



British Diplomacy in Bulgaria During the Cold War

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Abstract

The article surveys the British diplomatic goals, activities and efforts in Bulgaria during the Cold war. It argues that the British embassy in Sofia seemed to focus not only on the country itself but to be more or less an instrument to a large degree in light of the British interests in the Balkan region and a wider geopolitical field (USSR, East Europe, Turkey). British diplomats always acted in the context of the prevailing Bulgarian proximity of Germany and Russia, and constant fear of Turkey. The mission was mainly interested in the Russian sphere of influence in Bulgaria, Muslim minority issues and regional developments on the Balkans.

KeyWords: Bulgaria, British Diplomacy, Bulgarian-British Relations, Russian Influence, East Europe, Balkans

Introduction

Bulgaria has a specific geographical location in Europe and on the Balkans - not far away from Russia, Central Europa, the Middle East, Caucasus and the shores of the Black sea; a border country between Europe and Asia and a major transport corridor. This geographical uniqueness and historical developments often put the country in the situation to act as an external border in different geopolitical configurations. The United Kingdom is one of the countries that has global interests and is a significant political player in Europe, a permanent member of the Security Council of the UN, the world biggest former colonial state, distinguished decision maker in NATO and the EU, a military and economical power, and a nuclear country. Bulgaria and the United Kingdom established diplomatic relations in 1879. Both countries have definitely experienced difficult times ever since. Bulgarian-British relations are a rarely explored topic in scientific literature.

The key subject of the present article is to explore in detail the work of the British embassy in Sofia. The main objective of the text is to argue that the British embassy in Sofia seemed to focus not only on the country itself but to be more or less an instrument to a large degree in light of the British interests in the Balkan region and a wider geopolitical field (USSR, Eastern Europe). Given the lapse of time, its importance has changed concerning the British agenda in the region. Success on two main issues would result in accomplishing this goal. At first it was of utmost significance to define the British major interest in Bulgaria and subsequently to foster and develop the multifarious nature of that interest in the course of

time. The research timeframe spans from the beginning of the Bulgarian communist leader Todor Zhivkov's 33-year rule in 1956 (the destalinization process) until his resignation, which marked the fall of the Communist regime in 1989.

Considering the focus of the text, the main method of analysis is based on archives research, interviews, memoirs and declassified cables of British diplomats. In order to develop the theme in detail, the use of primary sources such as the archives of the "*The British Diplomatic Oral History Programme*" ("BDOHP")¹ as well as official documents from the Bulgarian State archive, the archive of the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign affairs and some materials about the work and activities of the Secret services of both countries, were of great significance. It is important to point out that in the memoir sources prevails the subjective factor. For instance, while working with documents one could not find signs of weakness. This peculiarity has been taken into consideration. Interpretations and confusions were of frequent occurrence in the memoir literature and the distance of time often changes one's perspective. The point to use such sources is partly to overcome the lack of transparent information from free media, which is a common feature for all the Communist regimes. The leading objective for use of some memoirs is to distinguish the general trends and evaluations, which give additional legitimacy to the text. As an example of memoir misunderstandings, some can be found in parts of the book "Diplomatic Anecdote" by Sir Roger Carrick.² (Carrick, 2012:11)

Diplomatic service is restricted—every action or statement should be coordinated with the FCO and every diplomat is obliged to follow unquestionably the instructions from the headquarters. This fact stresses the difference in statements and reflections of acting versus retired diplomats. Interviews, memoirs and statements of retired officers are much more sincere, full of unpleasant truths and facts, passed over in silence during their active diplomatic service.

For analysis reasons, it is necessary that one important clarification should be made. British diplomats maintained official relations with the Bulgarian government during the whole period. However, it was the party leadership of the Bulgarian Communist Party, which actually governed the country – the government only acting as an absolutely subordinate executive body, which unconditionally followed the party's orders. During this period British diplomats had very limited access to the country's policy decision makers, except for official and protocol events, for example cocktail parties hosted for national holidays (Logan. 2002:91). At that time they had little access to the state media, which were only made available for Eastern European diplomats, who were representatives of the allied countries from the Warsaw pact.

Bulgarian-British relations before the fall of the Iron Curtain

Bulgaria has never been Britain's main foreign policy priority as it is stressed in numerous statements of British diplomats, researchers and politicians. The two states have been rivals for long periods during the XX-th century. As British Ambassador in Sofia Roger Short (1994-1998) puts it, „*The relations between Bulgaria and Great Britain have not been good in the course of an on-going tradition*“.³ Bulgaria has maintained close relations mainly with Germany and the Soviet Union. The country was Germany's ally in the First and Second World Wars and after the partition of Europe in 1945, it became one of the states

¹ BDOHP provides research material for the study of British diplomatic history. Malcolm McBain established it in 1995, with the approval and co-operation of FCO. <http://www.chu.cam.ac.uk/archives/collections/BDOHP/>

² British diplomat known with his sympathy toward Bulgaria. Curiously describing standing passengers, pigs, fluttering hens and bleating goats on the passenger jet from Sofia to Burgas which is indeed a very nice and colorful story, but nonetheless a fictional one.

³ Short, Roger, "Filosofiatà dava moralni korektivi na choveka", Ivan Kalchev, *Filosofski vestnik*, 6, 1995, p. 12.

behind the Iron curtain. An impressive part of the Bulgarian society, and of course, political elite, is divided on the base of their geopolitical preferences - Russophiles and Germanophiles. For an averaged-size country located in a turbulent and complex region, finding a big partner and protector was a very strong idea, which often became an obsession. The Russophilic mood dated back to the beginning of the XIX Century when the hopes of the majority of Bulgarians for liberation from the rule of the Ottoman Empire were directed to the Russian tsars. In the same period, London and Istanbul were close allies. However, the events leading to Bulgarian independence, the insurgency against the Ottoman rule was sanctified prominently by the liberal government of William Gladstone. The British prime-minister published "*Bulgarian horrors and the question of the East*" which depicted Bulgaria and the Bulgarians as true victims, shaping the Western public opinion (Gladstone 1876). A few British journalists had a special role in this process - Archibald Forbes (Forbes 1894), Januarius Aloysius MacGahan, an American who was at that time a correspondent of the British newspaper "*Daily News*" and especially the Balkan correspondent of "*The Times*" - James Bouchier, who is treated as a national hero in Bulgaria.⁴ Bulgarians have never forgotten their support at the very inception of their state and nationhood. There are still a lot of street names and memorials of these men in Bulgaria. The British embassy has commemorated their memory ever since. After the Congress of Berlin (which dramatically divided the territories populated with Bulgarians with an active British consent in 1879), Bulgaria started to turn its hopes and aspirations for territorial unification mainly toward Germany. German and Austro-Hungarian influence came mainly through the Bulgarian ruling dynasty (Saxe-Coburg-Gotha), the Danube trade route, and cultural, educational and economic ties. The pro-German and pro-Russian groups coexisted as major ones without leaving much room for the rest. Although until 1945, there were a lot of Bulgarian politicians, businessmen and public figures who were defined as Anglophiles (Mitakov 1944).⁵

It should be underlined that the personality of Winston Churchill still has a great impact on Bulgarian-British relations. For many ordinary Bulgarians and scientists he was a *Bulgarian-hater*, who had had a strong role in the bombardment of the country and he was to blame for the cast of Bulgaria in the Soviet sphere of influence after the war. "*I had never felt that our relations with Rumania and Bulgaria in the past called for any special sacrifice from us*" (Winston Churchill:208).

Sofia could not accomplish its lobby presence in the British foreign policy circles as is the case for instance with the Arab countries (so called Camel Corps). There are isolated examples of diplomats who had a special attitude toward Bulgaria like Sir Steven Runciman (a prominent British historian), or William Harpham.

The Bulgarian mentality

Diplomats all the time cogitated upon the surrounding Bulgarian environment and its people. It is in the very foundation of their work. This includes the observations on the mentality and main features of the national character. Thus, British diplomats in Bulgaria during the communist period were no exceptions of the rule. Their attitude toward Bulgarians was rather positive except for some degree of criticism. They shared interesting observations about the Bulgarian mentality - *a sturdy, orderly, amiable and usually friendly people, albeit with a peasant caution, and a peasant suspiciousness of strangers* (Crawley, 1967:310). Crawley noted that what struck him the most, and that had to be kept in mind when dealing with Bulgarians, was the exceeding shyness and inferiority complex they generally demonstrated. Diplomats made a lot of comparisons between different nations. In that sense most common were the

⁴ He was of Irish decent. After him are named: Boucher Peak in Rila Mountain (where he was buried), James Boucher Boulevard and James Boucher Metro Station in Sofia, and even a Boucher Cove on Smith Island in the South Shetland Islands near the Bulgarian base in Antarctica and many others.

⁵ G.M.Dimitrov, Stoycho Moshanov, K.Muraviev, Cviatko Boboshevski and many others.

regional ones and especially those between the people in Eastern Europe (Cluton, 1961:88-91). „*We could say that a Bulgarian is phlegmatic, closer to the Czech, than to the inflammable Pole or Hungarian*” (Speaight, 1958:41). Most of the cables mentioned that the common Bulgarian is very passive, lethargic, melancholic (Lincoln, 1963:153). It is worth mentioning Crawley’s maxim - *if one wanted to win a war it was wise first to see which side the Bulgarians took and then to join the opposite* (Crawley, 1967:310). In addition, Carrick believed that Bulgaria had not made strategically right decisions for the past 800 years. Sir Derek Thomas, a secretary of the British embassy in Sofia in the 1960’s remarked on the Bulgarian reaction to power change in the Soviet Communist leadership (Khrushchev with Brezhnev) “*The Bulgarians were past masters at what is now called spin: what was accepted yesterday is history now*”. (Thomas, 2002:17) Overall assessments were that Bulgarians like the British have a pragmatic approach to life.

The British diplomacy during the Cold War

During the Cold War Bulgaria was an external border of the Soviet Block, a country surrounded by the problematic states for Moscow. Amongst the countries in the Balkan region, Yugoslavia courted by the two sides of the ‘Iron curtain’, served as a balancing factor between the two political systems. Turkey and Greece, on the other hand, were NATO members and traditional British allies. Romanian dictator, Nicolae Ceausescu initially demonstrated independence from the Soviets, which appealed to the West and suddenly made Romania interesting for the British foreign policy. He was the only Eastern European leader who opposed the invasion of Warsaw Pact troops in Czechoslovakia in 1968. Queen Elizabeth II received Ceausescu and his wife at Buckingham Palace (1978). No other Eastern European communist leader had had such an honor until then. Relations with Romania were much closer compared to Bulgaria (Sitariu 2013). Albania was neutral and almost landlocked with only 16 embassies operating on its territory. Bulgarian embassy there served as a link between the regime of Enver Hoxha and the Soviet leadership, since the two countries didn’t maintain diplomatic relations.

Analysis of the professional careers of the British ambassadors through the 1950-1980’s showed that during that period Bulgaria was a place where beginners, about-to-leave diplomats or those with insignificant careers were sent to serve. For example, the ambassadors in the 1980’s were diplomats coming from the Middle East and African assignments, nearing their age of retirement. They had no specific knowledge about the country or the region and did not make their mark in the Foreign Office. Ambassador William Harpham (1964-1966) was the only diplomat celebrated by the Bulgarian authorities during the Cold war. He was decorated twice with the order “Madarski Konnik” (Madara Horseman) and the highest Bulgarian state order “Stara Planina” (The Old Mountain). A gesture of a great significance, considering the communist regime period. His efforts to deepen bilateral relations continued throughout his entire life (1906-1999).

Amongst British diplomats, the post in Sofia during Communism was considered likewise an easy one, without particularly too much to do. The only challenge was to serve in a country behind the curtain. (Crawley, 2012:309). Although during the Cold War a diplomatic assignment to Sofia was believed to be a better option than its neighboring Bucharest or Tirana. (Thomas, 2002:17; Cloake, 2013: 51) The communist party left the embassy staff to fairly option to travel freely, to entertain, and to maintain a luxury lifestyle.⁶ We should, however, point out that free travelling and contacts were limited within certain frames and areas. Western diplomats were not entitled to visit the country’s border zones without special permission which continued to be the case until 1992.⁷ There was not any hostility shown by the general population nor any clear danger for the diplomats’ lives. Rare demonstrations, organized by the

⁶ A lot of materials for that are preserved in Bulgarian State Archive

⁷ Archive of MFA, opis 49-2, a.e.115

Communist party in front of the embassy building against British imperialism, especially during the 1950-1960, were more theatrical events in the party schedule, than a real feeling or some threat. According to the First secretary in Sofia Derek Thomas (1964), the key Foreign Office instruction to the British embassy was to avoid getting into trouble and deliver no good information about Bulgaria - *end of the story*. (Thomas, 2002:20) The staff occasionally produced diplomatic notes (protest letters), sometimes more than one for the same occasion – for example, against offensive photographs of PM Margaret Thatcher exhibited in front of the Libyan embassy.⁸

The Cold War atmosphere put great limitations on the operational possibilities of each diplomatic mission seen as unfriendly. The British legation and later embassy (from 1964) operated in some kind of *social fog* – not much room for maneuvering, lack of information, restricted access to different social groups and institutions, state-controlled media, limited contacts with locals. A first secretary of the embassy - S. Martin asked at an official meeting who it was in Bulgaria that formulated and implemented foreign policy - the Central committee of the Bulgarian Communist party or the Government and what their relations were.⁹ The embassy staff suffered from a lack of reliable information about the political situation of the country (Lincoln, 1960: 75). They had difficulties to understand the dynamics of the relations in the ruling bodies. Contacts with the decision makers in Bulgaria, especially in the 1950-1970, were quite limited. Even later on British diplomats had difficulties attending political press conferences, which was not a problem for press-officers from the embassies of the allied countries, as it was mentioned in notes from the British embassy.¹⁰

The British used to see Bulgaria as the closest Russian satellite: „*Foreign Office regarded Bulgaria as the most slavish of the satellites...*” (Thomas, 2002:19); “*Bulgaria... was the blueprint for what the Soviet Union would like to have established outside its borders*” (Bache, 2000:5); „*Bulgarian loyalty to the USSR was apparently total...*” (Carrick, 2012:2); “*most reliable ally*” (Lambert 1960: 15). Some of the reasons for such opinions were the facts that there were no revolts (such as in Czechoslovakia and Hungary), permanent internal tension (as in East Berlin and Poland), or mutual coldness (Moscow-Bucharest). At the same time Derek Thomas found it worth sharing an interesting and rare view about the Bulgarian-Russian relations “*In some sense, they feel discreetly, historically slightly superior to the Russians*. (Thomas 2002:20); Ambassador Cloake makes similar observations. (Cloake, 2013:48)

That closeness and trust between Sofia and Moscow determined a specific British interest towards Bulgaria. Analyses of the Russian influence over the country were among the main priorities of British diplomacy. The reason to have a British embassy in Sofia during the communist period was to keep a *listening post* (Bache, 2000:6); *watching post* (Longworth, 2006:18); *important source of information for the Southwest border zone of the Soviet Empire*. (Speaight, 1958:43)

Before the election of Mikhail Gorbachov as a party leader, Soviet leaders did not bother about Bulgaria at all. It was not until the death of Leonid Brezhnev (1982), who had very close relations with the aging Zhivkov, that the country became a place of growing interest for British foreign policy (Longworth, 2006:20) No wonder British diplomats expected some changes. The arrival of a relatively young leader in Moscow was a sign in that direction. There was a period of ease in relations but the strong disagreement about Afghanistan went on to stay. In the 1980's East-West relations within the context of the Cold War and the ties with the Soviet Union remained the main topics of reporting to the Foreign and

⁸ British embassy Sofia, Note Number 26 /7.07.1986 and 29/4.08.1986 – Archive of the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign affairs / Delo № 8, sp. 43-17, a.e. 145, signatura 17 (13) 19, 1986.

⁹ Memorandum from a meeting between S.W. Martin and A. Kolcev, chief of department IV of MFA (9.02.1970), State agency “Archives”, Archive of the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign affairs, 1477, S: I-100-13-1-7, O: 69871, p. 97.

¹⁰ British embassy Sofia, Note Number 12 / 2.04.1986 – Archive of the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign affairs / Delo № 8, sp. 43-17, a.e. 139, S: 17 (13) 12, 1986.

Commonwealth Office (FCO) from Sofia. The internal policy of Bulgaria was not of great concern to London. It was seen just as a part of the wider process that had started in Eastern Europe - of rudiments of democratization.

The major task of the embassy was to evaluate the Soviet influence in Bulgaria, the relations between the two communist parties and the military and economic cooperation. The main priority in achieving that goal was to gather information about the Russian military equipment, scientific developments trade and economic production, strategic plans, dynamics in party leadership, Russian experts in Bulgarian institutions, etc.. As ambassador Anthony Lincoln wrote in his first cable from Sofia (1960): "... *We want to see a weakening of the Russian connection*".(Lincoln, 1960:79)

At a first glance, the British diplomats considered Bulgarian foreign policy as absolutely subordinate to Russian interests. But it was only a first glance. This important nuance can be observed in some British diplomats' memoirs. Bulgaria's closeness to the Soviets and trust in the Russians allowed the Bulgarian political leadership to be relatively independent from Moscow. The fact that there were no Soviet troops stationed on Bulgarian land was quite indicative. Other Eastern European countries did not enjoy this degree of freedom. The Soviet Union could afford to „*cut slack*“ with regards to Bulgaria but not with Hungary and Czechoslovakia, let alone Eastern Germany. (Longworth, 2006: 20) Thus, for instance, despite the highly centralized model of economic planning practiced in the Eastern block countries, the British diplomats noticed some forms of economic autonomy as far as Bulgaria was concerned. The national air carrier "Balkan" for example, as well as wine producers were able to retain some of their profits for reinvestment and wage incentives of their employees. Trade exchange between Bulgaria and Britain was rather modest. The UK was mainly interested in the importation of Bulgarian agricultural produce.

Except for the main focus of interest (the Soviet Union), some other significant issues attracted the attention of the FCO in Bulgaria. British diplomats exercised a constant watch on the Orthodox Church, intellectual circles and the youth - dissatisfaction among the mentioned social groups could be a sign for a social upheaval. The regime managed to exercise control over the rare contacts of British diplomats with the locals. (Logan, 2002:22; Longworth, 2006: 18-20) The embassy struggled all the time to establish relations with Bulgarians from all walks of life.

They kept a close eye on the Bulgarian Orthodox church as a potential center of discontent with the regime. The public atheism of the Communist rule could be a precondition for such an assumption from British side. Most probably, diplomats made a parallel with the role of the Catholic Church, for example in Poland. The embassy wanted to see the Church as an opposition and it was not taking into account that during the whole course of Bulgarian history it was subordinated to the secular authority and had a special never-ending loyalty to the government body. Exactly the opposite model of Catholicism. Nevertheless, there were cables that stressed the presence of some contacts between the embassy and the Patriarchate. (Speaight, 1957: 8) The rare cases of religious problems came from some insignificant groups of Protestants, but they were handled hard and severe by the regime (leaders were sent to prison or labor camps in the 1950's). The embassy protested in some of the cases but without any significant effect. An expression of the youth revolt was listening to western music, wearing long hair and western clothing. Intellectuals who expressed disagreement with the regime made it in private conversations with the staff of the embassy. The only existing Trade Union was absolutely subordinate to the Communist party. There were no apparent opposition groups that British diplomats could work with in order to support any significant change. John Cloak, ambassador to Bulgaria 1976-80, said: "*There was absolutely no sign of any organized dissent at all*" (Cloake, 2013:54)

The embassy showed special interest in the ties between Bulgaria and some countries from the Third world, some of which were former British colonies. Bulgaria maintained close relations with several Middle East and North African countries, especially Iraq and Syria, and later with the regime of Colonel

Kaddafi in Libya. That economic, technical, political and military cooperation attracted the attention of British diplomacy. Bulgarians were among the biggest experts on Islam issues in the former Soviet Bloc and especially on Turkey. Bulgarian secret services developed huge intelligence networks in Muslim countries. Even the Soviet authorities tends to seek the advice of their Bulgarian counterparts in regards to their Muslim policies.¹¹ Highly sought amongst the Eastern Block are also the evaluations of the Bulgarian secret services, which operate in Northern Africa and the Far East. We could add to the colonial topic an interesting stroke - the certain degree of envy among British diplomats for the Soviet impact on Bulgaria and the respective loss of the UK imperial influence. In a secret cable, Ambassador Crowley drew parallels between the British Empire and the modern Soviet empire, whose officers were looked after by attentive Bulgarians. Monuments dedicated to the Russians were being built in the country while monuments for the British in the former colonies were being demolished (Crowley, 1967: 309,311-312). The empire had lost its last big colony (India) less than twenty years ago. In the memoirs of British foreign secretary Sir Geoffrey Howe there are some interesting lines about his meeting with Bulgarian communist leader Zhivkov: *“You remember the way in which the British Empire worked, Sir Geoffrey – with the colonies serving as the markets in which you could dispose of all the surplus produce for which Britain herself had no need? Well, for Bulgaria, Russia has long served the same purpose as your colonies”*. (Howe, 1995: 439)

It is not a secret that Intelligence work was mostly provided under the cover of the diplomatic missions. During the Cold War that was almost a dogma. So each embassy of the enemy country was closely watched by counterespionage structures of the hosting state. The British embassy in Sofia was not an exception. All the sources of that time mentioned that the Bulgarian secret services, known as State Security, kept a constant watchful eye on the diplomats. There were many stories with confusing situations, observations and eavesdropping. Recently published declassified documents of the Bulgarian State Security confirmed authenticity of these stories (State Security 1962). It should be pointed out that the predominating view was that the Bulgarian authorities treated the British diplomats with respect – distantly watched and followed. Bulgarian State security was very strong, well organized and experienced. In Bulgaria there were not many defectors like, for example, Oleg Penkovsky, Anatoly Golitsyn, Oleg Gordievsky (USSR), Miloslav Kroca (Czechoslovakia), who worked with the British embassy in Moscow and Prague (Correra, 2011). Alleged involvement of the Bulgarian State Security Service in the murder of the Bulgarian dissident writer Georgi Markov, a BBC World Service journalist, poisoned with an umbrella-gun in London (1978) – put a shadow on bilateral relations. The embassy was preparing a visit of the Foreign secretary David Owen but the “Markov case” postponed the plans for several years. (Cloake, 2013:49) Meanwhile, Owen visited all the other Eastern European countries. The communist censorship did not allow the issue to become a topic in the Bulgarian society at that time nor a discussion topic with the British embassy. A possible involvement of the Bulgarian state in this issue has remained undetermined until present day. This question is still of a strong interest to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. The stigma of being a Russian satellite shared by knowledgeable Foreign Service officers automatically transferred the issue of responsibility to Moscow. There was a view that the Bulgarian State Security Service simply tested various gimmicks on behalf of KGB. (Longworth, 2006: 2)

Until the fall of the Totalitarian regime in Bulgaria, the only relatively free field of action for the British diplomacy, relatively undisturbed by the communist regime, was the cultural one. A Bulgarian state report claimed that among the so-called capitalist states the United Kingdom had shown the greatest interest for a cultural exchange with Bulgaria.¹² There was a constant exchange of cultural delegations.

¹¹ Borachev, Chavdar, colonel, chairman of the Association of former military intelligence officers, speech at conference “The Refugee crisis and the challenges before the national security”, organized by the Institute for strategies and analyses, Sofia, 24 September 2015.

¹² Report of the Committee for cultural relations with foreign countries (29.10.1971), State agency “Archives”, Archive of MFA, 1477, Signatura: I-100-13-2-4, Osnoven: 67448.

The British council maintained its own center in Bulgaria for several years after the Second World War but it was closed at the beginning of the 1950's.¹³ The management of cultural and educational events was thus taken by the Embassy itself. In general, British diplomats appreciated the quality of cultural life in the country (theatrical performances, opera concerts, literature recitals, sculpture and painting exhibitions to name but a few). It was quite common for British diplomats in Bulgaria to comment on the Bulgarian opera and choral traditions. The activity of the Council began again in 1991 with a lot a language programs, cultural events, political and institutional projects. Bulgaria tried to develop a cultural presentation in Britain in order to foster a positive image of the regime and thus respond to Western critiques regarding communist dictatorship.

British-Bulgarian relations in the field of tourism started in 1952/53, when the first groups of British tourists arrived in Bulgaria.¹⁴ The number of British tourists has been growing ever since. After the democratic changes until present days, the number of tourists from the United Kingdom visiting Bulgaria has been among the highest.¹⁵ The embassy has been handling many issues in this area – from granting special hunting permissions and organizing luxury cruises (during the Communist regime) to solving crime and hooliganism cases (after 2000's).

The BBC radio was one of the main ideological instruments of British policy in Bulgaria during the Cold War. It broadcasted in the Bulgarian language since the 1940's. Among the themes were religion, human rights, criticism of the Communist regime, educational programs, and interviews with emigrants etc. After the beginning of Gorbachov's Perestroika in the mid 1980's BBC started to invite Bulgarian guests who were interviewed on the phone (Vasileva, 1989:197). The Bulgarian section of the radio was closed, as were the ones of the rest of the Eastern European countries, in 2006¹⁶.

Fear of Turkey is a constant in Bulgarian society. This largest neighbor has always been seen as a military, economic and demographic threat. The topic of the Muslim minority became central to British foreign policy, when the so-called "Revival Process" in Bulgaria commenced in the mid 1980's. The Communist party took a decision to change the names of the Bulgarian Muslims from Arabic-Turkish to traditional Slavonic, Christian and Medieval Bulgarian ones. The leadership fear of the demographic rise of the Muslim population compared to the decline in numbers of the Christian population in some regions, and an apprehension of a Cypriots division scenario, gave a start to the whole process (1984/85). The tension led to a mass emigration of Bulgarians from Turkish descend to Turkey, culminating in the summer of 1989 when more than 360,000 Bulgarian Turks emigrated there. The traditional allied relations between Great Britain and Turkey automatically made British diplomacy an active player in the issue. The British side defined the "Revival Process" as the early form of an ethnic cleansing¹⁷. While Great Britain and the Soviet Union were going through a process of recovery in their relations, Bulgaria and Britain, on the other hand, reached a stage when their relations were almost frozen. Moscow did not approve of the process either. The worsened relations and generation gap between Gorbachov (b.1931) and all the old guards - Zhivkov (1911), Honecker (1912), Kádár (1912), Husák (1913), added further to the complexity of the situation.

A main tasks of each diplomatic mission is to coordinate and implement the programme of official visits to its country with state visits being an unconditional priority. Here, British ambassadors were, therefore, not too busy before the end of the 1990's. Still, among the more important visits during that period

¹³ www.britishcouncil.bg/about/bulgaria

¹⁴ Spravka za razvitiето na turisticheskite vrazki i obmen mezhdru NR Balgaria i Velikobritania, (1971), Darzhavna agencia Arhivi,, MVnR, fond 1477, Signatura: I-100-13-1-7, Osnoven: 69871

¹⁵ Bulgarian National Statistical Institute: www.nsi.bg

¹⁶ www.bbc.co.uk/bulgarian/news/story/2005/12/051221_podrobnosti_bbc_bg.shtml

¹⁷ Thomas, Richard. Shameful British bar on workers labels Bulgaria as second-class, The Independent, 6.12.2006, www.independent.co.uk/voices/letters/letters-bulgarian-workers-427240.html

featured those of some parliamentarians, Labour party leaders, trade unionists and the British Secretary of State for Education – Margaret Thatcher. The future conservative prime minister was on an official visit to Bulgaria for 7 days in 1971, after her visit to Bucharest¹⁸. Her program was full of entertainment events, visits to educational institutions, bilateral meetings and countryside visits. The British Embassy also organized the first ever visit of a British foreign secretary to Bulgaria, after a full century of diplomatic relations, that of Sir Geoffrey Howe (10-11 February 1985). Negotiations on the visit lasted some 12 years (Mladenov, 1992:17). The Secretary wrote: “*I had never expected our arrival in Sofia to feel like a return to freedom. But after the sullenness of Ceausescu’s regime indeed it did*” (Howe, 1995:429). The main topics of the talks were arms control, economic cooperation, human rights under the Helsinki Act, the Russians. At that time the British were interested in the disarmament negotiations in Geneva. (the Geneva Accords were signed in 1988). Howe used the meeting to send a message to the Russians about the negotiations: West is serious in its wish to see progress in arms control. He asked the Bulgarian foreign minister: “*Why not press the Russians harder to get them back to the Geneva negotiations?*”(Howe, 1995: 429).

For comparison Bulgaria was the last country from the Warsaw pact to establish diplomatic relations with the Federal Republic of Germany (1973), relations were developing rapidly on the highest level – state and official visits took place several times a year since then (Helmut Kohl, Helmut Schmidt, Willy Brandt, Franz Josef Strauss, Richard von Weizsäcker etc.) Thus, the federal foreign minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher had seven visits to Sofia (1975-1986).¹⁹ Unlike the British, they did not focus on human rights issues but on economic cooperation. During the Thatcher era, the priority countries behind the Iron Curtain for the British foreign policy were the USSR, Poland and Hungary. British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher visited Hungary in February 1984 and Poland in November 1988.²⁰ The British were not enthusiastic about the reunification of Germany. Over the last century Bulgaria has always been an ally to Germany, which played at times the role of a mediator between Berlin and Moscow. Later Germany turned to be the major advocate to acknowledge the independence of Croatia and Slovenia, and consequently to support their accession alongside with Bulgaria and Hungary to the European Union.

Following the beginning of the democratic changes, the British initially waited to see the course Bulgaria would take in its development. Relations then started going upward with British diplomacy intensifying its activities. Ambassador Richard Stagg (1998-2001) accomplished the first visit of a British prime minister in the British-Bulgarian history - Tony Blair (1999), and that of the heir to the British throne Prince Charles (1998). When asked, why British premier had not paid a visit to Bulgaria for the past 120 years, Stagg explained the philosophy of British foreign policy. “*The UK diplomatic practice is not a supporter of such protocol events. It is more important to get the job done*”.²¹ Often the British geopolitical rhythm is very close to the American one. The First American president to make a state visit to Bulgaria was Bill Clinton (November 1999).²² After the Bulgarian accession to the EU (2007) and NATO (2004) official and unofficial meetings between the prime ministers and foreign ministers of the two countries became regular.

¹⁸ Programme of the visit to People’s Republic of Bulgaria of Mrs. Margaret Thatcher, M.P., Secretary of State for Education and Science in her Majesty’s Government (September 26 – October 1, 1971); State agency “Archives”, MFA, fond 1477, Signatura: I-100-18-1-7, Osnoven: 69427.

¹⁹ Hronika na balgaro-germanskite otnoshenia 1901-1999, Germansko posolstvo v Sofia, http://www.sofia.diplo.de/Vertretung/sofia/bg/03/D__und__BG/Chronik__1900-1999.html#topic100.

²⁰ www.margaretthatcher.org

²¹ Stagg, Richard, Na pat sme da stanem saiuznitzi, v. 24 chasa. IX, 198 (23.07.1999), s. 11.

²² Richard Nixon was in Bulgaria in 1982 - 8 years after his resignation.

Conclusion

The work of the diplomats in the researched period showed that the typical British pragmatism prevailed in British policy toward Bulgaria. British-Bulgarian trade, tourism and cultural exchange were constantly developing, even though the Cold War was in full swing. The analyses proved that the embassy's role and work were often influenced by external factors and developments deriving from a vast geopolitical context – mainly Russian influence and the resurgence of the Bulgarian-Turkish bilateral relations. The British Foreign Office did not consider Bulgaria as a country of specific interest but rather as a source of information. The only constant over the researched period, observed and proved by numerous sources, was the focus of the British Embassy on each aspect of the Russian presence in the country. Despite the change of British agenda in Sofia, some of their concerns have remained the same today.

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