

**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

**Cruising the Danube River
Bulgaria**

Cruising the Danube River

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Cruising the Danube River Bulgaria

September 29, 30, and December 7, 2013

Hello from Your on the Street Reporter. Continuing the reports on the Danube River cruise, we sailed west on the river, stopping at two ports on September 29 and 30: Belogradchik and Vidin, as seen in Figure 1. From these ports, we branched out into the Bulgarian countryside to pay a call on several museums, churches, and bistros.



Figure 1. Ports of call.

In my younger years, before I knew much about Bulgaria (in this context, “much” means not much), I had the impression the country had been ravaged by World War II. It was not. Bulgaria was an ally of Germany until late in the war and thus avoided Germany’s blitzkrieg. Following the war, the Soviets took over. I was also under the impression that the country suffered economically because of communism. It did not. Articles I read stated that by the mid-1950s, living standards were considerably higher than they were before the war.

I asked the tour guide about this fact, and he replied the bar for affluence was set pretty low to begin with. In addition, the Soviet central-planned economy bended as market-oriented policies began to take effect during the 1960s-1980s.¹

Stalin Again

Nonetheless, even in this compliant country, Stalin’s terror showed its head. By one source, it is estimated between 50,000 and 100,000 people were killed as part of the communist collectivization effort. Another estimate is more modest: 31,000 were murdered.²

¹ On my first writing of this essay (which I posted to my blog, but was later mistakenly deleted by my website provider), an American economist living in Bulgaria questioned this assertion. Citing a website for reference, he responded, “At the very least I believe you should be a bit more careful about holding forth on a topic which is highly controversial -- and about which you probably have no research background or personal expertise.” It turned out that the data I cited were correct. However, I used the wrong footnote, which I had obtained from a Wikipedia source. It was my mistake, for which I apologized to the man. He also took me to task for using Wikipedia, but not citing Wikipedia; citing the footnote source. It was as if he had discovered a momentous intellectual fraud. He even threatened to create a website lambasting my poor scholarship. I explained to him: Unless I cite Wikipedia directly, I go to the footnote, and then to the source of the footnote to verify (as best one can with any footnote, academic or otherwise) its integrity and authenticity. That is what I had done in this instance. He was not satisfied. He implied I was trying to mask that I was using Wikipedia! I am a strong supporter (and funder) of Wikipedia, but it does not have the integrity of conventional directories, as it does not do academic peer review. That is why I use it to go the footnote source for further verification. This man had a valid point about my erroneous footnote, and I admired his attention to detail, but I was finally put off by his pedantry.

Under the leadership of Georgi Dimitrov (1946–1949), the foundations for a Stalinist state were created. As stated above, it was highly repressive with thousands of citizens executed or imprisoned.

The Warsaw Pact

Now is as good time as any to provide a short explanation of the Warsaw Pact. It was formed in 1955, and consisted of these countries:  Albania,  Bulgaria,  Czechoslovakia,  East Germany,  Hungary,  Poland,  Romania, and  Soviet Union.³

In the past, I was under the impression the Pact was created by the USSR as a counter to NATO. That was the principal reason, but I believe the straw that broke the camel's back was West Germany joining NATO. Before the ending of WWII, Stalin had coveted Germany. Recent release of some Russian archives documents his desire to annex the country, even while WWII was still being fought in Russia with the Germans.

NATO countries and Warsaw Pact countries never went to war with each other. However, the Pact's countries did invade Czechoslovakia in August 1968 (Albania, Romania, and East Germany did not participate in this invasion.) From my position as a casual observer of this part of the world, I thought this invasion was dim-witted on the part of the Russians. In the long run, it helped lead to the 1989 unraveling of the USSR. The upcoming report on Prague, Czech Republic, returns to this topic.

The Warsaw Pact began to come undone with the the upheavals of 1989 in several of the Eastern Bloc countries, beginning with the Solidarity movement in Poland. But for a while, these seven countries, dominated by the Soviet Union held sway over much of Eastern Europe. Figure 2 shows the leaders of these countries in 1967.

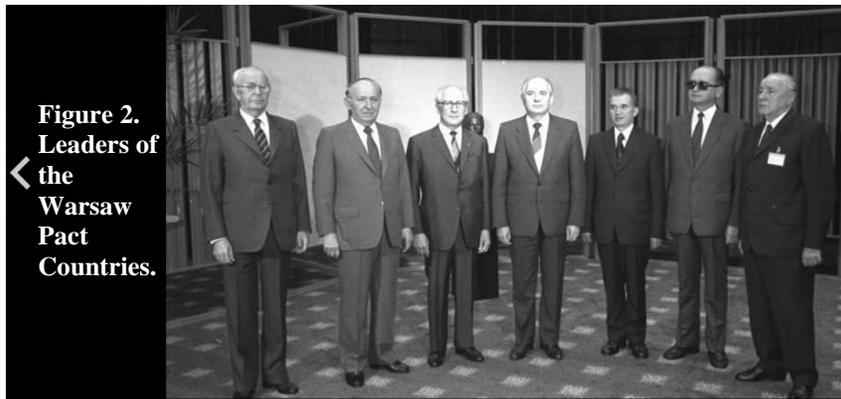


Figure 2. Leaders of the Warsaw Pact Countries. With Warsaw Pact leaders, 1987 (from left): Husák of Czechoslovakia, Zhivkov of Bulgaria, Honecker of East Germany, Gorbachev of the Soviet Union, Ceausescu, Jaruzelski of Poland, and Kádár of Hungary.

² Hanna Arendt Center in Sofia, Dinyu Sharlanov and Venelin I. Ganey, “Crimes Committed by the Communist Regime in Bulgaria,” *Country Report*, "Crimes of the Communist Regimes" Conference. 24-26 February 2010, Prague.

³ Thanks to *Wikipedia*, graphics and Figure 2.

In 1989, with the fall of the Berlin Wall, Bulgaria began a transition to democracy---as did other Eastern European countries that had been under Soviet domination. Unlike Romania, Bulgaria’s shedding of the USSR and of Stalin’s influence did not result in a bloody revolution.

Paraphrasing a cliché that rings true for communism: “You can repress all the people some of the time, and you can repress some of the people all of the time. But you cannot repress all of the people all of the time.” Dictatorial despots never learn this truism.

Not to Miss

This series is challenging in that I have promised to be brief, and to highlight one, maybe two places you should not miss. My exposure to each area during this short journey was limited. The explorations were usually only a few miles from the Danube River port to which the ship was docked. Yet, there is much more that I am not including in these reports. The solution is for you to make this trip yourself.

For this report, don’t miss seeing the Bulgaria countryside. If need be, rent a car or hire a tour guide to take you around. This part of the land, adjacent to the Danube River, is a pleasure to behold. Two photos in Figure 3 will give you an appreciation of its scenery and geography. The third photo offers some other advice on “not to miss” experiences.



Figure 3. Countryside and villages.

For this traveler, one of the most enjoyable parts of being in Europe is walking the streets of its small towns and villages. It is an escape from the box-like strip malls in America. These village streets offer the same kinds of stores as our local mall. But the “mall” in each country in Europe is unique. There are no cookie-cutter, L-shaped-box business centers.

Our older towns have this same diversity. When we exit the Interstates and take to the blue highways, we can easily find small towns that have their own personality. Even my hometown in New Mexico has no...ok...it has a few L-shape strip malls. But it also has diversity in its architecture.

I hope you are in agreement with me about the notion of building places in our country that offer visual relief. I would wager you and I agree that pictorial reprieve from bland sameness provides a mental breathing-space to our senses and souls. The towns in this part of Bulgaria offer breathing-space to both. So, hoping I have your interest, I would like to offer an example of a “not to miss” idea: a walk through a Bulgarian village.



I chose to forego a guided tour on one of our days in Bulgaria. (Holly stayed at the ship and out of the rain.) Instead, I took a walk around the town of Vidin, whose main street is shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4.



One of the more beautiful buildings on the street was a performing arts theater (Figure 5). The marquees advertised movies and (I think) plays. I attempted to have a conversation with two women who had exited the building:

Figure 5.

- I tipped my socialist hat, “Good morning. Do you speak English?”
- One woman nodded no, which in Bulgaria is a nod, which Americans understand as yes. I knew of this custom, so in response, I nodded my head with a no, which meant yes. The other woman said, “A little.”
- I was in luck, “I see movies are shown here. I think that marquee is advertising plays as well?” Anything to have an exchange.
- The woman shrugged her shoulders (a universal signal) and nodded her head with a Bulgarian no. She said “little,” and I had flooded her with a “lot.”
- I tipped my socialist hat, “Thank you, and the three of us went our separate ways.



Figure 6.

Fruit and vegetable stands, as well as small hot food kiosks, are universal in European villages. I stopped at one (Figure 6) and bought an apple. Remaining silent, I handed the clerk a Bulgarian note, as if I knew the cost of the apple and the worth of the note. She took the money, presented me with change and said something in Bulgarian. I was safe from anti-American terrorists! I had passed as a native. Not wanting to break my cover, I nodded a Bulgarian no and continued my walk.



Figure 7.

I like going into bookstores in foreign countries. You can gain a sense of the citizens' interests, as well as their assimilation of the English language---an aspect of interest to one who wishes to converse with the natives. For the store in Vidin, there were no books in English. Even the famous "Dummies" books were written in the Bulgarian Cyrillic language (Figure 7).

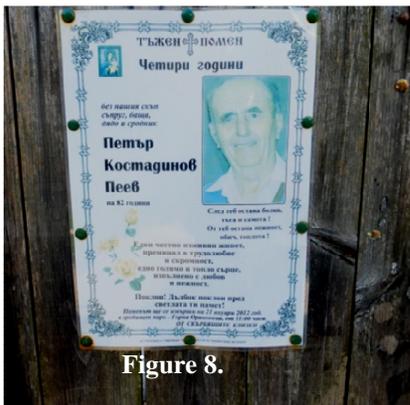


Figure 8.

I passed by several posters similar to the one in Figure 8. Conditioned to political campaign posters in America, I assumed these in Bulgaria were the same. But upon looking at them more closely, I noticed that none of the people were smiling, a sure sign that they were not politicians. Later, I learned they were obituaries (also called memorials).⁴ In a small town, most of which have no local newspaper, a public posting such as this was a practical way to inform the town of the passing-away of a citizen, as well as to honor the person. Vidin does have a newspaper, but perhaps no obit section.

⁴ In the first writing of this essay (again, its posting and then deletion from my blog by my website provider), I was taken to task by an American who lives in Bulgaria for using the word *obituary*. ...The same man who took me to task for using the wrong footnote, and for supposedly using but not citing *Wikipedia*. He stated these posters were not obituaries, but memorials. However, my editor informs me she heard the word *obituary* used in Croatia as well. Granted, Croatia is not Bulgaria, but I heard the word *obituary* from my Bulgarian tour guide, which is the reason I used it. The notice was to inform people of the passing away of someone. Sounds like an obituary to me. Given the thumb tacks and its composition of paper, if it is a memorial, it is likely a temporary one.



MEMORIAL
OF
THE VICTIMS
OF
COMMUNISM



On my way back to the ship, I passed by a small chapel, shown in Figure 9. The doors were locked, but the intent of the building was evident from the inscription on the wall.

As with all the places we have visited on this Danube River cruise thus far, the Nazi Germany and communist USSR of the past continues to resonate into the present.