

## DIPLOMATIC INTERPRETING IN SOCIALIST BULGARIA: SOVIET INFLUENCES, POLITICAL LOYALTY AND INTERPRETER-DIPLOMATS DURING THE COLD WAR

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**Abstract:** This article examines the development of diplomatic interpreting in socialist Bulgaria and its relationship to Soviet practices during the Cold War. Drawing on archival documents from Bulgaria's Central State Archive (CSA), memoirs, and visual sources, it analyses the institutionalization of diplomatic interpreting after 1944, the tension between political loyalty and linguistic competence in interpreter selection, and the emergence of interpreters as trusted political mediators. The study argues that diplomatic interpreters occupied hybrid positions at the intersection of linguistic expertise, political reliability, and state service. It also demonstrates how photographs and memoirs can help reconstruct the roles of interpreters who remain largely absent from official diplomatic narratives. By combining Bulgarian and comparative Soviet evidence, the article contributes to the historiography of diplomatic interpreting in Eastern Europe and to broader discussions of interpreter agency and visibility.

**Keywords:** diplomatic interpreting; interpreter-diplomats; Socialist Bulgaria; political mediation; interpreter visibility; Cold War diplomacy

### 1. Introduction

The history of diplomatic interpreting in Eastern Europe during the Cold War remains unevenly explored. While considerable attention has been devoted to major diplomatic conferences, international organizations, and Soviet interpreters, the development of interpreting institutions and practices in smaller socialist states has received comparatively little attention. This imbalance has created what Santoyo Mediavilla (2006) describes as 'blank spaces' in translation history. Bulgaria constitutes one such case. Despite its strategic position within the Soviet sphere of influence and its active participation in international diplomacy after the Second World War, the history of Bulgarian diplomatic interpreting has remained largely absent from Translation and Interpreting Studies (TIS).

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This article examines the institutional development, professional practices, and ideological dimensions of diplomatic interpreting in Socialist Bulgaria from the late 1940s to the 1980s. Adopting a comparative perspective inspired by recent work in Comparative Translation and Interpreting Studies (Tyulenev and Zheng 2017; Van Doorslaer 2017), it explores the relationship between Bulgarian practices and Soviet models of interpreter recruitment, training, and professional identity.

Recent scholarship has emphasized the interpreter's role as a political and cultural mediator rather than a neutral linguistic intermediary (Roland 1999; Baer 2014; Fernández-Sánchez 2019). Research on Soviet interpreters has shown that political reliability and institutional trust often mattered as much as linguistic competence in determining access to high-level diplomacy (Rogatchevski 2019). The Bulgarian evidence reveals similar dynamics. Following the political transformations of 1944, new diplomatic institutions and language-training programs developed within a framework that emphasized political reliability alongside professional expertise. For much of the socialist period, diplomatic interpreters remained largely self-taught, although more systematic forms of professional training emerged after the establishment of the Union of Bulgarian Translators in 1974. A 1977 one-month course for simultaneous interpreters stressed the need to cultivate both professional competence and ideological commitment, reflecting contemporary perceptions of interpreting as part of the broader ideological confrontation between East and West (Dankov 1977: 37–39). In the same report, interpreters were described as indispensable yet often overlooked participants in high-level negotiations, contract discussions, conferences, and other forms of international exchange, underscoring both their practical importance and their frequently invisible position within official narratives. Archival sources likewise reveal persistent tensions between ideological loyalty and linguistic competence, while also highlighting the emergence of interpreters as trusted intermediaries between state authorities and foreign interlocutors.

The article addresses three questions: how diplomatic interpreting was institutionalized in Socialist Bulgaria after 1944; how political loyalty and linguistic competence shaped the recruitment and evaluation of interpreters; and how interpreter-diplomats negotiated their roles as language specialists, state representatives, and political confidants. Drawing on archival documents, memoirs, and visual sources, the study argues that diplomatic interpreting under state socialism cannot be understood solely as a matter of linguistic transfer. Rather, interpreters occupied a hybrid position at the intersection of professional expertise, political trust, and state service.

## **2. Rebuilding Diplomatic Interpreting after 1944**

The institutional development of diplomatic interpreting in Socialist Bulgaria cannot be understood separately from the broader political transformation that followed the events of September 1944. The establishment of a communist regime brought not only a radical reorganization of the country's political institutions but also a profound restructuring of the diplomatic apparatus (see e.g. Stelova and Tankova 2002; Lilkov and Hristov 2019). As in other countries incorporated into the Soviet sphere of

influence, significant parts of the pre-war political and administrative elite were replaced by new cadres whose legitimacy rested primarily on political commitment rather than professional experience.

This transformation had important consequences for diplomatic communication. Before 1944, Bulgarian diplomacy relied on a relatively small but experienced corps of diplomats educated in foreign languages and accustomed to operating within the conventions of European diplomacy. The political changes that followed disrupted established patterns of recruitment and professional continuity. Some members of the pre-war diplomatic establishment were removed from office, while others became politically suspect because of their social origins, educational backgrounds, or associations with the previous regime. Among them were Dimitar Shishmanov (1889–1945), a diplomat, writer, and polyglot educated at the University of Geneva (Shishmanov 1995), who was sentenced to death by the People's Court<sup>1</sup>, and Stefan Bochev (1910–2002), a diplomat and journalist who was dismissed from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, imprisoned, and later interned in the Belene labour camp (Bochev 1999, 2009). The new state therefore faced the task of rebuilding its diplomatic institutions while simultaneously creating a new generation of personnel capable of representing Bulgaria abroad.

The shortage of qualified foreign-language specialists was particularly acute. During the immediate post-war years, the authorities required increasing numbers of interpreters, translators, and multilingual officials to facilitate contacts with the Soviet Union, other socialist countries, and international organizations. International youth brigades constituted one of the earliest environments in which interpreters were recruited and deployed on a significant scale. Archival records document 1,589 foreign volunteers from more than a dozen European countries participating in brigade activities in 1948 alone (CSA–Sofia, Fund 1053, Inventory 1, File 1484, p. 1), creating a substantial demand for multilingual mediation. Because these projects brought together Bulgarian and foreign participants, they created a growing demand for multilingual personnel and generated extensive documentation concerning interpreter recruitment and evaluation.

The gradual expansion of Bulgaria's international activities during the 1950s and 1960s further increased demand for qualified interpreters. Participation in international organizations, state visits, cultural exchanges, and diplomatic negotiations required personnel capable of operating in multilingual environments. Consequently, interpreting became progressively institutionalized within state structures. In this respect, the Bulgarian experience closely resembled developments in the Soviet Union, where interpreters occupied positions closely connected to the political and diplomatic apparatus (Roland 1999).

The reconstruction of diplomatic interpreting after 1944 therefore involved more than the replacement of personnel. It required the creation of new recruitment channels, training mechanisms, and institutional structures capable of supporting Bulgaria's

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<sup>1</sup> Unlike the multilingual proceedings at Nuremberg, the Bulgarian People's Court conducted its proceedings in Bulgarian and did not require institutionalized interpreting arrangements.

expanding international engagement. These foundations would continue to shape the profession throughout the socialist period.

### **3. Political Loyalty versus Linguistic Competence**

One of the most striking findings emerging from the Bulgarian archival material concerns the relationship between political loyalty and linguistic competence in the recruitment, evaluation, and professional development of interpreters. Although both qualities were officially valued, the available evidence suggests that political reliability frequently occupied a privileged position, particularly during the formative decades of the socialist regime.

This tension became visible already in the international youth brigades of the late 1940s, where interpreters were assessed not only on language skills but also on political reliability and ideological engagement. Maria Daskalova, a medical student with knowledge of German, was described as a “good interpreter” yet criticized for “naivety,” insufficient “vigilance and political acumen,” and for interpreting “mechanically” while “never add[ing] anything of her own” (CSA, Fund 1053, Inventory 1, File 1489, pp. 2–4). Such assessments suggest that interpreters were expected to exercise political judgment as well as linguistic competence and that political considerations often received greater attention than interpreting abilities.

The archival record also reveals the limitations of a recruitment system that prioritized political reliability over professional qualifications. Reports occasionally criticized interpreters whose linguistic competence did not correspond to the needs of the task. In the summer of 1948, for example, Lora Manoah, a medical student with knowledge of French, Italian, and German, was assigned to the Albanian brigade and subsequently criticized for not knowing Albanian and being unable to perform her interpreting duties (CSA–Sofia, Fund 1053, Inventory 1, File 39, p. 4).

These tensions are particularly significant because they demonstrate that contemporaries themselves recognized the limitations of purely ideological selection criteria. While political loyalty remained indispensable, some reports increasingly emphasized the importance of professional competence and the need for better-qualified interpreters. An evaluation report on Vasil Kiranov, a heavily criticized interpreter assigned to the Czechoslovak brigade, recommended that future recruitment prioritize candidates' language skills while treating “reasonable political alignment” as a secondary criterion (CSA–Sofia, Fund 1053, Inventory 1, File 110, pp. 55–57). The recommendation is noteworthy because it explicitly reversed the hierarchy that had often characterized early socialist personnel policies, suggesting that effective international communication required expertise that could not be replaced by ideological commitment alone.

The Bulgarian evidence therefore challenges simplistic assumptions about the relationship between ideology and professionalism under state socialism. The archival documents do not reveal a straightforward rejection of professional standards in favour of political criteria. Rather, they point to an ongoing process of negotiation between competing institutional priorities. On the one hand, interpreters were expected to

embody the political values of the socialist state and to function as trusted intermediaries in contacts with foreigners. On the other hand, the practical requirements of diplomacy, international cooperation, and multilingual communication created a persistent demand for genuine linguistic expertise.



**Figure 1.** *Wilhelm Filipov (centre) with Austrian Chancellor Josef Klaus (left) and Todor Zhivkov (right) during the Austrian state visit to Bulgaria, 1969.* Although not a diplomat, Filipov occupied a position of unusual proximity to political leaders as an interpreter, illustrating the trust and access that the role could entail. **Source:** CSA–Sofia, Fund 378B, Inventory 2, File 1, p. 10.

A revealing example is provided by Wilhelm Filipov, a professor of German language and literature at Sofia University who served as interpreter during talks between Todor Zhivkov and Walter Ulbricht (Nikolova 2007)<sup>2</sup>. According to Filipov’s memoirs, Zhivkov made a joke on a religious subject and insisted that it be rendered literally, reassuring the interpreter: “You will not be expelled from the Party — I said it, not you.” The remark drew a clear distinction between the political responsibility of the speaker and the technical role of the interpreter. Yet the very need for such reassurance suggests that diplomatic interpreters were not perceived as entirely neutral intermediaries but as participants who shared part of the symbolic and political responsibility for what was said. Equally revealing is Filipov’s response that he was not a Party member, prompting Zhivkov’s humorous reply: “Is that why you are such a good interpreter?” Despite its light-hearted tone, the exchange points to a degree of professional autonomy among diplomatic interpreters. The case suggests that trust in diplomatic interpreters in socialist Bulgaria was not always contingent upon Party

<sup>2</sup> Although Filipov does not specify the date or year of the visit, he links the episode to Walter Ulbricht’s visit to Bulgaria in connection with the expansion of bilateral treaty relations. This most likely refers to Ulbricht’s official visit of 6–10 September 1967, during which Bulgaria and the GDR signed a Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance (CSA–Sofia, Fund 117, Inventory 30, File 23).

membership and that professional authority could derive primarily from linguistic and cultural expertise (**Fig. 1**).

A comparable tension can be observed in studies of Soviet diplomatic interpreting. Research on Soviet interpreters has shown that political trust was often a prerequisite for access to senior political leaders and sensitive diplomatic negotiations (Roland 1999; Rogatchevski 2019). Yet the same studies also demonstrate that interpreters who achieved lasting professional success typically combined political reliability with exceptional linguistic competence. The Bulgarian case suggests a similar pattern. Political loyalty may have opened the door to positions of responsibility, but successful performance ultimately depended upon professional skills that could not be reduced to ideological commitment.

The persistence of this tension can also be traced in later decades. Training initiatives associated with major international events, including youth festivals and other forms of international exchange, continued to emphasize the political responsibilities of interpreters. Lectures devoted to ideological vigilance, contacts with foreigners, and questions of state security existed alongside efforts to improve language training and interpreting techniques. Such training programs (e.g. CSA–Sofia, Fund 1053, Inventory 9, File 102, pp. 17-21; CSA–Sofia, Fund 1053, Inventory 9, File 110, pp. 17-18) reflected the dual expectations placed upon interpreters as both language professionals and politically reliable representatives of the state.

The Bulgarian archival evidence points to a distinctive model of diplomatic and political interpreting in which professional expertise and ideological loyalty were organized within a hierarchical relationship. Political reliability frequently served as the primary condition for recruitment and advancement, while linguistic competence remained essential for effective performance. As a result, interpreters occupied positions that blurred the boundaries between linguistic mediation, political representation, and state service. The Bulgarian case thus illustrates how the history of interpreting can illuminate broader questions of expertise, trust, and political power in socialist states, where international communication required a constant balance between political control and professional competence.

#### **4. Interpreter-Diplomats and Political Mediation**

The archival and memoir evidence examined in this study suggests that diplomatic interpreters in Socialist Bulgaria occupied a position that extended well beyond linguistic mediation. Their responsibilities, access to political leaders, and participation in high-level diplomatic encounters placed them within a broader category that may be described as interpreter-diplomats. In this role, interpreters functioned simultaneously as language specialists, political confidants, and representatives of state interests. The Bulgarian case thus supports Roland's (1999) argument that diplomatic interpreters frequently occupy hybrid positions in which linguistic expertise and political trust become inseparable.

The emergence of interpreter-diplomats was closely connected to the institutional environment of the socialist state. Access to senior political figures required not only

linguistic competence but also a high degree of personal and political reliability. Interpreters often participated in confidential meetings, accompanied delegations during foreign visits, and became witnesses to discussions that remained inaccessible to most officials. Their work therefore depended upon relationships of trust that transcended ordinary professional qualifications.

One illustrative example is provided by the career of Serafim Serafimov. His early experience as a brigade interpreter during the post-war period was followed by a distinguished diplomatic career that eventually placed him in direct contact with major international figures (**Fig. 2**). At the age of twenty-two, Serafimov was recommended through Communist Party channels for a French-language course in Sofia designed to prepare future diplomatic personnel. Upon completing the course, he joined the Human Resources Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and was subsequently posted to the Bulgarian legation in Paris. During this period, he also served as a French interpreter for Swiss volunteers participating in a youth brigade in Bulgaria in 1948. Serafimov's trajectory demonstrates how interpreting could serve as part of a broader pathway into the diplomatic establishment. Rather than constituting a profession separate from diplomacy, interpreting often functioned as one of the mechanisms through which politically reliable and linguistically skilled individuals entered the structures of international representation. The continuity between post-war cadre formation and later diplomatic service is already visible in Serafimov's 1948 personnel evaluation. While noting his insufficient command of French, the report praised him as hardworking, intelligent, observant, modest, and politically astute (CSA–Sofia, Fund 1053, Inventory 1, File 1487, p. 22). The assessment suggests that political reliability and personal qualities were regarded as indicators of future diplomatic potential even when linguistic competence remained imperfect.



**Figure 2.** *Serafim Serafimov and Todor Zhivkov on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, Washington, September–October 1960. The image captures Serafimov early in a career that combined interpreting and diplomatic service. Source: CSA–Sofia, Fund 378B, Inventory 2, File 371, p. 74.*

The memoirs of Bulgarian diplomatic interpreters provide further evidence of this hybrid role. Ivan Boev, who served as one of Todor Zhivkov's principal Russian interpreters in the period 1979-1989, repeatedly emphasizes the importance of political trust in his professional life (Boev 2011). His recollections suggest that interpreting at the highest political level required more than technical competence. The interpreter was expected to understand political context, anticipate communicative difficulties, and contribute to the successful conduct of diplomatic encounters. Such expectations were not unique to Bulgaria. Similar observations appear in the memoir literature of Soviet interpreters, particularly in accounts describing the work of Vladimir Pavlov (2000), Viktor Sukhodrev, Oleg Troyanovsky, and Valentin Berezhkov with Soviet leaders.

The relationship between Todor Zhivkov and his interpreters offers particularly revealing insights into contemporary expectations concerning the interpreter's role. Memoirs describe situations in which Zhivkov prepared interpreters for his speeches containing culturally specific references, idiomatic expressions, or Bulgarian proverbs that would present difficulties in translation (Nikolova 2007). These accounts indicate an awareness that successful communication depended upon cooperation between speaker and interpreter rather than upon mechanical linguistic transfer. They also suggest that interpreters were expected to exercise independent professional judgment when confronted with communicative challenges.

An even more revealing example concerns a conversation recalled by the Arabic interpreter-diplomat Kiryak Tsonev during a meeting between Todor Zhivkov and Muammar Gaddafi in Tripoli (Tsonev 2005: 202–205). According to Tsonev, members of the Bulgarian delegation had been instructed to avoid language associated with madness or mental instability in their dealings with the Libyan leader. During the meeting, however, Zhivkov asked Gaddafi whether he was aware that certain Western politicians referred to him as a “mad colonel.” Recognizing the potential diplomatic consequences of translating the expression literally, Tsonev rendered it in a more neutral form, referring instead to an “extremist colonel,” a formulation that, according to his memoirs, pleased Gaddafi. He later informed Zhivkov of the modification and explained the reasons for his decision. Rather than criticizing the intervention, Zhivkov reportedly accepted the explanation and remarked that they were both diplomats and interpreters and were paid precisely because they knew what should and should not be translated literally. Whether recalled exactly or retrospectively reconstructed, the episode reveals contemporary assumptions about the interpreter's function. Rather than reproducing every utterance mechanically, interpreters were sometimes expected to evaluate communicative consequences, protect diplomatic relationships, and adapt messages to the requirements of political interaction. In such situations, fidelity was understood not as literal reproduction but as service to broader diplomatic objectives.

This understanding corresponds closely to recent scholarship emphasizing the active role of interpreters in political communication. As Baer (2014) has argued in the context of Cold War diplomacy, interpreters frequently acted as participants in political processes rather than passive transmitters of information. Their interventions, omissions, and reformulations could influence the course of communication even when they remained invisible within official accounts. The Bulgarian evidence provides further support for this interpretation.

At the same time, the position of interpreter-diplomat was characterized by a fundamental paradox. Interpreters occupied a place of considerable proximity to political power, yet their contributions often remained unacknowledged in public narratives. They participated in historic meetings, accompanied senior leaders during international visits, and facilitated communication between political systems, but official documentation frequently treated them as secondary figures. Their influence depended precisely on their ability to remain unobtrusive while exercising considerable communicative responsibility.

The careers of Bulgarian diplomatic interpreters therefore challenge conventional distinctions between diplomacy and interpreting. Rather than operating at the margins of diplomatic activity, interpreters formed part of the diplomatic process itself. Their authority derived not only from language competence but also from political trust, institutional loyalty, and an ability to navigate the complex communicative demands of international relations. The Bulgarian evidence consequently supports a broader understanding of diplomatic interpreting as a form of political mediation in which interpreters functioned simultaneously as linguistic experts and diplomatic actors.

Viewed from this perspective, interpreter-diplomats constituted an important component of the socialist state's international apparatus. Their activities illuminate the mechanisms through which political leadership communicated across linguistic and cultural boundaries, while also revealing the extent to which diplomatic communication depended upon individuals whose role cannot be reduced to translation alone. The Bulgarian case thus contributes to a growing body of scholarship that recognizes interpreters as active participants in the making of diplomatic history rather than merely its invisible facilitators.

## **5. Visibility, Memory and Archival Reconstruction**

One of the central methodological challenges in the history of diplomatic interpreting is the paradoxical relationship between visibility and invisibility. Interpreters occupy positions of exceptional proximity to political decision-makers and often participate directly in significant diplomatic encounters. Yet their presence frequently remains obscured in official records, media reports, and retrospective historical narratives. As a result, historians of interpreting are confronted with a recurring problem: individuals who played indispensable roles in international communication often leave only fragmented traces in the historical record.

This phenomenon has been observed in studies of Soviet interpreting. Rogatchevski (2019) characterizes Soviet diplomatic interpreters as “semi-visible” figures whose professional activities placed them at the centre of major political events while simultaneously relegating them to the margins of official history. Their voices are often absent from diplomatic archives, and their contributions are rarely acknowledged in formal accounts of international negotiations. Similar patterns can be identified in the Bulgarian case.

The problem is particularly evident in the documentation of high-profile diplomatic encounters. Official records typically focus on political leaders, diplomatic outcomes,

and institutional actors, while interpreters appear only sporadically, if at all. Media coverage tends to reproduce the same hierarchy of visibility. Political figures occupy the foreground of historical narratives, whereas interpreters remain largely anonymous despite their essential role in facilitating communication. Consequently, the reconstruction of interpreting practices requires historians to move beyond conventional diplomatic sources and to employ a wider range of evidence.



**Figure 3.** *Donka Melamed with foreign visitors during brigade activities, Divotino, Bulgaria, August 1947.* Although photographs of several brigade participants who also served as interpreters survive, this appears to be the only currently identified image depicting a brigade interpreter in a context directly related to her mediating role. The photograph illustrates the partial visibility of interpreters in the visual record of international youth brigades. **Source:** State Archive – Pernik, Fund 1220, Inventory 1, File 130, p. 2.

Visual sources reveal a similar pattern of partial visibility. Photographs of several Bulgarian brigade participants who also worked as interpreters in 1946-1948 have survived. However, these images typically depict them as members of the brigade collective rather than in their capacity as linguistic mediators. To date, only one photograph has been identified that appears to depict a brigade interpreter engaged in an activity related to her mediating role: an image of Donka Melamed with unidentified foreign visitors at the construction site of the Pernik–Voluyak railway line (**Figure 3**). The identification of Donka Melamed is based on the author's analysis of archival photographs and documentary sources and was confirmed through an interview with her daughter, Galina Melamed. The rarity of such images itself is significant. While interpreters were present within official visual representations of the brigades, their specific role as facilitators of international communication was seldom foregrounded.

The problem of visibility becomes even more apparent in the documentation of high-profile diplomatic encounters. A revealing example is provided by the visit of Fidel Castro to New York during the Fifteenth Session of the United Nations General Assembly in 1960. The visit generated extensive international attention and has been discussed in numerous political and historical accounts. Yet the individuals who enabled communication between the Cuban delegation and its interlocutors are rarely identified. Official narratives concentrate on Castro, his meetings with foreign leaders, and the broader political significance of the visit. The interpreters who participated in these encounters remain largely invisible.

(a) Menia Martínez during Castro's meeting with Nikita Khrushchev



(b) Stella Avishay during Castro's meeting with Todor Zhivkov



**Figure 4.** *Interpreters at Fidel Castro's meetings in the Theresa Hotel, Harlem, New York, during the Fifteenth Session of the United Nations General Assembly, September 1960.* Neither interpreter is identified in most written accounts of these encounters. The photographs illustrate how interpreters often disappear from diplomatic narratives despite their visible presence during the meetings themselves. Their roles can be reconstructed only through the combined use of photographs, memoirs, and archival sources. **Sources:** (a) Private archive of Vladimir Lebedev, Khrushchev's personal assistant; (b) Archive of the Bulgarian Telegraph Agency, 60-1551-7. *Credit:* A. Alekseev.

Closer examination of available sources, however, reveals a more complex picture. Archival materials, memoirs, press reports, and photographs each provide partial and sometimes contradictory evidence regarding the individuals involved in interpreting. In some cases, memoirs mention meetings without identifying interpreters. In others, official documents record participants while omitting the linguistic mediation upon which communication depended. Photographic evidence can occasionally supply information absent from textual sources, allowing researchers to identify interpreters whose presence is otherwise undocumented.

The cases of Menia Martínez, a young Cuban ballet dancer educated in the Soviet Union (**Fig. 4a**), and Stella Avishay, a Bulgarian journalist from a Sephardic Jewish family whose first language was Ladino (**Fig. 4b**), illustrate the value of such an approach. Their roles do not appear in most written accounts of Fidel Castro's meetings with Nikita Khrushchev on 20 September and with Todor Zhivkov on 27

September 1960 at the Theresa Hotel in Harlem, New York. In his memoirs, Serafim Serafimov, who accompanied Todor Zhivkov to this meeting while serving as Second Secretary at the Bulgarian Mission to the United Nations in New York, provided a two-page account of the encounter but did not mention the interpreter (Serafimov 2003: 148–149). The identification of Menia Martínez and Stella Avishay is based on the author's comparison of photographic, memoir, and archival sources. Yet photographic evidence, memoirs, and other supplementary sources confirm their presence in encounters that required linguistic mediation. The images do not merely supplement the written record; they challenge assumptions created by archival silence. By documenting the physical presence of interpreters in spaces from which they later disappeared narratively, photographs reveal the extent to which diplomatic history is often written around interpreters rather than through them.

The reconstruction of interpreter activity in Socialist Bulgaria depends upon the combination of multiple categories of sources. Official archives provide institutional context but often omit individual interpreters, while memoirs preserve personal experiences that are largely absent from official documentation. Photographs and journalistic accounts offer additional perspectives but rarely explain interpreters' precise functions. No single source type is sufficient on its own. Only by triangulating archival records, memoirs, visual evidence, and contemporary publications is it possible to reconstruct a more complete picture of interpreting practices.

This methodological challenge helps explain the continuing importance of memoir literature for the history of interpreting. In the Bulgarian context, the memoirs of interpreters and diplomats such as Wilhelm Filipov, Ivan Boev, and Serafim Serafimov provide valuable insights into professional practices, communicative dilemmas, and relationships with political leaders that are difficult to recover elsewhere. Although such testimonies require critical evaluation, their value lies not in providing entirely objective accounts but in illuminating aspects of interpreting that official records frequently neglect. When combined with archival evidence, they constitute an essential component of historical reconstruction rather than merely anecdotal material.

The Bulgarian evidence suggests that interpreter invisibility should be understood not simply as an absence from history but as a consequence of how historical records are produced and preserved. Interpreters were often present at important diplomatic and international encounters yet remained marginal within official narratives. Significantly, this condition was recognized by contemporaries themselves. Writing in 1977, Dankov described interpreters as indispensable participants in negotiations, conferences, and other forms of international exchange whose contributions frequently remained unacknowledged. The cases of Donka Melamed, Menia Martínez, and Stella Avishay confirm this pattern. Like their Soviet counterparts, Bulgarian interpreters occupied an intermediate position between visibility and invisibility: essential to diplomatic communication, yet often absent from historical memory. Recovering their contributions therefore requires methodological approaches capable of integrating dispersed traces from different categories of evidence and, in doing so, helps broaden both diplomatic historiography and the history of interpreting, while demonstrating that patterns previously observed among Soviet interpreters also characterized diplomatic mediation in a smaller socialist state.

## **6. Conclusion**

This article has examined the development of diplomatic interpreting in Socialist Bulgaria within the broader political and institutional context of the Cold War. Drawing on archival documents, memoirs, and visual sources, it has explored the reconstruction of interpreting after 1944, the relationship between political loyalty and linguistic competence, the emergence of interpreter-diplomats, and the problem of interpreter visibility. In doing so, it has addressed a largely neglected chapter in the history of linguistic mediation in Eastern Europe.

The Bulgarian case demonstrates that diplomatic interpreting under state socialism cannot be understood simply as a technical activity of linguistic transfer. Interpreters were expected to function simultaneously as language specialists, politically reliable representatives of the state, and trusted intermediaries in international relations. Political loyalty frequently served as a prerequisite for recruitment and advancement, yet the practical demands of international communication repeatedly underscored the importance of professional expertise. As a result, interpreters occupied positions that blurred the boundaries between linguistic mediation, political representation, and diplomatic service.

The evidence also highlights the agency of diplomatic interpreters. Rather than acting as neutral conduits, interpreters exercised professional judgment, adapted messages to diplomatic circumstances, and contributed to the management of political communication. At the same time, their contributions often remained obscured within official records, requiring reconstruction through a combination of archival, memoir, and visual sources.

From a comparative perspective, the Bulgarian experience reveals important similarities with Soviet models while demonstrating the value of examining smaller socialist states on their own terms. More broadly, the study contributes to efforts to integrate interpreters into the history of international relations by showing how expertise, political trust, and communicative mediation intersected in Cold War diplomacy. The history of diplomatic interpreting in Socialist Bulgaria thus offers a useful lens through which to understand the relationship between language, power, and international communication in the socialist world.

## **Acknowledgements**

The author is grateful to the archivists and librarians who assisted with the research for this article. Special thanks are due to colleagues and contacts who helped locate hard-to-access materials, including a 2007 publication on high-level interpreting by Vanya Nikolova that was unavailable through standard library channels. The author also thanks Galina Melamed for sharing information that contributed to the identification of Donka Melamed in archival photographs.

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### **Conflict of Interests**

The author(s) declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in relation to this research.

### **Ethics Statement**

The author(s) confirm that this study was conducted in accordance with the Journal's Research Ethics and Integrity Statement and that all ethical requirements applicable to the study have been fulfilled.