



Crushing the Imperial(ist) Eagles: Nationalism, Ideological Instruction, and Adventure in the Bulgarian Comics about Spartacus – the 1980s and Beyond

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With his muscular body and determination to fight the Roman imperial oppressor, Spartacus became the standard bearer of the ideology of class struggle rooted in the nineteenth-century socio-political currents in Europe and the US and flourishing in Marxist communist thought. Impressed by Appian's depiction of Spartacus, Karl Marx famously praised him as a noble, great general, a true hero of the ancient proletariat.¹ The Spartacus League, formed and led by Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxembourgh during World War I, fought against the involvement of Germany in the conflict and saw revolution as the only way to destroy the capitalist class and empower the proletariat. It was precisely the Spartacus League, which after the war renamed itself the Communist Party of Germany, that brought to post-revolution Soviet Russia the idea of Spartacus as the epitome of class struggle. The gladiator was "elected" as a leading ideological personality to be praised and employed as a role model for the masses.

As in many other European countries, in Bulgaria too, the figure of Spartacus was appropriated and reimagined to reflect and embody early twentieth-century socio-political struggles. Communist

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1 Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, 265.

movements were suppressed in the kingdom of Bulgaria until the end of World War II, and all manifestations of Marxist ideas in culture and art were curbed, including Raffaello Giovagnoli's book *Spartacus*. Published in 1874 and praised by Garibaldi himself, it enjoyed great popularity at the time but was officially condemned as subversive reading.² Nevertheless, the freedom fighter acquired prominence in Bulgarian society in the 1920s and 1930s, inspiring many artists and intellectuals whose minds and hearts were open to communist ideals. Two examples that stand out are the poems "Severniat Spartak" [The Northern Spartacus] and "Gladiator" written by the celebrated Bulgarian poet Hristo Smirnenski in 1921 and 1922, respectively. In "Severniat Spartak," a profound and emotional call to arms, expressed in the first person singular, the author likens himself to Spartacus, whose righteous revolt against the injustices inflicted by the ruling classes on the poor cannot be stopped by the Roman legions:

In vain, the legions raise their banners!
 In vain, you seek to bar my way!
 I throw against your gold cuirasses
 My million-strong iron masses,
 With burning breast, I join the fray.³

September 1944 saw a sea change – as the Red army made an unopposed entry into the country, it overturned the monarchy, paved the way for the foundation of the People's Republic, and brought a new cultural and ideological reality in its wake. Bulgaria became one of the most devoted Soviet satellites and sustained its close relationship with the big Russian brother for decades. Soviet-flavored Spartacus flourished in all spheres of public life.

Among the best-known appropriations of the name and the ideal it came to represent were the mass sports competitions, the so-called republican Spartakiads. Based on the Soviet original, which rose as the alternative to the Olympics, condemned as a manifestation of the exploiting capitalist forces, these games became an essential

2 The book is a perennial classic – the first edition currently available at the National Library in Sofia was published in 1896; the most recent one is from 2004.

3 Hristo Smirnenski, *Selected Poetry and Prose*, translated from Bulgarian by Peter Tempest, 59. The poem "Gladiator" can be found in the same volume, 55–56.

part of Bulgaria's sports scene for decades.⁴ The fact that the official newspaper of the Bulgarian army reported that a naval Spartakiad for cadets took place as recently as August 2021 points to the stability of tradition.⁵ The particularly felicitous amalgam of Spartacus' good physique and gladiatorial and military prowess, on the one hand, and his idealistic and humane character, on the other, created an image of perfection resonating well with the idea of athletic achievement: football clubs (following the Soviet model), gyms, a public swimming pool in Sofia, and a security company still proudly bear the name Spartak.⁶ As an echo from the communist days, Spartacus remains ingrained in Bulgarian culture.

In his insightful article on the Soviet reception of Spartacus, Oleksii Rudenko suggests that the Soviet influence on the countries in the Eastern bloc was uniform: "given the same influences of the USSR on the Central and Eastern European region, the image of Spartacus had become artificially imposed on them. Therefore, the true reception in the context of these countries is hardly worth considering: it was a constructed image that has quickly disseminated in historiography and cultural life."⁷ However, taking issue with the suggested uniformity of appropriation, I argue for the uniqueness of the Bulgarian adoption of Spartacus based on his undisputed place of origin – ancient Thrace – a territory occupied mainly by modern-day Bulgaria and thus determining a complex relationship between past and present that reaches far beyond Soviet influence.

Bulgarian historical fiction writers reveled in the suggestion made by Konrad Ziegler in 1955 that due to the corruption of the text, Plutarch's description of Spartacus as belonging to a nomadic tribe ("nomadikou") should be read as belonging to the Maedi tribe ("maidikou"), known to have occupied the lands along the river Strimon (nowadays Struma in southwestern Bulgaria).⁸ This intrinsic geographic connection, accepted

4 On the historical and ideological foundations of the Spartakiads, see Gounot, "Between revolutionary demands and diplomatic necessity," 197–8; on Bulgarian Spartakiads, see Girginov, "Bulgarian sport policy 1945–1989," 515–538; also Information Bulgaria, 572; 589; for examples from across the Eastern Bloc, see Strožek, *Picturing the Workers' Olympics and the Spartakiads*.

5 "Spartakiada po morski sportive," available online.

6 Also noteworthy is the name of a notorious gay club – *Spartakus* – that existed in Sofia in the early 2000s.

7 Rudenko, "The Making of a Soviet Hero," 355–6.

8 Ziegler, "Die Herkunft des Spartacus," 248–50; for an overview of Ziegler's hypothesis, see Fields, *Spartacus and the Slave War 73–72 BC*, 28. Ziegler's theory is not accepted unanimously – for example, Keith Bradley prefers the reading

by Bulgarian thracologists in the second half of the twentieth century, legitimized an elevation of Spartacus into a national icon, an image not necessarily replacing that of the Comintern hero but nevertheless infusing it with a sense of superiority and pride.

This paper considers a specific strand of the myriad Bulgarian literary depictions of Spartacus (there are at least a dozen historical novels dating from the 1970s to the present day, many specifically focused on the hero's life in Thrace),⁹ namely the comic series "Spartak" published in the *Daga* magazine (1979–1983).¹⁰ The plotline and characterization of the comics illustrate an appropriation to specific cultural ends – to establish the eponymous hero as a role model for young Bulgarian readers and a national hero both by embodying the proletarian anti-imperialist struggle but also by creating visual and textual links between his place of birth in ancient Thrace and modern-day Bulgaria. My analysis sets the story within the context of a significant cultural event in the country, the celebration of the thirteen centuries anniversary of the founding of the Bulgarian state in 1981, and sees it as a critical element of national propaganda, skilfully combining the didactic and the visually spectacular to reach out to young audiences. In the second part of the paper, I compare the narrative in *Daga* with two contemporary Bulgarian comic versions of the story of Spartacus, published in 2017 and 2020 (the latter is a new graphic novel based on *Daga's* story). Examining the main points of similarity (Spartacus as a nationalist icon) and difference (Spartacus' portrayal as an aristocrat rather than a proletarian hero), I sketch the current creative tendencies of interpreting the subject but also underscore the enduring potential of the personality of Spartacus to serve as a well-crafted vessel of ideological instruction and entertainment.

DAGA AND "SPARTAK"

Daga (the Bulgarian word for rainbow) was launched in 1979 and was regularly published until 1992. Its remarkably westernized aesthetic greatly impacted an entire generation and still sends ripples of

"nomadic" when quoting the passage by Plutarch; see Bradley, *Slavery and Rebellion in the Roman World*, 92.

9 For example, Stajnov and Jankova, *Legenda za mladija Spartak*.

10 All issues of *Daga* are available online, "Spartak" can be found in issues 2–11. References in this paper follow the original page numbers, corresponding to the page numbers of the uploaded scanned magazines. See the bibliography for more details.

nostalgia among those who read it as teenagers.¹¹ Even though comic strips and cartoons in magazines and newspapers had been much loved in Bulgaria for decades, *Daga* took the Bulgarian comic book to a new level of variety and visual sophistication.¹² Moreover, it was among the first officially endorsed full-scale comic publications after decades of rejection of the “Western” genre as incompatible with the progressive artistic values of communist society.¹³ According to Anton Staykov, the initial intention of the publishers to find a new propaganda instrument, unexpectedly, even to them, led to the generation of huge profit; so, after the first few issues, they simply closed their eyes to what the creative teams in *Daga* were doing. This resulted in a more liberal stylistic and linguistic expression, the broadening of the genre range, and, finally, almost total freedom of scriptwriters and artists, as well as a great joy to the readers.¹⁴

Published by the state-owned publishing house Septemvri, the magazine boasted impressive circulation. It occupied the shelves of the newspaper kiosks and bookshops next to the hit comic magazine *Pif Gadget* (one of the few Western magazines to reach Bulgaria, mainly thanks to its ties with the French Communist Party) and several children’s magazines imported from the USSR. The sixty-four action-packed pages offered the young reader a remarkable selection of stories ranging from adaptations of Bulgarian and world classics (e.g., Robert Luis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*, J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Hobbit*) to specially commissioned sci-fi stories, historical fiction (e.g., series about the great geographical discoveries), adaptations of folk and fairy tales complete with puzzles, crosswords, origami tutorials and letters from devout readers addressed to the editors. Special attention was paid to Bulgarian history – stories about medieval khans, czars, and nobles featured prominently and often included additional educational sections on the pages following the given episode – for example, illustrations of the elements constituting the typical dress

11 Its popularity can be attested by a recent documentary featuring interviews with writers and artists who have worked for the magazine, and the two collector’s edition books (2012 and 2016), featuring specially commissioned stories by the authors of *Daga*.

12 For an excellent introduction to comics in Bulgaria, see Staykov, *Kratka Istoria na Bulgarskia komiks*, 8–17; “Bulgarian comics in the second decade of the new century”; and Stefanov, “The infantile genre,” 41–62.

13 Stefanov, “The infantile genre,” 42–3.

14 Staykov, “*Daga* – detsko-yunosheskiat komiks kult.” Note that unless otherwise stated, all translations from Bulgarian and Russian into English are by the author.

and weaponry in different periods of Bulgarian history.¹⁵ This comic cornucopia was well-measured in terms of form and content to attract different age groups.

“Spartak” was published as a ten-episode series in issues 2–11 of *Daga* (1980–1983). The series was written by Lyubomir Manolov and illustrated by Georgi Shumenov, except for the first episode, illustrated by Vladimir Konovalov. The introduction of a new illustrator changed the visual style of the comic as the finer, more elegant drawings of Konovalov were replaced by the more realistic and chiseled bodies of Shumenov, allegedly because Shumenov was more skilled in drawing horses.¹⁶ The first thing that attracts attention when looking at the series against the rest of the magazine contents is that “Spartak” is distinguished by its monochrome style, while all other stories are drawn in full color. As noted by Teodor Manolov, the son of the writer Lyubomir Manolov and himself the author of a new comic version of the same story to be discussed below, Konovalov was not given enough time to color the panels before the publication of the first episode.¹⁷ Instead of becoming a disadvantage, the black and white layout became a trademark as this seemingly more mature look could be seen to match the gravity of the subject matter.

The key to understanding the significance of the comic is the political and cultural context of the late 1970s. *Daga* began its life in 1979 during a time of significant cultural activity related to the celebrations dedicated to the thirteenth centenary of the founding of the Bulgarian state in 1981 (counted from the arrival of the proto-Bulgarians on the Balkan Peninsula in AD 681). A major cultural nationalist project presented the Bulgarian nation as an amalgam (very peacefully formed) of three ethnic components – Thracians, Slavs, and proto-Bulgarians. As early as 1976, a decree issued by the central committee of the Communist Party initiated and funded a remarkable array of wide-scale academic, cultural, and media projects to celebrate the modern Bulgarian nation.¹⁸ Various historical studies were commissioned to popularize and commemorate the anniversary

15 In fact, an earlier 1970s illustrated book series entitled *Bulgaria Drevna I Mlada* [Bulgaria ancient and young] is described by Petar Stefanov as “historical stories in pictures” and seen by him as a precursor of the history-themed comics to flourish later in *Daga*; Stefanov, “The infantile genre,” 43.

16 Staykov, *Kratka istoria na bulgarskia komiks*, 93.

17 Manolov, *Spartak*, 7.

18 The special committee was headed by no other than Lyudmila Zhivkova, the daughter of the dictator Todor Zhivkov. For an analysis of the political dimensions of the celebrations, the use of historicity and the glorification of the past to

and demonstrate the critical position of the Bulgarian state on the map of Europe despite the Iron Curtain and, importantly, to exemplify an ancient nation confidently marching toward the bright future of communism. The writer of “Spartak,” Lyubomir Manolov, had even worked on a script for a feature film about the gladiator. However, his project was sidelined, and priority was given to motion pictures dedicated to the proto-Bulgarian arrival in the Balkans and their importance in forming the Bulgarian nation.¹⁹ Manolov redirected his creative energy toward the comic genre, and his project found a place in *Daga*. Since its first issues were strictly programmed to include ideologically grounded material before the magazine gained relative creative liberty in the late 1980s, Spartacus emerged as a crucial nationalist symbol of the same rank as iconic personalities whose exploits were celebrated in the pilot issue of *Daga*. These were Czar Simeon (and his victory against the Byzantines at Aheloi in AD 917) and Vasil Levski, the freedom fighter against Ottoman rule in the late nineteenth century.

SPARTACUS THE THRACIAN, SPARTACUS THE BULGARIAN

The Thracian provenance is crucial for the depiction of Spartacus. Four out of ten episodes of “Spartak” take place in ancient Thrace, with the narrative centering on the formative years of the hero and the nurturing of his physical prowess and inherent opposition to social injustices. The writer of the comic takes the liberty to create an original and detailed picture of Spartacus’ early life and to situate it within the divided and profoundly corrupt society of the Maedi tribe. The story opens with young Spartacus, portrayed as the son of the hunter Zoltes, carrying wood. Rhodopis, the daughter of lord Remetalk, intrigued by the handsome boy (around the same age as the reader of *Daga*), inquires whether he is a slave. Spartacus proudly responds that the blacksmith to whom he is an apprentice is a slave; he is an orphan.²⁰

validate the communist doctrine, see Elenkov, “Humanno-klasoviat vtori Zlaten vek,” 33–62; Kovachev, “1981.”

19 Manolov, *Spartak*, 7. The epic film Khan Asparuh, glorifying the proto-Bulgarian people as founders of the Bulgarian state and allegedly featuring 60.000 extras, was released in 1981.

20 Manolov and Kononov, “Spartak,” 3.4. References to all comic books include page and panel numbers.

Plutarch's claim that Spartacus' wife lived with him in Capua and they escaped together (*Crass.* 8.3) inspired fully-fledged modern fictional depictions of the gladiator's female companions, most notably by Howard Fast and Raffaello Giovagnoli. Both were popular in Bulgaria at the time. Giovagnoli's novel had been rehabilitated by the communist authorities. Fast's *Spartacus*, written by a pro-communist and blacklisted American author, was endorsed and published in Bulgarian translation as early as 1954, just three years after its publication in the US.²¹ In light of these popular literary sources, the limited female presence in the comic is striking. However, although the young Thracian lady Rhodopis makes a much shorter appearance than her non-comic counterparts, her role deserves attention as she is designed to provide contrasting (more pragmatic) views to Spartacus' working-class hero's maturing mindset.

The boy is punished for daring to converse with Rhodopis and is warned by the blacksmith (his mentor who trains him to fight and shoot) that she belongs to the ruling class, the lords. Nevertheless, Spartacus, driven by his emotion but also by his still immature understanding of the world, insists that she is a good person. He also asks himself: "Why does her father have the right to beat people?" Moreover: "Why does slavery exist?"²² This demonstrates his acute sensitivity to social inequality from an early age.

Later in the same episode, Spartacus shows disobedience while serving at the lords' banquet and is banished. He takes to the mountains, where, as the caption on the final panel reads, "people are free."²³

21 In Fast's *Spartacus*, the Thracian meets the German slave girl Varinia at the gladiatorial school; the romantic story is made even more central in Kubrick's film as their offspring becomes a symbol of the vitality of Spartacus' cause overcoming death. In Giovagnoli's novel, the strong female presence falls into three stereotypes: the filial devotion of Spartacus' sister, Mirza; the scheming and vindictive courtesan who joins Spartacus' ranks to betray him because he rejects her love; the virtuous and passionate Valeria Mesala – trapped in a loveless marriage to Sulla – who becomes the mother of Spartacus' daughter. In Hristo Danov's and Maria Daskalova's novel, Spartacus' wife, Fia, after leaving their son in Thrace, joins him to fight for their people, is enslaved with Spartacus, and stays with him until her death, shortly before the final battle. The other leading female character is Sempronia, who is in love with Spartacus but realizes that even after his wife's death, he would never betray his cause and escape with her. She begins to hate the regime that destroys Spartacus and the reader learns that it is that hatred that would lead her to join Catiline's conspiracy.

22 Manolov and Konvalov, "Spartak," 5.2.

23 Ibid., 8.4.

This is a crucial allusion many Bulgarians would have recognized. The communist partisans during World War II were persecuted by the monarchy, then allied with Nazi Germany, and took refuge in the mountains, conducting guerrilla raids from there.

The idea of class struggle within the Thracian society is made prominent by the portrayal of the ruling Thracian aristocracy as cruelly indulging in the mistreatment of the poor peasants and imposing restrictions on individual freedom. After eight years of banishment, Spartacus happens to save Rhodopis' life in a dramatic episode in which he confronts and slays a bison; this valiant act wins him the favor of her father and the nobles. However, soon after that, in episode four, Spartacus learns that the fate of Rhodopis is to become a priestess of Bendis. Although the girl is unwilling to dedicate her life to the Thracian goddess, she must obey the rule. This feels like a pivotal moment in the story and has several implications. In a communist society, women work shoulder-to-shoulder with men. However, ancient Thrace is exposed as a community where women's rights are suppressed, and discrimination transcends class segregation. The fact that the girl belongs to the aristocracy does not grant her the luxury of choice. Furthermore, the fact that it is the cult of Bendis she must serve stands out as an implicit condemnation of religion as interfering with personal development and freedom. However, the inescapable duty is not the only reason for her failed romance with Spartacus – the story indicates that Spartacus and Rhodopis belong to two conflicting worlds. Their worldviews clash during a romantic hunting scene, aptly chosen as Bendis was known as a goddess of the hunt. He claims that the world is not set right and is not fair. She responds that this is how the world works, and nothing can be done about it. Spartacus exclaims: "This is what torments me."²⁴ Soon, Rhodopis disappears from the story, confirming the rigidity of social roles in her world and Spartacus' firm resolve to fight against injustices.

In the following episodes, Spartacus participates in various missions, including the Mithridatic war – he fights among the ranks of the Thracian horsemen opposing Sulla at Chaeronea. Although the Pontians are defeated and the Thracians are forced to retreat, he fights valiantly and spares the life of the centurion Flaccus, who acknowledges Spartacus' noble nature, even if barbarian. This fictitious inclusion is among the many that create the trope of Spartacus' compassionate nature and readiness to help. We see him saving a Thracian shepherd boy, saving Rhodopis from the bison (the episode noted above), and

24 Manolov and Shumenov, "Spartak," #4, 4.5–6; 5.1.

refusing to kill his opponent later in the arena or during the various battles against the Romans after the outbreak of the rebellion. This combination of strength, resilience, and ruthlessness toward the oppressor, yet benevolence and rejection of pointless violence, contribute to Spartacus' appeal.

Back in Thrace, Spartacus again runs into trouble while defending a group of innocent peasants from the Thracian lord Amadok's cruelty. He is accused of insurrection, sent to prison, and sentenced to death; however, as the Thracians begin to befriend the Romans, as their natural allies in corruption, the king orders Spartacus to fight Amadok in the arena to entertain the Roman envoy. The young man wins but, in line with his ethos, spares Amadok's life; the Roman visitor is impressed and asks for Spartacus to be given to him to be trained as a gladiator, a request the king is more than happy to grant.

It is worth mentioning that Manolov's depiction of the events leading up to Spartacus becoming a gladiator ignores the hypothesis of the involvement of Spartacus as a mercenary serving in the Roman ranks – an event likely related to his arrival at the school of Lentulus Batiatus. Ancient sources, notably Appian, Plutarch, and Florus, acknowledge that Spartacus came from the Thracian lands but offer relatively brief and inconclusive accounts of how he ended up at the gladiatorial school in Capua. Appian describes him as a Thracian who served with the Romans and became a prisoner and, subsequently, a gladiator (*B. Civ.* 1.116). According to Florus' implicitly hostile depiction, he was a Thracian mercenary who first served as a soldier in the (Roman) army, then deserted, and finally became a gladiator (*Flor.* 2.8).²⁵

Bulgarian historians, both during the communist era and in contemporary studies, base their accounts of Spartacus' life on ancient sources. For example, in a historical survey published in 1964, Stoil Stoilov states that Spartacus' brilliance as a soldier won him a place in Sulla's army after the Thracians fighting on the side of Mithridates were captured; later, he joined Lucullus' legions and deserted when forced to fight against his Thracian people. He was captured and sent to the gladiatorial school.²⁶ Such an interpretation of the events does not contradict the state-controlled image. However, the comic story offers a particular and propagandistic take on this murky period of

25 For modern discussions of the conjecture of Spartacus' service in the Roman army, see Schiavone, *Spartacus*, translated by Jeremy Carden, 20–25; Fields, *Spartacus and the Slave War*, 27–30.

26 Stoilov, *Spartak*, 55–59.

Spartacus' life – instead of being a prisoner of war, Spartacus, betrayed by his tribe, becomes a victim of the oppressive regime of the corrupted Thracian lords. This could hark back to the denigrated image of the Bulgarian monarchy before the communist coup in 1944 and the subsequent conflict between the publicly condemned remnants of the degraded bourgeoisie and the virtuous workers and freedom fighters.

Episodes 6–10 depict the better-documented part of Spartacus' life and follow a less idiosyncratic and more mainstream interpretation of events. Spartacus becomes a star of the arena of Lentulus Batiatus. Unable to endure the prospect of yet another massacre to please the Roman perverse addiction to violent spectacles, he decides that the time for rebellion is ripe. Even though it is the spur of the moment, Spartacus, with the clear vision of a leader, captures the armories and, in the later scenes, demonstrates his talent in training and commanding the slave army (no doubt innate and not acquired during his service in the Roman army). He escapes the blockade at Vesuvius with the help of rope ladders made of vines. Manolov's Spartacus expresses his firm conviction that it is his destiny to succeed: "We, the free people, will pass."²⁷ Throughout the various battle scenes, the gladiator remains true to his character and lets several captured Romans go free.

Another milestone event that defines Spartacus as a proletarian hero is precipitated by strife within his ranks. Spartacus urges his men to head north and live free out of reach of the Roman power, while his comrade Crixus and others want to march against Rome and plunder it – thus enriching themselves and exacting revenge. Spartacus agrees against his better judgment.²⁸ Here, the main themes – Spartacus' democratic and compassionate nature and his innate qualities as a leader – are underscored and interpreted in the light of the ideal figure of class struggle and proletarian virtues. In the introduction to the 1983 Bulgarian edition of Giovagnoli's novel, the historian Hristo Danov summarizes what the communist regime hailed as characteristic of historical Spartacus, namely his "complete disinterest in private property and material riches altogether."²⁹ Thus, when his comrades insist on attacking Rome, Spartacus consents

27 Manolov and Shumenov, "Spartak," #9, 6.4.

28 Georgi Markov suggests that the popular perception that Spartacus initially opposed the idea to march against Rome but agreed to do it in spite of himself might have been influenced by Plutarch's more sympathetic depiction of the gladiator. However, Markov contends, Florus' view that it was Spartacus' plan to lead his men to Rome, could be equally plausible; Markov, *Buntat na Spartak*, 133.

29 Giovagnoli, *Spartak*, translated by Petar Dragoev, 463.

because of his democratic nature – and not because of being tempted by the prospect of rich plunder or revenge. The internal strife between Spartacus and Crixus highlights the qualities Danov finds in this hero of the “ancient proletariat.” Unlike other revolt leaders who “consciously fell back on the forms, insignia, and titles typical of the ancient eastern and Hellenistic monarchies, Spartacus created and applied [...] a definitely democratic leadership, clad in the republican form.”³⁰

Following a fierce battle in which Spartacus and his men crush the Roman eagles and send Lentulus into flight, the Gauls remain resolved to march against Rome. All his attempts to stop them are in vain. However, the armies of Crassus and Lucullus block the way to Rome while Pompey advances from Spain. Betrayed by the Sicilian pirates, Spartacus faces the fateful battle against Crassus’ legions. Although he seeks Crassus to fight him in a duel, he is slain before he can face the Roman general. Stoil Stoilov aptly describes a metaphorical confrontation of Crassus and Spartacus as a conflict of two human types, or reality versus dream. “No other social order apart from slavery-based society could exist at this stage of the historical development of humanity.”³¹ In an implicit critique of a world in need of reform, he concludes that “people like Spartacus are born once in a thousand years, while every century has its Crassus.”³²

Without dwelling on Spartacus’ psychological state, the comic, following the general trend of the period, conveys a sense of ideological isolation of the protagonist and his beliefs. Although gathering thousands of followers, he struggles to withstand the greed, savagery, and desire for revenge that surrounds him both in Rome and within his ranks. Nevertheless, his death is not in vain – it sparks what would become the blaze of war against slavery and would blend with the proletarian class struggle for a new social order. The sense that Spartacus transcends his late-republican world to reach out to posterity and instruct modern generations in virtue is powerful and visually striking in *Daga*. It reflects the official appropriation of the gladiator as a symbol of proletarian struggle, but also establishes explicit connections with contemporary Bulgaria both at the story’s beginning and end. The page following the end of the first episode transports the reader to contemporary Bulgaria and shows a photo

30 Giovagnoli, *Spartak*, translated by Petar Dragoev, 463.

31 Stoilov, *Spartak*, 77. The trope of the meeting between Crassus and Spartacus in a failed attempt to negotiate is widely used (e.g., Giovagnoli, Danov, and Daskalova) and has its basis in Appian’s account (*B. Civ.* 1.14).

32 Ibid.

of Spartacus' statue in the city of Sandanski, its chiseled monumental features reflected in the heroic look of the *Daga* protagonist.³³ The story comes full circle with the final image in episode ten. Reassuring the reader that the hero's achievement would be remembered for the years to come, the final caption, wrapped around an image of the head of Spartacus towering over the mountains, reads:

Thus, in the spring of 71 BC, died Spartacus – the leader of the greatest slave rebellion in antiquity. The rebellion failed but shook the very foundations of the vast empire spreading its dominion over three continents. The leader of the first slave revolt in the history of the Roman Empire was Thracian. Today, in the city of Sandanski, the statue of Spartacus stands as an expression of our gratitude for the immortal achievement of the hero born in these lands, according to historians.³⁴

So, back in the late 1970s and early 1980s, *Daga* offered a remarkably colorful mix of Western pop culture visual style and communist, as well as nationalist propaganda. Henry Jenkins recalls the notion of reading comics (in the West) as the opposite of reading serious, meaningful, as it were, literature: “we read in secret – under the covers by flashlight, hidden in a textbook in class – with the knowledge that there was something vaguely oppositional about our practices.”³⁵ *Daga* was different – if your teacher caught you reading these seemingly light, superficial stories in pictures, you could point out that it was the story of Bulgarian heroes that you were reading.³⁶

Before discussing two contemporary Bulgarian renditions of Spartacus' exploits to underscore the complexity of *Daga's* story, I will briefly consider a Soviet comic that exemplifies a distinct ideological take on the subject matter that remains completely alien to Bulgarian writers of the period. “Spartak” appeared around the same time as the series in *Daga*, in the April 1980 issue of the children's magazine *Vesyolie Kartinki* (still in print, unlike *Daga*, which did not survive the post-communism economic crisis in the 1990s).

33 Manolov and Konovalov, “Spartak,” 9. The statue, erected in 1978, is the work of the sculptor Velichko Minekov, author of numerous state-commissioned monuments glorifying the Bulgarian past.

34 Manolov and Shumenov, “Spartak,” #11, 9.10.

35 Jenkins, “Introduction,” 1.

36 In fact, scholars recognize that comics, by mixing images and text, can facilitate understanding and memorizing of given study material and can thus be used as an effective learning tool. Cf. Duncan and Smith, *Power of Comics*, 278.

The entire issue is dedicated to celebrating Lenin's birthday and is replete with snippets of information about his childhood; on page two, there is a poem dedicated to Lenin. The story lends itself well to the glorification of the communist luminary. Based on Raffaello Giovagnoli's *Spartacus*, whose popularity in Bulgaria has already been mentioned, the entire story, beginning with a quote by Lenin stating that "Spartacus was among the most prominent heroes of one of the biggest slave revolts around two thousand years ago,"³⁷ fills only three pages. The warrior is taken captive by the Romans and then made a gladiator. He cannot endure the humiliation and decides to rebel. The highlight of the story is the Vesuvius sequence – after descending the mountain slope by makeshift ladders made of vines, Spartacus and his men surprise and defeat the Romans, bringing the story to an end with a caption reading that "the news of Spartacus' victory roused thousands of slaves to a battle for freedom."³⁸ Even though, admittedly, the format of the magazine entails shorter stories oriented toward younger children, it is somewhat surprising how schematic and superficial the story appears even when abridged. The ending is indicative not only of the children-sensitive editing of the contents but also of the selective propagandistic approach; by omitting Spartacus' death, the story negates it, and the hero takes one step further toward immortality.

Daga's comic is not only aimed at older teenage readers. It offers more realistic (and therefore credible) character development. In addition to the general outline of the events during the slave war, it features details drawn from ancient historiography that contribute to a more nuanced depiction.³⁹ Moreover, unlike the "Spartak" in *Vesyolie Kartinki*, unabashedly striving to provide historical justification for Lenin's wisdom and guidance – the story seems to have been included because of Lenin's personal admiration for Spartacus – "Spartak" in *Daga* flaunts a very Bulgarian, idiosyncratic and nationalist agenda.

37 "Spartak," 14.1. The author of the text is unknown, but the first panel announces that the story is based on Giovagnoli's novel. The story is illustrated by E. Gorohovskii.

38 *Ibid.*, 16.1.

39 For example, Spartacus killing his horse in anticipation of the final battle, to demonstrate that there is no way back, can be traced directly to Plutarch, *Crass.* 11.6. An exciting explanation is offered by Dimitar Popov, who claims that horse sacrifice was common in Thracian ritualistic practice; Popov, *Spartak Trakietsat*, 144–5.

POST-COMMUNIST SPARTACUS

His enduring fame attests to the fact that Spartacus was – and remains – a perfect nationalistic role model. His afterlife in democratic Bulgaria is rich and replete with his reincarnations in historical fiction and comics, bearing the stamp of nationalistic, conservative features which replaced the outdated proletarian struggle. The remainder of this paper looks at examples of contemporary comics to map out the transmutations of the hero to suit the post-communist (and anti-communist) ideological agenda and to nurture and empower a new generation of Bulgarian teenagers. By tracing the characteristics of this departure from the proletarian image, the comparison aims to help single out the typical propagandistic traits of the original *Daga* series and elucidate the points of nationalistic propaganda where old and new comics overlap.

An important interpretative strand emerges, namely a firm denunciation of Spartacus as a proletarian hero, related to a negation of his humble origins lauded by earlier communist-era scholarship and promptly reflected in *Daga*. In his introduction to a study of the life of Spartacus, the thracologist Dimitar Popov states the necessity of redressing the ideological agenda, especially the view that Spartacus created a plan for a full-scale proletarian revolution – not least because no proletariat in the modern sense of the term existed in antiquity.⁴⁰ Perhaps surprisingly, such critical opinion was expressed (and left uncensored) as early as 1977 by a British scholar, J. G. Griffith, who participated in a symposium dedicated to Spartacus in Bulgaria. He wrote: “I cannot persuade myself that he was a prophet with a social message, dying for a cause for which the time was not ripe.”⁴¹ Even Stoilov, in his markedly propagandistic survey, admits that Spartacus’ cause was doomed, but at least the Thracian, “with his iron fist, opened the first crack in the granite wall of the Roman supremacy.”⁴²

The notion of the low birth of the hero is also out of vogue. Popov’s etymological analysis of the name Spartacus leads him to conclude that there is a direct link with the royal line of the Odrysian kingdom, thus rejecting the earlier reading that related Spartacus to the Maedi

40 Popov, *Spartak Trakietsat*, 8. A similar stance is taken by Bradley: it is “impossible to view the Spartacan movement as being in any way dominated by abstract or ideological imperatives: freedom from slavery was the intent of the fugitives; the slavery system itself remained unaffected”; *Slavery and Rebellion*, 101.

41 Griffith, “Spartacus and the Growth of Historical and Political Legends,” 69.

42 Stoilov, *Spartak*, 110.

tribe.⁴³ This view harks back to the hypothesis put forward by Theodor Mommsen that Spartacus was of noble, even royal lineage.⁴⁴ However, as Popov himself and recently Georgi Markov argued, there are no indications that Spartacus belonged to the aristocracy. If that had been the case, his noble parentage would not have escaped ancient historiographers' attention.⁴⁵

Such cautious treatment of the idea of aristocratic Spartacus is not endorsed by contemporary comic renditions of the subject, which make the hero's princely pedigree the central theme of the story. *Spartak: Zashtitnikat na Trakia* [Spartacus: The Defender of Thrace] and *Spartak: Buntat na robite* [Spartacus: The Revolt of the Slaves] are parts one and two of the story of the Thracian gladiator included in a series of comic books on famous Bulgarian historical personalities such as proto-Bulgarian khans and medieval rulers. Written by Miroslav Petrov and drawn in monochrome realist aesthetic by Veselin Chakarov, the two short, pocket-size comic books were published in 2017 by the Vazdigane foundation, an organization that promotes patriotic causes. In the book reviewing blog *Knizhni Krile*, Nenko Genov welcomes these comics as more realistic treatments of the story of Spartacus and distinguishes them from the propagandistic image of the slave leader, an emblem of proletarian struggles in the past.⁴⁶ Although tempting to take this laudation with a pinch of salt, such opinions indicate the urge to liberate Spartacus from his communist past, rediscovering him as a symbol of nationalistic pride. Part Two follows the commonly accepted plotline depicting the events from the onset of the revolt to Spartacus' death and does not offer any unusual interpretation. However, Part One starkly contrasts the depiction in the *Daga* series and reveals much about Bulgarian society's reimagining of the proletarian hero. Spartacus is now a proud member of the aristocracy – the prince of the Maedi people – who fights to protect his lands from the Romans. Among his feats is the mission to liberate Macedonia from the Roman invasion. Although this episode might be seen as a chronologically plausible fictitious interpretation of historical events in the Roman province of Macedonia, the twenty-first-century Bulgarian reader can easily relate this to a political sore spot, the ongoing dispute

43 Popov, *Spartak Trakietsat*, 79–80; see also Velkova, “Der Name Spartacus,” 195–99.

44 Mommsen, *History of the Roman Republic*, 350.

45 Markov, *Buntat na Spartak*, 64–65; Popov, *Spartak Trakietsat*, 80–81.

46 Genov, “‘Spartak – Zashtitnikat na Trakia’ I ‘Spartak – Buntat na robite’ of Veselin Chakarov I Miroslav Petrov.”

with North Macedonia regarding its language and ethnic and cultural profile. By tentatively equating Bulgarian with Thracian, the episode could be seen as furthering the nationalist agenda of those political and social circles in the country refusing to acknowledge the Macedonian language as distinct from Bulgarian and insisting on the common Bulgarian origins of people living in the former Yugoslav republic.

In *Spartak: Legendata* [Spartacus: The Legend], the son of the writer of the original series Lyubomir Manolov, Teodor Manolov, an art director and artist, (re)created together with his father the script of the series in *Daga* in a project advertised as consisting of ten graphic novels. The first one was published in 2020. Featuring many guest artists and colorists, this eye-catching volume preserves the main plotline of the *Daga* series but elaborates on story details and characterization – for example, Rhodopis is now a prophetess, thus evoking the character of Spartacus' wife in Plutarch, described as a bacchante (*Crass.* 8.3)⁴⁷ and, it seems, is promised a more substantial role in the series. More importantly, the story aims to reconcile the different hypotheses about Spartacus' provenance depicting him in contradictory terms, namely that he is a highly educated man and an experienced soldier but is also very close to the lower social class. *Spartak: Legendata* discards the proletarian origins of Spartacus, but unlike the comic discussed above, it finds the golden mean by presenting him as the son of an impoverished landowner. Becoming an orphan at an early age, he is sent to a distant relative, the local ruler (paradynast) Remetalk, who, in turn, arranges for his armorer to look after the boy and forgets about his existence, hence Spartacus being raised as a commoner. The language of the comic abounds in deliberate archaisms, which evoke folk tales or narratives from the Bulgarian Revival period.⁴⁸ Subjecting the narrative about ancient Thrace to the linguistic expression associated with national folklore tradition gives an impetus to the identification process of Spartacus as a Bulgarian hero. The fact that the book's full title includes the description "a graphic novel and an encyclopedia of our lands in antiquity" speaks volumes

47 In Danov's and Daskalova's 1977 novel, Spartacus' wife is also portrayed as someone who has the gift of clairvoyance.

48 The Bulgarian national revival period is traditionally framed between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and, according to Roumen Daskalov, is characterized by three major processes: the struggle for the establishment of an independent Bulgarian church, education, and literature. The revolutionary movement was thus aiming to liberate the country from Ottoman power; Daskalov, *Making of a Nation in the Balkans*; see also Genchev, *Bulgarian National Revival Period*, translated by M. Shipkov.

about the insistence on historicity despite the seeming admission of the creative license taken by the authors.

What unites all three comic stories considered in this paper is the derision of anything foreign – be it the Roman invader or the Greek influence, it is seen as potentially damaging and corrupting, and the mission of Spartacus is to spearhead the Thracian opposition to it.

The most striking omission is the suggestion of Spartacus' mercenary service in the Roman army. In both *Daga* and *Zashtitnikat na Trakia*, and very likely in the forthcoming books of *Spartak: Legendata*, as an heir to the original story in *Daga*, Spartacus evolves as a commander of the slave revolt not because of his previous military experience in the Roman army but thanks to his innate talent and charisma which enable him to channel his proletarian and nationalistic ideals.⁴⁹

The notion developed in *Daga*, of degraded Thracian society that sends Spartacus to his fate as a gladiator to please the Roman envoy, was already mentioned. The episode of the banquet during which Spartacus refuses to obey the Thracian nobles is elaborated in Manolov Jr.'s version. Spartacus arrives at the mansion and, dazzled by Hellenistic luxury and beautiful decorations, observes: "We used to be great, independent people, but today we are conquered by the Greeks through their settlement in our lands."⁵⁰ This may or may not be an implicit critique of Plutarch's depiction of Spartacus as bold, courageous, and clever, qualities that align him more with the Greeks than with the Thracians (Plut. *Crass.* 8.2). Inspired by Plutarch's account Aldo Schiavone describes his vision of Spartacus: "In a wholly unexpected manner, a more faceted personality takes shape, happily positioned between two cultures, if not between two anthropologies – Thracian strength and Greek gentleness: a difficult synthesis of unsuspected richness."⁵¹ Such an amiable and not entirely implausible picture of a multicultural Spartacus is not welcome in Bulgarian popular culture. The Thracian warrior's allegiance to the national cause is clear-cut and implicitly xenophobic, although keeping the limits set by political correctness in sight.

An exhaustive comparison between the literary depictions of Spartacus adherent to the communist ideals and the contemporary post-communist, right-wing-leaning views is beyond the scope of this

49 Thus, Florus' suggestion that he emulated the Roman custom of giving funeral gladiatorial games – in his case, with Roman captives fighting each other (Flor. 2.9) – finds no place in the comics.

50 Manolov, *Spartak*, 38.5.

51 Schiavone, *Spartacus*, 20.

paper. It would necessarily include the numerous works of historical fiction that have enjoyed popularity for the past fifty years. Nevertheless, the comics, presenting intriguing blends of ancient and contemporary theories about Spartacus and by their genre ethos reaching a wide readership, especially younger audiences, emerge as the touchstone of the cultural currents and didactic agendas. The bottom line of the present analysis is that the lack of concrete evidence about Spartacus' life before his arrival at the gladiatorial school ensures a convenient malleability of the image of the Thracian hero, shaped to suit desired ideological goals. The legendary aura surrounding Spartacus' provenance is purposefully embellished in Bulgarian popular culture by comic authors to create a shimmering image of the Thracian warrior who, although at times defending proletarian ideals, remains first and foremost a proud Bulgarian.

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ABSTRACT

Daga (the Bulgarian word for “rainbow”) was a Bulgarian comic magazine launched in 1979 and regularly published until 1992. Its remarkably westernized aesthetic greatly impacted an entire generation of readers. Included in its variety of stories (history, sci-fi, literary classics) is an action-packed account of Spartacus’ exploits. For ten consecutive issues (1979–1983), the story spanned the hero’s life from a more fanciful narrative of his early years in Thrace to the better-documented events in Italy and his death. The paper explores the plotline, characterization, and visual aspects of “Spartak” to reveal the eponymous hero’s significance for young Bulgarian readers in the 1980s. Drawing on the cultural and historical context, I argue that Spartacus was well suited to serve as a role model and a national hero by embodying the proletarian anti-imperialist struggle and also, notably, because of his supposed place of birth near the river Strimon in modern-day Bulgaria. I also look at examples of contemporary comics, including a new graphic novel based on *Daga*’s story published in 2020, and consider the transmutations of the hero to suit the post-communist (and anti-communist) ideological agenda, characterized by a departure from the proletarian image of Spartacus in favor of more conservative, aristocratic features.

KEYWORDS: *Daga*, Bulgarian comic magazines, Spartakiad, Strimon, Thrace

Razbijanje imperial(istič)nih orlov: Nacionalizem, ideološki poduk in pustolovščina v bolgarskih stripih o Spartaku v osemdesetih letih in kasneje

IZVLEČEK

Daga (bolgarsko “Mavrica”) je bila bolgarska stripovska revija, ki je izhajala med letoma 1979 in 1992. Njena izrazito zahodnjaška estetika je močno vplivala na celo generacijo bralcev. Med raznolikimi objavami (zgodovina, znanstvena fantastika, literarna klasika) je bil tudi akcijski opis Spartakovih podvigov. V desetih zaporednih številkah (1979–1983) je zgodba sledila junakovemu življenju od pretežno domišljajske pripovedi o njegovih zgodnjih letih v Trakiji do bolj dokumentiranih dogodkov v Italiji in njegove smrti. Članek raziskuje zaplete, karakterizacijo in vizualne vidike stripa “Spartak” ter prikazuje pomen naslovnega junaka za mlade bolgarske bralce v osemdesetih letih prejšnjega stoletja. Na podlagi kulturnega in zgodovinskega konteksta ugotavlja, da je bil Spartak primeren lik vzornika in nacionalnega junaka zato, ker je utelešal proletarski protiimperialistični boj, pomembna pa je bila tudi domneva o njegovem rojstnem kraju v bližini reke Strimon v današnji Bolgariji. Članek raziskuje tudi primere sodobnih stripov, vključno z novim grafičnim romanom, ki temelji na zgodbi revije *Daga* in je izšel leta 2020, ter obravnava transmutacije junaka, ki so skušale ustreči postkomunistični (in protikomunistični) ideološki agendi, za katero je značilen odmik od proletarske podobe Spartaka v prid konservativnejših, aristokratskih značilnosti.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: *Daga*, bolgarski strip, Spartakiada, Strimon, Trakija