



1944-1989

THE CAMPS

Political Repression in Communist Bulgaria

CONTENTS

I Bulgaria after 9 September 1944
how the repressive system was built

II The Goryani
the forgotten resistance

III How a person disappeared
the machinery of repression

IV The camp network
from the first hostels to the symbol of Belene

V Belene
the heart of the repressive system

VI The people
two lives

VII The Revival Process
the last great repression

VIII Memory
what remains after the camp is gone



CHAPTER I

I

Bulgaria after 9 September 1944

How the repressive system was built

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

CHAPTER I

On **9 September 1944** the Fatherland Front, dominated by the Bulgarian Workers' Party (Communists), took power in Bulgaria. In the years that followed, a rapid political transformation began:

- the dismantling of political pluralism;
- the destruction of independent opposition;
- the economy was nationalised;
- the courts were placed under political control;
- State Security was built up as the main instrument of political control.

The concentration camps did not appear suddenly.

They were the result of the step-by-step building of a totalitarian regime that turned punishment without trial into a tool of government.

These processes are well documented in the volumes published by the Dossier Commission, in the research of the Institute for Studies of the Recent Past, and in the teaching materials of the project Bulgaria 1944-1989.

THE PEOPLE'S COURT

CHAPTER I

One of the first instruments used against real and suspected opponents was the People's Court.

Operated from December 1944 to April 1945. Different sources give slightly different totals, and this should be said openly.

28,600

people arrested

9,100

sentences

2,730

death sentences

1,305

life sentences

Among those sentenced were ministers, members of parliament, officers, public figures, intellectuals and journalists.

Afterwards, opponents were increasingly interned by administrative order, forcibly resettled, or sent to Labour Education Hostels (TVO) - without any court sentence.

Not everyone sent to the camps was convicted of anything.

In many cases, internment was ordered by an administrative decision of the Ministry of the Interior, with **no trial at all** and it is exactly this practice that turned the camps **into an instrument of political control**.

farmers

members of the
opposition parties

members
of the
Legionary
movement;

army officers

intellectuals

members
of different faiths

priests

business owners

journalists

people simply described
as "socially dangerous"

Here we can break the
first myth - that the camps
were meant only for
"enemies of the people"

The connected system of control



As the researcher Borislav Skochev points out, the camps never existed on their own. They were only one part of the repressive system and alongside them stood:

- State Security;
- the prisons;
- forced resettlement;
- the network of informers;
- administrative internment.

It was the connection between these parts that allowed the regime to keep long-term control over society.

Concentration camps were not the beginning of repression, they were the point at which repression became an institution.



CHAPTER II

II

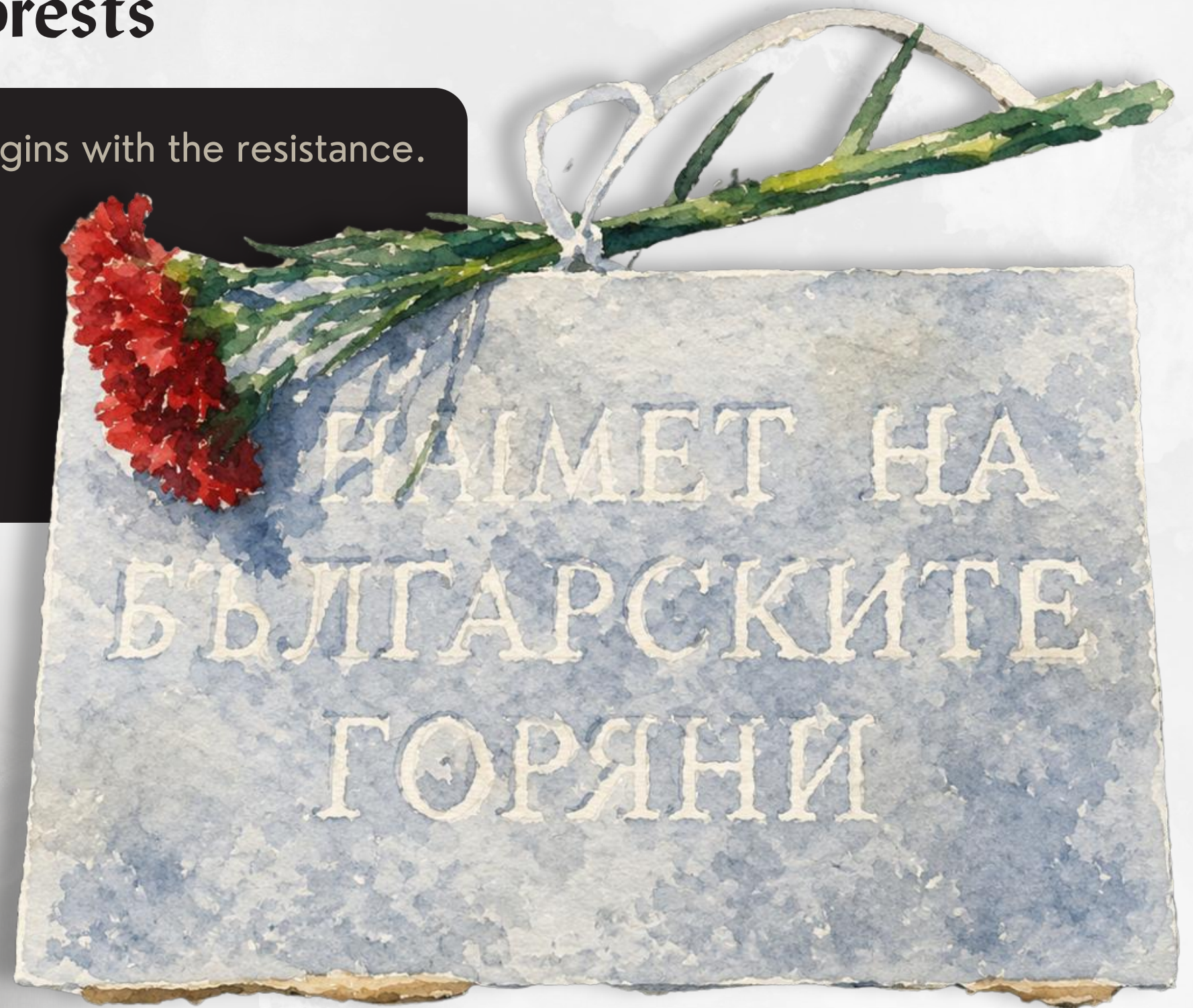
The Goryani

The forgotten resistance - the first organised armed anti-communist resistance in the Eastern Bloc

Resistance from the mountains and forests

The history of the camps does not begin with the camps, It begins with the resistance.

The appearance of the Goryani movement shows that communist rule in Bulgaria was not accepted without objection. The repressive apparatus, including the camps, grew precisely out of the state's effort to destroy every form of organised opposition.



WHO WERE THE GORYANI?

CHAPTER II

After the coup of **9 September 1944** and the establishment of communist rule, armed resistance to the new regime began to form.

Its members became known as the **Goryani** - a name that comes from the way they operated, since many of them hid and acted in mountain and forest areas.

In Bulgarian, "gora" means forest.

Historians describe the Goryani movement as the **first organised armed anti-communist resistance in the Soviet sphere of influence**, and as **one of the longest-lasting movements** of its kind in Eastern Europe. It began immediately after the communists came to power in 1944 and was finally crushed in the second half of the 1950s.

3,000+
Goryani fighters

10,000
people who helped them

WHO TOOK PART IN THE MOVEMENT?

CHAPTER II

One of the defining features of the Goryani is that they **were not a single political organisation**

Among the participants were:

- officers of the royal army;
- farmers and members of the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union;
- people who had lost their land to collectivisation;
- members of the political opposition;
- intellectuals;
- former partisans who had become disillusioned with the new regime;
- ordinary people whose families had already been repressed.

Why did the resistance appear?

- the repression that followed 9 September 1944;
- the work of the People's Court;
- the destruction of the political opposition;
- nationalisation and collectivisation;
- the growing powers of State Security;
- heavy restrictions on religious and public life.

It is important to stress that the Goryani movement was not a reaction to one particular act, but a reaction to the whole transformation of the state into a one-party totalitarian regime.

THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE RESISTANCE

CHAPTER II

Contrary to what is often assumed, the Goryani did not operate **in only one region.**

The largest concentration and the best organisation were in the **Sliven area** - some of the biggest and best documented Goryani groups were formed there.



Resistance across the country and how it was crushed

As early as the late 1940s the communist authorities launched large-scale operations to destroy the movement.

These involved:

- State Security;
- the People's Militia;
- army units;
- local networks of informers.

Archive documents show that operations against single Goryani bands were carried out with thousands of soldiers and Interior Ministry staff. In one operation in the Sliven area, around 13,000 police and military personnel were deployed against a single group.

Once the movement had been crushed, **arrest was not the end of the story.**

Many of those involved:

- received heavy prison sentences;
- were interned without trial in Labour Education Hostels;
- were sent to camps such as Belene;
- remained under State Security surveillance for years after their release.



*A well documented example is **Velichko Vele**v, who supported the Goryani movement while still a schoolboy. After his arrest in 1951 he was subjected to months of interrogation and violence, and was then sent to the Belene camp with no court sentence and no fixed term of internment. After his release he was arrested three more times and remained under State Security surveillance for the rest of his life.*

His full story is told in Chapter VI.



The camps did not emerge in a vacuum. They became part of a broader system designed to suppress organised resistance and eliminate political opposition.



CHAPTER III

III

How a person disappeared

The machinery of repression: surveillance, arrest, internment

The camps did not work on their own.

They were the last stage of a system that had been built step by step. Before a person reached Belene, he had already passed through surveillance, a case file, arrest and an administrative decision to intern him.

Belene is not the beginning of repression - it is its culmination

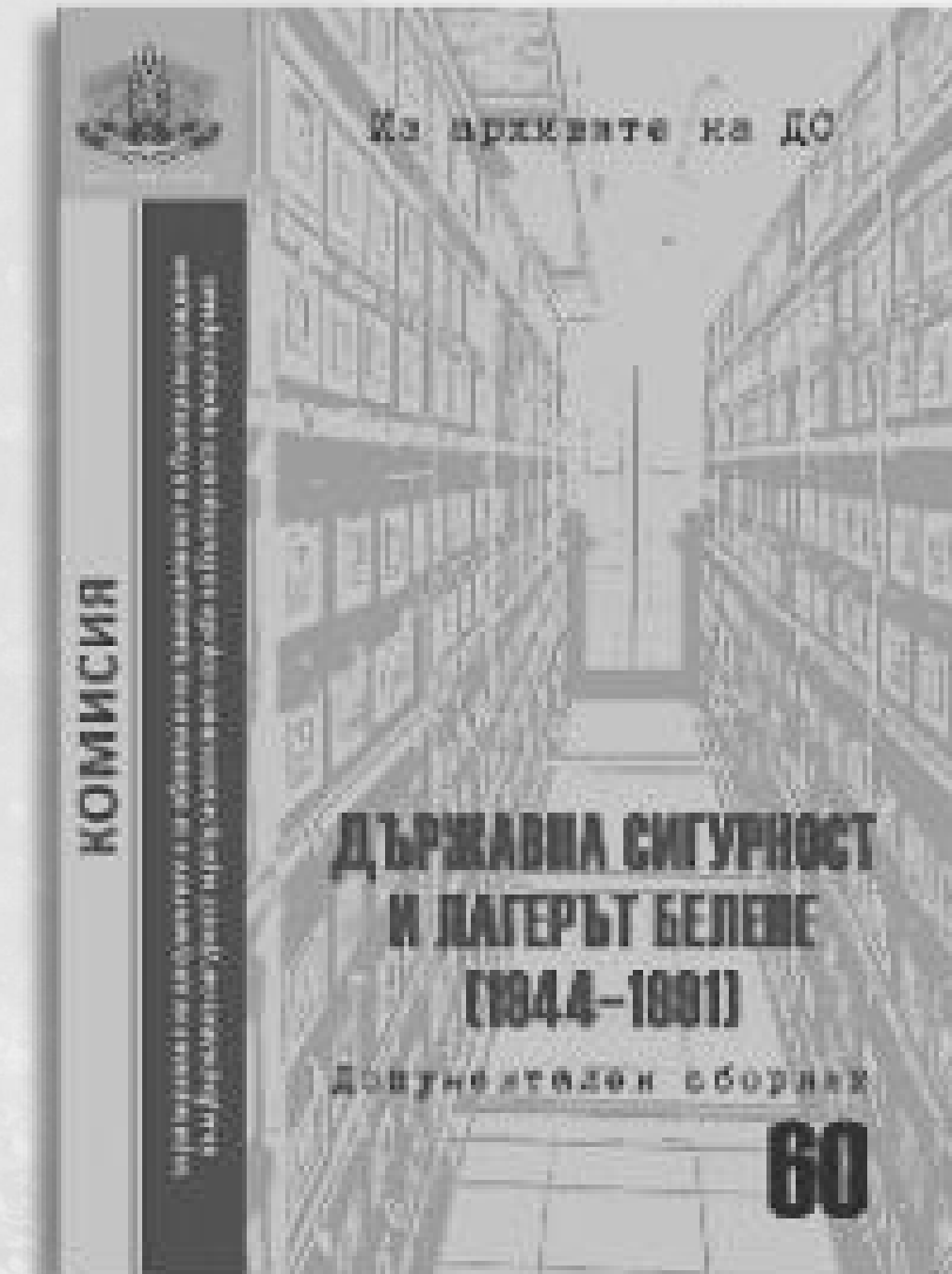


Repression began long before the arrest.

After 1944 State Security gradually built a wide system of surveillance over people described as “politically unreliable”.

These included:

- members of opposition parties;
- participants in the Goryani movement;
- clergy;
- intellectuals;
- farmers who resisted collectivisation;
- people with relatives abroad;
- anyone described as “socially dangerous”.



Information was collected through informers, observation, denunciations and operational case files.

THE ARREST

CHAPTER III

When State Security decided that a person was a threat to the regime, **detention followed.**

Depending on the case:

an investigation file might be opened;

a trial might be held

or the case might never reach a court at all.

*This is where one of the
most characteristic
features of the Bulgarian
system begins*

Many of those interned in Belene never received a court sentence.

Instead, an **administrative measure** was used: the Ministry of the Interior ordered that the person be interned in a **Labour Education Hostel (TVO)**.

The legal basis for this practice was created at the end of December 1944, with a decree-law on Labour Education Hostels. It allowed people described as politically or socially dangerous to be deprived of their liberty without any criminal sentence. It was on this basis that TVO Belene was created in April 1949.

This is fundamentally different from ordinary criminal law - loss of freedom became an administrative act.



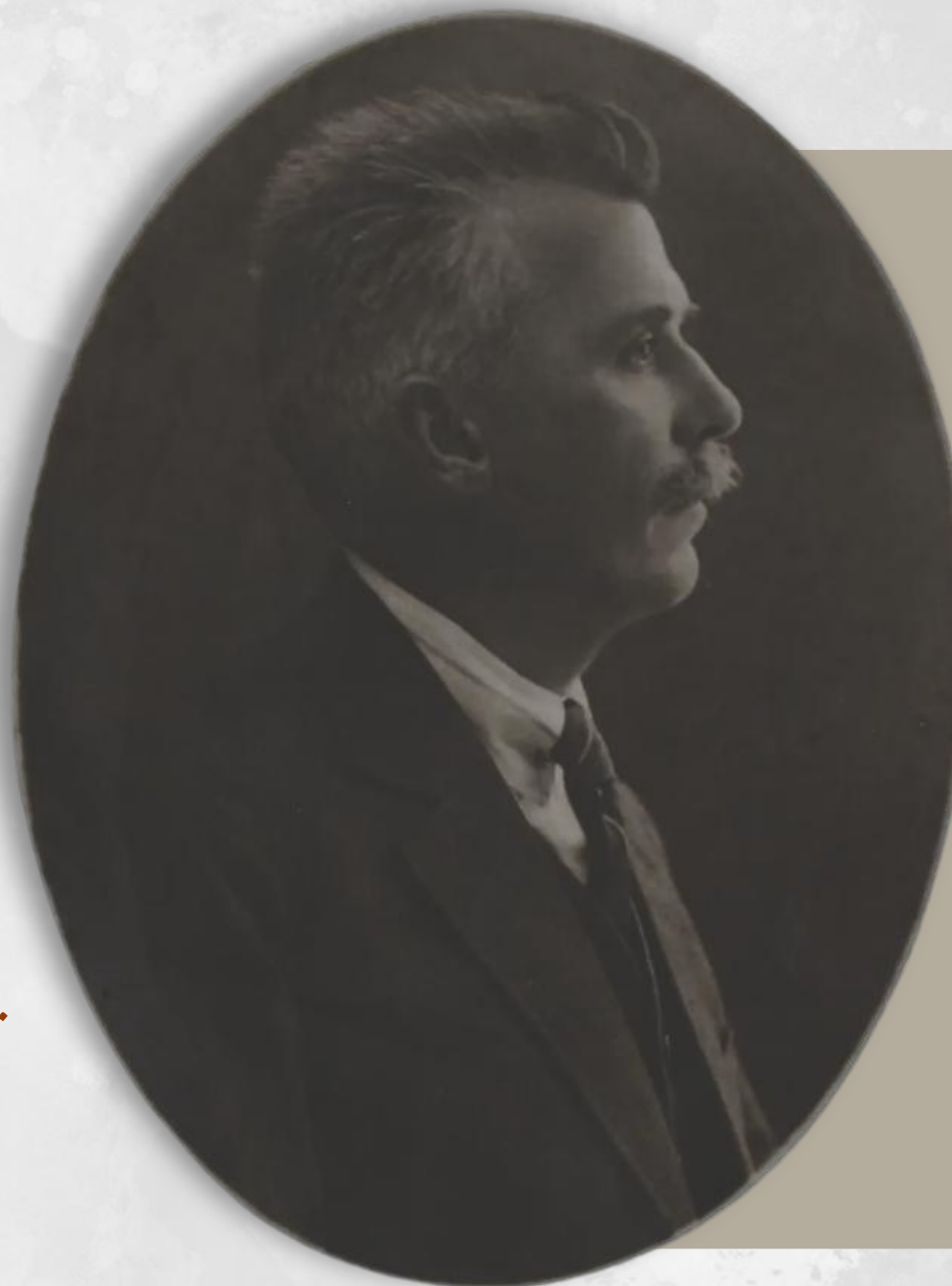
THE DOCUMENTS SPEAK

CHAPTER III

One of the great strengths of the archives is that they show how the system worked from the inside. The collections of the Dossier Commission contain:

- proposals for internment;
- decisions of the commissions attached to the Ministry of the Interior;
- lists of internees;
- petitions written by camp inmates;
- correspondence between the administration and the camp management

Documents like this show the administrative character of internment more clearly than any argument.



Alexander Girginov

in 1952 a commission of the Ministry of the Interior ordered the internment of Alexander Girginov - a former Minister of the Interior in the governments of the People's Bloc - in TVO Belene for a term of seven years. He died in the camp on 1 November 1953 and was posthumously rehabilitated by the Supreme Court in 1996. The decision is documented in the State Security archives.

After the administrative decision came transport under guard.

Survivors describe how, very often, they:

- did not know where they were being taken;
- arrived at the camp with no idea how long the internment would last;
- had no chance to tell their families.

This uncertainty was part of the mechanism of repression itself, and it repeats in testimony after testimony collected by the project Histories from Belene.

The repressive system does not begin with the camp. It begins the moment the state replaces the rule of law with administrative decision.



IV

CHAPTER IV

The camp network

From the first hostels to the symbol of Belene

CAMPS HISTORY

CHAPTER IV

When people talk about the communist camps in Bulgaria, usually only one name is mentioned - **Belene**. The historical documents show a different picture, as Belene **was not the first camp**, it was the culmination of a system that began to be built immediately after the communists came to power, and that took different forms in different years.

This is why understanding Belene means first understanding the development of the whole system.

THE FIRST LABOUR EDUCATION HOSTELS

CHAPTER IV

- 9 September 1944 • The Fatherland Front takes power
- December 1944 ● Decree-law on Labour Education Hostels
- 1945 • People's Court delivers its sentences
- 1945 ● Kutsiyan
- 1946 ● Bogdanov dol
- 1947 ● Bosna · Nozharevo · Lyubimets

After the decree-law on Labour Education Hostels was adopted at the end of 1944, the Ministry of the Interior began organising places of administrative internment.

They received people described as "politically unreliable" or "socially dangerous", often with no court sentence at all.

We are not talking about many camps existing side by side, but about the evolution of one repressive system.

BELENE – THE CREATION OF THE LARGEST CAMP

CHAPTER IV

On **27 April 1949**, by a secret decree of the Council of Ministers under Prime Minister Vasil Kolarov, TVO Belene was created on the island of Persin. The task was given to the Ministry of the Interior, which was granted control of Persin, Golyama Barzina, Malka Barzina and other Danube islands. The first group of about **300 interneees** was brought there in July 1949, from the Bogdanov dol camp.

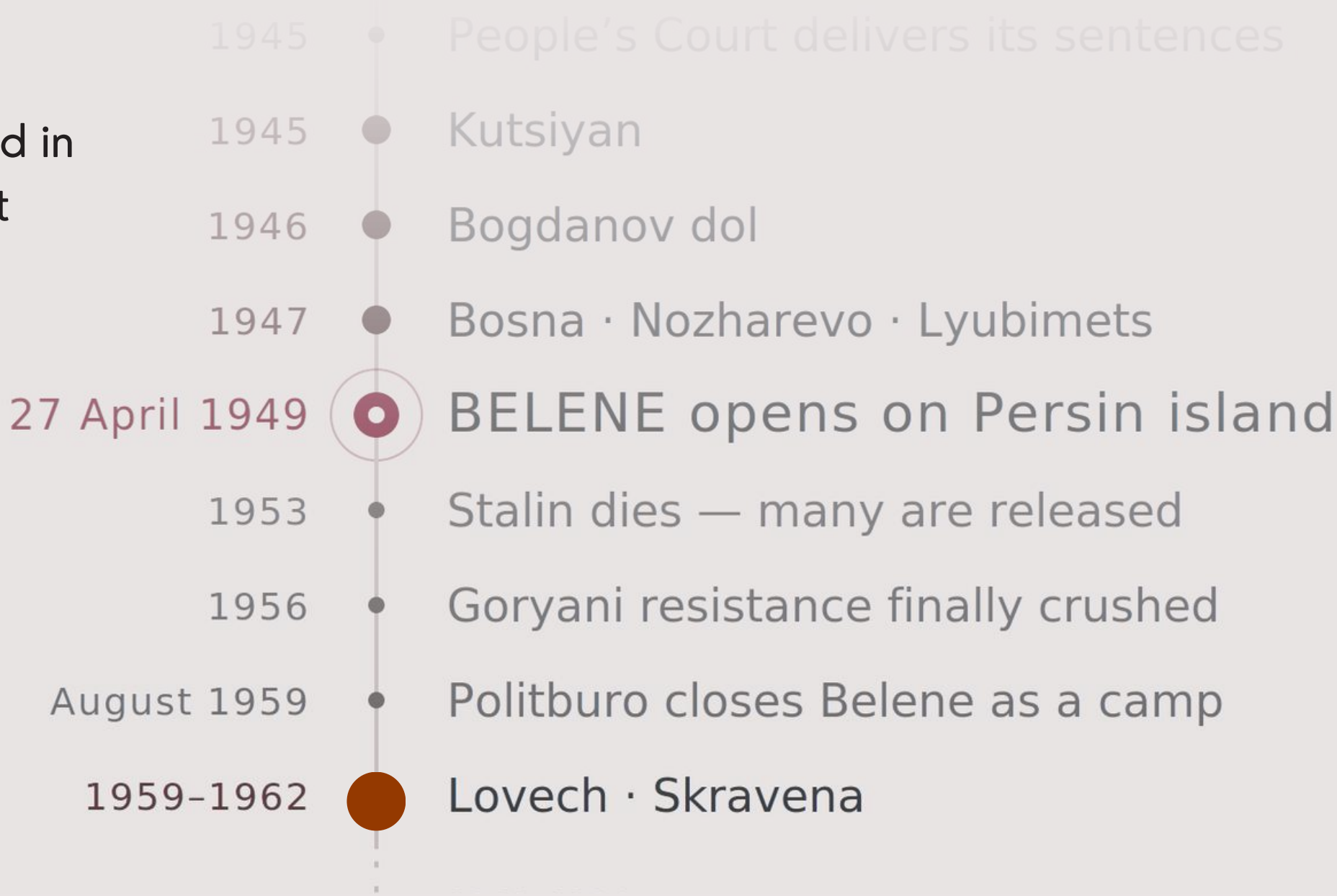


This shows that Belene did not start from nothing: it concentrated a system that already existed.

LOVECH – A NEW STAGE IN THE SYSTEM

In **August 1959**, after information about the camps appeared in the Western press, the Politburo of the Bulgarian Communist Party decided to close Belene as a camp for internees.

In the same year the camp known as **“Slanchev Bryag” (Sunny Beach) near Lovech** was created, with a women's section at Skravena. It operated until 1962. Historians treat it as a different stage in the development of the repressive system, marked by extremely hard forced labour in a stone quarry, systematic violence and a high death rate.



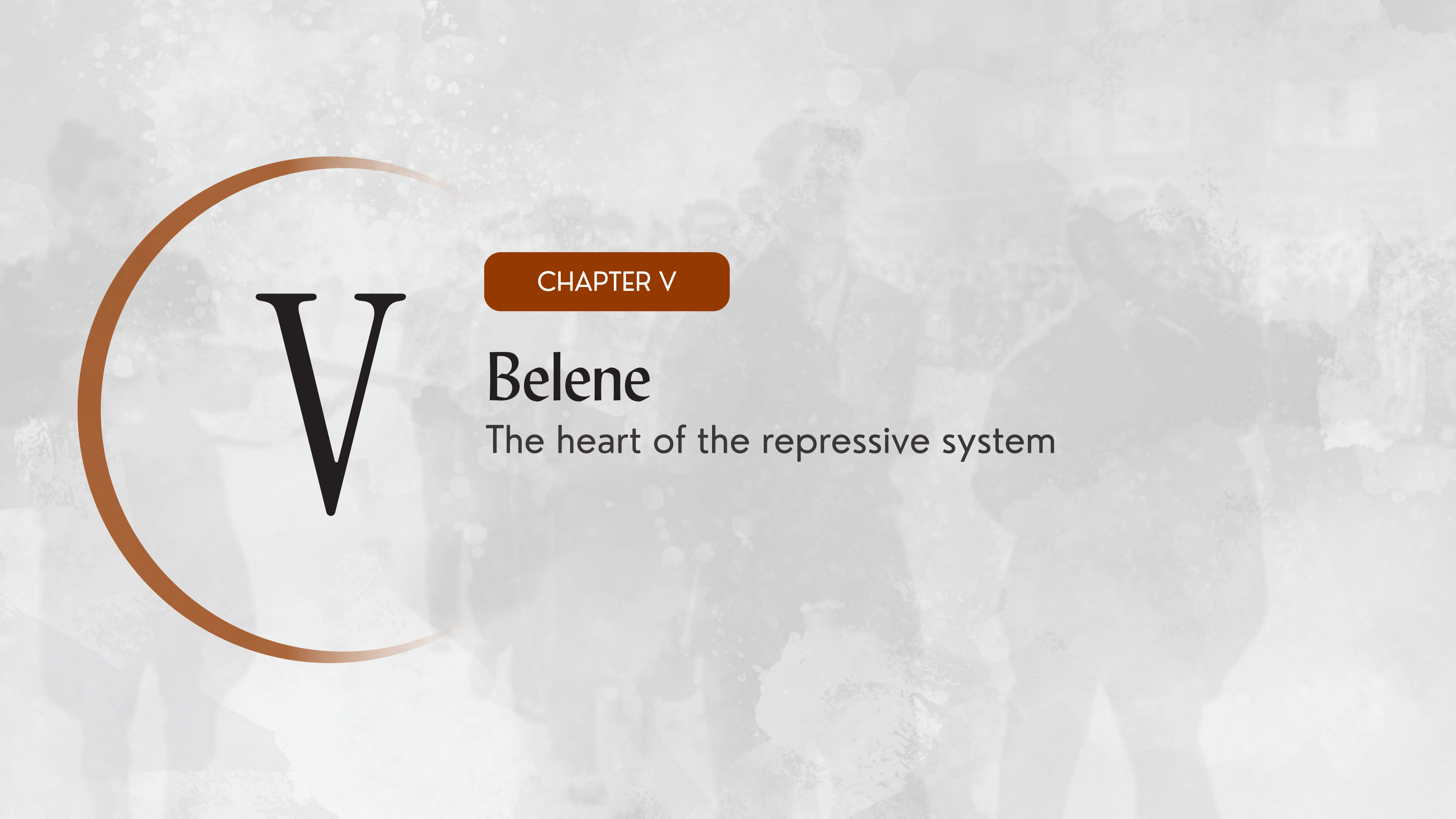
It's important to state that Lovech did not replace Belene, as it functioned differently.

BELENE IN 1985

CHAPTER IV



During the so-called Revival Process, the Belene camp was used again. **More than 500 Bulgarian Turks**, detained for resisting the forced change of their names, were held on the territory of the former Site 2. In April 1986 some of them went on hunger strike for thirty days. This is the natural bridge to the separate chapter on the Revival Process.

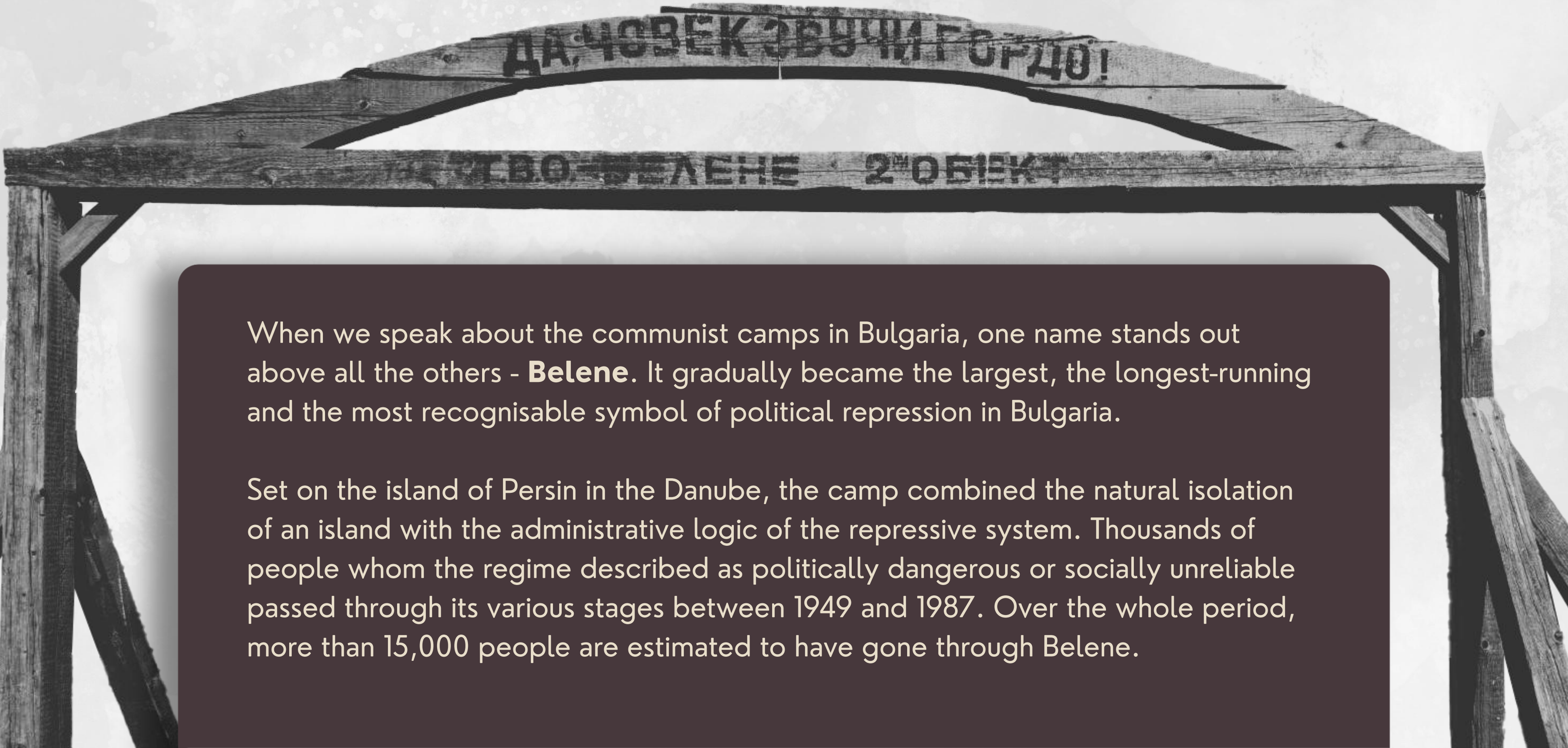


V

CHAPTER V

Belene

The heart of the repressive system



ДА, ЧОВЕК ЗВУЧИ ГОРДО!

ТВО-БЕЛЕНЕ 2-ОБЕКТ

When we speak about the communist camps in Bulgaria, one name stands out above all the others - **Belene**. It gradually became the largest, the longest-running and the most recognisable symbol of political repression in Bulgaria.

Set on the island of Persin in the Danube, the camp combined the natural isolation of an island with the administrative logic of the repressive system. Thousands of people whom the regime described as politically dangerous or socially unreliable passed through its various stages between 1949 and 1987. Over the whole period, more than 15,000 people are estimated to have gone through Belene.

WHY PERSIN ISLAND?

CHAPTER V

Natural isolation, administrative control

On 27 April 1949 the Council of Ministers decided to create a Labour Education Hostel on the island of Persin.

The largest Bulgarian island in the Danube offered natural isolation, limited access and the possibility of constant control. The river became a natural barrier, and the remoteness of the place became part of the mechanism of repression itself. Belene did not appear as an isolated institution - it concentrated a practice of administrative internment that already existed.

15,000+

people are estimated to have passed
through Belene, 1949–1987

The first internees arrived in July
1949, many of them transferred from
the Bogdanov dol camp.

WHY PERSIN ISLAND?

CHAPTER V

A map of the Belene archipelag

This map is drawn by former inmate Krum Horozov and entitled 'The Belene prison 1949-1962'. The latter is the year of the author's release after eleven years spent on the main island Persin. The two 'sites' of the camp are numbered; the cow farm and the pontoon bridge linking the island with the town are also visible.



The history of Belene is not uniform.

The camp went through different stages, reflecting the changing policy of the communist regime.

1949-1951

The first period began in 1949 and was aimed mainly at **political opponents**: members of the opposition, farmers, intellectuals, clergy and participants in the Goryani movement.

1952-1958

In 1952, at the height of the repressions, the camp held 2,323 people, including 75 women.

1959-1984

After it was closed as a camp for political internees in 1959, Belene stopped performing that function for a time, although the site continued to be used as a prison.

1985-1989

In 1985, during the Revival Process, the camp was used again this time to intern Bulgarian Turks who had opposed the forced change of their names. This continuity shows that, whatever the historical period, the camp remained a means of controlling, outside the courts, people the authorities saw as a threat.

Isolation, organised into a routine

The Space

Many people imagine a camp as simply a place surrounded by wire. In reality, Belene was a carefully organised space of isolation.

The internees were housed in wooden barracks in extremely poor conditions. The whole perimeter was guarded and movement was strictly controlled. The natural features of the island added to the sense of being cut off. In summer the heat, the dust and the mosquitoes made outdoor work an ordeal. In winter the damp, the cold and the thick Danube fog got into the barracks and contributed to the frequent illnesses described in survivors' testimony.

Everyday life

Life in Belene was organised around a strict regime. The day began early with roll-call and line-up, followed by forced labour - building and maintaining dykes, draining marshland, agricultural work, animal husbandry and other heavy physical tasks.

Survivors often say that the hardest thing was not the individual punishments but the endless repetition of the same day - labour, hunger, uncertainty, and no information about when, or whether, they would be released.

It was this routine that gradually destroyed the sense of time, of personal choice and of human autonomy.

Two sources, one picture

The conditions

The testimony of former internees is strikingly consistent:

- insufficient food;
- heavy physical labour;
- the lack of adequate medical care;
- the harsh climate led to exhaustion and frequent illness;

Many of those who survived Belene say that the consequences stayed with them for life - not only in their health, but in their families, their careers and their standing in society, which shows that repression did not end when a person left the camp.

The archives and the testimony

- Archives of the Ministry of the Interior and State Security show how the system worked.
- Survivor memories - collected by Borislav Skochev, Sofia Platform's Histories from Belene, and dozens of memoirs - show how it was lived.

Belene is not only a camp, it is the place where the repressive system acquires a human dimension. The archives show how it was organised and the testimony shows what it cost the people who had to live through it.



VI

CHAPTER VI

The people

Two personal experiences

Who was Velichko Velev?

Born 18 March 1933 in Boyana, Sofia. His father's restaurant was expropriated and the family's property confiscated; his father narrowly escaped execution and the family lived in a tent in their own yard. While still a schoolboy, Velichko began supporting the Goryani movement.

The arrest

Arrested in Sofia on **27 April 1951**, followed by six months of investigation with **systematic beating, starvation and abuse**. Sent to Belene in October 1951 - with no court sentence and no fixed term. He remained until September 1953.



“They demanded that we do our work, that we meet the quota... I was skin and bones and two eye sockets - that was me.”

“I never fell into despair... I had already accepted my fate. They told me openly that I would not come out of there alive.”

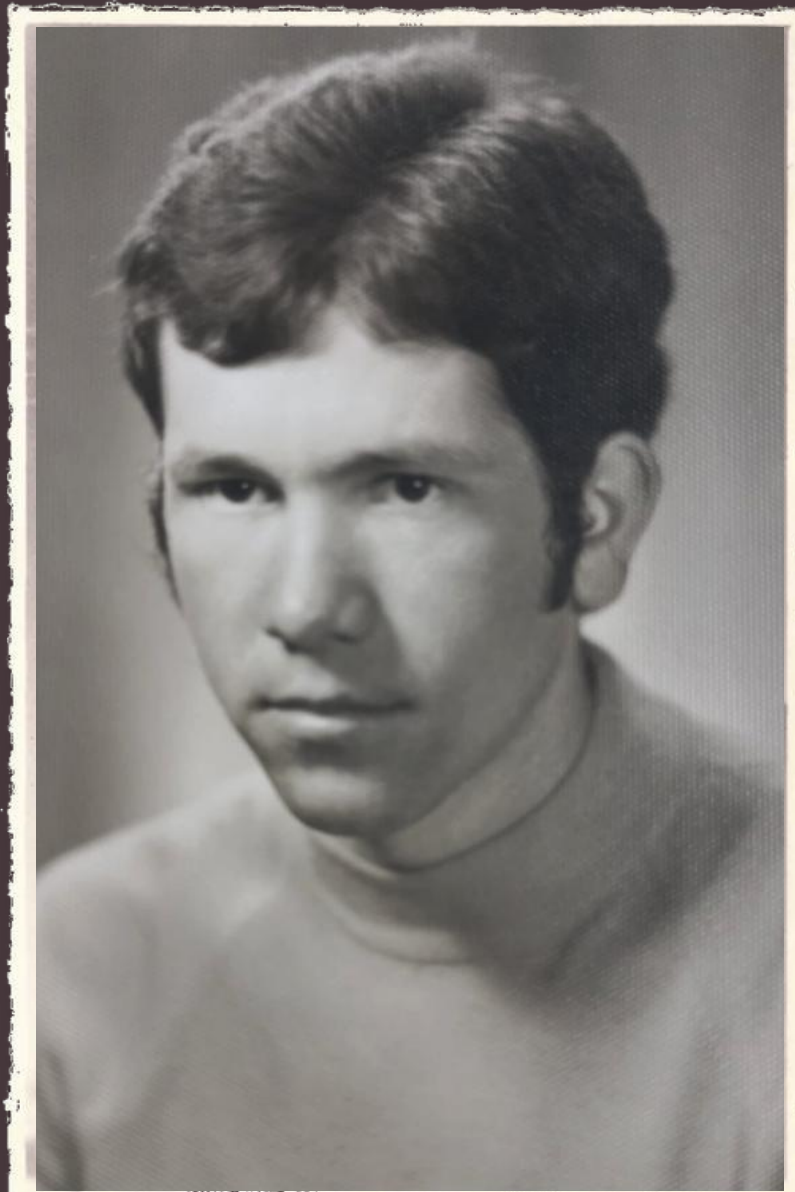
After release, arrested three more times on fabricated charges; watched by State Security for life. His family's property was never recovered.

Who was Mehmed Türker?

A Bulgarian citizen of **Turkish origin**, born 20 May 1950 in Sindeltsi, Kardzhali district. He studied Turkish philology at Sofia University and worked as a teacher. His friendship with Turkish writer and activist Yumer Osman Erendoruk brought him to the attention of State Security.

The arrest

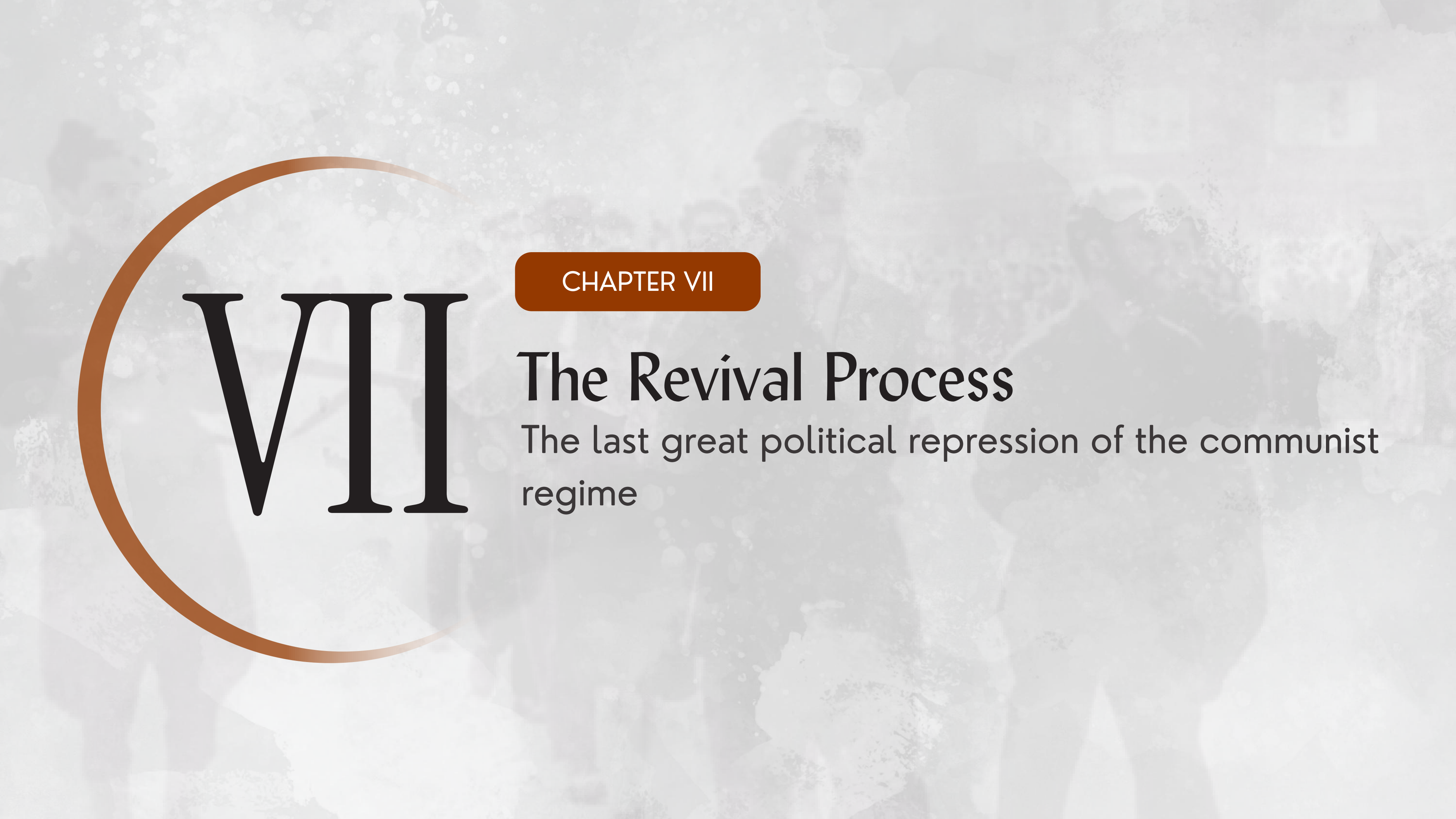
On **3 January 1985**, at the height of the Revival Process, he was arrested and interned in Belene. He was later moved to the camp near Bobov dol, and then forcibly resettled in a village in the Kyustendil region.



After Belene

In 1989 he was forced to leave Bulgaria during the so-called "**Big Excursion**".

He settled in Turkey, where he worked as a journalist for the newspaper Türkiye and wrote his memoirs. He covered the events of 1989 as a correspondent, and has **devoted much of his professional life** to documenting the forced assimilation and deportation of the Bulgarian Turks, in books, articles and a documentary film.



VII

CHAPTER VII

The Revival Process

The last great political repression of the communist regime

WHAT WAS THE REVIVAL PROCESS?

CHAPTER VII

Forced assimilation, 1984-1989

The name “Revival Process” is used for the policy of forcibly changing the names of Bulgarian Turks, begun at the end of 1984 and accompanied by restrictions on the use of the Turkish language, on traditional dress, on religious practice and on any public expression of ethnic identity. The policy was organised by state institutions and carried out under the direction of the Bulgarian Communist Party and the Ministry of the Interior.

850,000

people had their names changed against
their will

More than 1,000 were sent to prisons or
to the Belene camp



History repeats itself

One of the least known chapters in the history of the camp is its second use.

In 1985, more than 500 Bulgarian Turks were interned on Persin island, identified by the authorities as organisers or supporters of the resistance to the forced renaming. In April 1986 a number of them went on hunger strike for thirty days. Many of them were never tried in any court.

And here we see the same familiar mechanism:



Mehmed Türker was one of them.

BELENE'S SECOND USE

What does this period show?

The repressive system was not aimed at one political group. In different periods it was used against different parts of society:

- the political opposition;
- farmers;
- the Goryani;
- clergy;
- intellectuals;
- members of the Turkish minority.

The mechanism stayed almost unchanged - what changed were the people who became its victims.

Belene does not belong only to the history of the 1940s and 1950s. Its second use in 1985 shows that internment without trial remained part of state policy until the final years of the communist regime.





CHAPTER VIII

VIII

The Revival Process

The last great political repression of the communist regime

Memory

After the changes of 1989 the Belene camp ceased to exist as an instrument of political repression.

The real challenge begins with the questions - How does a society talk about its traumatic past? How does it preserve the memory of the people who were repressed? And what does justice mean when most of those responsible were never brought to court?

Breaking the Silence

In the first years after the end of the communist regime, the history of the camps remained little known outside a narrow circle of historians, journalists and the survivors themselves.

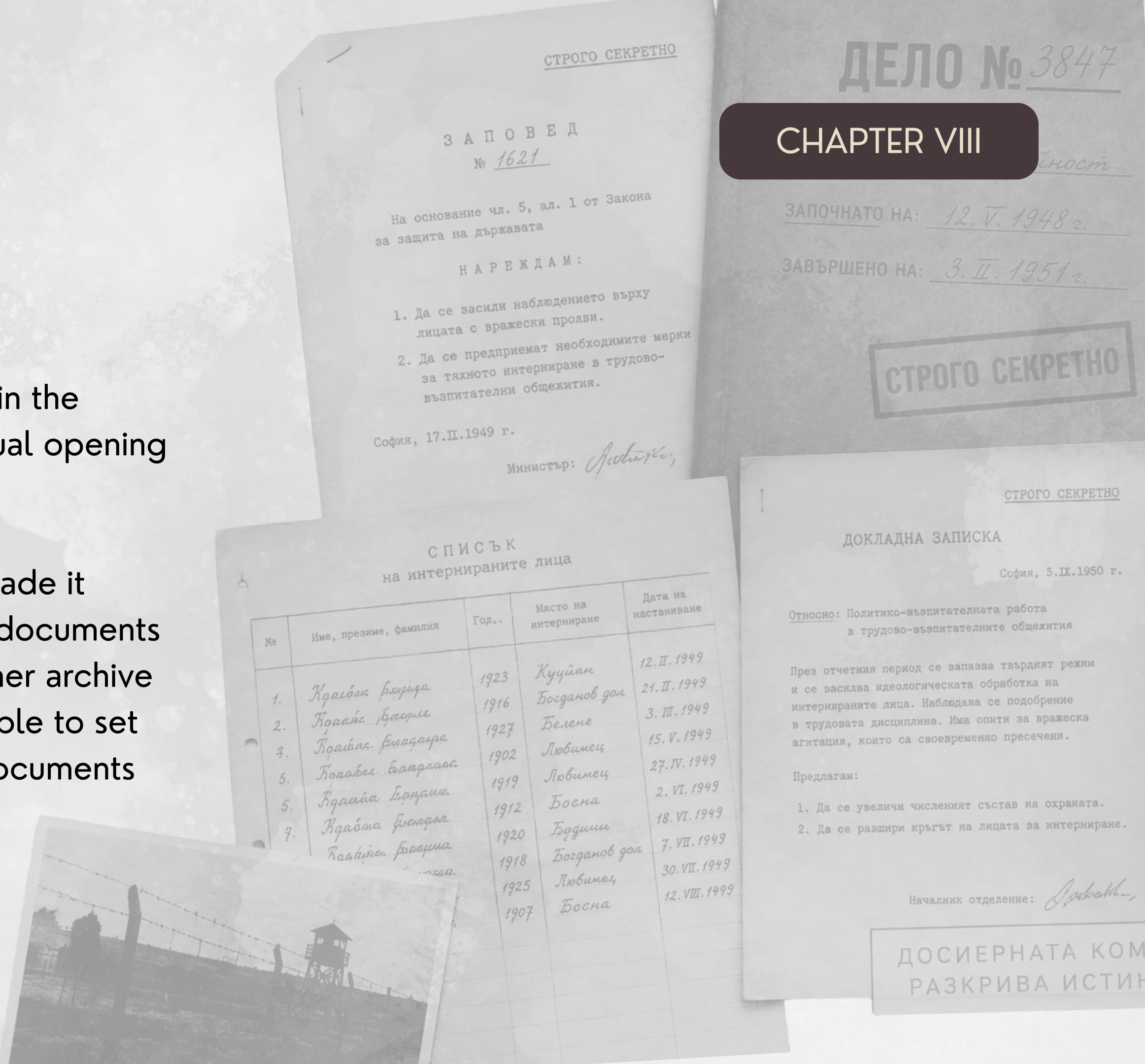
It was the witnesses who began to speak. Without them, a significant part of the history of Belene would probably have remained unknown.

THE ARCHIVES

Evidence from the Archives

One of the most important developments in the study of the communist period is the gradual opening of the State Security archives.

The work of the Dossier Commission has made it possible to publish thousands of pages of documents – orders, reports, lists of internees and other archive material. For the first time it became possible to set personal accounts alongside the official documents of the repressive system itself.



СПИСЪК на интернираните лица				
№	Име, презиме, фамилия	Год.,	Място на интерниране	Дата на настаниване
1.	Красимир Бърза	1923	Куцийан	12.II.1949
2.	Красимир Бърза	1916	Богданов дол	21.II.1949
3.	Красимир Бърза	1927	Белене	3.III.1949
4.	Красимир Бърза	1902	Любимец	15.V.1949
5.	Красимир Бърза	1919	Любимец	27.IV.1949
6.	Красимир Бърза	1912	Босна	2.VI.1949
7.	Красимир Бърза	1920	Богданов дол	18.VI.1949
	Красимир Бърза	1918	Богданов дол	7.VII.1949
	Красимир Бърза	1925	Любимец	30.VII.1949
	Красимир Бърза	1907	Босна	12.VIII.1949

A place of pilgrimage, a new generation

Every year, on the site of the former camp, a national pilgrimage in memory of the victims of the communist regime brings together survivors, families, historians, faith representatives, civic organisations and state institutions - the most visible public act of remembrance connected with Belene.

There are currently active efforts to turn the site of the camp into a national place of memory and cultural heritage, and civic organisations have worked for years to preserve it and use it in education.

Key initiatives keeping the memory alive

- Borislav Skochev's study, The Belene Concentration Camp 1949-1987
- The digital project Histories from Belene (video interviews)
- The educational work of Sofia Platform
- The Belene Island Foundation, preserving the site
- Commemorations by the Catholic Church for Bishop Eugene Bosilkov and other victims

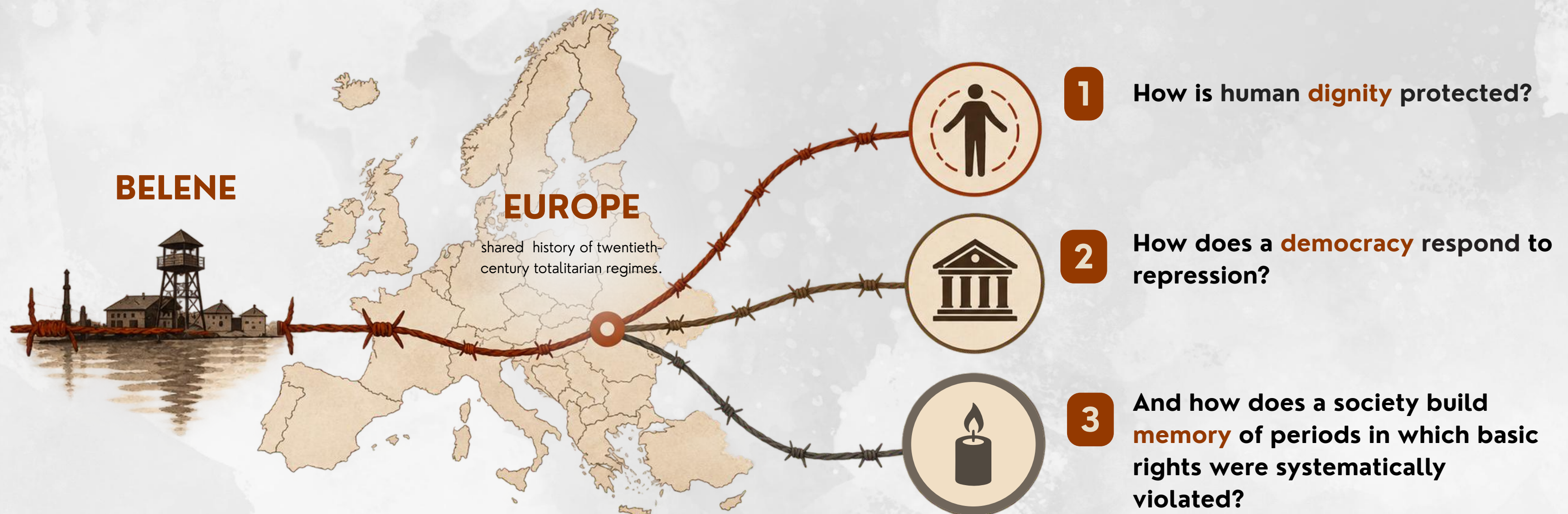
These initiatives show that memory is preserved not only in archives, but through people's stories, through education and through civic engagement.

WHY IS THIS A EUROPEAN STORY?

CHAPTER VIII

The history of Belene is part of the national history of Bulgaria but it is also part of the shared European history of twentieth-century totalitarian regimes.

In different countries the names are different, the political contexts are different too but the questions remain the same:



“When memory disappears, history repeats itself.”

“Freedom begins with remembering.”

The story of Belene is not only about a place where freedom was taken away. It is also about the people who refused to let the truth disappear with them. Today, our responsibility is not only to remember their suffering, but to preserve the evidence, to tell their stories with accuracy, and to ensure that this history remains part of our shared democratic memory.

[HTTPS://BELENE.CAMP/TOUR/](https://belene.camp/tour/)