

Title VIII Grant Summer 2017 Final Report

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Making Sense of Fascism: the Evolution of Soviet Perceptions of the Far Right in Greece and Bulgaria (1920-1939)

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Research Abstract: In the summer 2017, I concentrated on how the agents of the Soviet government and of the Communist International made sense of the links between Russian émigrés and the local far-right movements in Greece and Bulgaria as fascism was rising first in Italy and then in the rest of Europe (1920-1939). Former servicemen and refugees appeared as the most likely groups to be attracted to fascist organizations because of their advocacy of paramilitary violence, revisionist foreign policy, active state intervention into economy and social welfare. Communist leaders developed a range of policies to undermine burgeoning fascist organizations in the Balkans – encouraging repatriation of refugees, orchestrating smear campaigns in local newspapers, inducing host governments to close them, and even sponsoring armed uprisings to overthrow unfriendly governments.

Research Goals: In the summer of 2017, one of my goals was to contribute to the continuing scholarly debate on the origins and sociopolitical nature of fascism. The term itself remains elusive. The students of fascism are still haunted by the influential definition of that complex phenomenon coined in 1935 by Georgi Dimitrov, the Bulgarian-born chairman of the Moscow-

based Communist International - “the open terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinistic and most imperialist elements of finance capital”¹ But in fifteen preceding years there must have been many attempts to understand the new phenomenon of fascism that as its primary targets the Communists could not ignore. Thus, another goal was to trace early reactions among Soviet and Balkan Communists to the echoes of Italian fascism in Greece and Bulgaria.

Furthermore, the summer 2017 project is part of my new book research tentatively titled “Unorthodox Fascism: Religion and Race in the Far Right in Russia, Greece, and Bulgaria (1905-1939).” There is no comparative investigation of the rise of fascism in Christian Orthodox lands. But I am proposing to go beyond simple comparison of the relative weight of religious and racist elements in those three countries that had been defeated in the First World War and subsequent conflicts. I am going to examine the far right movements not in isolation but integrating all three national cases into one chronological narrative. I will focus on how Russian, Greek, and Bulgarian extreme rightwing activists made sense of their shared religion and communicated with or about each other. As such, my project is in line with the cutting edge research agenda in the study of fascism stressing “mutual or multilateral influences among fascist ideologies, movements, and regimes at regional and European level.”² The links between Russian émigrés in Weimar Germany and the rise of National Socialism are well established but there is no study of their contribution to Balkan fascism.³

¹ Georgii Dimitrov, “The Fascist Offensive and the Tasks of the Communist International in the Struggle of the Working Against Fascism,” (1935) https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/dimitrov/works/1935/08_02.htm

² Iordachi, Constantin, “Fascism in Interwar East Central and South Eastern Europe: Toward a New Transnational Research Agenda, *East Central Europe*, 37 (2010): 195

³ Kellogg, Michael, *The Russian Roots of Nazism: White Émigrés and the Making of National Socialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005)

In connection with my overall research agenda, my summer 2017 activities aimed to collect materials in the Russian archives and libraries to set the stage for my exploration of relevant sources in Bulgaria and Greece.

Research Activities: My research has been very productive in terms of achieving my goals but as usual there were some speed bumps that my colleagues should be aware of.

In view of my family situation, my home institution allowed me to spend the spring semester of 2017 in Moscow teaching my regular classes online for my Oklahoma students. Since I arrived in Moscow in December 2016, I was able to start working on my research project in January following the winter holidays instead of May 8 as originally proposed in my Title VIII application. I spent most of my time studying the reports of Soviet diplomats and the Comintern papers held respectively at the Russian Foreign Policy Archive (AVPR) and the Russian Archive of Political and Social History (RGASPI).

The first institution is not as user-friendly as the other one – luckily, I tried to get to AVPR last summer but could not since they usually take one month to process applications from researchers. However, the permission they granted me the previous summer was good for one year. Other grantees may want to keep in mind this processing time. It is best to apply by mail from the US several weeks prior to coming to Moscow indicating one’s research topic with clear chronological boundaries. The staff uses that information to select documents for investigators without giving them access to the catalogues (*opisi*). Unlike other archives, AVPR is extremely concerned about providing any classified data especially to foreign-based academics.

The other archive (RGASPI) grants immediate access to qualified researchers with such letters of introduction from their home institutions (or their partnering universities in Russia).

The only problem that I encountered at RGASPI was the disconnect between its various offices which can also lead to a time waste. Specifically, the reading room staff members don't know which archival sources were scanned and posted online. For example, they accepted my request for several documents from the Balkan Secretariat of the Comintern (collection (*fond*) 495, catalogue (*opis*) 69) and told me that the requested materials would be available two days later (the usual waiting time). When I came back, they said that those materials had been scanned a while ago and should be studied on the computers in the reading room. When I asked whether they were available online, they said no. For a couple of weeks, I came to RGASPI to read those materials on the computer screen. Then I began exploring their website hoping to merely find digitized descriptions of archival collections, and, lo and behold, I came across a treasure trove of the original Comintern documents posted by their digitization team (<http://sovdoc.rusarchives.ru/#tematicchilds&rootId=95278>). Now I could order other undigitized materials which saved me a lot of time. Other scholars affiliated with the American Councils should spend some time studying Russian archives' digital resources to prioritize what they should see during work hours, what from their home computer and what to access later in the US.

One less well-known resource I discovered in the winter was the extension of the State Historical Public Library far from its main location in the city center but near the Botanicheskii Sad metro station (officially known as the Center for Sociopolitical History). Before the fall of the Soviet Union, that branch had been in fact the library of the Marxism-Leninism Institute and previously of the Comintern itself before the latter's closure in 1943. It has the newspapers of the

Bulgarian and the Greek Communist Parties not found anywhere else in Moscow –

Rabotnicheski Vestnik and *Rhizospastes*.

To complement the reports of Communist representatives, I also examined the papers of various Russian émigré organizations in interwar Greece and Bulgaria held at the main Russian archive (GARF). Those materials had been brought to the Soviet Union when the Red Army advanced into Eastern Europe in pursuit of Nazi German and other Axis armies in 1944-1945. Because of the vehemently anti-Communist nature, they were practically unavailable to Soviet, not to speak of Western historians until the collapse of the Soviet Union. The catalogue descriptions (opisi) made between 1945 and 1991 still speak volumes about how the Soviet authorities perceived those refugee groups. The most common label is ‘White Émigré Fascist organization’ – some of them indeed proudly displayed fascist names and symbols as in the attached image of the All-Russian Fascist Party program (based in Manchuria with small branches in Europe).

After 1991, GARF opened those collections to all qualified academics and has recently completed the gargantuan task of digitizing and posting on its website all catalogues (enabling the search function too). Sadly, very few original documents have been digitized and they are accessible only within the GARF intranet. Despite its huge size and many offices, GARF is definitely the most user-friendly Russian archive. The requests are processed in two days, however, the unbound files (with loose pages) are not generally delivered to the main reading room open 8 hours a day. They need to be studied in a small office adjacent to the storage area containing the papers of the Russian anti-Communist organizations under the watchful eyes of its staff. They have only four desks and limited working hours (10 to 3 Monday through Thursday).

I have benefited most from the following collections there – the Soviet Red Cross (9501-5-44), the Council of Russian Archbishops in Exile (R6343-1-1), the All-Russian Servicemen Union in Bulgaria (R9116-1-1-60), the Central Office of the All-Russian Servicemen Union (R5825-1-1-5), the Correspondence of the Chief Chaplain (*Protopresviter*) of the Russian Army and Navy (R1486-1-24-55), the diary of General Alexis von Lampe (R5853-1-3-7), the Provisional Church Administration in South Russia (R3696-2-5-11; R3696-1-5-20), “Various Émigré Organizations” (R9145-1-40-54).

Important Research Findings: Analyzing the development of fascism in the 1920s and the early 1930s, the Communist observers were surprisingly sensitive to the existing similarities and differences between the far-right groups in contrast to the later unflinching adherence to rigid formulas. On one hand, one could detect certain precedents to the orthodox definition coined by Georgii Dimitrov in 1935. For example, in 1930, the Central Committee of the Greek Communist Party lamented the “rapid process of fascization of the capitalist regime actively abetted by the policies of Prime-Minister Venizelos and by the collusion of all bourgeois parties.”⁴ Other Communist commentators would hesitate to see fascism in a competitive multi-party system where even the Communists were allowed to legally operate as a mass party and openly publish their newspapers, “What we have in Greece is not fascism but the same developments taking place in the USA and Germany that nobody calls fascism.”⁵

Official Communist publications also reflected this diversity – for some, the military dictatorship of General Pangalos in 1925-1926 was clearly “reactionary” but not fascist - the Greek dictator “was vainly trying to play a fascist role” because “the circumstances called for

⁴ RGASPI, 495-173-42, page 98, 22 November 1930

⁵ Ibid., 495-173-48, page 131, I. Sofianopoulos to Niko (Kole), Athens, 16 December 1931

him to play the part not of Mussolini but of Napoleon III.”⁶ Even the classic fascist regime in Italy went through several stages – at first it had not relied on terror, had not dissolved trade unions, or disbanded the Communist Party.⁷

In addition, Communist analysts paid close attention to the social composition of fascist groups in the Balkans. Destitute refugees were seen as the main recruiting pool for fascist organization in Greece. Over 1.2 million had been expelled from Asia Minor as a result of the Greco-Turkish War of 1920-1922.⁸ Most of them used to own small farms and shops in Anatolia and the Aegean coast and lacked any “class consciousness” on arrival in Greek society. Supported by mainstream bourgeois parties, the fascists found it easy to distract those refugees from demanding a better life in Greece to expecting to return home as a result of a new victorious war with Turkey.⁹

The Communist commentators noted with surprise and alarm that fascism could appeal not just to middle-class “shopkeepers” but to any social group including intellectuals, peasants, and industrial workers. Thus, the Bulgarian comrades admitted overlooking fascist appeal to “working class youth” via local athletic organizations under the umbrella of the National Sports Federation.¹⁰ Another leading Bulgarian Communist warned that “the fascist danger in the Balkans severely limited our freedom to maneuver as far as trade unions were concerned.”¹¹ In

⁶ Ibid., 495-173-15, page 56, “The Reaction in Greece”, *Bulletin Communiste* (the Bulletin of the Central Committee of the French Communist Party), April 1926

⁷⁷ Ibid., 495-69-18, page 26, Comrade Rval’s speech at 11-19 sessions of the Balkan Secretariat, May-June 1929

⁸ RGASPI, 509-1-69a, page 146, G.D. “La Federation Balcanique et le conflit Greco-Turc,” November-December 1925

⁹ RGASPI, 509-1-69, page 12, ‘Mikhail’, code name of the Comintern representative in Greece, 9 January 1925

¹⁰ RGASPI, 495-69-62, page 85, Stoichev’s speech at the congress of the Balkan Secretariat, 2 October 1934

¹¹ RGASPI, 509-1-82, page 3, V. Kolarov to the Executive Committee of the Comintern, 10 March 1926

Greece, fascists aimed to lead the unemployed – they even organized several demonstrations to demand better social security.¹²

One feature consistently stressed in their analysis was paramilitary violence. Thus, Ivan Mikhailov's section of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization was always referred to as fascist because its armed groups used the rhetoric of national self-determination and social justice to attract and intimidate ethnically Bulgarian refugees from Greek and Serbian Macedonia into supporting that group. The Mikhailovites not only extorted the meager savings from their kinsmen but also served as privileged partners of corrupt local Bulgarian authorities and as thugs in anti-opposition crackdowns orchestrated by the central government.¹³

Furthermore, Balkan Communists reported on the activities of Russian émigrés and their connections to local governments, for example, the departure of the 200-man strong group under General (Ataman) Dimitrin, in charge of the Russian refugee camp in Piraeus, from Greece to Romania transported on a Greek boat and armed with Greek weapons.¹⁴

In addition to monitoring, the Soviets used diplomatic channels to pressure Balkan governments to close Russian émigré organizations. Lenin's Bolshevik regime was the first to recognize and support Mustafa Kemal as Turkey's legitimate leader when he rebelled against the Sultan's government in Constantinople widely seen as a puppet of the victorious Entente powers. The Soviets sent funds and arms to enable Ankara to defeat the Greek army occupying much of Western Turkey in 1920-1922.¹⁵ The Turkish press acknowledged a generous Soviet grant of

¹² RGASPI, 495-69-36, page 1, Comrade Alexis at the congress of the Balkan Secretariat, 1 January 1931

¹³ RGASPI, 509-1-159, pages 127-142, letters to the National-Revolutionary Committee, July 1932

¹⁴ RGASPI, 495-173-5, p. 1, I. Kordatos in the Greek Communist Party International Information Bureau, 25 April 1922

¹⁵ AVPR, 132-7-68-86, page 196, Information Bulletin of the Soviet embassy in Ankara, issue 3, 15-22 April 1922

30,000 gold rubles in April 1921 to help rebuild the areas liberated from Greek occupation.¹⁶

When Mustafa Kemal's movement took control of Constantinople, it transferred to the Soviets all property of the Russian imperial government that had sheltered numerous Russian anti-Communist groups.¹⁷

Even before this persecution and expulsions set in, most Russian émigrés had moved from war- and poverty-stricken Turkey. Over 50,000 troops evacuated from the last White Russian stronghold in Crimea spent only the winter of 1920 in various camps around Gallipoli when England and France sponsored their relocation to Yugoslavia and Bulgaria. Many Russian civilian refugees followed them although many more made their way to more prosperous areas of Western Europe. Moscow immediately put pressure on the Bulgarian cabinet dominated by the leftwing Agrarian Party to allow the Soviet Red Cross mission into Bulgaria to agitate among Russian émigrés for their return home. Working closely with the Bulgarian Communists, the Soviets also started a smear campaign in the Bulgarian press publishing forged documents implicating top Russian émigré officers in a planned coup to replace the Agrarians with a friendlier government. In the spring and summer of 1923, most of them were arrested and deported. This is when the real coup was launched on 9 June 1923 by Bulgarian rightwing politicians and officers supported by the remaining White Russian leadership. The new Bulgarian government cracked down on Soviet representatives.¹⁸ To overthrow this 'fascist' regime, the Bulgarian Communists organized an uprising in September 1923 on the orders from Moscow. It was bloodily suppressed by government troops, veteran organizations, armed

¹⁶ AVPR, 132-1-1-9a, page 27, April 1921

¹⁷ Ibid., page 85, November 1923

¹⁸¹⁸ GARF, 9501-5-44, A. Koretskii, "Doklad o polozhenii missii ROKK v Bolgarii so dnia perevorota 9 iunia po den' otiezda missii iz Bolgarii," 11 August 1923

Mikhailovite Macedonian refugees, and Russian émigré units in what appeared to be a coalition of fascist and counterrevolutionary forces.¹⁹ Such paramilitary groups colluding with the state apparatus were the usual suspects for Communist analysts. Still, there were cases of indiscriminate use of the term “fascism” such as labeling Social Democrats as “social-fascists.”²⁰

Policy Recommendations and Implications: Fascist movements developed in many failing democracies of interwar Europe and came to power in Italy, Germany, and Romania. Fascism had not perished with Mussolini and Hitler as Neo-Nazi groups resurfaced shortly after the Second World War. Capitalizing on economic recession and anti-immigrant feelings, they have become popular mass parties in France, Austria, and Holland. The most recent examples include the Ataka in Bulgaria²¹ and the Golden Dawn in Greece.²² Often compared to Hitler in the Western media,²³ Russia’s President Putin skillfully manipulates nationalism and religion to stay in power and to pursue aggressive foreign policy.

Thus, the study of the roots of fascism remains relevant not only from the viewpoint of the history of ideas but also from the perspective of political science and sociology. As such, policy analysts working for the US government should find it useful to understand the current social trends and the background of political decisions that may further destabilize much of Eastern Europe in the near future.

¹⁹ RGASPI, 509-1-18, page 184, Kolarov’s speech at the 6th session of the 6th conference of the Balkan Communist Federation, 10 November 1923

²⁰ RGASPI, 509-1-136, page 27, “Unemployment in the Balkans”, 12 February 1930

²¹ Taskin, Yuksel, “Europeanization and the Extreme Right in Bulgaria and Turkey: Unveiling Similarities Between Ataka Party and Red Apple Coalition,” *Southeastern Europe*, 35, 1 (Feb 2011): 95-119

²² Ellinas, Antonis, “Neo-Nazism in an Established Democracy: The Persistence of **Golden Dawn** in Greece,” *South European Society and Politics*, 20, 1 (March 2015): 1-20

²³ Nicks, Denver, “Clinton Backtracks on Putin Nazi Comparison,” *Time.com* (8 March 2014):1; Kamitschnig, Matthew, “The German Finance Minister Trips Over Hitler-Putin Comparison,” *Wall Street Journal (Online)*, (8 April 2014): 1

In the aftermath of the First World War, Communist functionaries and analysts in Moscow as well as on the ground in Greece and Bulgaria identified former servicemen and refugees as the most likely groups to be attracted to fascist organizations because of their advocacy of paramilitary violence, revisionist foreign policy, active state intervention into economy and social welfare. The same groups should also be monitored today where similar conditions have developed from the effects of the conflicts in former Yugoslavia, the Caucasus, Syria, and Eastern Ukraine.

In addition to data collection, Soviet and Comintern representatives developed a range of policies to undermine burgeoning fascist organizations in the Balkans – encouraging repatriation of refugees, orchestrating smear campaigns in local newspapers, inducing host governments to close them, and even sponsoring armed uprisings to overthrow fascist-friendly governments. The last option is more dangerous today than in interwar Europe since many of the so-called failed states are a product of overt or covert foreign intervention. But the other policies are more promising now than then given a variety of international bodies including the UN, World Bank, etc that would allow US policymakers to reverse dangerous local trends via a third party. New mass communication technologies also provide more opportunities to detect and defuse extremist groups than in the age of print media.

Co-Curricular Activities: I have met several scholars who have helped me familiarize myself with the new field I am entering with my second book project. One of them is Dr. Pavel Tribunsky, a leading scholar of Russian emigration in interwar Europe and America. Although he focuses on the liberal segments of Russian émigrés, he brought me up to date on the existing secondary literature on the subject. He has done research not just in Russia but also in various

American archives. He also introduced me to Dr. Konstantin Semenov whose research is closer to what I am exploring in my book project. Specifically, he concentrates on the Russian fascist émigrés during WWII. He gave me many research tips on specific archival collections including the one with the papers of the Russian Civil War veterans in interwar Bulgaria held in the State Archive of the Russian Federation (Moscow). Both Tribunsky and Semenov work at the main Russian emigration studies center – the Alexander Solzhenitsyn Russia Abroad House. I have also received advice from Dr. Martin Beisswinger, a German-born US-educated history professor at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow. He is preparing for publication his dissertation on Eurasianism, a minor interwar nationalist émigré movement enjoying a great revival since the 1990s. Martin alerted me to the Eurasianist influences among Russian Civil War veterans in the Balkans, specifically, in the Belgrade-based *Tsarskii Vestnik* newspaper.

Conclusions: Fascism developed as a reaction to the real or perceived danger of Communist revolutions in many European countries following the First World War. Although far from being objective, Soviet representatives paid close attention to their new sworn enemies. My summer 2017 project was based on the archives of the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs and of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in Moscow where I focused on the Soviet data about the links between the Russian émigrés and local far-right movements in the Balkans from 1920 to 1939. My findings demonstrate that Communist commentators had engaged in a nuanced analysis of fascism in the Balkans especially before Georgii Dimitrov's rigid definition of that phenomenon was adopted in 1935. As fascism's primary targets, local Communists emphasized paramilitary violence as the most distinct feature of the interwar far-right movements often with the connivance of local police. As good Marxists, Communist analysts focused on class and

expected bourgeois groups to be fascism's main social basis. That is why they were shocked to discover that in reality fascist organizations attracted even proletarians especially working class youth. Demobilized veterans and dispossessed refugees from Russia, Asia Minor, and Macedonia were even more likely to join fascist organizations in the aftermath of the First World War.

Plans for Future Research Agenda/Presentations and Publications:

After my research in Moscow in the summer of 2017, I will present its main findings and receive useful feedback at the annual convention of the Association of Slavic, Eastern European, and Eurasian Studies in November 2017 and 2018. Then, I will be working in Bulgarian archives in the spring and summer of 2018 - I have received a Fulbright grant to be able to do that. If time permits, I may be able to visit Greek archives during my stay in Bulgaria. When I finish collecting materials, I will start writing the book narrative chronologically organized into five chapters with the following working titles - "Russian and Balkan Reactions to the 1905 Revolution," "Russian and Balkan Responses to the Young Turk Revolution of 1908," "The Christian Orthodox Far Right and the Challenge of the Balkan Wars and the First World War (1912-1918)," "War Without End: the Russian Civil War, the Asia Minor Catastrophe, and the September Uprising in Bulgaria (1918-1923)," "The Politics of Revenge: Russian, Greek, and Bulgarian Refugees (1918-1939)." I intend to send the book proposal to the Religion and Global Politics Series of the Oxford University Press – the publisher of my first book. The topic should appeal to all academics interested in the emergence and spread of fascism (historians, political scientists, and sociologists). Non-academic audience will also be attracted to the book, which

examines the causes and effects of dramatic social and international conflicts of the early 20th century.

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