On February 20, 2014, Krassimira Daskalova, Professor of Modern European Cultural History at Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski, delivered the REEEC New Directions lecture entitled "A Woman Politician in the Cold War Balkans. From Biography to History: The Case of the Bulgarian Communist Functionary Tsola Dragoitcheva (1898-1993)."

In the beginning of her lecture, Professor Daskalova spoke about the tendency of Eastern European historiography to marginalize gender history and Western gender history scholars’ tendency to marginalize Eastern European gender history. She argued that exploring the gender history of Eastern Europe would expand the scope of historical inquiry, particularly in the fields of social and cultural history, history of everyday life, and transnational history. Professor Daskalova went on to state that political and diplomatic history cannot be regarded as gender-free or merely the realm of male agents, and that even topics like Stalinism, Cold War, or International Affairs cannot be adequately understood without considering gender as a category. Gender historians would greatly benefit from examining the gender aspects of Eastern European history, which would increase the breadth and accuracy of gender scholarship, as it would provide comparative perspective and decentralization.

According to Professor Daskalova, material scarcity has been an essential factor seriously affecting every aspect of women’s experience in Eastern Europe including women’s integration into the workforce, the struggle against male domination, as well as other crucial factors of gender history scholarship. In her opinion, women played an extraordinarily active role in building state socialist economies, but their perceptions of the meaning of women’s participation in societies differed sharply with the perceptions of Western gender scholarship.

Professor Daskalova noted the increasing importance of oral history, as it reveals that women had embraced new socialist identities which gave them positions of authority in their respective societies, where socialism was not simply an abstract ideology or a failed experiment, but an uplifting experience. Though we can indeed see oral history as an interesting field of study that enriches our understanding of the historical record, I would argue that the scholarship on oral history in post-1944 Bulgaria should include the accounts of the many victims – male and female – of the communist regime. A good start would be Atanas Kiriakov’s documentary on the survivors of the Bulgarian communist forced labor camps entitled The Survivors: Camp Tales, available at the REEEC Library as well as online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K40PUGl_4U0 (with the accounts of female inmates at 36:17 and especially at 50:00).

With the Bulgarian communist regime’s human rights record and economic performance in mind, it seems unclear to me how the building of state socialism in Bulgaria could be considered an uplifting experience in any respect, except for officials like Dragoitcheva. While Nazi terror and crimes have been universally condemned, the Eastern European communist regimes’ state-organized terror practices and crimes against humanity are still little known. In addition to the above-mentioned documentary, there are some texts from
western scholars who have examined the 1944-1955 experience in Bulgaria, such as the account of the Ethridge Mission in Bulgaria[1], as well as John Horner's article on Nikola Petkov's trial and execution in 1947[2], although this period generally remains under-researched.

Professor Daskalova noted Tsola Dragoitcheva's involvement in the 1925 terrorist bombing of the St. Nedelya Church in Sofia, but not the fact that the incident is one of the worst acts of terrorism of the early 20th century with over 150 dead, mostly among the civilian population, and hundreds of wounded. In addition to Ms. Dragoitcheva's direct involvement in the bombing, she was among the executioners of communist assassinations prior to the September 9, 1944 Coup, as well as one of the main leaders of the Bulgarian Communist Party and government after that. The anti-Fascist German journalist Wolfgang Bretholz reported that she had taken pleasure in her direct participation in one of the most horrific mass killings after the People's Tribunals' kangaroo trials – the mass execution of 25 regents and ministers, eight counselors, and sixty seven former representatives in parliament in February 1945.

[3]

Professor Daskalova defended an anthropological approach that treats people as individuals, rather than as members of groups and organizations, which would allow historians to better understand the reactions of men and women to historical events. While I agree with this point, I would add that research from a gender studies perspective on this period of Eastern European and Bulgarian history should not exclude the numerous accounts of the regime's female victims. Certainly, Professor Daskalova's work on Tsola Dragoitcheva represents only one part of her larger project, but the conclusions she draws and the sources she consulted (including the official archives of the Bulgarian People's Women Union, the Bulgarian Communist Party, and Women's International Democratic Federation, along with the published memories of Tsola Dragoitcheva) regarding the emancipator aspect of communist policies toward women would likely alter with a broader range of sources. Further research into oral history and biographic sources would bring to our attention other, less compromised female historical figures who were not involved in mass killings and official communist politics like Ms. Dragoitcheva. Their accounts examined in comparison with Tsola Dragoitcheva's case would give us a broader and more accurate picture of women's changed roles in post-1944 Bulgaria.

Hristo Alexiev is an M.A. student in Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies. A native of Sofia, Bulgaria, he has pursued Balkan Studies and East European and Eurasian Studies at the Sofia University, North Harris College, University of Houston and the University of Texas at Austin. He is also a graduate of the Music Department of Sofia University. Before being accepted into the MA program at REEEC on a FLAS fellowship in 2012, Hristo worked in Kosovo for five months in 2011, providing linguistic support to the US troops in KFOR. A recipient of the FLAS 2012 Summer Fellowship and the Boren Fellowship, Hristo studied in Turkey at Boğaziçi University during the 2012-2013 academic year. His acceptance of the Boren Fellowship includes an obligation to work for one year for the federal government. He hopes to pursue a career in the foreign service.
