

*The Bulgarian Gulag: History & Memory* examines the history of concentration camps in Bulgaria during eighteen years of communist rule (1944 to 1962) and the post-1989 attempts of trying to make sense of, and come to terms with, what took place behind barbed wire. In the immediate aftermath of 1989, it was revealed that the Bulgarian forced-labour camp network was one of the most extensive and repressive ones of the entire socialist bloc, comprising more than eighty camps and existing well into the early 1960s, years after the Soviet gulag camps had been closed down. The news attracted the attention of the local and foreign press, earning Bulgaria the rather sinister moniker, “Little Siberia” and prompting the post-communist Bulgarian government to attempt one of the most dysfunctional political trials (1992-2002) for crimes committed in the Lovech and Skravena camps between 1959 and 1962. Ultimately, the legislative efforts failed and the trial was discontinued due to the statute of limitation, for the atrocities committed in Bulgarian gulag were not, in judicial terms, deemed to be crimes against humanity.

My research project, *Lovech: The Last Gulag Camp*, within the “Physical Violence and State Legitimacy in Late Socialism” research network will address the survivor’s plight in the Lovech camp. It was the most violent of the entire Bulgarian gulag and in operation from 1959 until 1962, a rather late stage of socialism, especially considering the forms of torture practiced there. Drawing on multiple archival records, judiciary files, oral history interviews, documentary films, fictional accounts and journalistic investigations, I will survey the history of the notorious site of violence. *Lovech: The Last Gulag Camp* will address questions related to Bulgaria’s institutionalized state repression in a comparative context of political violence across the former Soviet bloc states, discussing issues related to incarceration practices and survivors’ post-release trauma in the private sphere during the communist period.

Many years have passed since the last of the camps closed down and this difficult past has somehow receded into the background of contemporary Bulgarian society. For the men and women who survived the sites of violence, however, repression is a continued experience, one that outlasts their release from the gulag. Invariably and forever marked by their internment, the trauma of the camp is at the center of their lives even today, at a time when they can openly discuss their suffering. Their voices, however, have become marginalized and confined to a silent void, characteristic of Bulgaria’s post-communist transition. There is no national institute dedicated to the memory of the communist past, and the absence of a state effort to address the historical memory of political violence is reflected across society. In this sense, we can claim that the historical trauma left by camp experiences underlies and tacitly affects even the academic-historical capacity to reflect on, culturally assimilate, and account for this past. The purpose of my research, therefore, is twofold. It aims to fill a historical gap while also addressing the dearth of memory and remembrance. In the felicitous words of a Bulgarian gulag survivor, “Our voices alone would not suffice, there needs to be others.”