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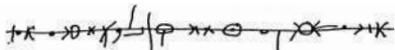
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“The Model Village”. The Modernization Project of the Villages in Bulgaria (1937 - 1944)



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ABSTRACT

The article presents and analyzes the state policies pertaining to rural space in Bulgaria in the 1930s and 1940s. The research focus is on a project bearing the ambitious label of “The Model Village”. The key objective of the program “The Model Village” emphasized the need of the village inhabitants (especially the young people) to adopt the modern hygienic habits, the rules of eating “healthily” and to recognize farm work as a professional activity.

KEYWORDS

Agrarian modernization, bulgarian rural space, “the model village”, additional farming schools



Introduction

In the 1920s and 1930s, the agricultural and social problems were a priority in social discussions, as well as in the strategies of the ruling circles in Bulgaria. One particular issue was brought in the limelight – the peasants’ living conditions, raising the level of their educational and “cultural” standing, and the professionalization of agricultural labor. This article represents an attempt to analyze the state policies referring to the rural areas in Bulgaria in the 1930s and 1940s, as it is mentioned in a project bearing the ambitious label: “The Model Village”.

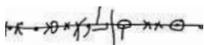
In recent years, the number of historical articles dealing with various aspects of the social changes that occurred in the Bulgarian rural areas after World War I has considerably increased. The lively interest in those issues has been inspired by researchers who have been trying to find the reasons behind the “belated modernization” phenomenon in Southeastern-European societies. In the context of the pre-socialistic transformational

processes in Southeastern Europe, there has been much talk about “the skipped agrarian revolution” and “development blockage” (Roth 1997: 26; Palairret 1985: 253-274; Sundhaussen 1989: 45-60). In view of these circumstances, the state policies regarding agriculture in the period ranging from the end of 19th century till the 1950s (an “era” considered stable in regards to its steady characteristics, its inner dynamics remaining unchangeable during the whole period) are to be perceived as a “list of historic gaps” (Wolf 2001: 277.) and a succession of deficiencies (Kassabova-Dintcheva 2002). According to these generalizations, the modernization thrusts come to Southeastern Europe always and only from the outside. Pursuant to them, the failure of modernization, however, is always interculturally determined and it is explained through “pervasive traditionalism” and the “unwillingness to change”. Even when innovative changes are suggested (social mobility, educational strategies, etc.), they are always presented as contradictory to the attitude towards these innovations. Consideration shall be given a priori from a static rural way of life that, in these stud-

ies, is eventually assessed as “a stronghold of backwardness and traditional conformism” (Kassabova-Dintcheva 2002: 238-239). This article offers a different perspective to the common notion of the rural community of the time as a benighted stronghold of misery, diseases and ignorance.

The key term that appears in the article is “agrarian modernization”, which is to be understood as a functional interaction of not only farming, but also of social and cultural reforms making their way into the prevailing small farming practices and the traditional lifestyle of the rural population. This term is used to denote the process of interaction between the “new” and the “old” trends in the economic, social and cultural sphere – a tendency which has its effect on the peasants, as well as on the experts in the spheres mentioned (Wolf 1994: 71).

The objective here is not to reconstruct some general picture or a theoretical model on the social aspects of the “modernization” of the Bulgarian village between the wars. Only some elements of this process are presented; hypotheses on the effects of the social transformations that took place in the rural regions are suggested, and some definite conclusions are attempted mainly to enrich the historical picture of the subject matter.



“The Model Village” Program and Its Contexts

At the beginning of the 20th century Bulgaria was a typical rural country of small and middle-scale farming and prevailing peasant population. The basic economic entity was the peasant household which rested on the distribution of labor within the family. The traditional family and kinship circles played an important role in the social support of children, elderly people and disabled persons, while the mutual aid of fellow-villagers formed the second important column of the traditional social network. In this seemingly static picture, however, strong internal dynamics and big regional

differences could be observed. Many rural regions were involved in economic and cultural modernization processes. Although the majority of the population did remain rural, Bulgaria underwent intensive economic and social transformations which introduced modern industry, transportation, communication and new urban social strata as well (Angelova 2013: 75).

After World War I, the reformatory state policy concerning the rural population considerably enlarged its scope. The public eye focused on the social problems which the peasants would experience (Mollov 1940: 5-9; Kalapchiev 1946:5-6). In the 1920s the movement for the “economic and cultural rise of the village” turned into a “social trend” and public ideology, and in the 1930s “the improvement of the conditions of life in the village” became the leading motif of the movement (Grancharov 1930: 171-180). Gradually, some important problems were brought forward: the living standards in the rural areas, the peasants’ educational and “cultural” sophistication, the transformation of farm labor into a professional occupation, etc. (Wolf 1994: 72-86, Popova 2002: 171,).

In this decade, the public transparency of those issues got even bigger and numerous public organizations strove to provide solutions. What is more, during public debates, the peasants would define themselves as active participants in the processes rather than objects of influence. A relevant agency consisting of experts in “the rural lifestyle” was established at the Ministry of Agriculture and State Properties (Popov 1938: 171-183; Raduchev 1941: 15-17).

The agrarian policy of the Bulgarian governments after 1934 implemented projects set back in 1920s – attempts at radical agrarian and social legislation during the rule of the Bulgarian Agrarian Union (1920-1921). What is different from the summer of 1934 is the specific institutional “atmosphere” – the imposition of centralized bases in managing the changed conditions on social activities. The result of this is, seemingly, the strange partnership between

the state regulation and the reserved capacity for autonomous initiatives in the social sector as a whole. Here one should also add the ideas for the implementation of "expert management" of all managerial levels, especially at the municipal level¹.

The economic structure of rural areas in this period is also subject to an ongoing development. Indeed, these processes cannot be connected to absolutely all rural areas. It is different for different regions and villages, but the general trends are related to the share of intensive crops in agriculture, as well as to the increase in linking farmers to market mechanisms².

It should also be noted the related to these processes increasing differentiation and professionalization of agriculture, expansion of craftsmanship and increasing the share of the new jobs and commercial industries such as electrotechnics, carpentry, photography studios, etc. not only in the city, but in the village as well (Popova 1998: 113-116).

In the 1930s various organizations of organizations of "the third sector" in the rural areas became noticeable (Gavrilova, Elenkov 1998: 111-124). Numerous branches of various educational, charitable, Red Cross and other organizations and companies were established (Kasabova-Dintcheva 2000: 136). The focus of the current public discussions was also changed. Since the early 1930s, the more abstract-sounding rhetoric of "agriculture", "the agrarian sector", etc. has been increasingly replaced by that of "the rural family and / or household" and "the farmer" (Stoyanov 1943: 101-107). In addition to this, "the experts" working in the village already see the villagers not only as an object, subject to "modernization", but as active participants in "ameliorative endeavors" (Aleksiev 1941: 162).

It is not without significance that since the mid-1930s, as a result of the first major "agricultural and sociological" studies, there has already been some clarity on the specific parameters of the living conditions of the rural population in the country. In the second half of the 1920s, a group of young agrono-

mists, working with prof. Yanaki Mollov, initiated the beginning of agrarian sociology in Bulgaria (Uzunov 1941: 10). It became institutionalized with the opening of the Agricultural Economics Research Institute in 1935 (Kalapchiev 1946)³. In this institute, just as in the Ministry of Agriculture and State Property, "a department for studying the living conditions in the village" was formed (Birnikov 1943: 39-44). The team working there began conducting the "agricultural and sociological research" (Kalapchiev 1946: 27-32). In the next few years, this gave specialists from the toddling agrarian sociology in Bulgaria the possibility to hold the first large-scale studies on living conditions in villages, on rural household budgets and expenditure of labor in households. Based on these data, "better" state strategies were also developed (Mocheva 1938)⁴. Few people from the Agricultural Economics Research Institute carried out their research through the assistance of agronomic services and teachers in existing additional agricultural schools in the country. Experts were trying to determine the surroundings in which the rural population lived – housing, their distribution, hygiene, problems related to the nutrition of the rural population, etc. (Mocheva 1938: 147-149)⁵.

Often the contradictory incentives and claims demanded more and more from the rural residents. This includes imperatives that permeate due to the influence of urban centers in the everyday practices of the village residents. All these elements entangle the multidimensional threads of the processes that a researcher has described as a kind of modernizing "colonization of rural worlds" - through processes of individualization, commercialization, medialization, the expansion of educational opportunities for the peasants (Langthaler, Sieder 2000: 8).



The "Model Village" Program (1937-1944)

At the beginning of 1937, as part of the highly popular movement for the "economic and cultural rise of the village", the

1) Naredba-zakon za selskite oblasti
§Decree-law of rural communitiety /Decree №79 since 29 July 1934, SG, issue100, since 3 August 1934.

2) See Central State Archive, F.505, d. 1 – Agricultural and Economic Research Institute. The collection contains around 500 "household accounting books" from the whole country. The total revenue and expenditure of the surveyed households can be traced within a few years (most of them are for the period between 1936-1939).

3) The institute was organized within the Ministry of Agriculture and State Property. Prof. Y. Mollov was curator and director of the institute until 1941; between 1941-1943 – A. Uzunov and until 1946 – G. Kalapchiev.

4) In sociological research on "rural agricultural household" of the 1930s and the dealings with problems of the "Bulgarian peasant", the main focus is related to the "cost of labor" of the rural housewife – at home and in the business operation. In this direction, the most representative study is that of Hristina Mocheva "Rural agricultural household in Bulgaria in 1935/1936 (budget, situation and cost of labor)", Sofia, 1938.

5) The study was conducted between 1935-1936 and it concerns 199 villages with data of 939 households /at an average of 6 people per household.

6) State Archive – Sofia, F1158k, a. u. 30, l. 298-299 – Church board-Dolina Banya, District of MIPH, Department of Community Care since 18. IX.1936; Public support, book 17-18, 1936, p. 531-531.

7) Towards the program of model villages – Model Village, year II, 1942, issue 9, 10.

8) Ordinance No37358 – Ordinances of the Ministry of Agriculture and State Property, Department of Agricultural Education, Department on the Custom in the Village, 1940, issue 44.

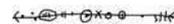
9) Ibid.

“Model Village” Project was launched in 11 communes⁶. Within less than five years, the program had already covered more than 110 rural communes on the entire Bulgarian territory, and, until the beginning of 1944, it was at its height⁷. Along with the change of the political regime in the fall of 1944, the enthusiasm about the whole Model-Village idea started to fade away until it finally died out around 1948.

The legislation of model households and villages after 1937 envisaged work in at least one village and three households in it in every district of the country (after 1941 and in the “new lands”)⁸. The final selection of the model village for each district was determined by a committee whose members included the regional agriculture chief or the chief in agricultural education, the regional custom agronomist, the district agronomist, the district doctor, the district engineer, the district manager, the district school inspector, the district forester. Once the committee had established the “model village” municipality, together with the mayor, they would develop a 3-year specific working program⁹.

The key objective of the program emphasized the need of the village inhabitants (especially the young people) to adopt the modern hygienic habits of the time, the rules of eating “healthily” and to recognize the farm work as a professional activity. The set of measures that would ensure a “better atmosphere” not only in one’s home, but also in the whole village, included improving the infrastructure, providing for sewers and bettering the water-supply, exploring the possibilities for at least partial electrification, building public health centers, as well as health consultative stations, bakeries, kindergardens, playgrounds and summer resorts. These small-scale local activities were to be organized at the initiative of central government institutions (Ministry of Agriculture and State Property, the Ministry of Interior and Public Health) and the active participation of rural communities and local “public” organizations (societies, cooperatives, committees).

Provisions were made also for the establishment of a practice-oriented educational system in the villages by organizing a network of so-called additional farming schools (Angelova 2003: 50-76). Specialized education was perceived by ideologists of public programs for the village as a significant modernization factor. It was considered the most important lever by which the new achievements of the agricultural science and technology, modern hygienic standards could reach more villagers. They should become usable and be introduced in understandable and applicable forms. A possibility of a large-scale “farming and household education”, suitable for village boys and girls, was seen in the enlargement of the network, including the additional farming schools established after 1924. Assigning the label “Model” to some schools depended very much on their proximity to the villages in the rural commune (Birnikov 1942; Wolf 1994: 71-86). In the early 1940s, such additional farming schools were set up in about 240 rural communes on the Bulgarian territory. At those schools, young graduates from junior high-school underwent a two-year course of training and education. They were later supposed to be dealing with agricultural production and household activities. About 83,000 graduates from those additional farming schools became the most important experts who were expected to carry out the “Model Village” Project – those young men and women were well-acquainted with the modern hygienic standards and knew how to eat healthily, how to make their farm profitable and so on. These people were also expected to serve as examples for their co-villagers (Birnikov 1943: 16).



External Influences on the „Model Village“ Program

The model “fever” received a stimulus also from outside; at that time such projects were a widespread trend all over Europe. The program in Bulgaria could not avoid outside influences that would come through

international organizations functioning in a relevant sphere and through the help offered by Bulgarian specialists in rural economy, who knew how to apply specific scientific models (Angelova 2008: 81-85). In the "Model Village" Project or, at least in its earlier version, some elements borrowed from the practices of the American Home Bureaus are to be noted (Mocheva 1941: 11-20; Mocheva 1941: 155). And this "borrowing" was rather intentional and not accidental – the project draft had been elaborated together with experts from the Ministry of Agriculture (who had been given the opportunity to specialize for a couple of months in the USA prior to drafting the project) and representatives of the American Near East Foundation in Bulgaria (Angelova 2005: 112-125). In 1935, an agreement between the Ministry of Interior and Public Health and the American Near East Foundation had already been concluded. This agreement emphasized the experimental economic and healthcare activities to be carried out in a couple of villages, which would later lay the foundations of the "Model Village" Program¹⁰. The Foundation was paying much attention to the sanitary centers in the villages, including the "model" ones. The program of the Near East Foundation for Bulgaria called the public's attention also to activities aiming at organizing model medical centers (both in urban and in rural areas) that would serve as practice centers for those doctors who were studying at the Foundation sanitary schools¹¹.

In the late 1930s and the early 1940s the "Musterdorf" German Plan came to influence the "Model Village" Project and, as a result, experts had already been sent to Berlin (mainly) to gain experience mainly (Petev 1943: 66-78; Uzunov 1941: 183-188; Vitanov 1941: 21-32). But the coincidences here are limited to the project names only. From a functional perspective, the German move-



Fig 1. General uplift demonstration in the rural community of Divlia, 1938. Summer kindergarten – Bulgarian central state archive, 3k, 15, 241.

ment prioritized primarily improvements in the technical parameters of the agricultural sector. As regards the "Model Village" Project, the emphasis was laid mostly on hygiene. That is why it was the women living in the rural areas (and especially the young women) who were the main target client in this project that sought to introduce changes mainly in the domestic sphere ("the lifestyle in villages"). Besides, the Bulgarian version was, to some degree, free from the totally standardizing zest of the "Musterdorf". The Bulgarian "public" agronomists would often share ideas and experience with their Romanian colleagues, who had ambitiously named their project "Cultural Hearths" (Todorova-Yoncheva 1943: 92-94; Gusti 1940: 3-18). What the two projects had in common was that they both aimed at mastering the strengths of the intellectuals living in the rural areas (civil workers, teachers, priests, etc.), as well as of the regular village population in order for the "social reforms", as provided by the Romanian state policy, to be put into practice.

In the process of elaborating the modernization strategies in regards to the Bulgarian village, the experience of the Italian "allowances" (Hadzhiev 1942: 13-20) and the 1928 Czechoslovak program "Concerns for a healthy village" (Burdzhova 1936: 172-176) were also taken into consideration.

It seems that what the experts cared most about was the implementation of the issues

10) Scientific archive – Bulgarian Scientific Academy, f. 178k, op. 1, a.u. 85, l. 1-9 – Private archives of Yanaki Mollov (1884 – 1948).

11) Central State Archive, f. 372k, op. 1, a.u. 582, p. 42-44.



Fig 2. General uplift demonstration in the rural community of Divlia, 1938. Examination of babies at the Child Welfare Station – Bulgarian central state archive, 3k, 15, 241.

concerning public health and hygiene. Thus, the important human side of the historical changes was introduced, for it is exactly the change inside the individual which precedes all other changes to follow on a major scale (Dimitrov 1941). Some might view this as “a policy of trivial facts” which, however, is deeply connected with the anticipation of an impending change.

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Conclusion

Before the program was terminated, the experts that had been involved in it still managed to put into practice some of their main ideas. Despite the fact that modern equipment for land cultivation was hardly within the means of the Bulgarian peasant’s pocket at that time and one could hardly afford to

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provide one’s dwelling with everything necessary for a “modern hygienic home”, more and more people got informed about the existence of such possibilities, and were, to some extent, ready to use them, for they were able to see that they were actually effective (Birnikov 1942). This happens to be one of the biggest accomplishments of the “Model Village” Project and also one of the most important changes of the “peasant’s” attitude towards the world. Even though a considerable part of the peasants did not have the possibility to put into practice the recommended innovations, the project still offered them the chance to obtain information about those reforms; the project literally put them up on display in a rather standardized form – in model villages and households. In this sense, something that can be described through an ingenious definition of modernization as “a revolution of growing expectation” actually took place (Roth 1998: 226-227).

The modern norms, as offered by the “Model Village” project, were gradually turning into “normal” ones for many young people living in villages, and for the members of the youngest generation, those norms had become the only behaviouristic model they would follow. So, as a result of the ever-evolving dimensions of the “rise of the village” programs, the Bulgarian peasants found themselves deeply involved in such projects that were taking place at that time in other parts of the world as well.

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