

GEORGI DIMITROV

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# GEORGI DIMITROV

## A Biography

Marietta Stankova

Published in 2010 by I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd  
6 Salem Road, London W2 4BU  
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010  
[www.ibtauris.com](http://www.ibtauris.com)

Distributed in the United States and Canada Exclusively by Palgrave Macmillan  
175 Fifth Avenue, New York NY 10010

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Communist Lives: Volume 3

ISBN: 978 1 84511 728 3

A full CIP record for this book is available from the British Library  
A full CIP record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

Library of Congress catalog card: available

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham  
from camera-ready copy edited and supplied by the author

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Of all the people who showed an interest in this book, I would like to mention first those sceptics who frankly questioned that it was at all necessary: they made me think harder about something I had taken for granted. But mostly, colleagues, friends and family have been supportive and even near-strangers have helped me at critical junctures. They all made my research less lonely and my writing more rewarding, and so it is an even greater pity that not all can be mentioned individually.

As the majority of the original sources used are of Bulgarian origin, I would not have been able to go forward without the cooperation of the Director and staff of the Central State Archive in Sofia, and especially those in Reading Room 100 who did their best to accommodate my optimistic and inevitably urgent requests. The Bulgarian National Library was the almost-perfect 'period' setting for much of my research where kind and professional librarians didn't blink an eye at the piles of dusty volumes that passed their desks during each of my visits. There, on countless occasions I have benefited immensely by the generosity and expert advice of Boyka Parvanova. Jordan Baev has shared invaluable insights and encyclopaedic knowledge of personalities and events. Luiza Revyakina, Irina Ognyanova, Lyubomir Ognyanov, Mihail Gruev and Mitko Grigorov have all granted me numerous personal and academic favours.

In Britain, Matthew Worley has been a source of wisdom, patience and encouragement, while Nina Fishman and Anita Prażmowska stepped in with much-appreciated feedback and positive criticism. I have been privileged, now as before, with Richard Crampton's timely and astute advice. The most pleasant hours were spent being regaled with the vivid memories of Dianko and Mimi Sotirovi, who lived through some of the events in the latter part of the book. I also wish now to thank Maria Dowling and Edmund Green, for guiding me onto the path of academia and for much more.

I acknowledge with gratitude the financial support of the British Academy for a big part of the research. The final stages of the project were funded by a grant from the Barry Amiel and Norman Melburn Trust.

My work would be inconceivable without the unreserved moral and practical backing of my parents. Much credit goes to my husband who preserved his calm and sense of humour through all the dramas of writing. But ultimately, it is my children – a fountain of emotions and aspirations – who have made the whole endeavour exciting and worthwhile.





## ABBREVIATIONS

BKP	Bulgarian Communist Party
BRP(K)	Bulgarian Workers' Party (Communists)
BRSDP(B)	Bulgarian Workers' Social Democratic Party (Broad)
BRSDP(N)	Bulgarian Workers' Social Democratic Party (Narrow)
BSDP	Bulgarian Social Democratic Party
BZNS	Bulgarian Agrarian National Union
CC	Central Committee
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
Cominform	Information Bureau of the Communist and Workers' Parties
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain
DII	Department of International Information
ECCI	Executive Committee of the Communist International
FB	Foreign Bureau
FF	Fatherland Front
ITU	International Trade Union
KKE	Greek Communist Party
KPD	German Communist Party
KPÖ	Austrian Communist Party
MOPR	International Organisation for Aid of Revolutionaries
ORSS	General Workers' Trade Union
PCE	Spanish Communist Party
PCF	French Communist Party
PPR	Polish Workers' Party
POUM	Workers' Party of Marxist Unification
PSOE	Spanish Socialists Workers' Party
SORSS	Free Trade Union Federation
SPD	German Social Democratic Party
SPÖ	Austrian Socialist Party
VKP(B)	Soviet Communist Party (Bolsheviks)
VMRO	Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation
VO	Military Organisation
WEB	West-European Bureau



## SERIES FOREWORD

Communism has, traditionally, appeared to be something of a faceless creed. Its emphasis on the collective over the individual, on discipline and unity, and on the overwhelming importance of ‘the party’, has meant that only the most renowned (and mainly Soviet) communist leaders have attracted interest from English-speaking political historians and biographers. In particular, the party rank-and-file have tended to be dismissed as mere cogs within the organisations of which they were part, either denigrated as ‘slaves of Moscow’, or lost in the sweeping accounts of communist party policy and strategy that have dominated the historiography to date. More recently, however, historians have begun to delve beneath the uniform appearance of democratic centralism, endeavouring to understand the motivations and objectives of those who gave their lives to revolutionary struggle. The current series, therefore, has been established to bolster and give expression to such interest. By producing biographical accounts of communist leaders and members, it is hoped that a movement that helped define the twentieth century will begin to be understood in a more nuanced way, and that the millions who – at various times and in various ways – subscribed to such a Utopian but ultimately flawed vision will be given both the personal and historical depth that their communist lives deserve.

Matthew Worley

Series Editor – *Communist Lives*



## INTRODUCTION

### WHY A POLITICAL BIOGRAPHY OF DIMITROV?

Georgi Dimitrov was a dedicated radical Communist for 47 years. It was during the last 15 of these that he became one of the most eminent figures of the international Communist movement in the first half of the twentieth century. Having joined the forerunner of the Bulgarian Communist Party (BKP) in 1902, he soon became one of its leaders, involved in a wide spectrum of activities from launching strikes to parliamentary representation. Dimitrov was one of the militants who played a central role in the staging of a short-lived Communist uprising in September 1923, which ended in disarray and sent him into exile among the ranks of Soviet-sponsored Communist operatives in Europe. Then, a trick of fortune plucked him from a decade of unrewarding underground work when he was arrested in Berlin, in early March 1933, to be accused in connection with the Reichstag Fire, just weeks after Hitler had become Chancellor of Germany. With little to lose, Dimitrov threw himself into an aggressive ideological self-defence, clashing head on with Goering and Goebbels. Helped by Communist-sponsored publicity, he won the sympathy of the international media and inspired a continent-wide protest against the advancing Nazi regime. Only on his acquittal was he granted Soviet citizenship and soon afterwards appointed Secretary-General of the Communist International, the organisation that coordinated the individual Marxist-Leninist parties and bound them to the policies of the first Socialist state. In 1935, Dimitrov proclaimed the policy of the popular front, a veritable turnaround in both Soviet diplomacy and the International's tactics; for the next four years he personified this attempt on the part of the Communists across Europe and beyond to build a leftist political alliance to counter the advent of the extreme right. This was shattered by the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, but when the Soviet Union joined the war against Nazi Germany Dimitrov oversaw various resistance movements, directing them on behalf of Stalin to seek even wider national cooperation. After the end of the Second World War, he returned to his native Bulgaria to take the reins of a Communist-dominated government. He followed the political line of the people's democracy, the controversial transition phase that eased in Communist rule across the Soviet zone of occupation and influence.

Revisiting the biography of a renowned Communist appears odd and logical in equal measures. At first sight – 60 years after his death and 20 years after the collapse of the Communist regimes which he helped install – it might seem that everything of interest and consequence has already been revealed through different methods and from different perspectives. This is certainly the impression intended by the extensive bibliography of Communist vintage which claims to trace Dimitrov's presence in everything from agriculture to art. Besides the self-serving efforts of the regime

Dimitrov founded, his case is no exception to the principle that only with the passing of time and the subsiding of contemporary passions, as well as the amassing of versatile evidence, can a rational and extensive assessment of historical figures and facts be reached. Indeed, the profound political transformation witnessed across Eastern Europe on the eve of the new millennium altered beyond recognition the overall historical paradigm into which many of the pivotal events in Dimitrov's life fitted.

Dimitrov is predominantly remembered as Stalin's authorised spokesman on matters of international Communism and as the doyen of Communist statesmen in sovietising Eastern Europe. For this reason, it is often forgotten that he had not always been the uncontested leader of his national party, nor indeed Moscow's trusted agent. It was after he was welcomed into the Soviet hierarchy in the aftermath of his passionate performance at the Leipzig court that he finally achieved his decades-long ambition of heading the beleaguered Bulgarian Communist Party. At the same moment, Communist propaganda began laying the foundations of the myth of the Leipzig anti-fascist and the wise politician of international stature.<sup>1</sup> Dimitrov's self-proclaimed Leninist credentials were immediately turned into an instrument for the streamlining of the Bulgarian Communist movement, both inside the country and in exile, and for justifying current policies. They were similarly employed in the process of legitimising the Communist domination of Bulgaria after the Second World War. The Dimitrov legend lay at the very foundation of Communist rule, its pivotal importance reflected in the fact that it was never subjected to any measures of de-Stalinisation or indeed *perestroika*.<sup>2</sup>

Communist-sanctioned historiography interpreted not only the evolution of the Communist party but the whole of Bulgarian post-First World War history through the prism of Dimitrov's heroics. For instance, the abortive uprising he started in September 1923 was presented as an act of forward Bolshevik-style thinking, while a disastrous blast in a Sofia cathedral in April 1925 was downplayed and blamed on irresponsible un-Bolshevik elements among the Communists. Simultaneously, the most ignominious episodes of Dimitrov's career – such as his significant involvement in the Stalinist terror in the later 1930s – remained taboo subjects. Traumatic personal events, such as the suicide of his first wife, were also shrouded in silence. Altogether, history was woven into ideology to ensure the portrayal of Dimitrov as the benevolent and far-sighted founding father of the new Bulgarian Socialist nation, as well as of the emerging brotherhood of Socialist states.

Outside the Communist bloc, the pre-1989 literature on twentieth-century Bulgaria was never abundant, though it did concentrate on modern Bulgarian left-wing politics and thus scrutinised the platform from which Dimitrov operated. In what can be regarded as a classic text, John Bell outlined the evolution of the BKP from its foundation to the period of mature Socialism, thus implicitly examining Dimitrov's place among the different generations of leaders. On the other hand, Joseph Rothschild's authoritative narrative astutely conceptualised the early Bulgarian Socialists within the Russian – as opposed to the Central European – radical-leftist tradition, and so defined the longer-term context of Dimitrov's inter-war political progress.<sup>3</sup> To these admirable achievements of their time should be added those of

Petur Semerdjiev, a former high-level Bulgarian Communist and therefore an author with unrivalled credentials to participate in the polemic; his work prods perceptively into the most popular aspects of the myth of Georgi Dimitrov, for instance the Reichstag Fire Trial and the popular front, finding them contradictory and inconsistent in terms of both substance and detail.<sup>4</sup> It can only be lamented that in this and later works on major issues of Communist history, such as the takeover of 9 September 1944, as well as on Russian policy in Bulgaria, Semerdjiev does not directly relate his first-hand experience. His persuasive argument that Dimitrov was central to the subjugation of Bulgarian Communism to Soviet plans stands out among the writings of his contemporary Communists, even those published after 1989.

With the fall of the Bulgarian Communists from power, amidst the dismantling of the Soviet bloc, Dimitrov's persona and politics swiftly became the focus of prolonged and intertwined political and historical controversies.<sup>5</sup> A spate of reminiscences and reflections by former greater or lesser Communist dignitaries saw the appearance of cracks in the previous monolithic Communist front. The majority simply sought to justify their own role in the building and maintaining of the dictatorship. Many authors, ranging from guerilla chiefs to personal bodyguards, conveyed undiminished awe for Dimitrov as a politician and man while still presenting him as much more complex and contentious than the hitherto one-dimensional image.<sup>6</sup> Among such output, more unpredictable were the somewhat disjointed notes by Vulko Chervenkov, Dimitrov's brother-in-law and immediate successor in 1949.<sup>7</sup> Despite his altogether respectful attitude, he offered a series of unflattering observations, especially in relation to Dimitrov's behaviour towards his ideological rivals, the so-called 'left sectarians', throughout the 1930s. Dimitrov's private secretary after 1945, Nedelcho Ganchovski, disclosed many of the insecurities and disappointments of the elder statesman – perhaps inadvertently.<sup>8</sup>

With the liberalisation of academic research and the mass media, a series of publications targeted the glaring gaps and inconsistencies in Dimitrov's authorised biography, and strove to reassess the received wisdom of past historiography. Because of the sensitive moment at which it appeared and the manifold goals it pursued, much of the new writing was sensationalist and politicised, fittingly appearing in journalistic format. Some revelations were no more than public knowledge, formerly suppressed, about Dimitrov's private life, especially his attitude to women and drink. Alternatively, extraordinary claims, for instance that Dimitrov should be credited with the cessation of the Allied air-raids over Bulgaria in the spring of 1944 or that he was killed by Tito, were not substantiated even by the text under the most bombastic headlines.<sup>9</sup> And yet, shallow and exaggerated as such exercises mostly were, they did stimulate attention and debate on much more meaningful issues, such as the origins and nature of the domestic Communist movement, the combination of factors that propelled it to power and its relationship with Soviet policy. These issues need to be addressed in a more academic manner in order to prevent the substitution of old for new myths, once again serving particular political preferences. Logically, the burgeoning re-evaluation of the Communist dictatorship should be extended to its historic figureheads, among whom Dimitrov took pride of place.

Dimitrov's political legacy, central to recent Bulgarian history, became the underlying focus of somewhat secretive dealings over the release of a key portion of his archive and the fate of his physical remains. For half a century his diary – copies of which were kept in Moscow – had only been used by a minuscule group of scholars, hand-picked by the authorities but still not allowed to quote openly from the original source. As the Communist system was dismantled and access to previously classified documents improved, ownership of the papers was questioned and objections were raised to the public release of what those with vested interests perceived as near-sacred personal information.<sup>10</sup> Further, a hard core of Dimitrov's admirers and self-admitted ideological heirs found it hard to face the inevitable erosion incurred by the carefully constructed imagery, due to growing archival openness and free discussion.<sup>11</sup>

In turn, the fate of the most dramatic reminder of Dimitrov's exclusive status – the mausoleum, in a prime location in Sofia, where his embalmed body was displayed for 40 years – fascinated politicians, pundits and graffiti artists alike. The demolition of this unique edifice in the Communist zone took place in 1999, but not before it triggered parallel political, academic and popular debates which exposed deep divisions in society regarding the roots and the nature of local Communism, as well as the methods of preserving its memory. The resulting clash of ideas illuminated the need for the post-Communist society to rationalise, and accept its recent history.

Similar reasoning underpins the necessity to give a fresh and thorough account of Dimitrov's life and political activity, now based on the increasingly available documentary evidence and employing transparent methods of research. The task is well overdue, as the explosion of journalistic articles has not been matched by academic output. Research publications have been few and far between, in stark disproportion to the enormity of the topic. Rarely have established scholars ventured beyond previously expressed views, some preferring to paper over rather than stir controversy.<sup>12</sup> For its part, the younger generation has sought to make its mark by employing novel techniques and steering away from subjects that appeared 'overdone'. Those who have engaged with Dimitrov's work have done so sporadically and mostly chosen particularly problematic and emblematic aspects, often pursuing an extreme line of interpretation. Even in their sum total, such writings are far from a dispassionate discourse on the driving motives and the meaning of Dimitrov's actions. This is not to deny the steady progress made by Jordan Baev towards a fuller and more balanced political portrait of Dimitrov, while other authors such as Georgi Naumov and Valeri Kolev have given much-needed nuance to the context in which he operated.<sup>13</sup> Further, there has gradually emerged an original and more theoretical approach, as offered for instance by Nikolay Poppetrov, to assess Dimitrov's significance in national history and discuss his aspirations and achievements within a 'hero or villain' dichotomy.<sup>14</sup>

Arguably among the most valuable results of recent Bulgarian historical scholarship are the printed compendia of documents related to the evolution and policies of the Bulgarian Communist Party. These are thematically organised, tracing for instance relations with the Comintern or changing attitudes to the obsessive Macedonian question. They are an admirable collaboration between archivists and historians, and an informative and thought-provoking initiation into particular developments or



individual political figures. They form indispensable if much less-known companions to Dimitrov's celebrated diary, providing a much-needed perspective on his actions – and at times an interesting corrective to his private files.<sup>15</sup>

Russian historians, who collectively occupy a unique niche in the study of Communism – in terms of access to primary materials and of insight into the Soviet background of Dimitrov's ultimately illustrious career – have generally preferred to follow a more institution-centred path. The eruditely edited series of documents dating from the Second World War and the years of the people's democracy have been complemented by detailed surveys of the internal workings of the Comintern and the channels of Soviet influence in Eastern Europe after 1945.<sup>16</sup> Ongoing research into Stalin's decision-making in particular cases, for instance into the projected Balkan federation, has brought depth and nuance to the analysis of events in which Dimitrov ostensibly played a key role.<sup>17</sup>

Over the past decade, the combination of archival releases and advances in interpretation has brought a multifaceted and dynamic picture of the Soviet approach to the Cold War. While the literature on the superpowers continues to dominate the field, a small number of fascinating studies of the lesser players have emerged; these test old assumptions and outline new parameters for analysis, not only at the international level but also within the countries which external forces appeared to have subjected to the East–West confrontation.<sup>18</sup> Following this line of enquiry, Vesselin Dimitrov has re-examined the Bulgarian example with insight and thoroughness.<sup>19</sup> As the theme of his monograph dictates, only Georgi Dimitrov's final incarnation, that of national Communist leader, has been tackled to any extent. This timely update demonstrates that Bulgaria can be rightly regarded as a useful example of the overlap between Soviet ideological and strategic goals at the end of, and immediately after, the Second World War.

The biggest academic impact must be attributed to two relatively recent documentary volumes, both in the English language and so reaching the widest audience. Dallin and Firsov's somewhat misleadingly titled *Dimitrov and Stalin 1934–1943: Letters from the Soviet Archives* is notable for its rich and balanced contextual analysis of a number of texts, produced or approved by Dimitrov on a variety of issues of Communist doctrine and its application. Although obviously and understandably selective, by following through several particular case-studies it sheds light on the decision-making process in the Comintern and demonstrates convincingly Dimitrov's dependence on Stalin's policy and will. This is reflected even in the fact that in this intriguing relationship, it was Dimitrov the self-professed disciple who produced most of the known documents – letters, memoranda, requests – whereas Stalin in his indisputably superior position mostly spoke, and often did so curtly or ambiguously.<sup>20</sup> However, the editors' belief that Dimitrov's diary, excerpts from which they used, highlighted his 'superb memory and capacity to reproduce conversations and documents accurately'<sup>21</sup> should be qualified by observing that on numerous occasions his personal records did not present the full picture, to say the least. Dimitrov's journal itself, published in several European languages in addition to Bulgarian and English, each with its own historical introduction, affords a fascinating glimpse into the inner

universe and the everyday reality of the man, and the working habits and the ways of thinking and acting of a member of the Soviet elite. But all this is significantly limited: the many conspicuous gaps in the journal are as evocative as its coverage. As all the respective editors note, the diary is a first-class source, primarily for the workings of the Comintern and Moscow's navigation of Bulgarian and Balkan affairs by and through Dimitrov. It combines the trivial and the supremely important and, as Ivo Banac has pointed out, in essence places Stalin at the centre of the narrative, more so than the protagonist himself.<sup>22</sup> The diary has unequivocally vindicated the suspense preceding such a major release, but of course it should be read and understood as only one – personal – perspective on events and people. A third voluminous tome of printed original sources, again from the excellent *Annals of Communism* series from Yale University, puts on the spot one of the definitive moments in Dimitrov's work, that of the expansion of the Great Purge over the Comintern headquarters.<sup>23</sup> The measured, yet incisive commentary reveals the complex dynamic whereby the international Communist movement was overwhelmed by trends generated deep within the Bolshevik practice and mentality; it also demonstrates the thin line between perpetrators and victims, a division which affected Dimitrov as well as his subordinates at all levels. Altogether, from these documents an image of Dimitrov emerges as a relentless bureaucrat, never far from the centre of power and inextricably implicated in the whole concept and act of revolutionary terror.

A fresh investigation into the life and political activities of Georgi Dimitrov is called for, as it is evident that his progress as a high-ranking professional Communist coincided with some of the most important turning points in European history before, during and immediately after the Second World War. At his zenith, Dimitrov was a member of Stalin's inner circle, at the top of the Soviet state and party hierarchy. Accepted as a symbol of anti-fascism, he was instrumental in Moscow's efforts to control and coordinate the activities of Communist parties globally. Yet, interestingly, this Communist icon has received less attention than some of his contemporaries in Eastern Europe: the magnetic Josip Tito continues to attract interest, while even lesser-known leaders such as the Romanian Ana Pauker have also merited research into their full life story.<sup>24</sup>

Just like the Bulgarian Communist Party from which he arose, Dimitrov has been commonly perceived as unwaveringly loyal to the Soviet Union. Indeed, he consistently and openly placed his faith in the Soviet model of Communism and his consideration of Soviet strategic interests at the forefront of his personal, party and even national priorities. However, it should be appreciated that these qualities were regarded as central to the doctrine of most national Communist parties, as well as to the convictions of their followers at all levels. In this respect, numerous contemporary Communist-era materials are unapologetically candid. Still, it is necessary to look beyond not only the politically-motivated idealisation but also the traditional Cold War assumptions of a one-dimensional Muscovite. The challenge is to uncover the forces and circumstances that propelled Dimitrov to the top while also seeking to explain his complex choices, and at times seemingly contradictory behaviour.

For all the ostensibly comprehensive iconography and despite the effective Western efforts to undermine it, there certainly remain a number of unclear episodes in Dimitrov's biography. His endeavours in exile in Central Europe during the decade before the Leipzig Trial have been virtually overlooked, despite being linked to several aspects of Bulgarian left-wing aspirations and Soviet involvement therein.<sup>25</sup> cursory knowledge of these issues needs expanding, to elucidate vital points of Comintern tactics and foreign policy in the period. Dimitrov's undercover services for the Comintern in the late 1920s and into the 1930s formed in a sense the groundwork for his subsequent elevated position in Moscow. Questions also remain over his bureaucratic role and ideological position during the Great Purge, a period in which he was ironically both at his most triumphant and most vulnerable.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, his experience of high Stalinism cannot be dissociated from responsibility for the persecution of political opponents and for the first show trials in early Communist Bulgaria. Such an investigation not only fills factual lacunae but implicitly adds to the understanding of the process of the making of a Communist leader of international status. On the one hand, it sheds light on the personality traits and wider events that made Dimitrov exceptional; on the other hand, it discusses whether his particular story was representative of the fate of a larger number of Communist émigrés.

Among the initiatives with which Dimitrov is often identified is that of the South-Slav federation. At the end of the Second World War, it was from the start riddled by clashing Balkan national interests and power aspirations upon which intricate Soviet–Yugoslav tensions were additionally projected. Ironically, it was Dimitrov's ill-advised actions that propelled the maze of complications to the centre of the brewing Stalin–Tito rift, a conspicuous reminder that Dimitrov could still exert some influence beyond his own country.<sup>27</sup> However, what is invariably obscured in this notorious event is the fact that Dimitrov had been the champion of federation before Tito rose to power or the idea registered in Stalin's post-war calculations. It is essential to appreciate that in this instance Dimitrov was pursuing long-held convictions that only temporarily coincided with Soviet interest. Yet the manner in which the conflict was resolved unambiguously proved Dimitrov's deference to Stalin, although not necessarily to the detriment of what he perceived as Bulgaria's priorities.

Even the most-discussed facets of Dimitrov's long political career reveal substantial grey areas in terms of both facts and interpretation. As with many idealised – or demonised – historical figures, only Dimitrov's most popular and contentious deeds and pronouncements have captured public interest and scholarly attention. The resultant image can be schematic, shallow and often anachronistic. As Dimitrov was involved in, or observed at close quarters, so many dramatic events in the twentieth century, it has been hard to refrain from politicising his contribution and forming moral judgement.

Georgi Dimitrov played a substantial role in the evolution of Communism in Bulgaria, in the Balkans and in Europe as a whole. He presided over the international organisation of Communist parties in a crucial decade which defined their whole identity. Occasionally, his reach stretched even farther, as demonstrated by his contacts with the Chinese Communists.<sup>28</sup> In his prime, Dimitrov had unique access to Stalin

and the topmost Soviet policy-makers, and interacted more than any other Soviet statesman with the leaders of foreign Communist parties. An objective and fresh account of his work should take into consideration newly-available evidence, and the evolution of the debate on both international Communism and the early Cold War. It is necessary to integrate individual findings into a continuous narrative that simultaneously offers a systematic and balanced analysis. Against a backdrop of the re-invigorated discussion on the essence of the Communist regimes, an enquiry into the life of an individual of Dimitrov's standing can provide valuable insight into the whole mechanics of the Soviet system's spread across Eastern Europe. A real challenge also lies in exploring Dimitrov's thinking as a Communist ideologue and politician. Here, elements of originality alongside compliance with Stalin, of national agendas and Soviet strategy should be disentangled to increase understanding of the progression of Communism and Soviet dominance in Eastern Europe.

Following Dimitrov's advance as a professional revolutionary, from his first affiliation to the Bulgarian Communist Party, through his exile in Central Europe and his headship of the Comintern in Moscow, to his return to Bulgaria as its first Communist ruler highlights the complexities in his character and the dilemmas in his work. It illuminates the extremities and the compromises, the versatile nature of his activity, but above all the dynamics between the leading position in his national party and his subordination to the Soviet Union.

\* \* \*

A brief entry from the summer of 1939 in Georgi Dimitrov's diary describes his second driving lesson, in the vicinity of the famous Boroviha sanatorium near Moscow:

I drove the automobile well. At the turn towards the sanatorium, the automobile hit a tree – the bonnet was damaged and R[osa] Yu[lievna] hurt her leg. *Gott sei Dank!!!* Everything went fine, the damage to the automobile is negligible and the people have not suffered much. 'A lucky disaster,' it might be said.<sup>29</sup>

Trifling as this incident may seem, it is a suitable metaphor for significant moments in Dimitrov's life, and above all of his retrospective approach to them. His mentality unmistakably shines through these few sentences. The laconic and optimistic report is highly representative of his well-cultivated ability to claim credit for positive developments, while turning his back on responsibility for any conflicts or drawbacks. And indeed, there were numerous controversies and substantial failures in his long political career – all of them marked by Dimitrov's self-confidence and by his success in managing to distance himself from accidents and casualties. From the September Uprising to the Great Terror and on to the violent dictatorship established in Bulgaria, Dimitrov refused to acknowledge the political failures and personal tragedies that many of his actions inflicted. Always the skilful propagandist and political survivor, he insisted these actions were necessary and ultimately positive. His propensity to adjust his ideas and reinvent his image served him well in his long and ostensibly successful career.

## RISING THROUGH THE RANKS, 1902–21

Little in Georgi Dimitrov's personal and social background hinted at his future as a well-known politician in Bulgaria, let alone a world-famous international leader. He began life as the eldest son of an ordinary couple in an inconspicuous village. His early years were marked by the family's austerity and instability – but also by their search for opportunities. In such conditions, his character evolved to become stubborn but sanguine, both resilient and rebellious.

\* \* \*

Georgi Dimitrov Mihailov was born on 30 June 1882<sup>1</sup> in the tiny village of Kovachevtsi in western Bulgaria. His parents lived there for a while before moving, first to the nearby town of Radomir and then to the capital, Sofia. The family's migration had started even earlier from the mountainous Pirin region in Macedonia, a land of complex and contested ethnic character with a predominantly Bulgarian population. Both his father Dimitur and mother Parashkeva came from places that had participated in the so-called Kresna-Razlog Uprising of the summer of 1878, a protest against the Berlin Treaty signed by the European powers in June of that year. This excluded Macedonia from the large independent Bulgarian state that had emerged only three months earlier with the San Stefano agreement that ended the Russo–Ottoman war of 1876–8. The loss of a province perceived by most Bulgarians, for ethnic, cultural and historical reasons, as inextricably involved in the idea of their nation engendered a national drama which dominated every aspect of Bulgarian development in the first half of the twentieth century. Dimitrov's Macedonian roots place him in the company of many other Bulgarian politicians; his later views on the solution of the so-called 'Macedonian question' were largely devoid of nationalist sentiment.

It is possible that Dimitrov's parents immigrated into the Bulgarian principality as a result of the Kresna-Razlog Uprising, but the suggestion that they had actively engaged in it seems more likely the stuff of subsequent Communist hagiography, looking to link Dimitrov with the tradition of the Bulgarian struggle for national liberation.<sup>2</sup> As the two young people crossed the border into the new state, they were probably driven by a mixture of economic and political factors, exploring new opportunities as well as escaping the restriction of minorities under Ottoman rule. After five centuries of foreign domination, Bulgaria emerged as a socially egalitarian but economically backward society, with an overwhelming majority of subsistence farmers. Dimitrov's parents too were of peasant stock, yet they benefited from the increasing social and economic mobility afforded by national independence.

Considering the place and time of Dimitrov's birth, his was an average lower-class family. There are different versions as to his father's and mother's early occupations and it would not have been untypical for them to change jobs seasonally. By the time they settled in Sofia, his father was running a small business, making traditional male headwear by hand and selling it from his shop in a busy high street. Communist literature invariably described him as honest and hard-working, but could add little of more substance. Georgi Dimitrov hardly ever mentioned his father in his sporadic reminiscences of his childhood and youth – in contrast to the open affection displayed for his mother. She was the one who was later vocally celebrated in the authorised biographies as a 'fighter for justice' and supporter of her children's revolutionary beliefs.<sup>3</sup> Before her marriage, she had worked as a hired farm-hand and as a servant in wealthier households. She learned to read only after she married and had children. Dimitrov sometimes claimed that he was born in the field while his mother was harvesting. Hard as it is to confirm this, it would not have been anything out of the ordinary at the time. Georgi was the eldest of six brothers and two sisters. Although clearly not wealthy, their father was able to support the fast-growing family and in a few years to build their own house on the outskirts of the city.<sup>4</sup> It was adequate, and later renovated, but located in one of the swelling poor quarters where many new arrivals from the countryside crowded into illegal and unhygienic accommodation.

Personal details of the first two decades of Dimitrov's life are scarce. Most intriguingly, however, he was raised in the fold of the Evangelical Church, a minority Protestant denomination in the traditionally Eastern Orthodox Bulgaria. His devout parents had possibly already been converted in their birthplaces, where North American missionaries had been very successful in the latter half of the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> Another version has it that Dimitrov's father adopted Evangelism under the influence of the relatives who helped him settle in Sofia.<sup>6</sup> The fact of this religious background was deliberately overlooked by Communist historians, who underlined only Dimitrov's humble beginnings.<sup>7</sup> Dimitrov himself only very rarely and grudgingly admitted to the fact, for instance stating in October 1920 that his 'father had the misfortune of being an evangelist; these people were agents of the capitalist policy of the USA . . . agents of the big trusts'.<sup>8</sup>

Dimitrov's elder sister recalled that he was a lively but generally well-behaved child, who always owned up to occasional mischief and respected his mild-tempered mother. Reading between the lines of the laconic early memories, he could be seen as boisterous, tending towards unruly. Although undoubtedly intelligent, Dimitrov only focused on what interested him. That he was undisciplined and stubborn might explain why he failed to take advantage of the excellent educational opportunities within the Bulgarian Protestant community. Giving children, particularly boys, a good schooling was generally highly regarded across Bulgarian society, and Protestants were as a rule especially ambitious and enlightened. However, around the age of ten Dimitrov entered into such a serious conflict with the local pastor that he was banned from Sunday school.<sup>9</sup> He then stopped attending religious services altogether, thus putting to rest his mother's alleged aspiration for him to join the clergy. So intense was the grudge he bore against the church of his childhood that in 1896, years after he had

broken with his faith, Dimitrov produced *Kukurigoo* ('cock-a-doodle-doo'), a 'satirical newspaper'. More of a leaflet, its main targets were priests and religion, causing acute embarrassment to his pious parents; fortunately for them, only two issues appeared.<sup>10</sup>

It is possible that the defiant streak in Dimitrov's character also accounted for his untimely departure from school, having completed no more than six years of primary school.<sup>11</sup> Later, this became almost a boast for him, but at the time it undoubtedly brought much grief to his parents. He also subsequently maintained that his health in infancy had always been precarious and that an exhausting illness at the age of 12 had left him unable to return to his studies properly. Such a story immediately raises the question as to how a child judged too ill to sit in a classroom was allowed to take up a physically demanding job – which is precisely what happened. An alternative if speculative explanation might be that the rigid school routine was not to Dimitrov's liking. Still, it is plausible that Dimitrov had to help his parents supporting their big household. Even if this is taken at face value, it is clear that by leaving school and denouncing the church, he was already breaking with the kind of life his parents had offered.

Notably – and contrary to tradition as the eldest son – he showed no interest in his father's trade, nor did he accept the first opportunities that came along: apparently, he was put off by the noise, dirt and smell at both a carpenter's and a blacksmith's. Eventually, he started an apprenticeship in a printing house, where the work appealed to him at once. He was fascinated to discover how the letters were put together to form a word, then the words composed into sentences and eventually whole pages of newspapers and books appeared.<sup>12</sup> Dimitrov learned quickly on the job, showing proficiency in deciphering illegible handwriting. Soon the boy from the slums became intrigued by the content of his work, especially of the newspapers he was setting to type. Reading the political press now formed a part of his daily routine; he was soon interested in domestic and international news and aware of the debates in Bulgarian politics. This whole new world was not simply exciting but proved to be a life-defining experience. It also triggered a near-obsession with the written word; for the rest of his life he derived immense satisfaction from publications bearing his name.

Dimitrov's personal social evolution paralleled the contemporary development of Bulgaria, which was aspiring to modernise itself after gaining sovereignty. Dimitrov was the grandson of peasants and the son of a craftsman, but himself a proletarian. These generational changes in his family reflected the evolving social demography of the country, where rural migrants were drawn *en masse* to the city. At the time he started work, factory labourers in Bulgaria numbered approximately 6,000 – no more than 0.2 per cent of the population – with the majority engaged in light industry. Trade-union activities, although dating back to the previous decade, were picking up after the strongman conservative Prime Minister Stambolov was deposed in 1894, the very year Dimitrov entered paid employment.

Printing in Bulgaria, as elsewhere in Europe, was amongst the most politically aware professions. In addition to earlier workers' societies, a Central Workers' Printers' Syndicate was organised in November 1894, the first trade union under the aegis of the Bulgarian Workers' Social Democratic Party (BRSDP). The latter had emerged

only three years earlier under the name 'Bulgarian Social Democratic Party' (BSDP), and was just beginning to engage with real workers rather than merely theorising about their problems.<sup>13</sup> Dimitrov wasted no time in joining the Printers' Syndicate, which – because of its links with the Social Democrats – in practice meant stepping into leftist politics. His very young age, lack of direct dependants and radical disposition quickly made him a most active trade unionist. Largely to proclaim its existence, the Printers' Syndicate launched a strike in February 1895. Dimitrov, who had recently got a new job at the Liberal Club printing house, served as representative of the apprentice printers on the workers' strike committee. The strike involved 200 workers at 13 printing houses and demanded the introduction of workplace legislation such as an eight-hour day, regular payments and the recognition of the trade union.<sup>14</sup> It ended in disarray, even though some employers in part accepted the demands.

The next attempt was made during a wider wave of protests across the country in 1899–1900. Again, the printers played a central role after their syndicate was re-launched under the new name of Workers' Printers' Society in May 1899.<sup>15</sup> At the Liberal Club printing works there were no less than ten instances of industrial action, which met with varying success. Dimitrov identified one of the major weaknesses of the strikers as the fact that not all their outbursts had been sanctioned and coordinated by the Printers' Society.<sup>16</sup>

Dimitrov discovered his vocation in this kind of professional and social agitation. His interest and enthusiasm were first put to good use in organising book donations to set up a workers' library. This achievement was rewarded with successive elected positions, first on the board of the Workers' Printers' Society in 1901. For several months in the following year he acted as the Society's book-keeper.<sup>17</sup> He was also an eager and popular participant in the social events, an important part of the life of the trade union. These were mostly weekend hiking trips, a popular leisure pursuit, often visiting one of the many monasteries in the mountains around Sofia. A picnic in the grounds would be accompanied by a presentation on current political and trade-union matters, reviews of literature or celebration of historic dates.

Gradually Dimitrov's profile as a workers' activist rose. His name became increasingly familiar through his publications in the Printers' Society's newspaper; his earliest signed contribution was a report dated 16 July 1902 on the recent quarterly general meeting.<sup>18</sup> For the first time he voiced his views that the trade union should prepare its members for 'conscious planned struggle for their interests'. Soon he was even criticising the Printers' Society for not paying sufficient attention to the recruitment and education of unorganised workers. But the brunt of his energy was spent on persistent demands for the improvement of working conditions in the printing shops. The reluctance of owners to address even basic demands such as the supply of drinking water to the premises forced Dimitrov and others to initiate an appeal to the Health Inspectorate in Sofia. The state authorities were asked to investigate the wide-spread poor health and safety provisions on the shop floor – to no avail. At about the same time, Dimitrov was involved in preparing the application of the Printers' Society to join the International Printers' Union.<sup>19</sup> Through these experiences, Dimitrov's energetic and emotional personality was finally unleashed,



finding a true calling. He showed commitment, purposefulness and the beginnings of longer-term political vision, and particularly an awareness that the trade unions needed not only a popular base but also skilful management and strong institutional links.

Dimitrov's growing trade-union work and ambitions led him to attempt to fill the wide gaps in his education. At the Workers' Social Club in Sofia he attended an extramural programme of studies which mixed basic school subjects with more advanced lectures on politics and economics. The latter were delivered by the leaders of the BRSDP, whose knowledge and confidence immensely impressed Dimitrov; he was almost instantly recruited to the Socialist cause.<sup>20</sup> Marxism became the focus of his already avid if unsystematic reading, which in turn reinforced his political passion. He devoured the biographies of Bulgarian national heroes by Dimitur Blagoev, the foremost figure of Bulgarian Socialism, who presented the struggle for independence as essentially social and economic strife. Through Blagoev's central theoretical piece, *What is Socialism and Does a Basis for it Exist Here?*, first published in 1891, Dimitrov discovered the idea that capitalism was an unavoidable stage in humanity's social and political development. This and subsequent works by leading Bulgarian Social Democrats were of immense benefit to a budding activist like Dimitrov, who could not read the theses of European Marxist thinkers in the original and depended on native adaptations and translations. The opportunity was both illuminating and limiting, as he was understandably overwhelmed by the received wisdom of the early native Socialists. Additionally, Russian literature was more easily available and readable without translation. Dimitrov was acquainted, for instance, with Georgiy Plekhanov's writings, which were particularly popular. Like many of his contemporaries, he found his all-time favourite in Nikolay Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?*, the novel that inspired generations of revolutionaries in the latter nineteenth century. Later Dimitrov recounted how he too had put himself through the privations and tests of will deliberately undergone by the most captivating character, Rakhmetov, a tough and ascetic professional revolutionary who famously slept on a bed of nails. It is possible that such an assertion was only made in order to liken Dimitrov to Lenin, a known admirer of Rakhmetov; there is no other evidence of Dimitrov displaying interest in physical training.

Inspired by his chosen social and political milieu, Dimitrov began forming his political opinions and preferences. Because of his deficient education and limited life experience, his views were exclusively derived from the Socialist ideology and propaganda into which he was irreversibly drawn. This could explain why he naturally gravitated towards the more extreme political positions and why he was so unwavering in his convictions. Initially without many professional or social prospects, he had found a simple and convincing political doctrine which gave him a clear direction in life. It was only a matter of time before Dimitrov became a full member of the BRSDP. Much later, his elder sister remembered him saying, 'I've found a better church than father's and a better school than the Sunday one!'<sup>21</sup> Whether or not this was a genuine quote, it certainly described plausibly Dimitrov's thorough immersion in Socialist beliefs and activism.

Dimitrov himself seemed to hesitate between 1902 and 1903 as the moment of his entry in the Bulgarian Workers' Social Democratic Party, stating different dates in different documents.<sup>22</sup> This might be explained by the changes the party experienced in 1903. The occasion of his enrolment however was remembered, as instead of reading out the standard promise he made a passionate and personal declaration of accepting Marxist teachings and Social Democrat policy. Living up to his pledge, Dimitrov demonstrated a rising zeal and a desire for tangible results.

Dimitrov's background and route into the Socialist ranks were a far cry from those of the intellectual revolutionaries who dominated the Bulgarian Socialist movement at the time. By 1903, the BRSDP had existed for 12 turbulent years under the leadership of its founder Blagoev, known as 'the Granddad'. It was a source of great pride for his Bulgarian followers that he had previously initiated the first Socialist group in Russia while on a university scholarship in St Petersburg in 1883–4. Expelled for his illegal activities, in early 1885 he returned to Bulgaria and threw himself fully into Socialist propaganda and organisation. Across the country, a number of other Socialists, many of them teachers fresh from studies abroad, set up a dozen discussion and information circles in the late 1880s, most of which also launched periodicals.

Blagoev was heavily influenced by Plekhanov, whose opinions he consulted from his first steps through to most of his political activity. Indeed, from its inception the Bulgarian Socialist movement remained largely in the shadow of its Russian counterpart, a factor that sheds light on some of the dogmatism of Blagoev's circle of associates and followers. That even those Bulgarian Socialists who were educated in Central and Western Europe gravitated towards their Russian contemporaries is exemplified by the well-known Krustyu (Christian) Rakovski, who had been close to Plekhanov in the 1890s but later emerged as one of Lenin's confidants during the First World War and eventually became a top Soviet official and diplomat in the early Bolshevik regime.<sup>23</sup> The attraction of the Russian revolutionaries was determined by Slavic affinities and above all by general similarities in terms of economic backwardness and a majority peasant population. Between them, Blagoev, grounded in his rapidly growing yet essentially provincial organisation, and Rakovski, a peripatetic cosmopolitan, represented the range of intellectual and activist legacy on which the Bulgarian Socialist party drew.

Dimitrov matured politically under Blagoev's powerful if distant tutelage. Later he tried to legitimise his own position by claiming to have been among Blagoev's close associates. He truly admired the founder's steadfastness and uncompromising stance and invariably took his side in the incessant arguments among the Bulgarian Socialists. There is no evidence that Blagoev ever particularly praised Dimitrov or picked him out from the younger cohort. The orientation of Dimitrov towards trade-union work put him in more direct contact with Blagoev's long-standing friends and collaborators Georgi Kirkov and Gavril Georgiev, both esteemed first-generation Socialists. Yet there is nothing to suggest that their relationship with Dimitrov ever evolved beyond their common political work, with its clearly established lines of seniority, or that he was welcomed into the close-knit circle of the founding fathers.

Joining the Printers' Society and the BRSDP, Dimitrov embraced the view that these organisations should be strictly hierarchical and centralised. He was also a proponent of closely aligning the trade unions – to the point of subordination – with the political party, a principle which meant deep dividing lines within the Bulgarian Socialist movement. By the time Dimitrov signed up to the BRSDP, it had already split once (in 1892) following long-existing internal differences, but after two years the two factions had merged again, realising that they were too insignificant on their own. The debate continued within the reunited organisation as to whether priority should be given to political revolutionary agitation, or to more practical work for better working conditions and social benefits for the workers. The exponents of the latter view were grouped around Yanko Sakuzov, one of Blagoev's earliest political partners and friends, who now argued in favour of political cooperation with other parties and stood for independent, if not completely neutral, trade unions. They were dubbed 'common cause' Socialists, after Sakuzov's eponymous journal, or 'Broad' Socialists, as they looked to reach out to a larger social basis than the tiny industrial proletariat. They opposed what they believed was Blagoev's too 'Narrow' interpretation of Marxism, which rested on a relatively small set of ideas; these included the insistence that only workers devoted to the Marxist ideals should be admitted into the party and its adjacent revolutionary trade unions, and that the Socialists should campaign strictly on their own political programme, refusing any political compromise with bourgeois parties even if it would lead to parliamentary representation. Indeed, Sakuzov's approach was best exemplified by his willingness to seek support in rural areas, which in 1899 secured his group half a dozen seats in the National Assembly. The same year he also favoured a loose alliance with the just-founded Bulgarian Agrarian National Union (BZNS).<sup>24</sup>

The 'Granddad's' fundamentalist vision, verging on dogmatism, was later presented by his adherents as ideological kinship with Lenin's Bolsheviks. The claim was based mostly on a pure chronological coincidence: the chronic tensions within the BRSDP erupted anew in early 1903, and culminated in another formal rift in the summer between the clashing Broad and Narrow factions. This occurred at roughly the time when the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks of the Russian Social Democratic Party embarked on their famous collision course in the second half of 1903. Actually, the disagreements within the BRSDP clearly echoed the divergent trends that permeated the enormously influential German Socialist Party, and through it spread in the Second Socialist International. While a combination of local factors and theoretical advances had led to the emergence of reformist views and practices in all European Socialist parties, the Bulgarian Broad faction derived most of their arguments from Eduard Bernstein's theses about the changing nature of capitalist society, which required the Socialists to adapt their thinking and action. For their part, Blagoev's Narrow faction adhered to the mainstream views of Karl Kautsky.<sup>25</sup> Despite the passionate disputes over the application of Marxist theory in Bulgaria, none of the leaders of the Bulgarian factions made any impact on the international Socialist scene. On the other hand, even though at the turn of the century the BRSDP was the largest

and best organised Socialist party in the Balkans, the leading lights of the Second International rarely looked in its direction.

Blagoev remained inflexible both in political and personal terms, severing all relations with those who disputed his views – which, to his mind, equalled his authority. By all accounts he was obsessed with the ideological orthodoxy of the party, insisting on an unwavering line of class struggle even though the proletariat in Bulgaria was obviously small and economic conditions made it an unlikely contender for revolution. Yet Blagoev had little respect for Lenin, and indeed only faint knowledge of who Lenin actually was. In this round of in-fighting, he quoted heavily from Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?* in the belief that it was penned by his mentor Plekhanov. While Plekhanov's major works had been duly translated into Bulgarian and published by the party, only extracts from Lenin's writings appeared, sporadically, in the Socialist periodical press.<sup>26</sup>

The fact that theoretical argument was so intense in the Socialist party almost 20 years after the beginnings of Socialist activity in Bulgaria reflected the economic and social development of the country. Blagoev's followers were interested in proselytising among the pure proletariat, who formed, however, only a miniscule part of the population. Industrial activity was mostly small-scale and only one step removed from agriculture in terms of both its products and its work-force – many members of the latter were seasonal hands hired at the factories only when there was little to do on the farms. Aware of its general economic backwardness, independent Bulgaria's political elite had sought to stimulate native industry in the final decade of the nineteenth century through a range of fiscal and protectionist measures. This was also a time of increasing state investment in big infrastructure projects such as railways, seaports and electrical production. These in turn contributed further to the emergence of new enterprises, for instance in the production of construction materials, or the consolidation of old ones such as textiles and food-processing. However, with roughly 750 miles of rail track in 1901 and just over 200 factories, the majority of these with less than 20 workers, Bulgaria remained a largely unmodernised economy. It was not only a society of peasants but mostly of smallholders who cultivated dispersed plots by traditional methods and tools.<sup>27</sup> Such factors hindered the spread of Marxist ideas, which took root exclusively in the towns among small circles of intellectual converts. Trade-union activity was the link that united the professional revolutionary thinkers at the helm of the party and the workers in whose name revolution was to take place.

Absorbed by the printers' trade union and taking his first steps into the Socialist party, Dimitrov had followed the ideological disagreement in the top leadership from a distance. The little understanding he had of the theoretical polemic among prominent European Socialists was derived from its representation in Bulgarian Socialist periodicals and its reflection in the dispute between Broads and Narrows. For him the quarrels in the BRSDP were above all a matter of loyalty – both to recognised leaders and to familiar tactics. He was naturally drawn to the more radical side of the debate, but was also aware that so far in Bulgarian politics Blagoev's faction seemed to offer a clearer vision, and one to which previous challengers had repeatedly come back.

Dimitrov was not even in the city when a group of Narrows seceded from the Sofia organisation of the BRSDP in February 1903, a momentous event which soon gave a new direction to the whole party. At the time he was working in Samokov, a town in the mountains about 20 miles south of the capital; although the circumstances are obscure, he had a position with the Protestant printing press adjacent to the American College, a respected secondary school established and run by Protestant missionaries. This was most likely a favour his mother had obtained due to her good standing in the community. Despite his long estrangement from the church, Dimitrov, who had lost his job in Sofia and could not find a new one there, could not afford to reject the charitable offer. However, afterwards he hardly ever mentioned the six or seven months he spent in Samokov.<sup>28</sup> A few memoirs, recorded at least half a century later, only dwelt on Dimitrov's attempted Socialist agitation, maintaining that the little town's authorities were disturbed by his revolutionary 'corruption' of students and young workers and demanded his dismissal. There is some anecdotal evidence that Dimitrov's presence was disruptive in other ways. Inebriated, he clashed with a local pastor and disturbed religious services; he also arrogantly challenged a visiting Protestant dignitary who was giving a public lecture.<sup>29</sup>

Following the factional split in Sofia, Dimitrov identified categorically with the orthodox Narrow wing. However, initially this attracted just four local organisations, with a total of some 1,200 members – and no more than a third of those were manual workers. In such an unenviable situation, there were opportunities for young and ambitious activists and Dimitrov seized them. In June 1903 he was able to publish his first article in the Socialist newspaper *Rabotnicheski Vestnik* ('Workers' Newspaper'). It was entitled 'Opportunism in the Trade Unions' and dealt with the aspect of the movement he knew best. The piece was a vicious attack on the Broad faction, who were accused of 'preying' on the low consciousness of organised workers and aiming to 'wreck and demoralise the trade unions, luring them away from their proletarian path'. Dimitrov proposed that this should be countered by systematic efforts to enlighten members by acquainting them with the theory of class struggle and the link between trade-union and party activity. 'And the day will not be far when the fog will lift, ignorance will disappear, passions will calm down and the misguided . . . will come to their senses . . . under the banner of proletarian Socialism.'<sup>30</sup> The eloquent and purposeful writing demonstrated real political passion but also the author's declaratory and derivative views: in a rather stereotypical manner, he was mainly repeating ideas that had long been the focus of disagreement between the two Socialist strands. The piece also revealed an intolerance of others' opinions and an assault on opponents rather than engaging in intellectual debate; these were qualities that became entrenched over time.

Dimitrov's brief stint in Samokov was almost the last time he practised his profession. After returning to Sofia, he moved around several printing houses but soon abandoned his day job to become a paid activist of the Socialist party. He launched his political career on the back of turmoil and readjustment: on 6–12 July 1903 Blagoev convened a congress where his followers expelled his rivals from the party. Each of the two groups claimed the original name of the party, so both had to add their popular