Vladimir Zarev’s *Ruin*: “The novel about the changes in all of Eastern Europe.”

When Vladimir Zarev’s *Ruin* made waves on the German literary scene, critic Martin Ebel remarked: “*Ruin* is the novel about the changes in all of Eastern Europe. We expected this book to appear in Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, or even Germany itself, but instead it came from Bulgaria” (*Tages-Anzeiger*, 23.05.2009; p 45). While this may have been a surprise to Western Europe and the rest of the world, it came as no shock to Bulgarian readers, who have known and loved Vladimir Zarev and his eleven novels over the past several decades. His best-selling *Razruha* or *Ruin* (2003), currently in its ninth Bulgarian edition, was published in 2007 in German as *Verfall* (Kiepenheuer & Witsch) to great critical acclaim, garnering over 40 reviews in leading German-language media such as *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, and *Berliner Zeitung*. Channel 2 of German National Television even made a film about Zarev entitled *The Bulgarian Balzac*, while other German critics have compared Zarev’s work to that of Thomas Mann, Dostoyevsky, Marquez and Bulgakov (I personally get a strong sense of Updike in the way his characters are built and interact, but I’ve had many a heated argument with Bulgarian critics over this!). With an initial print-run of 10,000, *Ruin* was dubbed the most successful Bulgarian book ever published in German by Deutsche Welle. *Ruin* was among five books nominated for the Book Prize for European Understanding at the Leipzig Book Fair. *Ruin* has also been translated into Russian and Croatian and is being developed into a Bulgarian feature film which began shooting in 2014. Zarev has cemented his success in Germany with his family-historical trilogy; originally published in German by Zsolnay Verlag & Deuticke, again to ecstatic reviews, DTV has recently released a soft-cover version of the trilogy *Familienbrand*, *Feuerköpfe*, and *Seelenasche*. In 2014, Bulgaria’s TV7 created a popular television series “The Tree of Life” based on Zarev’s trilogy.

*Ruin* is a social and personal drama, a novel about the economic and spiritual destruction Bulgaria suffered during the turbulent “Transition” from communism to democracy. While 1989 may have marked a drastic break with the past in much of Eastern Europe, what happened in Bulgaria was akin to an ignoble perestroika – a party-internal coup in which communist insiders deposed the longtime dictator. While an ostensible change to democracy ensued, the state security apparatus and the nomenclature remained in place, with the communists-turned-socialists winning elections on and off and the secret-police-turned-mafia running roughshod over law and
order. Ruin powerfully captures Bulgarians’ struggles to overcome the poverty and corruption that the “transition” has left in its wake. In the early 1990s, Ruin’s main character Martin Sestrimsky, a middle-aged novelist, is reduced to physical and creative impotence: terminally unemployed, unable to write, he is slipping into alcoholism. Martin in some sense embodies the Bulgarian intelligentsia as a whole: he is extremely intelligent, with a finely honed sense of irony, but despite, or perhaps because of his erudition and sensitivity, he easily falls prey to the new “cowboy capitalism”; in his desperation to make a quick buck as everyone around him seems to be doing, he falls prey to a scam that fleeces him of his last refuge, his mother’s beloved villa. His family is also unraveling: his wife Veronica, a literary theorist who once worshipped him, now openly scorns him. He has also lost his two daughters – Mila has disappeared down the rabbit hole of emigration like thousands of young Bulgarians, while his younger daughter Katarina has found her escape in heroin. Martin’s wry, first-person narrative chronicles his descent into ruin, but his creative salvation comes in the form of a parallel story about the Transition’s new elite. After a humiliating visit to see Boyan Tilev, a former-classmate-turned-businessman whom he unsuccessfully begs for a pitiful sum to fund a book, Martin starts to imagine how this newly minted oligarch made his millions – originally a lowly photographer for the secret services, Boyan is catapulted to mafia-kingpin status thanks to a shadowy character known as “The General”; yet Boyan, too, gets caught up in both his own lust and his lust for power. He leaves his wife and daughters for the icy Madgalena, “saving” her from her grotesque thug of a husband, and setting her up as his mistress and business partner. Although Boyan’s story at first seems as real as Martin’s, it gradually becomes clear that this narrative is Martin’s novel Ruin – elements from Martin’s life slip into Boyan’s narrative: the shysters who stole his villa also cross Boyan’s path, while an antique pistol plays a pivotal, yet different role in each story. And just as Boyan’s life ends in ruins, when one final deal goes terribly awry, so does Martin’s life: Veronica leaves him for her lover, while Katarina joins her sister in America. Abandoned and materially destitute, Martin nevertheless finds spiritual and creative redemption in Ruin.

I find it truly outrageous that the English-speaking world has not yet had the opportunity to read Vladimir Zarev – the Germans are surely chuckling in their bier steins at us! The English-language rights to Ruin are still available, and as luck would have it, the Bulgarian government
has recently created a new Center for the Book to support translation of Bulgarian literature abroad. I sincerely hope the time has come to unleash *Ruin* upon the English-language market.