

## THE CINEMA IN SILISTRA (1940 – 1958)<sup>24</sup>

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**Abstract:** *The present study examines the development of cinema in Silistra, as part of the cultural life of Silistra society after the recovery of Southern Dobrudja (1940-1944) and its fate after the communist coup (1944-1958). For this purpose, the institutional attitude of the authorities (local and state) towards the cinema, the purposes for which it is used and the degree of public interest in it have been revealed.*

**Keywords:** cinema, films, Silistra, recovery of South Dobrudja, communism, propaganda

### INTRODUCTION

This present study examines the development of the cinema in Silistra as a part of the social and cultural life of the Silistra community following the return of Southern Dobrudja (1940) and its fate after the September 9<sup>th</sup> coup, falling under the ideological control of the Bulgarian Communist Party (1944–1948). The study investigates the attitude of authorities (local and state) towards the cinema, the purposes of which it is used, and the level of public interest in it.

### EXPOSITION

Before the return of Southern Dobruja to Bulgaria, there was only one cinema in Silistra – “Rosi,” owned by Boris R. Nyamcov. In 1941, Boris Nikolov Todorov from Svishtov opened two new urban cinemas – “Balkan” (April 6) and “Rodina” /formerly “Rosi”/, which was soon renamed “Culture” (September 1)<sup>25</sup>.

The “Balkan” cinema was located in the building of the former “Orient” hotel<sup>26</sup>, while the “Culture” cinema was situated in a monolithic building in the city center<sup>27</sup>. The opening of the new cinemas satisfied the “cultural need” of the people in Silistra, but at the same time, they were dissatisfied with the poor conditions in both cinema halls. Half a year after their opening, despite the owner’s regular income, no improvements or repairs were made to provide comfort for visitors. In the “Balkan” cinema, the seats were old and uncomfortable, the walls were in a dreadful state, and the balcony used was “dangerous.” On the other hand, the “Culture” cinema was permeated with a bad odor and moisture<sup>28</sup>.

In early 1942, the management of the “Dorostol” community center launched a campaign to open its own cinema (Simeonova 2018: 143 – 144). In doing so, they hoped to provide a suitable venue for movie enthusiasts in the town, while securing a steady, reliable source of income to implement their cultural and educational programs. An appeal was made in the newspaper “Upsurge” to the community center members and citizens, urging them to make donations for the establishment of the community center cinema. The reasons why their support was needed were

<sup>24</sup> The report was presented at a meeting of the "Philology" section of the 62nd International Scientific Conference "New Industries, Digital Economy, Society - Projections of the Future - VI", held at the Silistra Branch of Ruse University "A. Kanchev", on October 27, 2023 with the original title in Bulgarian: КИНОТО В СИЛИСТРА (1940 - 1958)

<sup>25</sup> Upsurge, Silistra, № 14, April 18th 1941; There again, № 38, October 1st 1941.

<sup>26</sup> The "Orient" Hotel is closely connected to the culture of Silistra. In its lounge, the first theatrical performance in the city took place. At the beginning of the 20th century, the first cinema was opened here. During the Romanian occupation, it was used for performances by the Bulgarian theatrical troupe and concerts by the "Sedyanka" choir. Today, at this location on "February 10<sup>th</sup>" street, a residential block has been built.

<sup>27</sup> The building housing the "Culture" cinema is located in the central part of the city of Silistra. Today, at this location, stands the building of the Regional Library.

<sup>28</sup> Upsurge, Silistra, № 32, August 22<sup>nd</sup> 1941; There again, № 38, October 1<sup>st</sup> 1941.

brief and substantiated: “For two years now, our community center has been living a free life, but it is extremely poor. Without secure funds, it cannot catch up not only with other community centers but also fails to fully develop its educational programs and its cultural mission. Without funds, new books and magazines cannot be acquired or maintained, a librarian and the essential staff cannot be supported, nor is it possible to invite renowned storytellers – professors and scholars throughout the year to be heard by the community [...] All those [citizens] who donate more than 1000 leva will be declared benefactor members of the community center, and their names will be published in the local newspaper.”<sup>29</sup>

The municipality’s leadership responded to the appeal. Mayor Ivan Dochev and his deputy Boris Kodzhabashev, along with the management of the community center represented by Dragan Bobchev and the priest Yanko Bachvarov, managed to secure one of the halls at the Military Club for the community center’s cinema, facilitated by Colonel Hristo Kozarov – the head of the Silistra garrison. A ten-year lease agreement was signed for the venue<sup>30</sup>.

In order to adapt the hall for the cinema, substantial renovations were needed. To carry out these renovations and purchase a film projector, the management of the “Dorostol” community center entered into an agreement with Popular Bank – Silistra for a loan of 500 000 leva. The funds were not sufficient to purchase sturdy and comfortable seats, so the management addressed a letter of request to the community center members and residents of Silistra “to contribute material aid according to their abilities.”<sup>31</sup>

Residents of Silistra responded to the call for additional funds. Among the first donors were: Popular Bank – 10 000 leva, Haralambi Ivanov Ninov – 2000 leva, Petar Teodorov – 2000 leva, Yordan Yordanov – 1500 leva, Atanas Nedelchev – 1500 leva, Dragan Bobchev – 1200 leva, Yordan Kiryakov – 1000 leva, Boris Kodzhabashev – 1000 leva, Atanas Maximov – 1000 leva<sup>32</sup>. A beautiful wall clock for the community center’s cinema was donated by the Silistra goldsmith Vasil Manchev<sup>33</sup>.

By the end of 1942, the cinema hall was already completed and approved by the technical commission. The film projector was delivered and installed by the Sofia-based company “Dospat” AD<sup>34</sup>. The first screening was arranged for the movie “Trial”<sup>35</sup>. Boris R. Nyamcov was appointed as the cinema manager<sup>36</sup>.

The total arrangement and equipment of the cinema hall cost the “Dorostol” community center approximately 700 000 leva. Due to the enormous aid (material and service-related) provided by Colonel Hristo Kozarov, the head of the Silistra garrison, the community center administration declared him an honorary chairman<sup>37</sup>.

The grand opening of the community center’s cinema hall on February 21, 1943, became a significant event in Silistra’s cultural life. All official figures in the city attended, including the mayor, the garrison commander, the community center’s management, teachers, officials, and citizens. The city’s priests performed a blessing ceremony for the new cinema hall. Dragan Bobchev, the chairman of the community center, spoke on the topic “Community Center and Cinema,” emphasizing the significant “negative and positive” impact of cinema, defining it as a great cultural asset and acquisition. Plans were made for the income from it to become a “secure feather” to arrange future spaces for a library, reading room, and more<sup>38</sup>.

<sup>29</sup> Upsurge, № 93, October 23<sup>rd</sup> 1942.

<sup>30</sup> Upsurge, № 79, July 17<sup>th</sup> 1942; State Archive – Silistra, f. 94 K, op. 1, a.e. 31, l. 31.

<sup>31</sup> Upsurge, № 93, October 23<sup>rd</sup> 1942.

<sup>32</sup> Upsurge, № 97, November 20<sup>th</sup> 1942; There again, № 98, November 27<sup>th</sup> 1942.

<sup>33</sup> Upsurge, № 109, February 12<sup>th</sup> 1943.

<sup>34</sup> State Archive – Silistra, f. 94 K, op. 1, a.e. 34, l. 68; Upsurge, № 99, December 4<sup>th</sup> 1942; There again, № 194, January 7<sup>th</sup> 1942.

<sup>35</sup> “Trial” is a Bulgarian-Hungarian feature film from 1942 directed by Hrisan Tsankov, with a screenplay by Georgi Antonov. The cinematographer is Barnabas Hegyi. The music in the film is composed by Georgi Antonov and Peter Fenesh.; Upsurge, № 111, February 26<sup>th</sup> 1943.

<sup>36</sup> State Archive – Silistra, f. 249, op. 1, a.e. 3, l. 33; There again, f. 94 K, op. 1, a.e. 34, l. 68.

<sup>37</sup> Upsurge, № 111, February 26<sup>th</sup> 1943.

<sup>38</sup> Upsurge, № 111, February 26<sup>th</sup> 1943.

The owner of the two private cinemas (“Balkan” and “Culture”), Boris Nikolov Todorov, took legal action to halt the community center’s cinema. In response, the management of the community center, citing Article 7 of the Law on People’s Community Centers, which specified preferential treatment for community center cinemas in settlements with a population below 20,000 inhabitants, filed complaints in September 1943 to the Ministry of Public Education, the National Propaganda Directorate, and the Supreme Community Center Union to close the two private cinemas<sup>39</sup>. However, this did not happen, and all three cinemas continued to operate in the city (Simeonova 2018: 143 – 144, 350 – 351)<sup>40</sup>.

Despite significant difficulties, the cinema contributed revenue (from film screenings) of 605 028 leva to the “Dorostol” community center<sup>41</sup>, supporting a more successful cultural and educational activity. However, the generated income was insufficient for the planned construction of its own building.

After 1944, recognizing the significance of cinema as a powerful propaganda tool (Mincheva 2020: 327 – 329), the authorities under the control of the Bulgarian Workers’ Party (BRP) /Communists/ began imposing censorship in cinema by enacting the Cinema Culture Act in 1946. Its main goal was to establish the state’s monopoly over the import, export, and distribution of films. On April 5, 1948, the Cinematography Act was adopted (repealing the Cinema Culture Act), which led to the nationalization of private cinemas. The law demonstrated the repressive mechanisms that would govern the seventh art. The first article of this legislative act set forth the message: “Cinematography in the country is a state monopoly”<sup>42</sup>. It diminished reliance on personal initiative and creative impulse.

In reality, with the 1948 law, the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP) took control of cinema in Bulgaria and outlined its future vision through decrees, regulations, and other subsidiary legislative documents. At the Fifth Congress of the BCP in December of that year, socialist realism was declared the only correct method of artistic creation<sup>43</sup>. Under the ideological control of the BCP, strict censorship was enforced (Statulov 2022). The production of so-called socialist cinema began, introducing a new genre of films dedicated to socialist construction in Bulgaria. These films aimed to portray the images of the new people – the heroes of labor – on screen<sup>44</sup>. Soviet films were massively screened, not only depicting life in Soviet socialist society but also aiming to “mobilize millions of workers.”

In November 1948, in connection with the implementation of the Cinematography Act, the National Committee for Cinematography (KNIK) mandated that all existing cinemas in the country must re-register with the state enterprise “Bulgarian Cinematography” within a three-month period and obtain new permits<sup>45</sup>. Mobile cinemas were given one month to comply. Cinemas failing to acquire permits within this period would not be allowed to screen films<sup>46</sup>. The thesis was proclaimed that “our cinema serves the party, and by serving the party, it directly serves the people.”

In its efforts to win over the Muslim religious community, the government made some concessions in its favor. In January 1948, it acquired the “Culture” cinema, hoping to improve its financial situation<sup>47</sup>. Despite the enactment of the Nationalization Act and the subsequent

<sup>39</sup> State Archive – Siliстра, f. 94 K, op. 1, a.e. 34, l. 42.

<sup>40</sup> There again, l. 16, l. 42; State Archive – Siliстра, f. 94 K, op. 1, a.e. 33, l. 9.

<sup>41</sup> State Archive – Siliстра, f. 94 K, op. 1, a.e. 37, l. 9-19.

<sup>42</sup> State Gazette, issue 78, April 4<sup>th</sup> 1948.

<sup>43</sup> Resolution of the Fifth Congress of the Bulgarian Communist Party on Marxist-Leninist Education and the Struggle on the Ideological Front – A Historical Overview, 1948-1949, 3-4, p. 379.

<sup>44</sup> Proceedings of the Presidium of the National Assembly, issue 15 from February 19<sup>th</sup> 1952 г.

<sup>45</sup> State Gazette, issue 271, November 18<sup>th</sup> 1948.

<sup>46</sup> State Archive – Siliстра, f. 2 Б, op. 1, a.e. 45, l. 154.

<sup>47</sup> In 1946, Boris Nikolov Todorov, the owner of the film projectors, was held accountable for illicit enrichment, but managed to prevent confiscation by providing a specified guarantee in bonds. In January 1948, the film projector and its inventory were leased to the Muslim Religious Community, and Boris Nikolov Todorov was appointed as the director of the “Culture” cinema; State Archive – Siliстра, f. 249, op. 1, a.e. 87, l. 78; There again, f. 249, op. 1, a.e. 41, л. 434; There again, f. 573, op. 2, a.e. 11, l. 5-6, l. 70; There again, f. 2 Б, op. 1, a.e. 42, l. 18.

Cinematography Act (April 1948), it retained its right to use it. This was accomplished with the assistance of the Chairman of the Muslim Religious Community, member of the Bureau of the Okoliyski Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party, and People's Representative Bilyal Durmazov, who insisted before the Committee for Science, Art, and Culture to make an exception by leaving the film equipment at their disposal<sup>48</sup>. By 1951, the revenues of the Muslim community in Silistra from the cinema amounted to 1 100 869 leva<sup>49</sup>.

In the early '50s, Silistra hosted two cinemas: "Dorostol" (referred to as the community center cinema, managed by Boris R. Nyamzov as cashier) and "Culture" (referred to as the Turkish cinema, operated by the Turkish Muslim Religious Community, directed by Boris Nikolov Todorov).

On weekdays, the cinemas had two screenings at 18:00 and 20:00, while on Sundays and holidays, they had three screenings at 16:00, 18:00, and 20:00<sup>50</sup>. They exclusively screened Soviet films and a very small number from other countries within the socialist bloc, along with Bulgarian movies. In 1950, "Dorostol" screened 91 films, of which 77 were Soviet, 13 were from other "democratic countries" (Polish, Czechoslovak, Hungarian), and 1 was Bulgarian. "Culture" screened 92 films, with 75 Soviet and 17 from "other democratic countries"<sup>51</sup>. To ensure attendance targets, both cinema directors organized collective visits for films by the workers' clubs and enterprises. Individual visits by high school students were prohibited; they could attend a film only if part of a group visit<sup>52</sup>. There were extensive report presentations and public discussions about films. For this purpose, "agitprop" agents for Soviet films were appointed to the cinema staff<sup>53</sup>. Their goal was not only to promote these films but also to ensure their viewership<sup>54</sup>.

The local party leadership, realizing that "today cinema is undoubtedly one of the greatest factors in the re-education of our people"<sup>55</sup>, assesses the achievements of cinemas as insufficient. There are also many complaints about uncultured service. This is explained by the fact that "people who are not suitable for work in an educational institution, both in terms of education and labor qualities, work as employees in cinemas"<sup>56</sup>. Both cinemas regularly receive complaints about the "irregular power supply," which often leads to frequent interruptions in projections<sup>57</sup>.

Efforts by the authorities to change the aesthetic and artistic taste of citizens towards the proposed films through public discussions are not justified. Cinema attendance does not improve even after appointing regular artists to create posters for better film promotion. Only films with adventure plots, such as "A Song for Man" and "Flag in the Mountains," have good revenue and are attended by over 8000 viewers (1954)<sup>58</sup>.

Although the villages of Popina and Babuk had purchased narrow film projectors, they weren't able to use them because they weren't electrified. This prompted the Okoliyski Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP) to insist on providing the so-called mobile cinema, with which "90% of the agitation and explanatory work" for achieving high yields in the People's Agricultural Cooperatives (TKZS) "would be done by the cinema." The goal was to "visually" demonstrate the experience of the Soviet Union to the surrounding villagers. "A huge role" in this is attributed to films such as "Generous Summer," "The Knight of the Golden Star," and others, "in which the collective farm life and the attitude of the collective farmers towards state events are vividly and naturally shown"<sup>59</sup>. In November 1950, the mobile cinema of the Polish Embassy was

<sup>48</sup> State Archive – Silistra, f. 573, op. 2, a.e. 11, l. 12.

<sup>49</sup> There again, l. 47.

<sup>50</sup> There again, l. 6.

<sup>51</sup> State Archive – Silistra, f. 2 Б, op. 1, a.e. 129, l. 14.

<sup>52</sup> State Archive – Silistra, f. 2 Б, op. 1, a.e. 128, l. 23.

<sup>53</sup> Abbreviated term for an agitator-propagandist.

<sup>54</sup> State Archive – Silistra, f. 573, op. 2, a.e. 11, l. 39.

<sup>55</sup> State Archive – Silistra, f. 2 Б, op. 1, a.e. 128, l. 22.

<sup>56</sup> State Archive – Silistra, f. 249, op. 1, a.e. 87, l. 79.

<sup>57</sup> State Archive – Silistra, f. 2 Б, op. 1, a.e. 128, l. 23.

<sup>58</sup> State Archive – Silistra, f. 249, op. 1, a.e. 87, l. 79, l. 82.

<sup>59</sup> State Archive – Silistra, f. 2 Б, op. 1, a.e. 129, l. 14.

sent to the region, screening the film "Flight" in the villages of Alfatar, Babuk, Ishirkovo, and Stanchevo (Kalipetrovo)<sup>60</sup>.

It seems that the efforts of the party's ideological department to use cinema as a "powerful means of agitation" yielded results, as in October 1956, the local official newspaper, "Silistra Tribune," published material with the title "Great Success for Cinematization." It becomes clear that for the first 9 months of 1956, the Cinematization Management in Silistra (headed by Boris Nyamtsov) "registered a massive success," and the plan exceeded expectations both in terms of audience and revenue. During this period, urban and rural cinemas were visited by a total of 350 434 people. Urban cinemas organized 364 group visits with 31 017 people, 129 discussions with 5,070 people, and 7 film lectures attended by 760 visitors. The rural cinema network (including 7 stationary and 2 mobile cinemas for the surrounding population<sup>61</sup>) organized 390 group visits with 46 574 people, 104 discussions with 14 622 people, and 11 conferences with 1037 people<sup>62</sup>. It is not noted that the increase is mainly due to the compulsory organized visits to cinemas, often with entire projections purchased by enterprises and schools.

Despite multiple schedules for the takeover of the "Culture" cinema, the Muslim Religious Community managed to retain ownership. To justify the exclusion of the "Culture" cinema from the list of nationalized objects, the Muslim administration committed to persuade its community members to attend Soviet films<sup>63</sup>. Additionally, it allocated 10,000 BGN from its budget for the Bulgarian-Soviet Friendship event (October 1950)<sup>64</sup>. Considering the pressure from the Bureau of the Okoliyski Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party to conduct an action in the village of Iskra for "recruiting members for the People's Agricultural Cooperatives" (July 1955) as a "duty," the Muslim community accepted it<sup>65</sup>.

In May 1956, the State Cinematization insists that the nationalization of the "Culture" cinema should be completed because, according to its calculations, the revenues could support approximately 9 more cinemas in the surrounding areas. The head of the local state cinema "Dorostol" had already made a proposal to the State Cinematization management about which villages should be cinematized (Vetren, Iskra, etc.). A meeting was organized with the activists of the Turkish community, during which they were "explained the significance of nationalization" of the "Culture" cinema. The leaders of the Turkish community in the city "seriously opposed and did not give their consent, as they had been supported by its revenues until now"<sup>66</sup>. Only after the decision of the Town People's Council to build on the site of the so-called Cultural House (now the Regional Library) was it ordered that the cinema equipment and inventory be handed over to the district administration "Cinematization" (August 1957).<sup>67</sup>

In 1959, under the management of the District Enterprise "Cinematization" in the Silistra district, 31 cinemas were operating, including 4 in Silistra and 3 in Tutrakan<sup>68</sup>. Regular film projectors on wide film reels were operational in 9 villages. Another 15 cinemas had narrow film reels and served villages without stationary cinemas. The "Cinematization" enterprise aimed to organize, lead, and control the cinema network in the district, educating those working in a socialist spirit through cinema. To accomplish this task, 327 cinema organizers worked at the enterprise, responsible for organizing group visits, film discussions, and film lectures<sup>69</sup>.

<sup>60</sup> State Archive – Silistra, f. 2 Б, op. 1, a.e. 128, l. 24.

<sup>61</sup> Silistra Tribune, II, № 48, December 4<sup>th</sup> 1957.

<sup>62</sup> Silistra Tribune, I, № 44, October 19<sup>th</sup> 1956.

<sup>63</sup> State Archive – Silistra, f. 573, op. 2, a.e. 11, l. 39.

<sup>64</sup> There again, l. 41.

<sup>65</sup> There again, l. 104.

<sup>66</sup> State Archive – Silistra, f. 2 Б, op. 1, a.e. 267, l. 265.

<sup>67</sup> There again, l. 42, l. 67, l. 110, l. 124.

<sup>68</sup> In 1960, their number increased to 33 stationary and 12 mobile cinemas. The state policy is to have a cinema hall in every village. State Archive – Silistra, f. 547, op. 2, a.e. 11, l. 115-116, l. 124; Silistra Tribune, № 40, May 21<sup>st</sup> 1960.

<sup>69</sup> Silistra Tribune, № 47, August 1<sup>st</sup> 1959.

## CONCLUSION

The preference of the people of Silistra for cinema can be inferred from the fact that after the return of Southern Dobrudja in 1940, the city saw the opening of three cinemas (two private and one cultural center cinema). Besides serving as venues for film screenings, the cinema halls transformed into centers of cultural and educational life in the city. Literary and musical events, parent-teacher meetings, informative gatherings, concerts, performances, lectures on various educational topics, and celebrations organized by children from elementary schools were held in these venues. The high public approval of the cinema's role in cultural life is evident in the support given by the people of Silistra for the opening of the cultural center cinema "Dorostol."

After the communist takeover in 1944, cinema primarily functioned as a propaganda tool. This is evidenced by the films available for the citizens to watch, with a predominance of Soviet films—mainly about World War II and depicting life in the Soviet socialist society. The authorities determined which films to broadcast and which to cease projecting. The main efforts were directed towards utilizing the potential of cinema for political agitation, and to reach a larger audience, so-called collective visits were introduced. Special attention was given to using cinema as a means of ideological education for the youth.

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