

The Surreal Power of the Communist Waiter

BY ALBENA SHKODROVA

"The power of the waiter in communist Bulgaria exemplified the way that core economic concepts and social engineering distorted civic culture," writes Albena Shkodrova.

He excelled in ruining your day. He could slam the door in your face. Or he could make you wait for hours, leave you hungry, hone his sarcasm on you. He could bring you food left by another customer, or food that wasn't what you ordered. He could overcharge you heavily. He could... and often he did. And he went unpunished, mostly.

Few roles in Eastern European communist societies were more notoriously distorted than that of the waiter. Disproportionally empowered and evading control, waiters were elevated from servants to masters through a combination of ideology, system failure and central management.

The relatively mild and fairly resilient Soviet-type regime that existed in Bulgaria between 1944 and 1989 worked hard to develop an extensive network of restaurants. Some had to provide an affordable alternative to home cooking for the millions of Bulgarians employed in state industry. Others had to cater for international tourists. Producing restaurants that would impress foreign visitors was one of the regime's goals. And indeed, communist restaurants have a firm place in the collective memory. Though perhaps not quite for the reasons intended.

Both Bulgarians' and foreigners' memories of restaurant service in communist restaurants seem to be predominantly negative.

"I don't recall any service," reflects Alexander Eppler, an American who spent several years as a music student in Bulgaria at the end of the 60s. "The waiters were just very pissed off. I was amazed. How come they don't have black eyes? Or broken noses? Because if you met someone on the street and he acted like that, there wouldn't be a long discussion."

Foreigners who visited Bulgaria around that time describe the attitude they encountered as "passive aggression", the service as "terrible", and the waiters as "nasty". They recall ordeals, misunderstandings and, above all, being ripped off. "As they said in Bulgaria back then, the date was also added to the bill," says Raymond Detrez, a Belgian who has visited Bulgaria regularly since 1972.

According to the records of the state tourist company *Balkantourist*, in 1975 the British trade unionist Arthur Scargill publicly denounced the trickery that went on in Bulgarian restaurants as criminal. Around the same time, a man threw a stone through the window of the Bulgar-



Photo: Unknow

ian Tourist Committee in London, expressing the outrage felt by many British and other European travellers. Even the censored Bulgarian press repeatedly criticized practices such as forcing customers to order the most expensive items on

distance. Unlike their predecessors, neither their income nor their jobs depended on the commercial success of their establishments. On the contrary, in an economy of persistent shortages, it was customers whose wellbeing depended on waiters and

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the menu, adding water to alcohol, serving smaller portions, passing off cheap drinks for more expensive ones, etc. etc.

Bulgarians' recollections are just as negative, though without the amazement or bitterness. To establish a good relation with a key waiter was rule number one if you wanted to visit a certain restaurant frequently. Rule number two was to avoid irritating this waiter at any cost. While generally scorned, waiters were also seen to possess power. A good relation with them was regarded as *vruzki*, that is, part of the network of connections, crucial for making life bearable.

Why, then, did serving in a restaurant—generally a humble profession—acquire such extraordinary powers under communism?

The seeds of the problem were sown in the early years of the communist regime. By the early 50s, private restaurateurs and shop owners had been replaced by communist managers, who were appointed by a central authority and controlled from a

salesmen—on their providing one with some sub-standard product or other, or in giving one a coveted table or a decent meal.

On top of this, the transformation of service culture in Bulgaria was also a byproduct of communist social engineering. Between 1944 and 1959, the regime created a workforce for the new state industry by means of a rapid and at times coercive policy of urbanization and 'collectivization' of the country's agriculture. Social groups changed places and millions of people, new to the city and its culture, became influential participants in urban communication.

A new service style, characterized by hostility, rudeness and indifference, spread across the big cities. Friendliness came to be seen not only as a waste of time, but as an act of humiliation contrary to the communist principle of equality. No longer a requirement for keeping a job in the service sector, good service was a matter of personal choice. And while it could often still be found in villages and small towns, it was practi-

cally obliterated from the cities and tourist areas. The Bulgarian regime was well aware of the problem, which it shared with other Soviet-style states. The archives and press from the period document various efforts at improving service in restaurants. These included training, regulation and control, together with ideological appeals for enthusiasm and responsibility. The latter, unsurprisingly, were borrowed from the Soviet Union. A telling early example was the "Gusin and Voroshilov initiative". A brainchild of Soviet activists, workers were organized into taskforce groups that would run state enterprises "with excellence". The implication was that all other workers felt liberated from such an obligation. In 1953, the idea was applied in the famous Hotel Bulgaria in Sofia. Employees formed brigades for "excellent restaurant service", "exemplary washing of the porcelain", "excellent maintenance of the heating system" and "excellent handling of the laundry".

Members of the government and the Party, and even Todor Zhivkov himself, repeatedly appealed, urged, scolded, advised. But ideological pleas and regulatory patches weren't enough to correct systematic failures. Often, they only exacerbated them.

Tipping, for example. Nominal-

ly, accepting tips was illegal. But the rise in international tourism led to the notion that tips might encourage waiters to behave nicely towards their customers. The state, however, failed to devise clear regulations legalizing gratuities. Rather like other countries dealt with euthanasia, so communist Bulgaria dealt with tipping: it remained illegal but, when practiced, went unpunished.

In the communist economy, this semi-solution had a semi-effect. It benefited waiters, who started providing good service exclusively to customers who paid hefty tips. These were mainly travellers from Western Europe, unaware of the existing ban, who were extremely generous by Bulgarian standards. Sales and restaurant personnel who worked with Westerners recall not bothering to collect their salary for months, so dramatic was the discrepancy with what they earned in tips. At the same time, customers who didn't tip heavily continued to be humiliated and abused. Waiters who didn't serve Westerners compensated by maltreating their customers in other profitable ways.

Another major contribution to communist waiters' notorious arrogance was their frequent involvement in intelligence operations, which further enabled them to avoid control and punishment. Waiters were often hired by the secret services to carry out spying operations in restaurants. Restaurant managers remember having limited powers over their staff.

All this caused the waiter's profession to be held in wide contempt. The arrogance that derived from their surreal power was generally the norm. Waiters themselves had an explanation of their own: "As long as the rich cater for the poor, it will be so." <

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