Belene camp: a symbol of communist repressions or a visibly forgotten site of memory today?

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MAPPING MEMORIES
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Outline of my talk

• Historical background
• Current situation of Site Two of Belene camp – photos

• Commemoration events and actors
• Public and political discourses
• Theoretical lens - four models for dealing with the traumatic past (Aleida Assmann)
• Possible future work
Historical background

- 27 April 1949, ‘labour-educational commune’ (Trudovo-vazpitatelnno obshtezhitie, TVO), a labour camp, the Danube island of Persin (opposite the village of Belene) for individuals who, for political, security or other reasons are not taken to court.
- Adversaries of the regime: former MPs, activists of oppositional parties, members of the former elites, peasants who refused to join the collectives, and other ‘counter-revolutionaries’ who ‘spread hostile rumours’, ‘conducted enemy agitation’, ‘expressed resentment for the undertakings of the people’s power’, had a ‘negative attitude to the people’s power’ or ‘hostile utterances’, or whose kin were ‘traitors of the fatherland’, i.e. refugees abroad (Koleva 2012)
- Detention increased in 1951 from 6 months to 3-7 years
- 5 September 1953 - converted from camp to prison - inmates were either released or were given sentences
- Hard labour and scarce food
- After the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, the camp was re-established alongside the prison and existed until September 1959
- In mid 80s used again - Bulgarian Turks interned on the island during the forced assimilation campaign of the regime
- The prison exist till today (the eastern part of the island)
- 2000 – Site 2 of the former camp included in a nature reserve with restricted access to protect the Danube wetlands
The pontoon bridge to the island

To go to the island is needed permission by the administration of the prison, at the riverside of the town.
A map drawn by former inmate Krum Horozov, entitled “The Belene prison 1949–1962”
На това място е бил зловещият втори обект на концентрационния лагер Белене. Превърнал се в символ на комунистическата диктатура в България.

Тук на 1. VI. 1990 г. за първи път се събраха оцеляли лагерници, близки и приятели, „поддръжници“ на демокрацията от цяла България, за да се поклонят на хилядите жертви на тоталитаризма.

Истината за лагера Белене ще остане в паметта на българските поколения като по-трайна от гранит опора срещу тиранията. За да помним, че страданията са висока цена на свободата.

Юни 2005 г.
От БЗНС-НС - Плевенска област
В ПАМЯТ
НА ВСИЧКИ
НЕВИНИНИ ЖЕРТВИ
СТРАДАЛИ ТУК,
НА ОСТРОВ БЕЛЕНЕ!
ПОКЛОН!
Exhibition
“BREAKS IN THE WALL: PORTraits OF PRISONERS FROM BELENE”
Petar Baychev

In Belene 1949-1954
Hundreds of portraits and sketches

Sofia Platform
25 Years Freedom in Bulgaria
initiative under the auspices of the President of the Republic of Bulgaria Rosen Plevneliev, implemented by the Sofia Platform and supported by America for Bulgaria
Женската част на „Белене” на остров Църваца

През 1944 г. няколко жени, включително Пърлена Георгиева, участват активно в борбата срещу фашизма и в началото на Втората световна война. Тази група от женски бойци е създадена в „Белене” на остров Църваца, където жените работят за необходимите материали и средства за борбата срещу фашизма. Пърлена Георгиева е една от най-активните и много ценени членки на тази група. В началото на войната, тя е била в „Белене”, където е участвала в различни дейности за създаване на разделителните снопове. Пърлена е създала и организирала близо 200 снопа, които са били изпращани в други части на страната за борбата срещу фашизма.

Една от най-важните задачи на Пърлена е създаването на разделителни снопове, за да бъдат посочени за борбата срещу фашистите. Тя е работила за създаването на снопове, които биха могли да бъдат изпратени в други части на страната за борбата срещу фашистите. Ето защо, Пърлена е създала и организирала близо 200 снопа, които са били изпращани в други части на страната за борбата срещу фашизма.
Commemoration events and actors

• 7 June 1990 – first commemoration event, initiated by the Union of the Repressed
• Since 1990 annual commemorations, held at the end of May or at the beginning of June

• Organizational Committee for the construction of a memorial of the victims of the Second Site, initiated by the local Catholic priest Paolo Cortese, 2014
• Belene Island Foundation, 2016: http://beleneisland.org/?lang=en
Belene Concentration Camp

The Belene Concentration Camp was established on the 27th April, 1949, on the basis of a secret decree of the Council of Ministers, led by the Prime Minister, Vasil Kolarov. The Communist government took the decision to create a Labour Education Hostel (LEH) and the Ministry of the Interior was given the responsibility for establishing the camp on the Ramiza islands of Pernik, Golyama Ramiza, Malka Ramiza, Miklo, Maselnitsa.
Belene Island Foundation

Aiming at:

• Creating a Memorial Park at the Second Site of the Belene Concentration Camp.

• Creating a Memorial Museum in the town of Belene for the victims of the totalitarian regime;

• Investigating and organizing of historical documentation and evidence concerning labor and concentration camps on the territory of Bulgaria between 1940 and 1990.
Belenes Concentration Camp

Donation Account
IBAN - BG05ST31930000233396982
BIC - ST3ASBF

Belene Island Foundation
5930 Belene,
Belene Municipality, Plevens District,
4 M. Vasiliev St.

Support the construction of Memorial Park on Perlin Island, in memory of the sufferers and the dead.

Donate

Belene Concentration Camp
Public and political discourses

No “we” discourse on communism in Bulgaria

The discourse about the communist past falls apart in private discourses with utilitarian uses, that unfolds from “Death to communists” to “I am proud of my communist past” and have equal rights of presence in the public space, regardless whether because of the increasing tolerance, tiredness or apathy, equally unhealthy indeed. (Znepolski 2017)
Theoretical lens - four models for dealing with the traumatic past (Aleida Assmann)

• Dialogic forgetting
• Remembering in order to never forget
• Remembering in order to forget
• Dialogic remembering
Dialogic forgetting

- pragmatic solutions how to bring to an end a lethal conflict by controlling and containing the explosive force of memory
- ‘silence’
- the state could not directly influence the memories of its citizens, but it could prohibit the public articulation of resentments, that were liable to reactivate old hatred and new violence
- putting the former elites back into power
- much had to be forgotten in order to consolidate the new
Remembering in order to never forget

- to transform the *asymmetric* experience of violence into *symmetric* forms of remembering.
- To leave the memory of suffering to the affected victim group was now recognized as prolonging the original murderous constellation. The fatal polarity between perpetrator and victim can never be reconciled but it can be overcome by a shared memory based on an empathetic and ethical recognition of the victim’s memories.
- therapeutic remedy for the survivors but also as a spiritual and ethical obligation for the millions of dead victims
Remembering in order to forget

- to leave behind and go beyond
- remembering is not implemented to memorialize an event of the past into an indefinite future but is introduced as a therapeutic tool to cleanse, to purge, to heal, to reconcile.
- **Ritual framework of Christian confession**: remembering is the introduction to forgetting: the sins have to be publicly articulated and listed before they can be blotted out through the absolution of the priest
- **Artistic concept of 'catharsis'**: through the representation of a painful event on stage a traumatic past can be once more collectively re-lived and overcome in the very process of doing so.
- the group that undergoes such a process is purged in this shared experience.
- **Freudian psychotherapy**: a painful past has to be raised onto the level of language and consciousness in order to be able to move forward and leave it behind.

Examples: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Bishop Tutu und Alex Boraine) created a new form of public ritual, which combined features of the tribunal, the cathartic drama and the Christian confession. In these public rituals a traumatic event had to be publicly narrated and shared; the victim had to tell his or her experiences and they had to be witnessed and acknowledged by the accused before they could be erased from social memory.
Dialogic remembering

• Dialogic and relational, applied between states (but also possible for groups within one state).
• Dialogic remembering transforms a traumatic history of violence into an acknowledgement of guilt. On the basis of this shared knowledge the two states can coexist peacefully rather than be exposed to the pressure of periodical eruptions of scandals and renewed violence.
Possible future work
What’s next?

- May 19, 2018 – May 26, 2018
- Belene Island Foundation
- European week of memory

Белене/Belene. Сърце на Европа, heart of Europe, cuore d'Europa, corazón de Europa, coeur d'Europe, Καρδιά της Ευρώπης

По европейски стил, водени от европейските ценностни, ще почитаме за една седмица всичките невинни жертви на тоталитарните режими на ХХ век.
Затова приемаме идеи (дейности за деца, театър, музика, рисунки, кино, кръгли маси, молебени, и т. н.).
Всяка идея е добре дошла.
#Памет #ОстровПерсин #Белене #ЕнергияЗаБъдещето #СветитеМестаНаБългария
Camps in Belene, in Lovech

“They are not sites of memory, today they are denied even status of sites of remembering, not only because all material traces of mass crimes are wiped out and the state does nothing to mark them, thus marking and the awareness of the society of the symbolic value of what happened there”. (Znepolski, 2017)