

# A Geological-Social Essay on Bulgaria

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By Paul T. Hornak

In Sofia, the bookstores cluster on a single street and open at 10. With an hour to wait, I stepped into the Museum of Natural History. Its echoing halls contain the nation's geological, zoological, entomological and botanical collections. From the first glass box on the ground floor I was bored. Before me, with explanatory cards in Cyrillic, were the rocks of Bulgaria, some glimmering in the weak light but most sitting dully gray-black, undifferentiated from their neighbors. Four commodious rooms of them spread before me.

Out of the corner of my eye, in the center of a lineup of basalt, I recognized a face. "That's the third man who harassed the old lady," I said with surprise. There he was, his head sculpted, resting on a block of wood. Extraordinary. I looked for the other five customs men and, wonder of wonders, they too glared at me from the array of stones. The chunky-faced, stern-eyed border agents who had come to our compartment in succession at the crack of dawn were part of the natural history of Bulgaria. The old woman had fed me bread and salty olives. She slept the night on the seat beside me, curled up like a little girl, a kerchief about her head. The agents

cursorily riffled my passport and those of the Syrians in the facing seat; they examined hers in detail, asking sharply for supporting documents. She complied. She had visited in Istanbul three months, was a Bulgarian coming home to Sofia.

The Bulgarian railroad attracted stony people. I saw the conductor fuming in a corner beyond the display lights. Shouting gravelly curses, he had awakened me from a sound sleep and snatched my ticket. He was chasing low-class squatters from the first-class seats; the compartments sat empty the rest of the trip.

Bulgaria, a classless state, is full of enforcers. In the museum I saw a lump of coal that embodied both the national spirit and the waitress slouching by the register in the Novotel Europa watching me starve. Diners near me paid and left. Finally she strode over and said, "Lunch is served on other side please." The people at my elbows, were they working on breakfast? "Please, other side," she said coldly. I moved across 10 feet of carpet to the proper section.

Geology was becoming positively fascinating. Passing the hall of crystals I saw the girl in the park with shining clarity. As though cutting a corner of her own sharp facets she turned her

boyfriend abruptly at the foot of the monument and strolled on his arm down a row of maples. She was slim but with a substantial bosom her thick sweater could not blur. The whites of her eyes illuminated her brown face like backlit diamonds. She tossed her hair and smiled. A thousand crystals. The couple stepped lightly past the molten igneous derelict flowing from trash can to trash can pretending to stroll (for nobody is supposed to be poor), and headed into the trees.

Sofia is choked with trees. Chestnuts downtown, poplars on the boulevards, big scaly beeches overtaking backyards. But its people are rocks. Slabs of amorphous sandstone, net bags on their arms, plodded the outdoor market. In the wooden stalls were five basic items: tomatoes, green peppers, potatoes, cucumbers, bread, of high quality and in great quantity. The rocks were queuing for something else. Drawing closer, I saw a dumpy fellow in the first mudlike stages of sedimentation laboriously scooping ice cream. A Turk on the train told me: "They are not happy. I have been to Yugoslavia. There, with the soft Communism, it is dirty but the people smile. In Bulgaria it is very clean, but it is the hard, cold Communism."

I thought of the hotel maid who,

after delivering my laundry, extended a wad of bills. "U.S. dollar? Pound? Deutschmark?" When I showed her I had what she had — Bulgarian money even the State Committee for Tourism refused to exchange — her face darkened. Her mouth cracked like shale. Balkan Tourist, operated by the state committee, was paying 50 percent over the usual rate for foreign currencies. The maid was fortunate, actually. She could go on confronting foreigners under legitimate pretexts. Others could not. "We tried to give our Bulgarian friends a bottle of cologne," the Turk told me. "They said, 'No, the party may find out.' They said they might get in trouble just visiting with us." The party is strong. Across the city, its leaders are hung with paste. Pictures of stones.

They are in the museum too, all of them. After a while I got tired of looking at their faces. Across the street the bookstores were open. In one of the shops, on a pedestal surrounded by red and black covers depicting victorious soldiers and rebellious field hands, I found the English titles: Steinbeck's "Grapes of Wrath" and story collections of F. Scott Fitzgerald and D. H. Lawrence, our emissaries to the geological formations of Eastern Europe. I did not want to read them.

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