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Experiencing Historical Time: Apocalypse and Authoritarianism in Inter- -War Bulgarian Existential Philosophy

The inter-war period was one of the most creative times in Bulgarian history. It pursued a specific project with respect to time, aimed at reducing the feeling of on-going crisis in the present by means of nostalgia for the past or yearning for an unknown future, seen as a radically new mode of being, a new world, a new eon. The First World War was a momentous historical event, compared by those who had lived through it to Armageddon, the last battle. Biblical terminology was widely used at the time to describe an experience that was without parallel for those who had experienced it. As Reinhart Koselleck points out, for those affected by them or who took part, the two world wars brought about such profound transformation, such radical changes of experience that they could not previously have pictured or imagined (Козелек, 2002, p. 331).

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This text discusses the sense of the pace of time as reflected in the works of Bulgarian philosophers from the “philosophy of life” school – in the broadest sense – and of other thinkers active in the humanities. A common feature of the descriptions these Bulgarian authors gave to the years of crisis was the sense of an acceleration, an “intensification” of the flow of time, which seemed to be intentionally speeding towards its own end. For this reason the feeling of “condensed” time among the authors of the inter-war period is inevitably associated with Biblical imagery. The “reduction” of time foresees the end of time. What was particularly important for those who felt trapped in the crisis was for time to “run out” sooner so that the *new existence* might set in sooner, even though they viewed this with mixed feelings. Because the experience of broken-down time, of the discontinuity of time, involves fear *of* and hopes *for* some entirely new reality that will come to substitute time and, in putting an end to time, will appear as a secular expression of eternity, the feeling that sharp deviations were taking place from the customary, departures from previously firmly rooted stereotypes, and that an oppressive transition was occurring towards the unknown, is constantly present in all contemporary reflections on that period. When we read the numerous texts of the inter-war period, especially those related to its three peaks of apocalyptic experience (between which a *calmer* trend of essays can also be found), i.e. the years immediately following First World War, the crisis of the early 1930s (which began with the stock market crash of 1929), and the pre-war realities leading up to the Second World War, we are left with the impression of clearly articulated fears and desires with respect to the approaching end – the end of the old world viewed as the end of time in general. Reinhart Koselleck points out the cyclical recurrence in crucial times (the “constantly renewed role”) of feelings that an end of the world is drawing near, and indicates the Judeo-Christian tradition inevitably underlying these attitudes (Козелек, 2002, p. 331).

The inter-war age “invented” the genre of the philosophical essay, which is well suited to express the feeling of a fast-approaching turning point in time. This was a literary category that Bulgarian writers adopted rather late in history, but which, in the 1920s and 1930s, flourished as never before in Bulgaria. The new reality demanded a new mode of expression. As the philosopher Yanko Yanev pointed out in his *Awakening. A Philosophical Essay*, “we do not even have definite enough words and notions to express what is happening, for language itself is in crisis, reason itself is ailing” (Янев, 1931b, p. 385). Here our attention will be focused on penetrating the nature of the inter-war age

through the prism of philosophical texts and writings in the humanities in general. These will be examined as the hermeneutics of the *life world*.

The world views “captured” in these philosophical essays were in tune with the general assessment of the period throughout the world. “The conception of post-war time as representing a ‘crisis’ sprang from the experience of the inescapable ‘thrownness’ of man in the post-war structuring of life; it is from the impenetrability of this life that stem the moods of despair and the atmosphere of an approaching end, moods that appear to be the ‘general spirit of the times’” (Еленков, 1998, p. 76). The abrupt change in all dimensions of life after the First World War generated much theorising on the “crisis of our time” and brought world fame to some of the authors of such theories. Their Bulgarian counterparts were no less colourful in their descriptions of the convulsions the age was experiencing.

Here I will refer to the commentaries of the eminent Russian émigré scholar Piotr Bitsilli, who worked and died in Bulgaria. The state of crisis is one of the major themes of his writings. Bitsilli was a regular contributor to *Sovremennye zapiski* – the Paris-based Russian émigré journal, where in 1932 he published the article “The Crisis of Culture Today”. The author explained how the failure of so many hopes and the destruction of so many values during the War had engendered “apocalyptic” moods, and the need for some kind of “Renaissance” as a reaction against the Present, against “Europeanism”, and in the direction of a “Romanticism” that strives towards “the cherished bosom”, the “primordial sources”, the forgotten traditions. “Prophets have appeared,” writes Bitsilli, “who proclaim the good news of the ‘New Middle Ages’”. It was decided that the ‘Satanically’ rationalistic civilization had reached its end and was now, so to speak, devouring itself, so that today we have good reason to expect the coming of the *new eon*” (Бицилли, 2004, p. 73–74).

Several authors left a lasting mark on Bulgarian intellectual history due to their sensitivity to the sharp turns of the age, their awareness of the intense “flow” of time. These were scholars in the field of the humanities: Spiridon Kazandjiev, Yanko Yanev, Nayden Sheytanov, etc. Their common platform for publication was *Zlatorog*, the most authoritative Bulgarian journal of the time (established in 1920).

This is where Spiridon Kazandjiev published his celebrated essay “At the Source of Life” in 1923. His basic idea concerned the internal and external correspondence between separate manifestations of the spirit in general. The essay expressed the author’s concern for the current state of life – its fragmentary

nature, its instability, insecurity, but also his distinctly articulated hope for the future. The crisis that had engulfed the intellectual horizon (Kazandjiev's interests were focused on philosophy, ethics, aesthetics, and literature), would lead, or so he hoped, to a true rebirth of values, of which the major value was Life itself. The following quotation from the essay is particularly characteristic: "In the pure, primordial, virginal life lie both good and beauty. And today's philosophy, just like art, is full of yearning for such a life. In it are heralds of a coming feast of the soul, the feast of great emancipation. The cultural-historical mists are dissolving and lifting, and behind them appears the cosmically pure world..." (Казанджиев, 1923, p. 92). But the *Feast of Practical Reason*, as Kazandjiev terms the new spirit of the times, also has dark aspects: vitality may manifest itself as a regression to bestial brutality, to the cruel and selfish side of man – the author, though made hopeful by the first signs of a radical new culture, does not spare us his anxiety about the possible oppression or even destruction of this culture by the crude, primeval instinct.

Yanko Yanev, who was also frequently published in the journal *Zlatorog*, regularly adopted the crisis aspect of the times as a topic of his works. His essays place him in the line of the existential-Romantic reaction to what was approaching. Yanev was especially sensitive to the vicissitudes of his time and his means of expression often contained Biblical metaphors. In his essay *The Heroic Man*, he claimed that the apocalyptical perspective was often encountered in history as the predominant mood accompanying significant disasters, or as a premonition after certain periods have been completed: "Whenever there is a turn in the course of history, there begins a period of turmoil. In fact, every new history begins with such a period. What distinguishes our contemporary history is precisely such a period of most fateful experiences, similar to the ones that shook Europe in the times of Alexander's campaigns, in the times of the Great Migration, of the Crusades, and of the Napoleonic Wars" (Янев, 1933, p. 264).

Several specific features mark Yanev's perception of the inter-war period, and make his texts distinctly recognisable.

First, he invariably demonstrates a sense of the *historicity* of the times he is living in. However, his essays are certainly not the only works imbued with this feeling: a close and easy comparison can be made with Spiridon Kazandjiev's brochure *Historical Time*, which was published in 1932 and was popular in the 1930s. But the remarkable exaltation that distinguished Yanev's numerous publications in that period is specific to him: "We live in an epoch where the

past opens up before our eyes, like the opening of some old, famous tomb. [...] We are the present of all past times! We are the first children of the new world. History ends with us and at the same time the new epoch for man begins with us" (Янев, 1931b, p. 278–279).

Second, his sense of historicity indicates that the times are of an apocalyptic nature "raised to the second power": the individual of that period finds himself in a world cataclysm, but he can also dimly discern the end of this cataclysm and of time in general, for the change is so radical that the coming future is perceived as a new eon, as the end of *this* world and the advent of a different one, completely transcendent with respect to the previous world: "We are living through apocalyptic times. There is something of the Old Testament in the latest developments in the world. Something like the symbolic depiction of the knight, the devil and death in Durer's engraving" (Янев, 1932, p. 385).

One other particularity in the outlook of this Bulgarian thinker was his ambivalent attitude to war. The past world war was perceived by him – in keeping with the common feeling of the times – as an all-encompassing degradation and decadence, as the destruction of stereotypes and values, as a total breakdown of the familiar world. The feeling was one of loss of stability, loss of faith "in the existence of world justice and world harmony. All theories held until now, which had declared the existence of order and harmony in the world, which saw embodied wisdom in the world, the doctrines of the rational structure of the universe, are breaking down today before the savage despair of mankind, which is finally calling to account for all the randomness and cruelty in life" (Янев, 1931b, p. 279–280). Together with this, the feeling that invariably accompanies all of Yanko Yanev's emotional reflections regarding the crises, whether it be the crisis of the past war, or of the Great Depression in the 1930s, or of the new pre-war and war period, is the *joyful* premonition of the coming end of time, a presentiment of a borderline and finality. The end of times provokes in Yanev not only distress and anxiety but exhilaration at what lies ahead, as if it were the realisation of a long cherished dream. The following lines from *Politics and Economic Crisis* give some idea of the creative potential Yanev saw even within plainly destructive developments: "Today the world presents an entirely different image. We are full of chaos. Our principle is the principle of negation. It is as if an unquenchable thirst for destruction were burning in our hearts. In no other time has destruction ever had such a creative, even religious, significance. The world is no longer a unity. We have lost the

feeling of the Absolute; we are no longer attracted by order and the enlightened spirit of harmony” (Янев, 1932, p. 363). Characteristically, Yanev emphasizes the creative nature of the crisis, and in this respect he refers to the work of Erich Mendelsohn, *Der schöpferische Sinn der Krise* (1932) (Mendelsohn, 1986). The crisis is presented as a chaos that gives birth to the new. Again, as in Yanev’s other reflections on the shocking course of world events, his ambivalent attitude is plainly evident: though it is true that man is thrown into the wave of events and is left all alone, in this abandonment by God Yanev sees something more than a tragic aspect; this new insecurity and the precarious position of man inspires and exhilarates Yanev. What attracts him is not world harmony (which has proven to be an illusion) but chaos as something creative, vital, and full of endless possibilities for man. In his sympathies Yanev is on the side of chaos as opposed to the cosmos; amidst the downfall of the old idols he hears the Hallelujah of life and the song of the future. These moods relating to the birth of a new man out of the chaos are certainly close to the poetry of Teodor Trayanov (“I feel the holy links with the distant age of chaos – in my meek and bold words grows the God-equal man” – T. Trayanov), a close friend of Yanev for many years.

The elated and ecstatic attitude to things new – a new world, a new man, a new poetry, new gods (“a new cosmic system with a new sky and a new law”),¹ was characteristic of Yanev from the very beginning of his work, where, in his poetically coloured imagery, even the planets were heard to sing in a new chorus (Янев, 1929). For instance, “A New Time” is the title he gave to his publication in the newspaper *Pryaporets* (to which he was a regularly contributing author):

“Today a hush has fallen upon Europe. But this hush is like that which sets in before a storm. It is ominous and the air is already full of gunpowder fumes. Uncountable sufferings have befallen Europe. Upon her old back thousands of systems have come to ruin, thousands of worldviews, thousands of hypotheses and speculative pastimes have excited the young sons of Europe by their absurdity and vain glory. The great tragedy of our time is that the whole universe of the spirit, in which until recently the intervention of God’s will could be felt, has broken down under the bolts of a thunderstorm” (Янев, 1931a, p. 2).

This attitude grew stronger, especially during the Second World War, when Yanev was in Germany. The apocalyptic foreboding that imbues all of

¹ This quote is from Yanev’s essay *The Tragedy of Man* (Янев, 1925, p. 37).

Yanev's writings devoted to the *spirit of the new times*, becomes increasingly perceptible in those years, at the "end" of which his Romantic attitude sees an impossible world of knights and heroes. Below we will trace this new emphasis in the expectation of the end of times.

Returning to the second peak of apocalyptic experience, in the "middle" of the inter-war period, we should note that this was combined with reflections on the immediate post-war reality and the emerging impression of permanent crisis. Even though the crisis of the 1930s, which was also felt acutely in Bulgaria, was in fact a result of the Great Depression that began in the US in 1929, in the texts devoted to the presence of this crisis in Bulgaria no chronological account is given of its course: the post-war years "merge" with the 1930s, at least at the spiritual level, and the registered features of the new crisis are presented as identical to those of the aftermath of the war. The stress in philosophical essays and publications is the *crisis of the spirit* as something heavier to bear than the material crisis. The periodicals of this time abound in characterizations of a *world* crisis and are focused on man's situation of doom, of submission to the elemental forces at work in the world. "Today's times are ailing. This is the diagnosis given by all the great thinkers and contemplators of contemporary times. This is also the immediate conviction of every man who has preserved his clear logical thinking. The spirit of today's world is torn by the paroxysmal fever of sharp inner contradictions, and the edifice is bending under terrible unrest and revolutions" (Цветаков, 1936, p. 2) – such opinions appear everywhere in the periodicals of the time.

The experiencing of time as *historical* is immediately displayed in the title of the above-mentioned emblematic work by Spiridon Kazandjiev, "Historical Time. The Crisis in the Material and Spiritual World and Our Tasks", dating from 1932. Here the author aims to find and analyse the various dimensions of the crisis in the spiritual and material culture of the mid-inter-war age. The stress is that people are experiencing *historical time* – a time of historical rebirth, of the passage of one world into another (Казанджиев, 1932, p. 22), which is inevitably painful and distressing. In "Historical Time", the reader clearly feels the author's growing concern and alarm at the universal relativisation of values. Kazandjiev is mostly distressed by the negative phenomena at this crucial time: the experience of it is worded in the vocabulary of an existential type of philosophy, which had diagnosed the age as lacking in style, as a time of massification and technicisation of life. Not only the individual soul but even the collective one has been abandoned by all its past ideals, but has not yet found new ones,

so that it is left “homeless, unsheltered, standing under the open sky. It’s fate has never been so tragic as now!” (Цветаев, 1936, p. 2).

The crisis and the experience of crisis were the focus of essays and publicist writings between the two world wars. Particularly impressive is the specific rhetoric of the “screaming” titles of publications in those years, such as “a vile age”, “a nightmarish reality” (titles of texts by L. Tsvetarov in the newspaper *Mysl i volya*, [Thought and Will], 1933) and many other similar texts.

The new world war that loomed on the horizon gave new incentives for reflection on the crisis as the predominant theme of publications in the 1930s. Thinkers with attitudes similar to Yanev’s were increasingly elated by the “spirit of the new times” (when the “national European revolution has made a great break in the way of thinking inherited from past centuries, and has defined the development of mankind for thousands of years to come” (Йовев, 1941, p. 144)) and thrilled in expectation of what was to come. Stefan Yovev, an author with definitely right-wing political leanings, wrote that “we are living in a great age, in the middle of the greatest revolution that mankind has ever undergone. All past values are subjected to radical re-evaluation” (Йовев, 1941, p. 141). In expressing the mood with which he meets the new changes taking place in life, Yovev quotes in *Barbarian Blood* the verses from Furnadjiev’s poem *Horsemen*: “A wind is coming, and it’s fearsome, o mother, fearsome and joyous” (Йовев, 1937, p. 22). It is paradoxical that this quotation was drawn from poetry inspired by the *winds of the September uprising* of 1923 and written by a poet of proletarian political sympathies, while Yovev would later emigrate and join the German Wehrmacht, but it seems that precisely Furnadjiev’s verses could best express the terrible premonition of the coming End but also the feverish excitement, the obsession with what was coming – two extreme opposites of feeling on the emotional scale of experiencing the new pre-war and war period.

As a result of the conservative revolutionary movement in Germany, time has stopped, the end of history has come, man has climbed onto the throne of God – this is the concise summary of Yanko Yanev’s moods in the last years of his life. Yanev shared his joyful elation at the new times in his numerous public appearances in Germany and in the international national-socialist publication *Young Europe*. In *The Image of Titanic Time* he wrote that:

“No historical epoch [...] has ever been so incomprehensible and so monumentally caught up and moved by this world fury as is the present one. This is an epoch of war, of the war that Europe starts to wage only when by

all evidence it becomes clear that historical time is approaching its end...[...] Not every war is titanic in its foundations, but only the war that changes the image of the world and lends it a new form; such a war comes when the time of times approaches its end and when an abyss opens separating the past from the present, an abyss in which the last streams of decline pour out, of what is moribund in history, the streams of vileness..." (ЯНЕВ, 1942, p. 13).

Like every war, this one too has come at the will of the Creator; the image of time is enveloped in flames; it is shaped on the fields of death, but it is also enveloped in immortality (ЯНЕВ, 1942, p. 14). Yanko Yanev's Romantic pathos is very similar to that of Emil Cioran, with whom he has been compared in a recent study: "We can only wonder, had he survived, whether he [Yanev], idealist that he was, would have repudiated his attraction to the German revolution" (Hitchins, 2012, p. 90).

Antoniý Gashtev, who later emigrated to South America, was another representative of the existential style of philosophising; he was particularly influenced by Nikolay Berdyaev's personalism, with its thematic focus on global changes perceived as an approaching apocalypse. In 1945 Gashtev was editor in chief of the journal *Slavyanska misyl* [Slavic Thought], in which he published two large texts entitled "The Trial over History" and "The Conflict between Man and History". The view he expresses there was that the apocalypse is not only a revelation of the end of history but also a revelation that occurs with *consistent regularity* at the end of a given epoch; it is a judgment passed within history itself: "The apocalypse exists not only in supra-history, but also within the limits of history itself. The historical apocalypse indicates the inadequacy of what man has desired in his spiritual-social-historical existence" (Гащев, 1945, p. 35).

The extensive use of Biblical terms by various authors in the inter-war period indicates how strongly they experienced their time as one of *crisis*, as an agony, which, however, they saw as carrying hope for a new existence, for a radical, cosmic transfiguration.

An interesting comparison can be made between these attitudes and the occult history of humankind popularised by Petar Dynov, the significant Bulgarian teacher of Western esoterism. In his last prophecy (in 1944) he spoke of the cosmic Fire that was to come and transform the whole world by bringing it a new moral. This was meant to be the end of the epoch and the beginning of a New Era, an era in which love was to reign on earth. These views of the Bulgarian theosophist form the optimistic pole of the "apocalyptic" scale.

In his *Anthropological History of Philosophy* Assen Ignatov says: “There are historically uninteresting epochs but there are also privileged eras fulfilled with events” (Игнатов, 1998, p. 227). Such a “privileged era, fulfilled with events” is the inter-war period for Bulgaria.

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Doświadczenie czasu historycznego. Apokalipsa i autorytaryzm w bułgarskiej filozofii egzystencjalnej okresu międzywojennego

Niniejszy artykuł poświęcony jest doświadczeniu tempa czasu, odzwierciedlonemu w twórczości bułgarskich filozofów sytuujących się w nurcie „filozofii życia” w najszerszym ze znaczeń, jak również innych myślicieli. Zostaje w nim pokazane, jak poczucie czasu „skondensowanego” u autorów okresu międzywojennego nieodzownie kojarzone jest z obrazami biblijnymi – czas „zredukowany” zapowiada zbliżający się koniec.

Myśliciele, którzy pozostawiają trwałe ślady w bułgarskiej historii intelektualistów właśnie w powodu swej wrażliwości na gwałtowne zwroty w czasie, na intensywność jego upływu, to m.in. Spirydon Kazandżijew [Спиридон Казанджиев], Janko Janew [Янко Янев], Najden Szejtanow [Найден Шейтанов] – autorzy o orientacji prawicowej. Artykuł ukazuje, jak „koniec czasów” budzi u nich nie tylko udrękę i niepokój, ale i podekscytowanie z powodu tego, co nadchodzi – pojmowanego jako urzeczywistnienie długo pielęgnowanego marzenia.

Słowa kluczowe: doświadczenie apokaliptyczne; międzywojnie w Bułgarii; Spirydon Kazandżijew; Janko Janew; eseje filozoficzne; hermeneutyka „świata życia”; „kryzys naszego czasu”

Experiencing Historical Time: Apocalypse and Authoritarianism in Inter-War Bulgarian Existential Philosophy

This article deals with the sense of the pace of time as reflected in the works of Bulgarian philosophers from the “philosophy of life” school, and of other thinkers active in the humanities. It is shown that the feeling of “condensed” time among the authors of the inter-war period is inevitably associated with Biblical imagery – the “reduction” of time foresees the end of time.

Several authors left a lasting mark on Bulgarian intellectual history due to their sensitivity to the sharp turns of the age, and their awareness of the intense “flow” of time. The most prominent among them were Spiridon Kazandjiev and Yanko Yanev, authors with right-wing political leanings. This article reveals how the end of time provoked in them not only distress and anxiety but also exhilaration at what lay ahead, as if it were the realisation of a long-cherished dream.

Keywords: apocalyptic experience; Interwar period in Bulgaria; Spiridon Kazandjiev; Yanko Yanev; Philosophical essays; Hermeneutics of the *life world*; “Crisis of our time”

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