but to initially pursue the path of market privatization. To maximize state revenues from the sale of its enterprises, the government sought cash bidders, often disregarding the future of the enterprises' employees. As a result, managers and employees often turned against the privatization process, stealing as much as they could before their enterprise was sold to an outsider. Fearing unemployment, workers simply helped themselves to tools, spare parts, small machines, etc., keeping them for personal use, bartering them, or selling them for scrap in a process cynically called "spontaneous privatization." There was also a process referred to as "hidden privatization," whereby one part of an enterprise was privatized and thereafter charged the remaining state-owned part of the enterprise for its goods or services, which pushed the latter into deeper debt (Medarov and Tsoneva 22).

In response to the prevalence of spontaneous and hidden privatizations, the Bulgarian government gave priority to a new scheme called "Worker-Manager Companies," or *Rabotnichesko-Menidzhürskite Druzhestva*, usually abbreviated in Bulgarian as "RMD" and referred to in the English literature as "Management-Employee Buy-Outs" or "MEBOs" (Mihailova). The Worker-Manager Company was theoretically a better way to privatize state assets, since employees could take ownership of their enterprise and run it profitably (assuming they could find markets for their goods). For workers who had labored in the enterprises for decades, this arrangement seemed the fairest way to dispense of state-owned property. Since the RMD option was not available before 1995, "spontaneous privatizations" and "hidden privatizations" had proceeded apace. After 1995, the government began giving RMDs priority over cash bidders. But because workers did not have the capital necessary to pay the full value of an enterprise, the government allowed RMDs to pay only 10 percent of the bid they submitted. Once the RMD took ownership of the enterprise, they had to pay 10 percent of the total each year for ten years at a predetermined and fixed interest rate.

Given the hyperinflation of the 1990s, this generous payment schedule incentivized asset stripping by the new RMD owners. After paying only 10 percent of an enterprise's value, owners could sell off land, buildings, equip-

ment, contracts, etc., in order to turn a quick profit exceeding the initial 10 percent payment. By the time the second payment came due, the privatized enterprise would be devoid of all valuable assets. For breach of contract, the government could legally repossess the enterprise, but by then it would be worthless. This form of RMD privatization was widespread throughout Bulgaria after 1995 and would play an important role in the saga of Plovdiv Typewriters.

After the Bulgarian economy imploded in 1996 and the Bulgarian Socialist Party fell from power, a newly elected pro-Western government immediately changed the rules governing RMD privatizations. They lowered the percentage of employees needed to participate in a proposed buyout from 50 to 20 percent. The idea was that different groups of employees could find their own financial backing and place competitive bids for the enterprises, thereby driving up the price. Because managers and employees negotiated the terms of the deal directly with the Ministry of Industry or the Privatization Agency (and with little outside supervision), secrecy shrouded the special interests involved. Moreover, after 1995, when the state began giving RMDs priority over all other investors, management-employee teams were often used as fronts for new domestic groups hoping to launder money earned through clandestine arms sales during the Bosnian War. Given the opacity of the process, citizens accused government officials from both parties of using RMD privatizations to reward their political allies by selling enterprises well below their presumed value. In an external ranking of the most corrupt forms of privatization, RMDs were ranked second only to spontaneous privatizations (Kaufmann and Siegelbaum 423).

In addition to the RMD strategy of privatization, Bulgaria had also instituted a mass privatization scheme after 1994 molded around the Czechoslovak experience, which called for the distribution of investment "points" to all adult Bulgarian citizens and was rife with various corrupt schemes from the outset (Mihailova). The Center for Mass Privatization (a functionally separate organization from both the Ministries of Industry and Agriculture as well as the Privatization Agency) oversaw this process as a parallel form of privatization. Through a series of closed-door negotiations, the ruling party in charge of the privatization process would decide what percentage of different enterprises would be distributed through mass privatization auctions. Investment vouchers (*bonove*) that had been distributed to individuals were then exchanged for shares in a state enterprise or contributed to an investment fund. These investment funds were supposed to manage collective investments in privatized enterprises and subsequently pay dividends to their shareholders. In other cases, fund managers offered cash to buy vouchers outright. Having lived under forty-five years of state socialism, few Bulgarians understood anything about capitalist-style investments and were only too happy to sell off their vouchers for an immediate cash payment, especially during the

economic turmoil of the 1990s. Large investment funds amassed vast pools of vouchers by paying ordinary Bulgarians next to nothing or simply stealing them through various schemes (Mihailova). Entities like Albena Invest Holding (which plays a major role in our story) bought many investment vouchers from ordinary Bulgarians and used them to purchase shares in previously state-owned enterprises.

Corrupt privatizations of Bulgaria's major industries were ubiquitous in the 1990s and 2000s, including those of its national airline, Balkan, and its largest metallurgical plant, Kremikovtsi, as well as the hotels and infrastructure of its vibrant tourism industry (Medarov and Tsoneva; Ghodsee, *The Red Riviera*). But these dirty privatizations also occurred against a wider backdrop of pervasive corruption throughout the initial introduction of free markets. One study found bribery and racketeering widespread throughout the country (Grødeland et al. 651). Administrative officials, doctors, professors, and pharmacists all sought increasing payments to supplement their dwindling public salaries. Traffic police set up roadblocks and stopped automobiles at random to collect fines for real or imagined violations. License and permit applications got lost without the right "gifts" in advance. The legal system offered little protection to ordinary Bulgarians, since it too was rife with bribes and political partisanship. In 2000, Transparency International gave Bulgaria a score of 3.5 out of 10 on its Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), where zero is the most corrupt and 10 is the least corrupt. By comparison, in 2000, Finland scored a perfect 10, the United States scored a 7.8, and Nigeria earned the lowest score of 1.2 (Transparency International). Given the overall climate of grift and lawlessness that prevailed at the time, therefore, it was no surprise that the Plovdiv Typewriter Works would also fall victim to a shady privatization scheme.

"Robber-Swindler" Privatization

The Plovdiv Typewriter Works had remained a state-owned enterprise until the beginning of the 1996–1997 Bulgarian financial crash. This crisis precipitated hyperinflation, food shortages, and massive unemployment. The government of the Bulgarian Socialist Party lost in a landslide to the Union of Democratic Forces (SDS) in the May 1997 elections. The new Prime Minister, Ivan Kostov, appointed a man named Aleksandŭr Bozhkov as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Industry. Kostov led an openly pro-Western party, and Bozhkov aggressively pursued the privatization of Bulgaria's remaining state-owned enterprises in obedience to the requirements laid down by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the European Union (Mihailova). Bozhkov also allegedly used the privatization process to enrich himself and his political allies; a popular nickname for him in the late-1990s was "Mister 10%" (Bŭklova). Although the architect of the scheme that ultimately looted the Plovdiv Typewriter Works remains a mystery to this day, investigative

journalists suggest that it was Bozhkov himself who helped a troika of Plovdiv locals wrest control of the enterprise from Albena Invest Holding (Ekip Maritsa).

The actual details of the privatization process are as Byzantine as they were corrupt, and this short article can only provide a brief survey of the events that ultimately led to the liquidation of the factory, the theft of an estimated ten million Bulgarian leva, and the loss of thousands of jobs. The story begins under the government of the Bulgarian Socialist Party, which decided in late 1996 to begin the preparations to privatize a certain number of shares of the still-profitable Plovdiv Typewriter Works through the voucher privatization process under the auspices of the Center for Mass Privatization (“Pisheshti Mashini EAD—Plovdiv” 2; “Pisheshti Mashini EAD” 64). At that time, Albena Invest Holding was already a large domestic investment fund, which had amassed its capital by buying up privatization vouchers. It also secured external funding from French banks eager to participate in the fire sale of Bulgaria’s once-vast industrial base and its lucrative tourism sector. But the scheduled mass privatization auction was delayed because of the financial crisis and the subsequent change in government.

In 1998, under the new Kostov government, the Center for Mass Privatization got the green light to auction off 67 percent of the shares in the Plovdiv Typewriter Works to privatization voucher holders (“Shestdeset i Sedem” iv). Given that the enterprise employed so many locals in Bulgaria’s second largest city, the government may have hoped that the mass privatization process would result in the transfer of ownership to the enterprise’s workers. Instead, Albena Invest Holding bid for and won 52 percent of the shares of Plovdiv Typewriter Works, and only 11.6 percent went to the workers (Zhekova 9). At the end of the auction, about 36 percent of the total shares in the company remained with the Ministry of Industry. Albena Invest thus emerged as the majority shareholder in early 1999 (Kushaliev).

The new quasi-private enterprise was reorganized and given a two-tiered management structure, with one board of directors that included representatives of the workers and the state and a separate supervisory board that included representatives from Albena Invest Holding. Because Albena Invest Holding had a controlling stake, the employees feared that it intended to asset-strip the factory and run it into bankruptcy as had happened with so many other privatized enterprises in the 1990s across Eastern Europe. Plovdiv Typewriter Works still owned valuable real estate, and it would be more profitable for Albena Invest to sell off the enterprise in pieces than to invest in the retooling necessary to move from the production of typewriters to more sophisticated electronic devices. On March 20, 1999, the majority shareholders announced that they would be laying off two hundred employees, a move that infuriated workers, raised suspicions of an impending liquidation, and turned the employees against their new management (Percheva 1).

Less than two months later, a man named Veren Filchev (a former employee who had labored his way up from a grinder to a sales representative) was appointed as the head of a new joint-stock company called Typewriters A.D., which represented the shareholder interests of the Ministry of Industry. On April 17, 1999, Plovdiv Typewriter Works held a general meeting attended by 1) a representative of the Ministry of Industry (Filchev, who held a power of attorney to represent Bozhkov); 2) representatives of Albena Invest Holding (the majority shareholders); and 3) the chairman of the Union of Democratic Forces-affiliated trade union, Podkrepa (Solidarity): a man named Atanas Krüstev. Under Bozhkov's direction, the Ministry of Industry had transferred the Podkrepa chairman thirty-five shares (or .01 percent of the capital) of Plovdiv Typewriters so that Krüstev could represent the interests of the factory's workers at the general meeting, thus laying the groundwork for an eventual RMD privatization of the enterprise's remaining shares.

After the official general meeting concluded and the representatives of Albena Invest Holding departed, Filchev, Krüstev, and a worker named Dimitür Bachvarov convened a second shareholder meeting without the presence of the majority stakeholders. At this second meeting, the minority shareholders (including many workers), whose shares totaled 48 percent, voted to dissolve the two-tiered management structure and created a new board of directors with Filchev as executive director and Krüstev and Bachvarov as board members, thus giving Filchev and his accomplices the right to form an RMD (Kushalieva). Although the legality of this second meeting was dubious, Filchev, Krüstev, and Bachvarov registered the management changes in the Plovdiv district court on May 20, 1999. Filchev also formally accused the representatives of Albena Invest Holding of forgery and fraud, which launched a local investigation (Todorova 4).

A fierce legal battle ensued once Albena Invest Holding understood what had happened at the second meeting. They contested the dissolution of the supervisory board and the registration of the new management but had little success in the Plovdiv courts, which were possibly sympathetic to the plight of the workers in the factory (Kushalieva). Albena Invest Holding represented the interests of Bulgarians from the Black Sea region of Dobrich and were therefore viewed as suspicious outsiders by the natives of Plovdiv. Various court cases and appeals were won or overturned, and the fight between Albena Invest and Typewriters A.D. slowly worked its way up to the Supreme Court of Cassation in 2002. But the glacial pace of Bulgaria's legal system undermined Albena Invest because the Ministry of Industry and the RMD moved in to restructure the enterprise while the lawyers argued in court.

In June 1999, just weeks after the registration of the new managers in the Plovdiv court, the Ministry of Industry announced that it would privatize its remaining stake in Typewriters A.D. With the auction imminent, two new shell companies registered to compete for the state's shares: Typewriters—

Private, owned by Filchev, Krüstev, and Bachvarov, and Typewriters 99, owned by Albena Invest Holding. During the privatization process, Typewriters 99 bid 320,000 levs, and Typewriters—Private bid 1.2 million levs (*Banker*). Because Typewriters—Private represented 20 percent of the employees of the former Typewriter Works, it was eligible for RMD privatization and was therefore the preferred bidder. The Ministry of Industry sold its shares to Typewriters—Private. Through the terms set out in the RMD privatization law, Typewriters—Private got a favorable payment schedule, which required them to pay only 10 percent per year for ten years (*Banker*). Therefore, Typewriters—Private paid only 120,000 levs for the state's shares, less than half the amount of the cash bid of Typewriters 99.

Once the RMD privatization was accomplished, the new managers could sell assets or transfer shares to new entities. New shell companies were formed, and stock shares were transferred in a complex chain of shifting ownership even as Albena Invest tried to fight for its rights through the courts. But decisions about the future of the Plovdiv Typewriter Works remained with the single-tiered RMD Board of Directors, which promptly commenced the asset-stripping (with the tacit support of the Ministry of Industry). In this particular case, two different parts of the government seemed to be working against each other; the Ministry of Industry undermined the outcome of an auction previously held by the Center for Mass Privatization. Since the initial decision to auction off the enterprise through the Center for Mass Privatization was taken under the former government, the subsequent RMD privatization might have been the only way for Bozhkov to assert ministerial control over the process.

There were thus three different groups involved in the privatization process: 1) Albena Invest, which most likely wanted to strip assets and turn a quick profit; 2) the actual employees of the Typewriter Works, who wanted to keep the factory producing office machines for Western export markets; and 3) the Minister of Industry (Bozhkov) and his representatives who *claimed* to be representing the workers. To this day, it remains unclear if the Ministry of Industry did this to protect workers from the predatory intentions of Albena Invest Holding or if the Minister of Industry himself thought he could profit (and get his fabled 10 percent) if he worked with the workers and the friendly Podkrepa Union representative to pave the way for the RMD privatization. In the end, the RMD only paid 120,000 levs to the Bulgarian state but sold off millions of levs in real estate and equipment.

Bulgaria's typewriter and small electronics industry was destroyed. The employees, who initially held 11.6 percent of the original shares, claim they received nothing. More than 2,500 workers lost their jobs, some with decades of seniority in the factory. Even as the machines and real estate were being sold off or transferred to new entities, the court cases continued, with Albena Invest hoping to recoup some of its losses. But after years of legal wrangling,

with an endless series of decisions and appeals under different governments, the last fragments of the Plovdiv Typewriter Works were finally liquidated in 2012.

Memento Corrupti

Although it is unclear whether the Plovdiv Typewriter Works would have retooled and joined the computer age after 1989, they could have sustained themselves for a while doing contract work for West European and American corporations. But as with so many other Bulgarian industries, the main export markets for Bulgarian typewriters had been brother socialist countries, and these markets evaporated after 1991. Moreover, Bulgaria's transition to free markets occurred during an era of globalization when flexible specialization replaced the old Fordist models of mass industry (Verdery 34). Suddenly, Bulgarian goods had to fight for market share in a world already awash with cheap and diverse manufactured goods from Asia. It was perhaps only a matter of time before the enterprise went bankrupt, but the particular way that the Typewriter Works was dismantled left a lingering scar on the collective imagination of Plovdiv residents. Indeed, when I asked a Plovdiv taxi driver to take me to the former *Zavod za Pisheshti Mashini*, I got an unexpected diatribe against democracy, capitalism, Mikhail Gorbachev, Helmut Kohl, David Hasselhoff, and "Bate Boiko," Bulgaria's Prime Minister Boiko Borisov.

For the last twenty years, local journalists have rehashed the corruption that characterized the 1990s, and the Plovdiv Typewriter Works is often presented as a paradigmatic case of the state colluding with selected insiders to rob the Bulgarian people of their industries. For example, a 2004 article in the Bulgarian newspaper *Banker* discussed the chaos surrounding the fate of the factory and the shady Worker-Manager privatization process: "The sad thing is that, like hundreds of enterprises in the country, the only typewriter production factory in our country fell victim to the so-called robber-swindler privatization" ("Tūzhnoto e, che podobno na stotitsite predpriiatia v stranata i edinstveniat zavod u nas za proizvodstvo na pisheshti mashini stana zhertva na t.nar. razboinichesko-mentūrdzhiiska privatizatsiia"). Here the journalists at *Banker* are using a Bulgarian play on words that captures the negative reputation of RMD privatizations. The phrase "rabotnichesko-menidzhūrska privatizatsiia" (worker-manager privatization) is cynically referred to as the similar-sounding "razboinichesko-mentūrdzhiiska privatizatsiia" (robber-swindler privatization), a designation that continues to live in the minds of Bulgarians who remember the role of RMDs in the pillage of the 1990s.

A 2013 article in Plovdiv's regional newspaper, *Maritsa*, "The Ferocious Typewriter War" ("Svirepata voiina za Pisheshti mashini"), reports "the grand robbery of the people through the so-called mass privatization" ("grandioznoto ograbvane na naroda chrez t.nar. masova privatizatsiia"). The authors detail the various ins and outs of the privatization process and concur that the

workers who held a small number of shares ultimately received nothing from the process. In the end, the editorial team of the *Maritsa* newspaper claimed, “Those who have benefited are no more than 1 percent of all. The fairness in this privatization is also not more than 1 percent” (“Tezi, koito sa se oblagodetelstvali, sa ne poveche ot 1 protsent ot vsichki. Spravedlivostta v тази privatizatsiia süshoto ne e poveche ot 1 protsent”) (Ekip Maritsa).

A January 23, 2019 photo essay (Ianev) on the Plovdiv news website *Pod Tepeto* explicitly referred to the privatization process as “looting”: “In the second half of the 1990s, during the time of mass privatization, the factory was literally looted and shut down” (“Prez vtórata polovina na 90-te godini, po vremeto na masovata privatizatsiia, zavodüt bukvalno e razgraben i spira rabota”). The photo essay features black-and-white images of workers building typewriters in the old factory and asks the reader, “Do you remember the time when the Maritsa typewriter was one of the industrial emblems of Plovdiv?” (“Pomnite li vremeto, kogato pisheshtata mashina ‘Maritsa’ be edna ot industrialnite emblemi na Plovdiv”). In a comment on the essay, a reader named “Zhani” remembered once finding an exported Bulgarian-made Maritsa typewriter tucked away in the closet of a house they bought in England. Zhani wrote of their feelings upon discovering this machine in the United Kingdom: “I was glad, but also sad, because I know that all this is gone. And thousands of people worked in these factories. Everything was destroyed and robbed...” (“Stana mi drago, no i müchno, zashtoto znam, che vsichko tova veche go niam. A khiliadi khora rabotekhme v tezi zavodi. Vsichko beshe razrusheno i ograbeno...”). These news stories and photo essays reinforce the folk knowledge and public memory of the corruption of the RMD privatization process.

Indeed, Maritsa typewriters from Plovdiv have become one of the many emblems of the lost industries of Bulgarian socialism, particularly among internet users with an interest in documenting the recent past. For example, a Bulgarian website dedicated to the preservation of information about old Bulgarian technology (www.sandacite.bg) featured a post about Maritsa typewriters on November 3, 2016 accompanied by photos of the Plovdiv residents who once manufactured them (“Bülgarski Pisheshti Mashini Maritsa”). Another website preserving the everyday memories of socialism (www.socbg.com) has a page featuring color pages from a 1977 catalogue with Bulgarian-made radios, televisions, and typewriters (“Radio, televiziia, i pisheshti machini”). As mentioned above, Gospodinov and Genova included the Maritsa and Hebros typewriters in their *Inventory Book of Socialism*, and of course, a Plovdiv-made typewriter is essential decor for the country’s nostalgic socialist restaurants, like Raketa Rakia in Sofia. A Maritsa 30 graces the living room of the touristy Red Flat (*Cherveniat Apartament*) near Vitosha Street, and more than ten Bulgarian typewriters are displayed in the private mall-based Retro Museum in Varna. While they certainly serve as potent reminders of the lost

socialist past, these Plovdiv-made typewriters may also invoke memories of anger, frustration, and mistrust for those old enough to remember the sordid saga of the factory's privatization.

Conclusion

Unlike the DDR Museum and the "Alltag in der DDR" exhibit in the Kulturbrauerei in Berlin or the N'Ostalgie Museum in Leipzig, cultural anthropologist Ivailo Dichev argues that "Bulgaria never created a serious memorial institution that dealt with the communist period" (Dichev).⁶ Instead, the ethnologist Nikolai Vukov observes that public memory of the socialist past has been dominated by the narratives of its victims (334). But Vukov also argues that no matter how many museums or monuments are erected to the post-1944 victims of the purges or the labor camps, the residual material remnants of the socialist era undermine the one-sided nature of these anti-socialist memory projects. When Genova and Gospodinov argued that everyday objects from the recent past were being lost, they hoped "to make an inventory of all that [was] dropping out of sight and to visualize the disappearing daily life of socialism." This is important because the "disappearing daily life of socialism" as embodied in objects like the Maritsa typewriter are not just relics of the past, but physical embodiments of memories and processes that have the potential to manifest in contemporary political action.

Vukov asserts that physical objects from the socialist past force his compatriots to reflect on the "manifest trauma of the present, since for many Bulgarians the problems of the transition period have been much harder to beat than the restrained but 'cozy' life that they had before" (333–34). Similarly, Dichev claims that "the political transition period of the 1990s, after the fall of communism, was much more difficult in Bulgaria than in many other former Eastern bloc countries. Memories recalling the terror during the establishment of the regime were blurred by more recent traumas" (Dichev). In other words, the persistence of the materiality of socialism, as embodied in objects made in Bulgaria between 1944 and 1989, can be as much a critique of the capitalist present as it is about nostalgia for the socialist past. Items like the Maritsa typewriter serve as just one of many *memento corrupti*, reminders of the chaos and criminality that marked the birth of capitalism and democracy in the 1990s. These physical objects have the potential to inspire frustration, regret, anger, cynicism, and perhaps ultimately a desire for radical political change.

Assuming that the Plovdiv Typewriter Works made about 1,750 units a year for the domestic market, there are roughly 350,000 Maritsa and Hebros typewriters still floating around in schools, offices, basements, attics, and in Bulgaria's flea markets. In countries like the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia, there are literally hundreds of thousands of these machines still

6. One possible exception is the Museum of Socialist Art.



Figure 8 (photo courtesy of Robert Messenger at OzTypewriter)

bearing their diminutive “Made in Bulgaria” plaques on the back. To the extent that the Plovdiv-made typewriters continue to exist, both physically in the real world and virtually as images or symbols of the socialist past, this humble writing machine fuels the public memory of the corrupt economic transition process. Particularly for Plovdiv residents, objects like the Maritsa typewriter may work to extract memories of a lost past, but they also actively create, construct, and implant thoughts about the fairness or unfairness of Bulgaria’s move from socialism to free markets, thoughts that may ultimately mobilize critiques and challenges to the ever-increasing robber-swindler character of contemporary capitalism.

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Abstract

Between 1967 and 1998, the Plovdiv Typewriter Works manufactured millions of inexpensive and reliable typewriters for both domestic and export markets. At its peak, the factory employed almost three thousand Bulgarians and sent writing machines to over forty-five countries, including the United States, The United Kingdom, Australia, and West Germany. Sold under the brand names “Maritsa” and “Hebros” in Bulgaria, and “Omega,” “Bundy,” “Lemair,” “Crown,” “Pacific,” and “Waverly” abroad, millions of machines flooded international markets in the 1970s and 1980s until its disastrous privatization and untimely demise in the 1990s. These Plovdiv-made typewriters serve as both potent physical remembrances of the socialist past and painful material reminders of the criminality that characterized Bulgaria’s transition toward capitalism after 1989. In the context of contemporary Plovdiv, a simple typewriter—a portable Maritsa discovered in a grandmother’s closet or a boxy electric Hebros kept in a city library—might become an agentic host for collective memories of loss, trauma, and injustice in contemporary Bulgaria—a kind of *memento corrumpi* or totem to remind people that corruption is unavoidable (just as

the *memento mori* of antiquity reminded people of the inevitability of death). Through a detailed history and textual analysis of media discourses around the rise and fall of the Plovdiv Typewriter Works, the article explores how the ghosts of shady privatizations inhere in the material remains of Bulgaria's industrial past.

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