

National Myths in Post-Communist Bulgaria and Their Criticism

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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the history-related national myths of contemporary Bulgaria and the public criticism levelled against them. A string of mass-scale reactions since the early 1990s up until the present day have revealed how entrenched the negative stereotypes towards national minorities or neighbours, the simplifying historical narratives, and the historical symbols with powerful ethno-mobilization potential, are among Bulgarians. These contrivances have been subject to critical scrutiny by academics working on behalf of several NGOs. Social scientists, cultural anthropologists and literary scholars have zeroed in on the narrowly ethnic twist of national identity and the forging of a nationalist mythology. A few historians have launched a sceptical revision of several key historical myths, e.g. the “Turkish yoke”, the “National Revival era”, etc. Yet the repercussions of this academic or NGO output among the broader public in Bulgaria is indeed rather limited.

INSTEAD OF AN INTRODUCTION: A LINGERING CONTROVERSY

*“The Bulgarians sobered faster than their Balkan neighbours. Now it is the Serbs’ turn to sober. But it is going to be even harder in Macedonia, they are still getting drunk out there. The Albanians might be facing the steepest challenge sobering...”*¹. This assurance was recently made by Bulgarian researchers known to share a civic commitment in combating discrimination of ethnic or religious minorities. From the comparison with its neighbouring Balkan countries, Bulgaria has emerged as a heartening showcase: the “sobering” is the authors’ metaphor for the nation’s alleged scrambling out of national myths.

However, a diagnosis as optimistic as this might look somewhat weird from a number of perspectives. What a string of events and public reactions in post-communist Bulgaria since the early 1990s until the present day reveals is a rather entrenched negative stereotyping of minorities and neighbours, a set of knee-

jerk patterns in narrating the past as well as the persistence of historical symbolism with strong ethno-mobilizing action: these are all manifestations of something, which – with all due reservations – might be identified as “national” and/or “historical” myths. The most staggering case was the controversy around a research project that had flared up less than two years prior to 2009, when the statement in our opening quote was made. Two researchers – a Bulgarian PhD student in Germany and a well-known Austrian historian and anthropologist – were condemned for having denied the reality of an historic event that took place in 1876 and became widely known as the Batak slaughter. It refers to the killing of nearly 2000 Bulgarian Christians by Muslim anti-insurgency paramilitaries in the process of stamping out an uprising against the Ottoman rule². What actually triggered the nationalist hysteria – that spilled out across media and town squares and featured politicians (including the country’s president) – was the way the word “myth” was used in

¹ Petar-Emil Mitev, Antonina Zhelyazkova, Goran Stojkovski, “Macedonia at Crossroads III, Conclusion”, *Kultura* (a weekly), 9 January 2009, available at: <http://www.kultura.bg/bg/article/view/15104> (in Bulgarian).

² See the project’s publication: Martina Baleva, Ulf Brunnbauer (eds.), *Batak As a Place of Memory / Batak. Ein bulgarischer Erinnerungsort*, Sofia: Iztok-Zapad, 2007.

an initial version of the Batak project. Even though the embattled researchers had resorted to the term's stricter academic implications rather than its popular meaning of a "hoax" or "contrivance", the unleashed public response was brandishing the details of the slaughter as a historical event. Furthermore, beyond the dry facts, Batak was held up as a national sanctity tarnished by "anti-Bulgarian forces". Sparkles still flicker around the "Batak denial" in media or websites, and even in the National Assembly in Sofia. In early April 2011, the Bulgarian East Orthodox church canonized the 1876 victims.

Thus, the polemic has unwittingly proven the assumption that the Batak slaughter is a myth in the specific sense as a symbolic construct with a powerful identity charge erected around a real historical event; it has also shown how powerful this kind of constructs are in today's Bulgaria. The cliché that the Bulgarians aren't "quite as chauvinists" as the neighbouring nations, suffered a resounding defeat. Yet are there civic or academic circles in the country who are ready and willing to face up to nationalist tenets and are capable of resisting the recurrent ethnic mobilisations? An attempt to answer this question should be based – for the sake of clarity – on presenting the historical myths of the ethnic majority in Bulgaria.

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO BULGARIAN HISTORICAL MYTHS

The key one among them was referred to above: "the Turkish yoke" (or "slavery" in a more literal rendition) as the Ottoman domination from the late XIV century up until 1878 has been termed in the popular – as well as the academic – discourse. The 'yoke' has typically been painted in the darkest of colours as an era

of barbaric, "Oriental" despotism, which by default has gone hand-in-hand with systematic and indescribably cruel abuses of the empire's Christian population, forced mass-scale islamisations, etc. The more extreme versions describe Bulgarians as victims of a "genocide" similar to the Armenian one.

Despite the "yoke's dark ages", the national ideology provides the Bulgarians with a number of reasons to be proud: it is commonly surmised they were consistently and heroically resisting the alien oppression. Besides, the era of the so-called Bulgarian National Revival (standardly dated 1762-1878) has been a point of specific emphasis and – in many ways – romanticising. On the other hand, there is a prevailing assumption that the Ottoman conquest had obliterated a glorious Bulgarian medieval civilisation. Ever since its birth in the XIX century, the local national ideology has invariably listed the Slavic alphabet and writing, created by the Byzantine missionaries Constantine-Cyril and Methodius in the IX century, among the "Bulgarian" cultural achievements. The cliché of an indigenous renaissance in the arts, which burgeoned even before the West European one, is still being syndicated, mostly based on the XIII c. murals in the Boyana Church near Sofia.

The origins of Bulgarian civilisation are sometimes cast even further back in time. A voluminous cache of amateurish – yet not without the direct involvement of academic historians and archaeologists – publications has piled up since the early 1990s lionising the ancient, pagan proto-Bulgarians. This literature is the pillar of the "proto-bulgaromania" that enjoys a substantial popular appeal and credits the Bulgarian ancestors with numerous inventions, e.g. "one of the most accurate" calendars of humankind. The last decade has seen the active recycling for popular usage of

the ancient Thracians, who had already been promoted as civilisation ancestors and genetic kin of the Bulgarians during the 1970s, in the context of the cultural policy championed by Lyudmila Zhivkova, the late daughter of the communist party-state ruler, Todor Zhivkov. The Thracians have also been credited with magnificent cultural achievements made independently from the ancient Greek or Roman civilisations: the Thracian treasure troves are still representing Bulgaria in museums around the world boosting national self-esteem back in their “motherland”.

Apart from the overblown claims in the cultural sphere, these in politics and statehood are also worth mentioning. The medieval Bulgarian state map has been unabashedly stretched out in both historic atlases and T-shirts. Even though there is no lack of irony in the way the slogan “Bulgaria on three seas” is perceived today, the broader public predominantly gives credit to a formidable list of “lost lands” that Bulgaria is – both “historically” and “ethnically” – entitled to claim. Top place in the list is allocated to Macedonia, a land that for any good reason qualifies as Bulgarian national myth, like the Kosovo myth for Serbia or the Transylvanian myth for Hungary. What seems to provide the key frustration here is the Macedonians’ bid to be a separate nation. The notion that the latter was “artificially created” within communist Yugoslavia and that Macedonian language is no more than a Bulgarian dialect has enjoyed an outstanding currency – even among intellectuals who tend to go quite “liberal” on historical issues.

In parallel with that, the history taught at school has cultivated among Bulgarians the feeling that they have always lost – unfairly, despite their gallantry at the battle field – on the political arena: this has partially been attributed to imperialist tendencies among

the great powers (depending on political bias, these could be one or more West European countries, the West in general, or Russia). Nurtured by history textbooks, the Bulgarian martyrdom myth has been reinforced by the cliché that deep down its core this has ever been “a tolerant nation” that caused no pain to members of any other national community and sustained a unique ethnic coexistence model in its “own” state. In this section, preventing the deportation of around 50,000 Bulgarian Jews to Nazi death camps during World War II has become the most exploited historical event. Bulgarian society however has refused to shoulder any responsibility for more than 11,000 Jews who were deported from the occupied territories of Greece and Yugoslavia. The multiple campaigns for the expulsion of major portions of the domestic Muslim population since the 1878 creation of the Bulgarian state up until the 1980s, the abuse committed to this population group or the destruction of the Ottoman cultural heritage have never been a popular discussion topic. The crimes carried out against other Balkan people during the Second Balkan War in 1913 or during the two world wars get even less of a mention.

THE TRANSITION’S EFFECT

The adoption of any kind of policy in history and memory, that could highlight the embarrassing facts and humble the claims for past glory, is still being successfully warded off by the cliché that the Bulgarians – unlike their chauvinistic neighbours – are too unassuming, that they even lack national self-esteem. Hence, the claim that they are the only ones on the Balkans that have successfully sobered out of nationalism. As a matter of fact, the post-communist transition period has even

further entrenched Bulgarian nationalism. By and large, the latter has traditionally gone along two key “axes”. The first one is anti-Turkish or anti-Islamic; it has been manifest in the “Turkish yoke” discourse as well as in the prevalent attitudes towards Turkey and the Muslim minorities in the country. The second axis is the irredentist one that mostly busies itself with the so-called Macedonian question. In both areas, Bulgarian society was profoundly indoctrinated with chauvinistic tenets under the Zhivkov regime, similar to the Romanians’ indoctrination under Ceausescu or that of the Albanians under Enver Hoxha. In the aftermath of the 1999 events, the circles identifying with the former regime quite consistently tried to sustain legitimacy through the code-words of “patriotism”, rallying themselves against the revisions of history inspired by “alien forces”. Yet the new anti-communist discourse cast itself into the mode of reiterating or even further inflating the already entrenched period pieces, especially on nostalgic subjects like Macedonia. Its acolytes claim that the communist regime was “nationally nihilistic” in its core and sold Bulgarian interests out to Moscow.

Under the circumstances, instead of bashing national myths, the post-communist plurality of ideas engendered paranoia. Ever since the early 1990s, the scare that for misunderstood political correctness – borrowed from the West or sponsored by Turkey – some historians and policymakers were willing to substitute euphemisms like “the Ottoman presence” for the commonly accepted “Turkish yoke” was making waves across Bulgarian society. Allegations are rife that today’s history schoolbooks fail to treat the “Turkish yoke” in a sufficiently patriotic way or even pretend that no such ever existed. At a later stage, these obsessions were complemented by the

panic that the poem “I Am a Little Bulgarian” by Ivan Vazov (1850-1921), revered as the greatest national writer, would be dropped from school primers. In June 2011, during a patriotic holiday, over 24 000 children all over the country took part in a web portal initiative to recite simultaneously “I am a Little Bulgarian”: the event was supposed to drive home the idea that, despite all detractors, both Vazov’s work and Bulgarian identity will thrive forever.

Still, are there exceptions – e.g. public personae or academic circles – that have opted out of the nationalist discourse or even actively resisted it?

VOICES CRITICAL OR LESS SO

Like most changes in post-communist public life in Bulgaria, the reappraisal of the fundamental national identity myths was to a large degree promoted from outside the country. The nongovernment sector played the important role of a mediator, quite often based on funding from the Open Society mega-foundation of George Soros. Hence the entrenched conviction among those nostalgic for the former regime (and among others as well) that the West, the USA or, indeed, “the global Jewish conspiracy”, has been sponsoring a process of “denationalization” of the Bulgarian nation. Apart from the numerous NGOs and human rights organisations, e.g. the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, academic circles have also been critical of nationalism. The two realms are not actually unconnected. Most academics working in the humanities who became known for their anti-nationalist civil stance or even gained a reputation as “myth busters” have at least made a passing through the civil sector. They often work

on projects of Sofia-based think-tanks after having studied or taught abroad by dint of the same networks, e.g. the Central European University in Budapest. Some of the NGOs committed to the battle for enhancing Bulgarian civic culture or boosting Balkan political understanding, have been headed by historians or other humanitarian academics. Some of these new centres have published valuable research on ethnic or religious communities in the country, promoted initiatives to support Bulgarian “civil society”, worked on pan-Balkan projects analysing “the image of the other”, thus contributing to the shakeup of popular nationalist myths. However, the way the NGO world functions, with its demand for a fast product (strategic *policy papers* rather than actual research) to account for the funding taken up, has somewhat distorted the critical reassessment of nationalist stereotypes. It has too often been reduced to trivial political correctness. In a number of cases, the result has been a lack of deeper reflection on the issues and moral cynicism: the concession that certain sets of issues (e.g. the minorities’ condition, especially the plight of the Roma population, etc.) provide a winning card in the fights over project funding has reigned supreme. Well entrenched clichés – like the one of the “sobered Bulgarians” referred to at the beginning – are not so hard to come by in publications of NGO-active experts. With the proviso that in the local context the distinction between the civil sector and university/academic circles is difficult to make, it might be claimed that among the academic group that most directly relates to nationalist mythmaking – the historians – the evolution towards a genuine critique has been slow to gain momentum. This can predominantly be attributed to the fact that history science in this

country is still regarded as a patriotic quest, and the historian has been looked up to as the guardian of the purity and credibility of the national narrative. It is also a consequence of the prevalence of an obsolete set of concepts and methods that have proven difficult to outlive even among “plugged-in” historians. This is why the undermining of the narrowly ethnic articulation of national identity has often been taken up by humanitarian researchers from adjacent fields, e.g. social sciences, cultural anthropology or philosophy³. It was again the historical myths that came into the crosshairs of some younger literary or cultural historians. They produced a string of studies, specifically on the fiction and nonfiction writing from the so-called Bulgarian Revival, that have contributed to the rethink of the way Bulgarian national ideology – and mythology – has been historically constructed⁴. As a result, the discussion of national myths has gained the reputation as the turf of literary historians and cultural anthropologists, thus alienating professional historians.

However, research coming from social or culture sciences has been by and large restricted by its focus on how collective conceptions are created and what implications they have had. These studies have shed light on the use and abuse of “collective memory” but never had the capacity or the aim to question the *veracity* of its constructs. The latter has indeed been perceived as a “positivistic” issue that cultural theorists, sociologists or literary

³ A few names are worth mentioning here, e.g. Ivailo Dichev, Petya Kabakchieva, Liliana Deyanova, Maya Grekova.

⁴ For instance: Albena Hranova, *Language And Its Speeches*, Sofia: Figura, 2000; Desislava Lilova, *Revival Implications Of The National Name*, Sofia: Prosveta, 2003; Nikolay Aretov, *National Mythology And National Literature*, Sofia: Queen Mab, 2006.

historians contemptuously shrink away from and comfortably cede to historians.

HISTORIOGRAPHIC REVISIONS

Given these circumstances, it wasn't quite a surprise that some of the boldest deconstructions of traditional interpretations in the field of history science have come from foreign experts. However, with the exception of the "Batak Project" (where the authors did not actually pursue quite as ambitious goals), these "provocations" have never gained any visibility outside narrow academic circles. For instance, the French academic Bernard Lory has directly assaulted the myth of the five centuries of "slaughter" visited upon the Bulgarians by the Turkish "slave drivers"⁵. In 2002, a Bulgarian translation of a monograph written by the Dutch historian of Ottoman art Machiel Kiel⁶ came out; the study shattered to pieces the belief that the Ottoman invasion had a catastrophic effect on a previously existing "unique" Bulgarian medieval culture. In this case – as in a number of other similar ones – the Bulgarian history faculties preferred to keep a low profile.

Still, a certain amount of critical aptitude among Bulgarian historians cannot be denied. It is most visible among Ottoman and Balkan history experts. The popular conceptions of the "Turkish slavery" have been subject to robust criticism on behalf of researchers like Vera Mutafchieva (who died in 2009), Tsvetana Georgieva and Antonina Zhelyazkova (another

⁵ Bernard Lory, "Five Centuries They Slaughtered Us – Thoughts around a Historical Myth", *Historical Future* 1, 1997. The article is accessible in Bulgarian at: <http://www.libsu.uni-sofia.bg/Statii/Bernar.html> (all the publications are in Bulgarian).

⁶ Machiel Kiel, *Art and Society of Bulgaria in the Turkish Period*, Assen-Maastricht: Van Gorcum, 1985.

activist in the civil sector, director of IMIR, the International Centre for Minority Studies and Intercultural Relations). They have also debunked another widely believed historical fiction: the forced mass-scale conversions to Islamic faith. These researchers – specifically Georgieva – have been blamed for promoting the term "Ottoman presence", even though it is either absent in their publications or presents a classic case of "taken out of context".

Another subject area, which is chronologically a part of the Ottoman era, but has traditionally been themed as the authentic realm of patriotism, the National Revival in XIX century, has been revisited by historians as well, apart from literary ones. On the one hand, the variety of historiographic perspectives and ideological stakes behind its interpretation as the "sublime Bulgarian age" became subject to fresher reflection⁷. On the other, it was highlighted that the Revival dynamic cannot be explored or understood outside its contemporary Ottoman context⁸. Some recently published studies have shown how the freeze-out of this context had enabled ideological contrivances like the Bulgarian "Revival town", with its "Revival architecture", or the "unique" national clothing styles, cuisine, etc.⁹.

⁷ See Roumen Daskalov, *The Making of a Nation in the Balkans: Historiography of the Bulgarian Revival*, Budapest: CEU Press, 2004. See also the monograph of the Bulgarian-US historian Maria Todorova on the build-up of hero No 1 in Bulgaria's national pantheon: Maria Todorova, *Bones of Contention: the Living Archive of Vasil Levski and the Making of Bulgaria's National Hero*, Budapest: CEU Press, 2009.

⁸ Alexander Vezenkov, "Obvious Only at First Glance: the „Bulgarian Revival“ as a Separate Era", In: Diana Mishkova (ed.), *The Balkan XIX Century. Other Perspectives*, Sofia: Riva, 2006 (in Bulgarian).

⁹ Stephan Dechev (ed.), *In Search Of the Essentially Bulgarian: Networks Of National Intimacy (XIX-*

In most of these cases, it is a matter of historians who occupy rather marginal niches away from the university or academia establishment. Their names are mostly associated with the Sofia-based Centre for Advanced Study (CAS) founded in 2001, with periodicals like *Critique and Humanism* or with faculties or universities other than the ones laying down the mainstream of historiography (the History Faculty of the Sofia University or the history institutes of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences). Yet even representatives of the latter have published important research, e.g. on the Bulgarian government oppression of Muslim communities. Beyond any doubt, the most traumatic legacy in this respect was left by the communist regime when the Bulgarian-speaking Moslem minority, and subsequently the Turkish-speaking one, were forcefully given Bulgarian names and identity¹⁰. Thus, after a long-lasting reign of an anti-Turkish agenda, the Bulgarian historical scholars finally provide us with evidence that they are capable of breaking the mould and facing up to their own clichés¹¹.

XXI centuries), Sofia: Institute for Art Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, 2010 (in Bulgarian).

¹⁰ The most serious contribution on the subject has been provided by the study of Michail Gruev and Alexei Kalionski, *The Revival Process. The Muslim Communities And The Communist Regime*, Sofia: Institute for Studies of the Recent Past, Open Society Institute, 2008 (in Bulgarian).

¹¹ A more general overview of Bulgarian historiography over the last two decades: Daniela Koleva, Ivan Elenkov, "Historical Studies in Post-Communist Bulgaria: Between Academic Standards and Political Agendas" in: Sorin Antohi, Balázs Trencsényi, Péter Apor (eds.), *Narratives Unbound. Historical Studies in Post-Communist Eastern Europe*, Budapest: CEU Press, 2007.

INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION: MYTHS STILL INTACT

As already seen, the key historical myths that became subject to critical revisits over the last couple of decades, had been exclusively resting on the anti-Turkish and anti-Islamic axis of Bulgarian nationalism. It is however unfortunate that the public repercussions of this academic or NGO-based critical output do not look quite as impressive as they might. This is corroborated at least by the ease of whipping up mass scale anti-Turkish nationalist mobilisations like the "Batak scandal". Just as disheartening is the fact that a string of other well-worn constructs, through which Bulgarians have been habituated to filter their perceptions of the past, are still almost unscathed.

Among them is just about everything related to the traumatic Macedonian subject: the handful of reflective publications by Bulgarian researchers on the Macedonian issue have mostly been published overseas. The crimes against Serbs or Greeks committed by Bulgarian troops during the 20th century wars still remain a taboo. The "traditional tolerance" of the Bulgarian nation to the Jews has yet to see a more comprehensive rethink, especially against the backdrop of the rampant anti-Semitism of the last few years.

The further back in time we go, or down the entrenched historical myths, the more timid the specialised publications appear. Among those researching the antique history (archaeologists, classical philologists, etc.), very few are the ones who have had the stomach to debunk the pile of inventions on a subject like the Thracians. Medieval historians and experts in problem-ridden disciplines like the "old Bulgarian studies" or "Cyril and Methodius studies" have been singularly silent. Arts history, ethnography

and folklore studies, dialectology have remained predominantly traditionalist in their approaches. Instead of undermining established schemes, they have mostly superficially modernised their clichés and indulged in pseudo-innovation. Taking into account how complicit with Bulgarian popular mythology these research areas have always been, and their recent faltering evolution in a more genuinely up-to-date direction, the “sobering” of the Bulgarians seems for the time being put on the backburner.

Translation from the Bulgarian by Georgi Pashov

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