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Industrial Heritage without Memory: The Cotton Factory of Varna between Past and Redevelopment

Abstract: *This article examines why one of Varna's largest pre-socialist buildings – the Cotton Factory – remains materially intact while its industrial past has largely disappeared from public memory. Drawing on site observation, archival fragments, interviews and online discussions, the study identifies a set of mechanisms through which memory erodes: fragmented sensory recollection, low occupational prestige, institutional opacity, shifting moral regimes after 1944 and 1989, urban discontinuity, spatial distancing and the emergence of neighbourhood myths. These forces converge, producing a durable silence around the factory's social world. At the same time, certain residual attachments – belonging, aesthetic recognition and projected cultural aspirations – continue to anchor the building in collective imagination. The factory persists as a material form whose past cannot be fully narrated yet has not been culturally concluded.*

Keywords: *industrial heritage; collective memory; institutional opacity; labour history; urban transformation; silence and forgetting; Varna (Bulgaria).*

Introduction

My first visit to the Cotton Factory yard called up memories I had not expected. As a child, I sometimes accompanied my father to the metal-working plant where he spent the largest part of his working life. The hall was loud, the machines struck metal with sharp concussive blows, and workers moved around them with the quick, practiced gestures of people who knew exactly what each sound meant. They had protective headphones but rarely used them because they interfered with the work. I remember the heat, the scattered offcuts of steel they handed me to play with, and the way the yard looked disordered only to an outsider; inside that apparent disorder every object had a purpose.

That memory shaped how I saw the Cotton Factory – a large brick complex dating from 1899, later known as "Prince Boris," "Tsar Boris," and after 1943 "Hristo Botev." In its abandonment, with machines removed and floors cleared, the spatial logic of industry was still visible:

the long sheds, the rhythm of openings, the traces of circulation. The yard, though partly overgrown and partly rearranged, had the same industrial feel I recognised from childhood, the same sense of a place once full of movement and noise. Just like the plant where my father worked, where personal stories existed even if not told, here the stories rarely surfaced at all.

Across conversations, people recalled the oldest building easily – its size, its importance, its place in the city – yet denied to recall its industrial life. The factory had been one of Varna's major cotton industry workplaces for more than a century, employing thousands and shaping the life of the surrounding neighbourhood. Its architecture remains prominent, and its fate is regularly discussed, but memories of daily work are fragmentary or absent.

This contrast sets the question guiding the article: how did a factory so large and long-standing become a place where the building is remembered but the labour is not?

Theoretical Background

Collective memory depends on social anchors that stabilise experience and make it narratable. Connerton's distinction between embodied and narrative memory is useful here: practices may leave vivid bodily traces yet fail to become stories when not supported by durable social forms (Connerton, 1989, 2008). In the Cotton Factory, the socialist period maintained a dense ritual life, but these practices did not translate into labour narratives that survived after 1989. The disappearance of commemorative structures left embodied knowledge without the institutional supports needed for transmission.

Mary Douglas's account of institutional thinking provides a complementary frame. Institutions preserve classificatory forms rather than historical content and generate "shadowed zones" in which certain questions cannot be asked (Douglas, 1986). Their memory is periodically reset through generational turnover, overwriting earlier information while structural categories remain intact. This clarifies how forgetting can arise not from cognitive loss but from routine organisational operations and shifting moral orders. In Varna, ownership opacity, bureaucratic fragmentation and political reclassification created a zone in which the factory's history became increasingly difficult to articulate.

Halbwachs likewise notes that memory becomes narrative only when linked to stable social figures or purposes (Halbwachs, 1992). In the Cotton Factory, such anchors were either absent or later disrupted.

Taken together, these perspectives situate the Varna case within broader discussions of how institutions shape what is remembered, what becomes unsayable, and how material forms may endure even as the labour that created them recedes from collective account.

Methods

This study uses a small qualitative dataset combining interviews, site observation, archival sources, public discourse and a publicly accessible Facebook discussion about the Cotton Factory. Nine semi-structured interviews were conducted with former workers, neighbourhood residents, a local historian and a municipal employee. They lasted 15–30 minutes and were recorded with consent or documented in notes. Questions addressed work routines, production knowledge and perceptions of the factory's role in the neighbourhood. Transcriptions were read closely, with attention to wording and small self-corrections. No formal interactional analysis was performed. Interviews were conducted jointly by the author and two student researchers. All participants are anonymous.

Fieldwork included two site visits of six to seven hours each. Notes recorded building condition, material traces, circulation patterns and the sensory environment. A basic phenomenological protocol documented what was perceptually available, supported by photographs.

Archival and media materials (approx. twenty items) were collected from library holdings and regional press, providing indicative snapshots of public discourse. They were catalogued by type and date and used according to institutional regulations.

The researcher's background includes familiarity with industrial environments due to childhood proximity to factory labour. This is noted solely as positional information. The memory mentioned in the Introduction served as an initial orientation to spatial cues but was not used as data.

Data handling relied on close reading, phenomenological site description, micro-hermeneutic attention to wording in interviews and documents, and basic multi-scalar organisation of materials.

Positionality

As a researcher arriving from the capital and working within an unfamiliar local framework, my role could be interpreted as structurally privileged: I defined the questions and their purpose. Participants were

informed that their accounts would be anonymised and used for research, yet the act of being recorded can heighten awareness of possible misuse. This, together with the presence of a three-person team, may have increased the sense of intrusion and contributed to the cautious, abbreviated responses. The fieldwork took place within a summer school on urban memory and industrial heritage, and the focus on the building's aesthetic value was likely preffered by participants because it provided the safest, most neutral ground.

Limitations

The study relies on a small and heterogeneous dataset. Access to former workers was constrained by time and by the absence of a stable local network, restricting opportunities for follow-up conversations and depth of narrative material. Archival coverage remains uneven and reflects the survival of documents rather than comprehensive extraction. These constraints shape the analysis: the study identifies the mechanisms through which memory is reduced, reorganised or displaced, rather than attempting a full social history of the factory.

Genealogy of the Cotton Factory in Varna (1896–1944)

Varna's cotton-spinning complex emerged alongside the city's industrial consolidation at the turn of the twentieth century. After the Liberation Varna port became the principal commercial gateway of the Principality, and the 1894 Law for Encouraging Local Industry accelerated the formation of joint-stock enterprises. Within this context, the concession for a large cotton-spinning factory was granted in 1896 to several Varna entrepreneurs, who soon transferred it to the Manchester-based *National Cotton Spinning Company of Bulgaria Ltd* (Denkov, 2024).

The Varna project was the lone success in a period when most Bulgarian attempts to establish cotton-textile enterprises collapsed before opening. Initiatives in Kyustendil, Kazanlak and Sliven stalled for lack of capital or failed in negotiations. Preparation in Varna took five years, during which several Bulgarian initiators went bankrupt – a measure of the venture's scale and fragility before foreign financing arrived (Ivanov, 2021).

The enterprise was registered as the "First Bulgarian Anonymous Privileged Company for Cotton Yarns 'Prince Boris'," with a capital of 1,500,000 leva, two-thirds held by English shareholders. Popova (2019)

notes that the site next to the Old Railway Station was chosen to optimise logistics for imported cotton. The municipality provided the land under the industrial-encouragement statute. Production began in January 1899, when the first factory whistle was heard in the city. At opening, the factory had 8,000 spindles, increasing to 11,400 in 1900 and 15,600 by 1908.

Photo 1. The Cotton Factory in Varna, early 20th century. *Postcard showing Varna residents in front of the cotton-spinning factory "Knyaz Boris," photographed from the lakeside.*

Ivanov (2021) notes an early public-relations effort aimed at countering rumours of immoral behaviour by the English owner toward local girl-workers. Sponsored articles and an explanatory brochure attempted to stabilise public opinion and protect the company's standing.

The first detailed account of labour relations appears in June 1902: a strike of more than six hundred workers from both shifts, with twelve-hour workdays, employment of children aged eight to fifteen, workplace accidents, routine fines and a printed declaration of new conditions that workers refused to sign (Izvestnik, 1902). This is one of the few pre-war accounts of internal labour relations identified during the research.

Contemporary surveys show that by 1910–1912 Varna had become Bulgaria's principal cotton-textile centre, with almost ninety per

cent of the national workforce located in the region; compared to other Bulgarian textile enterprises, which averaged fewer than fifty workers, the Varna factory operated on an exceptional scale (Popova, 2019). Production remained below expectations, and imported yarn from İzmir, Lesbos and Britain was consistently cheaper, limiting the factory's ability to dominate the domestic market despite its scale (Ivanov, 2021).

During the First World War, textile production in Varna contracted sharply due to reliance on imported cotton. In 1915 the English owners closed the factory, described as the most serious industrial loss for the city during the war years.

A decade later, a municipal publication from May 1925 reported that the factory at the Old Station would be reactivated by a new Italian company led by Mr. Geller, which had acquired the rights of the former English owners. The factory reopened as "Tsar Boris," an Italian–Bulgarian joint-stock company with a capital of ten million leva; in 1929 the capital was increased to twenty million leva during further modernisation. Archival newspapers record several public appearances of the factory during this period. Denkov notes that the enterprise expanded despite the global economic crisis, reaching its highest output by 1939.

After Bulgaria's accession to the Tripartite Pact, the principal shareholders, Jacques and Rafael Suzan, were compelled to sell their involvement to the newly formed company "Kotonia" (Denkov, 2024). The factory subsequently entered state ownership due to financial difficulties. In 1943 its name was changed to "Hristo Botev." The last documented event in the archival material is a workers' assembly on 21 September 1944, at which an Otechestven Front committee was elected (Byuletin na grad Varna, 1944).

Findings

Only the original brick building of the factory from 1899 carries architectural or historical value and is protected today. It is designed by the architect Dabko Dabkov, and classified as an immovable architectural heritage object (National Institute for Immovable Cultural Heritage, n.d.). The rest of the complex was built incrementally – before and after 1944 – with different materials, styles, and functional intentions. These additions do not form a coherent architectural ensemble.

Photo 2. Aerial view of the Cotton Factory complex, Varna (2020). *Source: varnaheritage.com, declared NKC register.*

The region of Cotton Factory is fairly distant from the centre of Varna. Its terrain is currently accessible from several entry points, including two upper gates that lead into internal streets lined with red brick buildings, providing space for workshops, storage rooms, and warehouses. The terrain accommodates small businesses, storage activities, and occasional creative uses: artistic workshops and exhibitions. During field visits, an upholstery workshop, a screen-printing shop, a frame shop, car washes, and informal parking were visited. Facades show cracks, plant growth, and signs of abandonment. Tenants reported repairing leaking roofs and maintaining their own interiors, as the owner does not provide upkeep. New construction was visible near the administrative building, where foundations for a multi-storey residential block were being laid. A large vynil print of the new building with a phone number was hanging on the fence.

A mosaic bust of Hristo Botev stands on its original pedestal near a row of small commercial units inside the former cotton factory yard. The monument remains unmarked and partially surrounded by improvised fencing and construction debris, reflecting the site's current use.

Municipal staff started negotiations with the owners to relocate the monument for preservation, as reported in the local press (chernomore.bg, 2025).

Photo 3. Hristo Botev bust in the factory yard. *Photograph by the author.*

Public recollections of the factory varied to a significant extent. Some people recognised it only as "Hristo Botev" and described it as an old cotton plant associated mainly with women's work. Several respondents mentioned the English origin of the red bricks and their durability. A few recalled the factory as noisy and full of machinery, while others said they knew almost nothing about it beyond its physical presence in the city. Some described large workforces in the past, estimating that thousands of workers were employed, while others remembered only that relatives had worked there briefly. A number of people noted the existence of nearby worker housing or referred to a "Cotton Quarter," though few provided precise details and I couldn't confirm which buildings belonged to it. In the interviews available recollections of the factory's closure were inconsistent, with dates ranging from the early 1990s to around 2000.

Tenants and regular visitors of the site described specific parts of the complex and their own histories within it. One tenant with decades of experience in the buildings described the administrative block, the chimney, the former foundry, and an underground reservoir, as well as a period when mineral water at approximately 27° flowed through indoor pipes. Others referred to discarded machinery, scrapped looms, and features that had once included communal baths or ornate railings. One tenant pointed out that people now come to the oldest red-brick façade for photoshoots because of its distinctive appearance.

Accounts from childhood or family memories added further descriptive details. One woman recalled visiting her mother in the factory as a child and hearing the constant noise of machines. Several people described a kindergarten associated with the factory, remembered variously as weekly or overnight, serving families who worked in three shifts.

A municipal cultural official explained that the city does not have authority over privately owned industrial buildings and cannot require preservation or cultural reuse. She stated that she did not know the detailed ownership of the Cotton Factory and that it is hard to check. She referred to general difficulties associated with protecting older buildings in Varna, including long administrative procedures, restoration costs, and limited specialist capacity. Across all sources, references to owners, heirs, or past directors are usually inconsistent.

Most interviewees didn't respond to questions about the work organisation, ownership, or the socialist period, responses contracted into short formulas. Examples included repeated responses like *"I don't know"* and *"I can't say"* from former workers when asked about leadership, or the life of the factory. In one interview, the respondent stopped almost every line of inquiry with statements such as *"No, not really"* and *"I don't remember"* even when she had worked in the factory for years.

Topic-shifting was frequent. When asked about how the factory functioned, one participant redirected the conversation toward childhood memories, the smell from a baking factory, or the kindergarten, without answering the original question. Another moved from a question about the production process to a general comment about having *"worked a lot"* and therefore having "no memories" (*"they had no memories because they worked a lot"*).

Analysis: The layers of forgetting

Cognitive fragmentation: memory reduced to sensory traces

Conversations with former workers and residents show that one layer of forgetting is the fragmentation of memory. People do not describe the factory's purpose, production flow or interactions among workers. This pattern recurs across interviews. One Facebook user recalls the overwhelming noise: *"Inside, from the noise of the spindles you couldn't hear anything, even if someone shouted right in your ear. I don't know how they endured it."* A respondent remembers entering the factory as a child, but nothing beyond the sound. A woman who grew up in the neighbourhood recalls the atmosphere but not the structure or routine. Another respondent who worked as a cashier for years summarises her experience in a single line: *"most of the time I spent inside with the workers,"* without connecting these fragments into a sequence.

Comparative studies of cotton mills in Britain and the United States show that operatives worked amid heat, humidity, dust, vibrations and constant machine noise; they often relied on lip-reading when conversation was impossible (Greenlees 2007). Although drawn from other contexts, these findings highlight how technical organisation routinely produced sensory pressure that confined memory to bodily experience. The sensory intensity reinforced the separation between what workers did and what they could later narrate.

Another aspect of this fragmentation is that respondents knew only incidentally who supplied the cotton, who graded or transported it, or who used the finished thread. This horizontal facelessness reflects a basic level of cognitive deprivation: the production sequence survives as a technical outline, while the people who supplied raw material or used the product remain invisible.

In this sense, the Cotton Factory resembles other industrial settings. This first form of forgetting appears as memory reduced to disconnected sensory traces. It forms the base layer of the broader forgetting process described in the following sections.

Spatial stigma and boundary silence

The Cotton Factory stands at the edge of Maksuda, Varna's Roma neighbourhood, and this proximity also shapes how the place is spoken about. Historical sources indicate that the neighbourhood of Maksuda

had longstanding informal settlement patterns, with Roma residents occupying the area without legal status already before 1913 (Varnenski obshtinski vestnik, 1913).

One real-estate editorial from 2008 frames the ruins of the "Hristo Botev" factory and the adjacent Maksuda neighbourhood as obstacles to Varna's *"European future"*, describing the area as the *"ugliest"* and most undesirable part of the city and proposing its complete erasure to enable redevelopment (Tonchev 2008). This discourse situates the factory not as heritage, but as a spatial problem inseparable from the stigmatization of the neighbourhood.

Several respondents mention the area directly, describing it as *"the Roma quarter"* and calling it *"unattractive"* or undesirable for investment. One interviewee states that many families *"sold their houses for almost nothing"* when Roma households *"were moving towards them,"* framing the neighbourhood as a source of social and economic retreat. Another notes that *"no Bulgarian would buy property in the Roma quarter,"* linking the factory's location to a wider reluctance to engage with the area.

The same pattern appears in public comments. Participants in an online discussion describe the area as *"close to Maksuda"* and therefore *"unappealing,"* suggesting that the building's environment is reason enough for its neglect.

These observations point to a consistent dynamic: the stigma attached to Maksuda extends to the factory's immediate surroundings and affects how people describe their relation to the place. Spatial context becomes a factor in what is remembered, what is spoken, and what remains unaddressed.

Community status and public positioning

The early archival materials position the factory's workforce within a clear social hierarchy. Newspaper articles and notes from the first half of the twentieth century show a contrast between the factory's economic importance and the low status of its workforce. In 1902, workers are described as coming from *"very poor families"* and standing on *"a very low cultural level"* (Izvestnik, 1902), marking them as marginal within Varna's social landscape. Municipal appeals from the 1920s call on the public to support the factory's reopening because of its regional significance, yet mention workers only as an anonymous category whose employment must be secured (Politicheski izvestiya, 1924). Interwar reports present awards, exhibitions and production

quality, but never the people who produced them (Varnenski okrazhen vestnik, 1926; Slavyanin, 1931). Workers appear as a category, not as individuals.

This marginal status partly explains the limited testimony from the socialist and current period. Several respondents avoid extended descriptions of factory life and speak about their work in minimal terms. Some respondents note Varna's social stratification, remarking that certain professions were not considered suitable for *"Varnenets nobility."* Another, when asked if her mother could give an interview, interrupted herself with the unfinished sentence *"She can't know, she would never communicate with such…,"* accompanied by visible discomfort. A long-serving worker called the *"biggest event"* in her factory life not any change in the enterprise itself, but completing her education and moving from the production hall to accounting.

Such remarks frame textile work as low-prestige and help explain why it did not accumulate a narrative tradition: it was necessary yet socially undervalued. The result is a consistent historical and contemporary configuration in which the factory is publicly visible, while the status of its workers implies that their stories remain largely unspoken.

Perceived leaderlessness and dispossession without an agent

The historical accounts of Varna's textile sector show clearly identifiable entrepreneurial figures such as Asen Nikolov, whose business trajectory, family background, investments and factory expansions are documented across the interwar period. His role appears with names, dates, capital figures and specific initiatives.

In contrast, the Cotton Factory's owners and managers remain unnamed and untraceable in local memory, leaving no personal profiles or leadership narratives. This visibility gap has two dimensions: the absence of actors whose stories could anchor memory, and the unresolved tensions surrounding ownership – one arising from lack of information, the other from limits on what can be said.

Archival documents list categories of ownership – English, Italian, Jewish shareholders, state control – but not the individuals behind them. Decisions appear as impersonal acts: the *"English"* closed the factory in 1915, *"Italians"* took over in the 1920s, the state *"assumed control"* during wartime. Authority appears only as designation, not as people.

This absence continues under socialism. Former workers recall no leadership structures. The archive preserves the memoir of the 1949–

1950 director (DA – Varna, f. 1517, op. 1), showing that managerial perspectives existed, yet none are remembered.

Socialism elevated the "udarnik" – exemplary workers presented as proof of ideological success (Apostolova, 1957; Udarnik, 1946). They stood as symbolic representatives of the factory when real decision-makers remained distant. Workers recognised this performative logic (Creed 1995); official and private truths coexisted. "The party," the hegemon, stayed abstract, much like the foreign owners before it.

The current owner appears in public records, but no further information is available. A person identified by tenants declined to meet. Several respondents mentioned TIM as a suspected owner – a large Varna-based conglomerate associated in public discourse with criminal structures.

A municipal official confirms the consequences of this opacity. Responsibility is formally distributed across agencies, ministries and private owners, but in practice no actor can act. The municipality "has no competence," cannot invest in private property and must defer to higher authorities that do not respond. Some owners allow heritage buildings to deteriorate until demolition becomes legal. Authority is everywhere in principle, nowhere in practice.

Public commentary reflects this pattern. Users describe the factory as "waiting to fall," "taken for nothing," or "left to collapse" by unnamed interests, controlled by forces that cannot be contacted.

Institutional opacity is both narrative and practical. Without identifiable authority, no one can be approached, held accountable or form institutional memory. The factory's history becomes a sequence of events carried out by unrecognisable agents performing unknown actions.

Before 1944 the initiative to build the factory, the municipal land provided and the long-standing efforts to keep it operating express a proprietary attitude framed as serving local livelihood, even though the enterprise was legally private. As noted in the press: *"The company is not important; what is important is the reopening of the factory…"* (Varnenski obshtinski vestnik, 1925). Respondents echo this: they perceive the building as part of *"my childhood," "our neighbourhood," or "our family history."* To the question what was the factory for her, one responded simply: *"Everything.*" This belonging operates independently of legal ownership.

The strength of this attachment makes the later rupture more consequential. Under socialism, factories were said to be *"in the hands of*

the working class," though decisions were taken elsewhere. During mass privatisation, a similar symbolic promise resurfaced through vouchers and free shares; in practice, most vouchers ended in privatisation funds and control shifted to a small group of investors (Getova, 2022). This produced a second symbolic affirmation followed by a second loss. As one respondent said: "*It's very disgusting, it's very sad. This was done for the people… Everything that was done is being destroyed."*

Being told twice that the factory was *"in workers' hands,"* and losing it twice without clear actors, produces a silence shaped by disappointment, guilt and a sense of powerlessness. Under such conditions, silence is not forgetting but a way of avoiding a past that offers no stable ground.

Facebook discussions reinforce this dynamic. Commenters describe the building as *"snatched by private interests"* or *"taken for nothing,"* while still treating it as shared heritage.

This institutional opacity aligns with research on governance. Mary Douglas (1985) notes that institutions sustain themselves by distributing accountability so widely that responsibility becomes unlocatable. The persistent invisibility of the owner produces both administrative paralysis and narrative collapse.

Fear and the consequences of responsible speech

The empirical record shows that contract killings remained a visible feature of public life in Bulgaria into the 2000s – 156 cases between 2000 and 2005, with only 17 resolved – making such violence a relatively low-risk tool for eliminating rivals. Since the 1990s, Bulgaria has lived with the long aftertaste of violent entrepreneurial groups, unresolved contract killings, and the visible penetration of criminal actors into local politics and legitimate business (Shtenov et al, 2007). State institutions were widely perceived as weak or compromised (Gachevska, 2012). These parallel analyses describe the risks as producing *"unfocused fears, perceptions of insecurity, and feelings of unease"* that cannot be precisely located.

This caution is reinforced by older, socialist-era habits of disciplined speech, in which political and institutional topics required careful navigation (Gachevska, 2012). Respondents do not cite these details explicitly, but their hesitations and topic shifts reproduce a wider communicative norm: one avoids specificity when the boundaries of safety are unclear.

Respondents describe the factory as *"taken," "left to fall,"* or *"run down,"* in some cases organisations such as TIM are suspected not as rumour but as a recognised actor in Varna's economic landscape. The name appears as an implicit boundary: people acknowledge it quietly, without elaboration, and then change the subject. The combination – widespread local knowledge, absence of official confirmation, and reluctance to discuss details – creates a climate in which speaking freely about the factory feels unsafe or simply unwise.

These dynamics do not need to be present in the Cotton Factory itself to influence everyday behaviour. They have produced a diffuse, historically accumulated sense that naming powerful actors, discussing ownership, or criticising institutional decisions may carry unpredictable consequences. Respondents face another constraint, alongside the above mentioned: speaking about the factory may involve social risk.

Moral reclassification and the multiple erasures of memory

The memory pattern around the Cotton Factory follows Maurice Halbwachs's view that collective memory is reorganised through shifting "social frames": what can be recalled depends on the authority structure that validates it. It also reflects Mary Douglas's account of institutional "shadow zones," where experience becomes unsayable because it no longer fits the classificatory order.

Archival fragments show that this dynamic has deep historical roots. Early twentieth-century accounts classify ownership through national and ethnic labels – English, Italian, Jewish – rather than identifiable individuals or practices. A 1902 newspaper, commenting on the English owner's behaviour during a strike, notes: *"As you can see, all of this may be very English, but it is not at all Bulgarian."* (Izvestnik, 1902) A brief note from 1930 reports that *"the factory is in the hands of Jewish shareholders, a pity but a fact."* (Naroden ratnik, 1930)

Such judgements reflect the moral horizons of their time and anticipate later reclassifications after 1944 and 1989. In each period, the dominant narrative framework determines which aspects of the past are speakable. The literature describes two successive waves of suppression. The first begins after 1944, when the socialist state redefined legitimate memory (Deyanova, 2005). Histories of entrepreneurship, foreign ownership and pre-socialist work cultures became politically unusable.

A parallel mechanism reappears after 1989, but with reversed polarity. Positive memories of socialist life or workplace experience carry

the risk of disapproval. Several respondents shorten their answers or retreat into generalities when the socialist period arises. Moments that could ground personal accounts – workplace dynamics, routines, achievements – are reduced to safe minimal formulas.

This material aligns with Katherine Verdery's observations on the post-1989 moralisation of the past. Public discourse often references socialism through evaluative shorthand – the Facebook comment calling it *"the bad socialism"* is typical – while concrete memories remain unspoken. Interviewees confirm this implicitly: none provide extended descriptions of their work lives under socialism, even when they spent decades in the factory. The 1946 Udarnik newspaper corpus documents a factory saturated with organised activity – brigades, physical-culture units, agitbrigades, memorial rituals. Archival traces from the period, including a photograph of the recreation base of the State Industrial Enterprise "Hristo Botev" (DA – Varna, f. 640, op. 1, a.e. 45), indicate organised leisure facilities existed, yet none appear in interviews; only the kindergarten persists because it still operates.

Asked explicitly about social life in the factory, one respondent whose parents worked there recounts: *"…my father sang in the choir, my mother, they went rowing… There wasn't a factory without them, without a dance troupe, without a choir… It has always been like that."* Her memories remain descriptive and avoid moral evaluation. At the end she adds emotionally: *"We demolished monuments, we demolished everything. I went to Buzludzha*[1] *when they opened Buzludzha. I went on the first day. It was so beautiful. Now it's a tomb. It's the same here, a tomb."* Only one neighbourhood participant offers a spontaneous judgement, and from a third-person position: "*I've only heard that all the people were happy while the factory was working. But when democracy came, the factory closed."*

Across these transitions, the effect is cumulative. The pre-1944 past is overwritten after 1944; the socialist past is overwritten after 1989; and each new regime reinforces silence around part of what came before. Workers' experiences do not vanish but their narrative expression contracts through repeated cycles of moral sorting. The result is a

[1] Completed in 1981 on the peak linked to the founding of Bulgaria's socialist movement, Buzludzha served as the Bulgarian Communist Party's chief monumental symbol. Its futuristic form and mosaics projected ideological authority; its post-1989 abandonment turned it into a conspicuous ruin and a contested site of memory, illustrating the unresolved legacy of state socialism in Bulgaria.

memory field shaped not by forgetting alone but by successive reorganisations of what counts as acceptable speech.

Urban discontinuity: city growth and the weakening of local memory

Testimonies and public discussions suggest that the transformation of Varna's urban environment has weakened the continuity of memory surrounding the Cotton Factory. Several respondents note that the city has changed *"a great deal"* and that many new residents have settled in the area, altering the neighbourhood's social composition. An architectural history specialist remarked that the district *"is not what it was,"* pointing to the rapid expansion and reconfiguration of Varna's industrial zones in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Today's population around the factory is not the population that engaged with it during its operational years.

Several pedestrians told they *"are not from here and don't know anything about the factory,"* despite having lived in the neighbourhood for twenty or thirty years. They recognise the name "Hristo Botev" but associate it only with the building, not with its former function. Intergenerational transmission is missing.

Physical changes reinforce this reclassification of the past. Pedestrians pointed to the disappearance of the small pre-1950s houses once surrounding the site, replaced by new apartment blocks and construction pits. Trucks carrying concrete passed every few minutes during fieldwork. Two men who had stopped for a drink commented: *"These buildings are recent. Here on this street, as you go down, everything was on the left and on the right, there were houses. Yes. Like these houses."*

In this setting, the old fabric of the neighbourhood is not only erased but treated as obsolete, making the socialist and pre-socialist past appear irrelevant to the shifting present. Online discussions echo this. Commenters describe Varna as *"completely changed"* or *"unrecognisable,"* placing the factory within a city that no longer supports its former social meaning. The building becomes a remnant in an urban landscape with new economic and spatial priorities.

The spatial and demographic reorganisation of Varna thus contributes to the erosion of memory, not through deliberate forgetting but through the dilution of the social environments that once sustained it.

Convergence: how silence becomes structurally produced and culturally stabilised

A final pattern in the material is the way incomplete knowledge about the Cotton Factory becomes filled with conjecture, inherited rumours or circulating neighbourhood myths. When respondents attempt to explain aspects of the factory's history but lack concrete information, they draw on fragments that mix verifiable elements with imaginative or exaggerated claims.

A few examples. Names such as "Prince Boris" and "Prince Kiril" appear interchangeably, and the factory's age varies across recollections. Different respondents attribute the founding to "the English", "Italians" or "Germans". In public discussion, commenters claim the building is protected by UNESCO, or that it was the first industrial site after the Liberation. Tenants recount how striking the brick produces a metallic sound, or describe it as uniquely hard to drill. One respondent attributes this to *"unique English clay"* and concludes that the buildings still stand because *"they cannot be removed"*. These claims circulate, despite the fact that the factory could be demolished like any other.

Fragmented sensory memories do not accumulate into narrative. Low occupational prestige discourages elaboration. The invisibility of owners and managers leaves no figures around whom accounts can cohere. Spatial stigma distances the factory from present-day identity. Moral reorganisations after 1944 and 1989 restrict which periods feel speakable. Urban turnover dissolves the communities that once held memory. Fear – shaped by socialist-era disciplined speech and post-1989 perceptions of risk – encourages vagueness when responsibility is unclear. Where factual knowledge is thin, discourse iteration produces improvised explanations and local myths that fill the gaps without restoring the historical record.

This process also stabilises a new cultural centre of gravity. Repeated fragments – foreign origins, architectural quality, exceptional durability – become shared assumptions. These iterations do not reconstruct the factory's past but provide a coherent framework through which the building remains intelligible in the present. The architectural admiration survives, while accounts of work, production and everyday life do not. The Cotton Factory becomes a case where the interplay of these forces produces not misinformation or conflict but a deep, enduring and structurally reinforced silence.

Conclusion

The structure of the Cotton Factory in Varna remains a prominent landmark. The silence around it is not an absence of memory or interest, but the outcome of several converging conditions. Its presence is sustained not by legal protection or deliberate preservation, but by a suspended significance that no institution or community has resolved. It continues to stand partly because it carries a meaning that has not yet been fully articulated.

Despite the many layers of forgetting, the factory persists because certain forms of memory continue to attach to it. These memories are not narrative but structural – the long-standing sense of belonging, the unresolved social conflicts embedded in its history and territory, the cultural aspirations associated with industrial modernity, the neighbourhood legends and the aesthetic appeal of the building itself. People who scarcely recall the work still recognise the façade; those who cannot name its owners still imagine what it could become. The vision of transforming a once noisy and inhospitable interior into a quiet, open space – a gallery, a concert hall, a place for public life – anchors the factory in its constructed past and present, and opens a future horizon.

This mixture of attachment, projection and aesthetic recognition forms the residual memory that continues to hold the building in place, even as the stories that created and animated it have faded. If the remaining relations and latent meanings that tie the factory to the lives around it were ever stripped away, it would become what many other industrial sites have already become – a place detached from memory as it is removed from the landscape.

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