

## NO, WE CAN'T CATCH UP WITH THE GERMANS<sup>1</sup>

(A Review of the Book of Daniela Decheva *Between Creativity and Peacemaking. The Peace Prize of the German Book Publishing Industry and the Culture of Memory in Germany*, Sofia: University Publishing House “St. Kl. Ohridski”, 2023, 360 pp., in Bulgarian)

### 1. Timeliness of the book

I have already explained elsewhere<sup>2</sup> why in contemporary Bulgaria, due to the scarcity and awkwardness of positive values in the present, national identity is constructed through politically fabricated and sustained myths and legends about “our past”. As a result of the specifics of the historical process that took place here, we lack a “culture<sup>3</sup> of memory”; it is a cultural deficit which determines the inevitable fact that disputes over the “correct interpretation” of the supposedly obligatory “common national past” can lead even to physical lynching of the “enemy”<sup>4</sup>.

The relevance of Daniela Decheva’s book lies in the paradox that we, the Bulgarians, do not even have the language in which to express and understand the real problem – in our language “the past” is a noun, which is only in the singular, as if the past were one, monolithic and universal. Therefore, the Bulgarian word for remembering such a past, “memory”, does not have a plural... Thus, the real multiplicity of the historical process that took place, as well as its diverse experiencing by different social subjects, both at the time of its occurrence, and even more so nowadays, begins to seem anti-natural, literally “rejecting the nature” of “the people”. This appears like a sufficient reason for the seemingly spontaneous, mass readiness to exterminate the “abnormals”, bearers of another past or another memory. And so, it were to be, as long as the past would be considered to be that unshakable and unquestionable common value, which is meant to be the axiological center, but also the backbone of national identity.

The current significance of the monograph *Between Creativity and Peacemaking* is in the

convincing evidence that the constructive centre of national identity can be not some (political party) group-interested phantasm about the past, but our present, publicly understood – through a rational debate of critical publicity (Habermas) – the radical overcoming of the past<sup>5</sup>. This is so complex and contradictory to the general self-evidence we uphold here that it takes a scholarly monograph on the unique German experience to understand even that it is possible at all.

### 2. The strength of the achievement lies in the successful intertwining of research subject and method

#### 2.1. On the subject’s side – *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, determining the priority of the cultural studies perspective to the interdisciplinary research

It would be misleading to get the impression that the Peace Prize is simply a sole social fact that is taken by itself and then meticulously described. The researcher chose this rather strange phenomenon<sup>6</sup> as it contains in a condensed form and vividly manifests the most important features – *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (of what there is not even a suitable word or expression in the Bulgarian language): it is the mundane, routine work in dealing with the past or coming to terms with it, but also a struggle to curb that past to build a new value foundation, founded on universalistic humanism. Therefore, it is a public task that cannot be solved just as it goes. The only possible successful solution is through an extremely complex, diffuse and dispersed system of public practices, which simply find their culminating manifestation in this Peace Prize. But this makes essential all the particular details of this socio-

culturally assembled phenomenon – who initiates and presents the annual awards; what is the procedure by which the event takes place, what kind of persons are the laureates and also their lauders'; the specific contents of the speeches themselves, exerting a profound public impact; the scale, intensity and focus of the public debate constantly accompanying the awards. The latter, in turn, directly refers to the connections between the selected prize-winners and the dynamics in the political priorities of governments according to the changing global socio-political context (p. 23, also p. 72–75; p. 340), but on the condition that the involvement of critical publicity (of the German civil society), ensures that – through the public debate surrounding the award – it “does not degenerate into a loudspeaker of authorities” (p. 35). “And in the final account, all this discursive exchange is an exchange of cultural symbolic capital between its participants – they reaffirm to each other the respect, prestige, positions in power constellations and participation in a shared transnational value-normative space” (p. 24).

In this sense, the success of the research derives, first of all, from the extraordinarily successful choice of subject-matter. It expresses the national specificity, which is a key intersection between the traumatic historical past of the German nation and its changing, increasingly promising place in the contemporary globalized world<sup>8</sup>. At the same time, the international weight directly depends precisely on the success of constructing a national self-awareness, as a result of the unique *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*.

The problem is that such – essentially diffuse and dispersed (Weber) – “subject” is not something that just exists by itself, but it is constructed through a very special large-scale, persistent struggle over the decades. It cannot be accomplished unless its actor is the national civil society itself (p. 51), which precisely through the intense and necessarily rational public debate, gives an expression of critical publicity.

## 2.2. *On the research method's side*

To understand such a complex, intrinsically problematic and essentially non-obvious subject became possible only because it was approached not with a sort of “natural attitude”, but with a deliberately chosen and conceptually justified re-

search approach, corresponding to the specifics of the subject-matter. Methodologically, Decheva's success is due to the strict adherence to several research imperatives.

First of all, I will point out the explicitly grounded *historicism* as a due approach to solving the research problem<sup>9</sup> – how and in what changing context the success of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* becomes possible and at what cost, as well.

In the second place, I see the success in the consistently maintained polyphony in the revealing of the multifold subject – transition of personal attitudes into socially necessary ideas, of ideas into texts (culturally significant events), of texts into policies, of policies into widely shared new attitudes, of these new attitudes in the historical process of transformation of the national society and its positioning in the world.

Third in order, but first in importance, is *the priority of the cultural studies perspective*, emphasizing historical variations in the interplay, but also in the tensions between past, history, history (as knowledge of the preceding), memory, *culture* of memory and *policy/politics* of memory<sup>10</sup>, process of social transformations, leading to the revival of various “pasts”. And all over again, but for the sake of the redefinition of our current national self-identity by sustaining a policy of formatting the humanistic global public perception of us, the society and nation. However, it is a start from the beginning also due to the emergence of the unsuspected problems, deriving from the success in *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* – cliché, canonization and even sacralization of a *unitary, obligatory way of remembering* each of the traumas of the past, which prevents the authentic personal shock in feeling empathy for the horror of the mass crimes. Without the latter, however, there couldn't be not only scientific, i.e. impartial establishment and interpretation of historical facts, but above all – catharsis and a real personal conversion to the values of humanism (p. 8; 269; 308). And thus, it becomes clear why Decheva's research is constructed as a fruitful dialogue with the original views of about 150 famous social researchers, philosophers, writers. Most naturally among them are the names of Bulgarian culturologists – Iv. Znepolski, Iv. Dichev, D. Koleva, G. Goncharova and others.

From what has been said above, it is clear that I appreciate the first three chapters of the monograph extremely highly. Although they are about 15 percent of the volume of the book, they substantiate the research choice of the social fact “Peace Prize of the branch organization of book distributors in Germany”. These three chapters clarify the empirical reality of the actual large-scale, decades-long subject of study but they also justify the chosen and rigorously implemented research strategy. The remaining 85 percent of the text is a scrupulous empirical defence of the correctness of the research choices made. I put it bluntly, it is certain that another author working with the same factual material would have reached a completely different result, and I doubt that alternative readings of the “data” would have had the same cultural and civic significance.

### 3. “The Old Bachelor’s Nightcap”

I will admit, however, that all the time, while I was voraciously devouring the pages unfolding the exposition of the spectacular results of the interdisciplinary research carried out, (which is a vivid demonstration of what true European studies means and why such an academic specialty is necessary, especially in societies like the Bulgarian one), a memory of Andersen’s non-fairy tale was obsessively lurking in the periphery of my consciousness. It is short and ominous – yes, the nightcap is wonderful: soft, comfortable, made of the finest silk. But it goes along with the thoughts, unfulfilled dreams and the tears of the old bachelor, which cannot be washed out. “Never wish a ‘Bachelor’s Nightcap’ for yourself!” – the wisdom comes.

So, I wonder whether the amazing capacity of the contemporary German public for successful *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* does not derive – to a large extent – from the long string of mind-shattering events in the twentieth century. You don’t have to be a Germanophobe to wonder if there aren’t some substantial and long-lasting reasons (and not just a coincidence of casual circumstances) why the Germans caused the first recorded genocide of African tribes in modern times<sup>11</sup>; atrocities committed by regiments of the *Wehrmacht* in the course of the Second World War<sup>12</sup>, the unthinkable inhumanity of the Holocaust, its

successful silencing for nearly twenty years, as well as the successful incorporation of the majority of the population of the German Democratic Republic into the Stalinist regime in place there until the end of the 1980s. In short, the problem, which is far from being mine alone, is whether there was a due price, but paid in advance, that serves as the foundation afterwards, but on this very basis, of productive strenuous work to overcome that kind of past. This civil-political struggle is, in fact, far from over as the steady rise of the far right over the last decade has attested for.

### 4. The pleasure of reading

As a rule, scientific texts differ from fiction primarily in terms of the readers’ experience. But precisely in this respect, Decheva’s book is again a rare exception – reading it brings gratification. Because, even if it is on a subconscious level, you feel that what is being said is smart – in a *moral, emotional, historiographical, civil and political* sense. Everything is thought out, weighted, carefully crafted, i.e. mastered, and even in places – served with gentle humour in the subtext.

I realize that this overall quality, as much as it reflects the personality of the author, is still aided by a favourable premise, to a significant extent. The very subject of the research contains an extremely high self-reflexivity because it is articulated through the ever vigilant critical public, whose agents are the heirs of a “nation of poets and thinkers” (p. 27). And we have to agree with Habermas that an authentic civil society presupposes a very specific sociocultural context of late modernity: “A politically functioning public sphere needs not only the institutional guarantees of the rule of law (*Rechtsstaatlichkeit*), but it also relies on the cultural traditions and models of socialization coming against it, as well as the political culture of the population *accustomed to freedom*”<sup>13</sup> (italics in the original).

The general lesson from Decheva’s enlightening study can be summed up like this: “If you want to be happy, be!” But while in Russia it is an aphorism (of the triumvirate, hidden behind the literary pseudonym Kuzma Prudkov), in Germany it was adopted as a moral imperative for a politically responsible behaviour based on reason. In the USSR/Russia, what is said is just a joke be-

cause the social life there excludes the individual person from being the creator of his/her life and from being responsible for it. In the countries of the European Union, as I mentioned at the very beginning, this attitude is the humanistic foundation of everything else. It is this foundation that is reinforced by the very 70-year-long existence of the Peace Prize whose purpose and essence were rendered comprehensible in the book *Between Creativity and Peacemaking*.

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No, we won't catch up with the Germans. But at least we know where we could "drive further in this thick fog" (T. Kolev) if we have actually – and not just declaratively – made a European civilizational choice.

Georgi Dimitrov

### Notes

- 1 For the younger ones, it should be explained that there was an original song "How will we catch up with the Americans?" performed in 1994 by our great actor and showman Todor Kolev. It was extremely popular long after its release, because in a notably artistic way, with minimalistic means, it expressed the major value crisis from the beginning of the Transition in our country. In those times the conflict between expectations for economic prosperity, authentic democracy, protection of human rights through the rule of law, i.e. new quality of life, and the harsh reality of the starting societal/structural-institutional and cultural/value prerequisites. At the time, the European Union was just emerging, practically invisible in our country, which is why America/Americans were the self-evident symbol of the "desired otherness". In recent years, the image of the "cherished Beyond" has mainly gravitated towards the EU, and Germany often appears as its metonym, especially in axiological terms.
- 2 Dimitrov, G. (2020). The Bulgarian Society at the turn of the 21st Century: A Cognitive Challenge (30 Years after the Collapse of Communism), *South-eastern Europe*, vol. 44/2, 105–129.
- 3 We must necessarily recall the virtuoso formulation of M. Mamardashvili that culture is *the effort and the ability to practice the complexity and diversity of life* (Mamardashvili, M. (2004). European responsibility. In: *Selected*, S., East-West). Decheva's book is a powerful, both empirical and conceptual, proof of the essentiality of each of the semantic accents in this understanding – the effort, the skill, the complexity, the diversity, and above all, *the practice*, emphasised by the author himself, i.e. a sustainable routine is what determines the supreme importance of culture in European public life.
- 4 The prolonged street clashes surrounding the dismantling of the "Monument to the Soviet Army", accompanied by even more violent confrontations in the electronic space in 2023, could have been avoided with a simple, but historically correct, compromise replacement of the text on the memorial plaque: "To the occupant, the Red Army, from the grateful Bulgarian Communist Party, which was brought to power by it". Thus, the monument itself would remain (literally and figuratively) in its place, including its size, characteristic aesthetics, and positioning in the center of the capital – to the delight of its supporters and opponents.
- 5 Decheva insists on clarifying that, since the 1990s, this wording has gradually been replaced by "memory culture" because it is believed that the past cannot, and should not, be "overcome". It must be constantly present and remembered as a reminder and a warning.
- 6 "My goal in this monograph is to study the specific manifestations of the German culture of memory in the discursive space of the Peace Prize. [...] And since the culture (or policy) of memory is inextricably linked to the collective identity of a given community, through its study, key features of the collective image of Germany are highlighted and clarified – in its present, even more so in its past, and above all in the effect of superimposing the past on the present" (p. 9).
- 7 Lauders in this case are publicly significant figures, no less influential than the respective laureates (authors, but more importantly: civically engaged intellectuals), who in the presentation of the new winner of the award to the public, and essentially – in Germany, and also to the international one, clarify why this particular person with his life's standing contributes to the establishment of world peace, but not "as the absence of war and/or prerequisites for it, but as the sum of all conditions for respecting human dignity and all human and civil rights. Over the years, the horizon of this understanding has ex-

- panded more and more, in parallel with the expanding interpretations of human rights and the threats to them” (p. 29).
- 8 “Here I aim to explore the typological features of the German politics/policy of memory in the last thirty years, reflected in the speeches of the laureates and their lauders in the period 1989–2019. [...] The discursive space of the Peace Prize is a favorable environment for research of Germany’s post-war self-perception both from an internal perspective and in its intersection with the perspective of outside observers from the world’s intellectual elite” (pp. 9–10, compare also with pp. 27–28).
- 9 “The logic of the monograph starts from the questions of why and in what way the Peace Prize is a significant factor in Germany’s public political and cultural space, in other words, why its discursive space is worth exploring.” “... this text adheres to rather a cultural-historical approach in an attempt to combine the macro- and micro-politics in the researched subject”. “In my opinion, this is the only way to understand the current status of memory culture as a dominant identity paradigm and its gradual transition from “collective silence” through “dealing with the past” to “culture/politics of memory” (pp. 9–10, compare with pp. 19–20).
- 10 “At the same time, it is precisely since this decade that the concept of memory policy, i.e. the culture of memory, has now been perceived as an object of purposeful political management – not that it has not always been so” (p. 93), i.e. the relations and interpenetrations between culture and the policy of memory in modernity may be historically changing, but they are always in an inextricable, intrinsically contradictory unity.
- 11 “The German Reich recorded in its brief colonial history the first genocide in the 20th century: the slaughter of nearly 80% of the Herero and Nama tribes (approx. 80,000 people) in South-West Africa (now Namibia) by the German colonial authorities in the period 1904–1908 and the internment of the remaining people in camps where half of them died of epidemics and malnutrition” (p. 104).
- 12 The documentary facts revealing these crimes shocked Europe and present-day Germans (p. 94–95).
- 13 Habermas, J. (1995). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. (Translation in Bulgarian). Sofia: University Publishing House “St. Kliment Ohridski”, p. 42.