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MEMORIA CARBONARA (ARCHIVAL MEMORY AS A PHILOSOPHICAL RESOURCE: THE MINI MARITSA IZTOK CASE)

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Abstract. This study uses the archival heritage of Mini Maritsa Iztok (Maritsa East Mines) as a starting point for philosophical reflections on memory, identity, and social transformation in the context of today’s “green” policies. Through the archives – understood as carriers of lived experience, existential engagement, and cultural significance – we seek to explore those layers of Bulgaria’s industrial past that may underpin the transition from the “deep uncertainty” associated with “green” challenges towards possibilities for coping and inclusion in the sphere of the private, the everyday, and personal perspectives. In this sense, the archives are not merely a documentary foundation, but mediators of philosophical and social potentials through which the problematic place of industrial heritage in our present time can be meaningfully addressed.

Keywords: archival heritage; industrial memory; coal mining; “just transition”; unimagined future

This article addresses the topical issue in the humanities and social sciences concerning the ways in which different communities – situated within economic networks and dependent on their professional statuses, but also individual citizens – respond to and navigate economic and social transformations. As a rule, the inevitability of change is most often attributed to climatic, geopolitical, economic, military, technological, and other such causes. At the same time, the factors related to human capacities for coping with the anxieties, fears, and uncertain expectations surrounding an unimagined future are overlooked as comparatively insignificant. Typically, profound economic, social, and cultural changes, and the inequalities associated with them, are explained primarily through global or national models of crisis and resource management, and more rarely through the attitudes, experiences, and everyday choices of citizens – which, however, are also subject to direction and management. It is precisely citizens – not imaginary formations such as nation, ethnicity, race, or professional guild – who bear the burden of changes. This is

why, within the horizon of their life projects, it is important that such changes be identified, described, and analysed by contemporary social and human sciences. This largely presupposes research access to crisis situations in which life trajectories encounter difficult-to-surmount obstacles, restrict freedom of action, and exhaust individual and social resources for coping.

All of this is today. We are living it. Some of us particularly painfully. We think it is a legacy from our ancestors, but in fact it is a loan from our children's future. Our motivation in reflecting on what has been described above, as well as in relation to this article, is quite obvious. It is rooted in and driven by our present, even though it seeks larger stakes back in the past in an attempt to address, via the past, pressing issues that frame our own everyday lives.

How can this state of inevitability be changed? This is the crucial question behind which there is an implicit "must", a sense of obligation, and a call to action on our part. Yet the questions that set the course of action also ask something else: why does it turn out that Bulgaria's "modernizing" moves are always made "against the inertia" of domestic economic processes? One already proposed answer goes as follows:

Our economic history in the 20th century is the history of a "caged" country whose strategic economic policy decisions were made either abroad or internally, but with extremely limited degrees of freedom. [...] In Bulgaria, the "zest" for change is chronically weak, while the force of the status quo is exceptionally strong. The resulting lack of creativity is probably one of the national traits. (Avramov, 2001, p. 69)

And since other possible answers go beyond our research intentions and capacities, we will have to set most of them aside and rely on a simple certainty: namely, that even though we are groping our way forward – both as a society and as a scientific community – we are nonetheless expanding our cognitive boundaries to some extent. How? By critically rethinking phenomena from the past that do not merely cast a shadow towards, but also shape our present, we hope to demonstrate convincingly that, on the biographical level, along our personal life trajectories, there is much more than inevitability. There are potentials capable of reshaping social and emotional statuses, whereby the changes will not be seen as extraordinary efforts imposed from the outside, but as dependent on the choices of each one of us, supported by carefully targeted policies of social solidarity and justice. Can the effectiveness of such policies surpass today's dominant economic realities? Can Bulgaria's economic future unfold under the condition of remembering past paradigmatic cultural and economic models? Do we even have such models? How were local economic shocks and booms perceived, experienced, and worked through in pre-socialist Bulgaria, for example? Are there traces of protections in favour of free individual economic initiative, or, conversely, was it stifled by a sometimes latent and sometimes entirely explicit statism? Were the structures buttressing the

big economic picture – back in the past, there and then, as well as today – capable of withstanding the ruptures and disintegration in the private sphere?

This study focuses on the problematic heritage of Mini Maritsa Iztok (Maritsa East Mines), examined through the lens of archival memory and the possibilities for its philosophical and sociocultural interpretation. A propaedeutic analysis is offered of the preserved archival materials, through which are traced not only the technical and economic development of this complex, but also the deeper social, existential, and identity layers formed over historical time. In this context, the archives are treated not only as source material, but also as a symbolic resource that sets semantic vectors for understanding concrete human experience, work ethics, institutional culture, and more.

The retrospections on the institutional history of Mini Maritsa Iztok unambiguously show that at the time of its creation in the 1950s, it was the largest coal-mining enterprise in Bulgaria and on the Balkan Peninsula. Its history reflects the development of open-pit coal mining in the country and outlines one of the largest-scale industrial structures in Bulgaria and Southeastern Europe.¹ Established in the context of post-war socialist industrialization, this complex became emblematic of an ideologically modelled “labour progress” and of an exemplary economic enterprise ensuring national energy independence. Its geographical location in the Thracian Plain and the combination of three coal mines and their associated thermal power plants formed an infrastructure of strategic importance both for the national economy and for the geopolitical security of the state.

The social dimension of the complex was marked by the formation of industrial worker communities, established through the intentional relocation of populations and the creation of a new type of settlement. These communities were not only economically determined but also culturally constructed within the framework of the socialist model of labour as an ethical, social, and ideological construct. In this sense, Mini Maritsa Iztok should be understood not merely as a production facility, but as a sociotope in which economy, ideology, and cultural identity intersect.

As is well known, on 16 June 1951, Council of Ministers Decree No. 652 established the Maritsa Iztok State Mining Enterprise, based in the village of Troyanovo. The activities of the complex led to a significant transformation of the landscape – almost 240 square kilometers of Bulgaria’s territory, including some of the most fertile areas of the Thracian Plain, were turned into an industrial zone. Today, this largely depopulated and depersonalized place is associated not only with large-scale coal mining and energy production, but also with the massive accumulation of environmental problems, including due to its status as the largest source of sulfur dioxide pollution in Europe.

The contradictory strategies of industrial modernization are also reflected in academic research dedicated to the development of the electric power sector in

Bulgaria. When it comes, however, to the perspective that focuses on human capital – on what happens at the biographical level – it should be noted that there are almost no studies.² There is an outright lack of sociological or, more broadly, humanities-oriented research that, for example, forecasts the directions in which the so-called “green transition” will unfold. It is precisely because of this gap that the focus of our study – of which the present article is a part – is on the heritage of Mini Maritsa Iztok, which in recent years has become central to intense public debates and conflicting visions of the future. Both the narratives describing the situation and the scenarios surrounding the anticipated changes sound contradictory. Our aim here is not to analyse the carbon tax or its economic and environmental considerations, nor to offer an expert evaluation of the organizational structure, economic decline, or efficiency of the extraction and production system.³ Instead, we choose to approach this heritage from a philosophical and sociocultural perspective, with an emphasis on memory, identity, and the transformation of labour.

In this sense, it will be essential to capture and describe not so much economic processes and relationships, but phenomena related to experiencing, overcoming, and dealing with the stereotypes and prejudices that have come to dominate the attitudes of a large part of Bulgarian society. **Captive attitudes shackle the readiness to act. Their rigidity leads people to adopt an inert, amorphous attitude towards their own future.** This needs to be changed, and analytical tools (sociological, anthropological, historical) for studying the effects of accelerated social dynamics and high technological development could play a role in the processes of renewal. Such tools may offer a different perspective on the problematic heritage and uncertain future of Mini Maritsa Iztok. Such a perspective allows us to identify and recalibrate key trends in the development of Bulgarian society, and through them, the emergence of various forms of social cohesion, economic initiative, and educational and cultural inclusion. Here, however, we must introduce one more limitation to our study. Since we are interested in attitudes formed before, during, and after the regime of state socialism in Bulgaria – and their relevance to certain dominant economic models – we will have to forgo the more ambitious task: the idea of broadly outlining the scope of knowledge about Bulgarian cultural identity. How basic communal ties were constructed, how fundamental value orientations, public norms, and social, labour, and cultural practices were formed in Bulgaria – such a study has already been done (Bochev, 1998), and although the temptation to repeat it is strong, it can wait.

The situation is different when it comes to the possibility of studying the dynamics of individual and collective notions of a “decent” life, of a “significant” professional status, and of “justice” – a dynamics that intertwines changes in the economic profile not only of the largest coal region in Bulgaria but also of the private professional attitudes of those employed in its enterprises. According to the “raw” data from biographical interviews conducted at the end of November

2024, it seems undeniable that even today those employed in the Bulgarian energy sector have the self-perception of professionals engaged in an industry that has traditionally been important and contributory to the national economy. These are (for the most part) meticulously trained and carefully cultivated professionals, whose self-esteem is also reinforced by their relatively higher pay compared to those employed in other economic sectors in Bulgaria. Our field research clearly highlighted this fact. Energy sector workers want to preserve their status. It is only natural that changes upset them and provoke their resistance. Their concerns dominate, underestimate, and suppress their own adaptability. That is why they do not wish to associate their civic and labour power with “Eurocratecological”⁴ causes. Who, in such a situation, would pay attention to forms of civic initiative that support new and high-tech economic models, environmental or other projects that defend rights, encourage mutual support, and so on? It is important to speak about such initiatives. It is important that they be “kept in the light” so that they gradually become priorities and desired goals. In recent years, interest in this type of activism has grown in the context of transformations driven by rapidly developing (bio)technologies. In such a situation, anxiety carries stakes that extend far beyond individual consciousness and acquires the potential to organize social behaviour, guide social welfare policies, and prioritize scientific research (Petryna, 2002).

We will continue by examining Mini Maritsa Iztok as a kind of “architecture of memory”, around which material and symbolic forms were created that reflect the interaction of humans, nature, and technology. These transformations are preserved in archives – testimonies of labour, control, resistance, and adaptation.

The archival heritage concerning Mini Maritsa Iztok constitutes a complex corpus of sources created and preserved in various archival repositories and in diverse institutional fonds over decades. During the initial empirical study, the largest number of archival fonds on the subject were, as expected, identified in the State Archive – Stara Zagora (SA – Stara Zagora). More specifically, thirteen archival fonds were found. Significant documentary evidence related to the activities and institutional context of Bulgaria’s coal-mining and power industries is also preserved in the Central State Archives within the archival fonds of a number of key state, party, design, and research and development institutions.

Particularly interesting are also the archival records preserved in the ACDDAABCSSISBNA. More specifically, these concern so-called “letter-coded files” (*literni dela*), which were opened for each “object of operational service” (i.e., operational target) and were usually closed when the target was disbanded or liquidated. In this case, the documents pertain to the following operational targets: Energy Production;⁵ Energy Management;⁶ the Coal Directorate at the Committee

on Energy and Fuels;⁷ the Research and Development Institute for Energy and Fuels;⁸ the Standing Commission on Coal at the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance,⁹ and others.

These documents do not merely record events – they are evidence of the logic of the communist regime and of the way it “archived” reality. This is precisely what makes the State Security archives a philosophical resource – not as carriers of “the truth” but as a window into the historical formation of particular structures of sensibility, norms, and identities. This archival resource enables philosophical reflection on topics such as labour, identity, power, surveillance, and the transformation of society.

Insight into the lines of work of State Security in the energy sector is provided by the example of the opening of the letter-coded file regarding the Coal Directorate under the Committee on Energy and Fuels, dated 16 January 1964, under Department III – State Security.¹⁰ This directorate, which directed and coordinated all coal-mining enterprises in Bulgaria, was fully monitored by State Security, with the following main operational tasks:

1. Work on the established and newly emerging hostile contingent;
2. Protection of [...] mine-surveying plans showing the coordinate system and import balance;
3. Prevention of accidents in underground and open-pit mines;
4. Work on specialists travelling abroad;
5. Work on specialists from capitalist countries visiting the State Economic Corporation “Coal” [DSO “*Vaglishta*”] for commercial purposes;
6. Work on received alerts [*signali*], and other matters.

The above tasks are carried out with the assistance of three agents and twelve confidential contacts. New agents will be recruited as needed [...].¹¹

The example of the letter-coded file on the Coal Directorate shows how the archive functioned not as a repository of memory but as an instrument of control. Instead of preserving human experience, it formatted it according to the logic of surveillance and suspicion. In the spirit of Foucault, archiving here was an act of power – it created categories such as “enemy” and “trusted”, producing a truth that was convenient for the system. **Such an archive does not remember, it models reality** – and this is precisely why it calls for philosophical reconsideration today.

The documents in the file reveal various mechanisms of social control and disciplining. On the one hand, we see constant monitoring and assessment of the “loyalty” of workers, engineers, and managerial staff. An example of this is found in reports of abuse – irregular procurement of unnecessary spare parts, illicit transportation of goods, abuse of business trips abroad, and others.¹² Reports of “hostile propaganda”, suspicious contacts with foreigners and Western firms,¹³ careless fulfillment of professional duties, or sabotage are also frequent.

One of the reports notes:

[T]he people working in this department literally idle away most of their working hours, telling various jokes and tall tales. The initiative shown by this department in solving production-related issues has been very weak, not to say nonexistent. There have been many cases in which entire days were lost dealing with matters related to additional personal remuneration [...].¹⁴

Particularly telling is the practice of planting agents among the workers, which sheds light on the problem of trust, fear, and internal censorship in the workplace. In one of his reports, dated 12 September 1964, an agent codenamed “Meternih” documented an angry tirade by an engineer who was dissatisfied with the social injustice, the privileges of the Communist Party elite, and the widespread poverty in the country. The engineer stated:

Only our good-for-nothings cling blindly to the [Soviet] Union, because they wouldn't be able to run the country on their own for even a single day, let alone for years. Life is terribly expensive, while the [government] ministers receive unbelievably high salaries. [...] Many posts have been created, and there are many managerial positions reserved for people from the Party. [...] In our country, both in the villages and in the towns, people have been robbed and have nothing. Only women work in the fields, and no one is worried about this fact. Various delegations constantly visit the country and are treated to banquets costing thousands of leva. Likewise, our delegations constantly travel to various countries, and huge amounts of money are spent on propaganda. All of this is piled on our backs and comes at our expense. That is why the people is dissatisfied, and if God forbid something happens, the people will stone them to death. I've given the state 115 decares of excellent land, so when I take something from a TKZS [cooperative farm] field, I consider that I'm taking what is mine, and my conscience doesn't trouble me [...].¹⁵

This report reveals significant social and moral tensions. It raises questions about the limits of personal ethics, social responsibility, and political isolation under centralized governance. The regime created a deep psychological distance between the individual and power, suppressing the expression of discontent and blocking the possibility of social dialogue.

Another group of documents from the State Security archives reveals how the local population adapted to the processes of industrialization, as well as how the secret services monitored intergroup tensions, including those based on ethnicity. An example of this is the surveillance of workers of ethnic Turkish origin for comments following the visit of Turkish Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel to Bulgaria.¹⁶ At the same time, alerts were documented of the mass departure from the local mining settlement due to extremely poor financial and living conditions – an indicator of the social cost of industrial progress.¹⁷

Equally significant is the topic of environmental negligence and the so-called “archive of denial” – a series of documents and information reflecting systematically

ignored alerts about pollution and cover-ups of environmental damage. They reveal mechanisms of institutional inaction and manipulation, whereby environmental threats were disregarded and the truth about the damage was covered up.

A document from another letter-coded file regarding the selection of a site for the construction of the Maritsa Iztok 3 thermal power plant reports that there were coal reserves of approximately 11 million tonnes beneath the site, highlighting the strategic significance of the deposit. Nevertheless, there was no reliable water source on site – a key resource for cooling and technological processes in energy production. Additionally, it is noted that air pollution in the area already exceeded permissible limits, even before the new power plant was commissioned (CDDAABCSSISBNA, 2016, pp. 175 – 176). This case reveals a typical paradox of industrial planning in the era of central governance: the drive for intensive exploitation of natural resources often disregarded basic environmental and infrastructural conditions. The lack of a water source called into question the long-term sustainability of the project, while the high level of pollution even before the thermal power plant's startup suggests serious environmental risks that were likely systematically underestimated or ignored in the name of production goals. This attests to the absence of integrated environmental control and planning, characteristic of many large-scale projects within socialist industrial policy.

The State Security archives did not merely preserve the past – they constructed it according to a model subordinate to the regime, so that the former power arrangements would be remembered. Through surveillance, discipline, ideological profiling, and technological supervision, they produced a reality that suited the regime. In this sense, they require not only a historical but also a philosophical reading – as a documentary matrix of an era in which social truth was institutionally designed rather than discovered. In this way, archives become an object of critical reflection on the very nature of memory, power, and historical knowledge. Such a philosophical reading of the archives takes us beyond established categories of documentation and authenticity – towards a more intimate and simultaneously critical engagement with the past. It was through this perspective that we began to realize that engaging with archival evidence is not merely an analytical exercise; it is an encounter with a complex cultural reality in which mechanisms of power and human intentions coexist in unexpected ways. Archives prove to be not only a mirror of an institutionalized truth but also a stage for human voices, captured and reshaped within the domain of state rationality.

We had not expected that the possibility of reliving the past by engaging with archives would turn out to be something truly special. Without exaggeration, we can say that the archival documents (preserving not only fragmentary narratives and carefully controlled personal memoirs but also the documentary corpus of major state undertakings such as Mini Maritsa Iztok) gave us the chance to grasp more directly the mindset above all of the socialist economic and party elite. Now,

however, we realize that the “light-and-shadow” side of the elite, as well as the banal fabric in any document, becomes attractive not so much through the descriptions of the state of economic affairs as through the culture of the time quietly embedded within it.

The Mini Maritsa Iztok case can be explored not only as a concrete object of archival and historical reconstruction, but also as a theoretical field in which different disciplinary approaches intersect – from archival studies and social history to the philosophy of memory and critical hermeneutics. It reveals how industrial archives can be reinterpreted as dynamic spaces in which the past is not merely preserved, but can be actively reworked in response to contemporary cultural, political, and ecological challenges. Mini Maritsa Iztok thus serves as a key example of the need for an interdisciplinary approach that situates archival practice within the broader debate on historical responsibility, cultural sustainability, and identity in the conditions of a post-industrial society. Viewed more narrowly, the study of this archival heritage goes beyond empirical documentation of Bulgaria’s industrial past and becomes a tool for critical reconsideration of the complex interrelationship of memory, identity, and social transformation in contemporary society. The metaphorical synthesis *Memoria Carbonara*¹⁸ offers a different perspective through which archives are seen not merely as repositories of information, but as cultural and existential carriers of layers of lived experience, institutional memory, and collective symbolism. In this sense, archives acquire the status of mediators of philosophical meaning through which both historical trauma and the possibility of critical reflection on industrial heritage are articulated. Put briefly, any attempt at a philosophical reading of this heritage requires us to view archives not as pages of the past, but as ethical horizons of the present. In a world that often erases memory, archives serve as a form of conscience – an insistence on truth that is not only factual but also moral.

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NOTES

1. For the institutional transformations of Mini Maritsa Iztok over the years, see 25 *godini* 1977; 50 *godini* 2002; Bankov 2002; 60 *godini* 2012; Konstantinov 2016.
2. We must note two exceptions: (1) the research team of Nadezhda Ilieva (National Institute of Geophysics, Geodesy and Geography at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences), Georgi Bardarov (Sofia University), and Dimitar Sabev (Economic

Research Institute at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences), who analysed the “current demographic and socio-economic processes” in the region of Mini Maritsa Iztok and prepared “a quantitative and spatial analysis of the expected future demographic situation in the affected municipalities” and “the forthcoming changes in the labour market” (see Ilieva, Bardarov & Sabev 2023); (2) the work carried out by the team of the Collective for Social Interventions (KOI). Their study *Transition: Reloaded?*, part of the project *Infrastructures for a Just Transition (both in Bulgarian)*, financially supported by Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, seeks to highlight the contradictions surrounding the green transition in Bulgaria’s energy sector. They call for overcoming the “narrow frames of media coverage of the topic” and amplify the voices of the most vulnerable – miners and energy sector workers.

3. This has already been done by fellow researchers (see Tchalakov, Hristov & Mitev 2011, pp. 7 – 32). Going beyond descriptive accounts, Professor Ivan Tchalakov and his research team have outlined possibilities for action – i.e., solutions to the existing difficulties. They propose adapting solutions that are external to the Bulgarian context, but that can suggest ways of dealing with the “shadow practices in the Bulgarian energy sector”. Referring to the book *Acting in an Uncertain World: An Essay on Technical Democracy* by Michel Callon, Pierre Lascoumes, and Yannick Barthe (2009), they argue that the rift between “experts and laypeople, between science and politics”, should be bridged through “debate” dominated by “socio-technical arguments”. Such arguments, however, do not extinguish or eliminate the conflict; rather, they reframe it in such a way that it becomes “thinkable and testable in terms of [...] projects and solutions that integrate diverse perspectives, demands, and expectations”. From the research team’s conclusions, it is worth highlighting their insistence that such topics must not be approached with “simplification and one-dimensional interpretation [...], because things are truly complex and therefore require an authentic debate of technical democracy”. In the combination of the outcomes of such a debate, the awakening of dormant civic courage, and the adoption of strict institutional and legal mechanisms, our fellow researchers see the possibility “to limit both oligarchic overexploitation and the preservation of old patterns of socialist plunder, as well as to prevent the emergence of new forms of such exploitation of technologies”.
4. A clumsy portmanteau of “European”, “bureaucratic”, and “ecological”.
5. ACDDAABCSSISBNA – M, VI-L-569.
6. ACDDAABCSSISBNA – M, VI-L-627.
7. ACDDAABCSSISBNA – M, VI-L-628.
8. ACDDAABCSSISBNA – M, VI-L-631.
9. ACDDAABCSSISBNA – M, VI-L-849.
10. ACDDAABCSSISBNA – M, VI-L-628, l. 1.
11. ACDDAABCSSISBNA – M, VI-L-628, l. 12.
12. ACDDAABCSSISBNA – M, VI-L-628, l. 26 – 30.
13. ACDDAABCSSISBNA – M, VI-L-628, l. 130.
14. ACDDAABCSSISBNA – M, VI-L-628, l. 106.

15. ACDDAABCSSISBNA– M, VI-L-628, l. 183 – 184.
16. ACDDAABCSSISBNA – M, VI-L-628, l. 243.
17. ACDDAABCSSISBNA – M, VI-L-628, l. 241.
18. From the famous *Pasta alla Carbonara* (Coal Miner’s Pasta), so named for the abundant amount of black pepper in it (as if it were prepared in a coal mine). On the other hand, the attempt at a gastronomic pun in the title of this article reflects the motivations and actual actions of those involved in the concoction that is nowadays wrapped in the already worn-out constructs “low-emission economy”, “Green Deal”, “just transition”, and the like. In Bulgaria, all of these have long since come to mean – and to sound, due to overuse in public language – like depressingly banal phrases, lavishly seasoned “at the table” and indicating something deeply false and incomprehensible. Instead of lifting the burden from people’s everyday lives, such motivations, words, and actions overcook the hopes that were promised to them.

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