



CENTRE FOR ADVANCED STUDY SOFIA

## CAS WORKING PAPER SERIES

**Issue 1**

Sofia 2007

This publication presents part of the research outcome of a project carried out at the Centre for Advanced Study Sofia under the title

## **Sofia Academic NEXUS**

### How to Think about the Balkans: Culture, Region, Identity

*Available in electronic form at  
[www.cas.bg](http://www.cas.bg)*



---

CENTRE FOR ADVANCED STUDY SOFIA

70 Neofit Rilski Str., floor 3-4  
phone: +359 2 9803704, fax: +359 2 9803662  
[cas@cas.bg](mailto:cas@cas.bg), [www.cas.bg](http://www.cas.bg)

---

Copyright © 2007 by the CAS contributors/CAS.  
All rights reserved. Copyright remains with the individual authors/CAS.  
No part of this publication can be reproduced, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise without prior written permission of the individual authors/CAS.

## BALAZS TRENCSENYI

### THE NATIONALIZATION OF PHILOSOPHY: CONSTRUCTING A BULGARIAN ‘NATIONAL ONTOLOGY’ IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD<sup>1</sup>

#### I. Discourses of National Character in Bulgaria

The key problem of most of the social and political thought that emerged in Bulgaria from the late-nineteenth century up to the establishment of the post-WW II communist regime was the constantly evoked “paradox of development.” While civilizational advancement was the overall aim of the nation-building project,<sup>2</sup> it also meant social differentiation, the collapse of the traditional life-world of the peasantry and of the entrepreneurial layer that emerged in the mid-nineteenth century using the economic structures of the Ottoman Empire. This posed a series of dilemmas concerning the identity of the community. On the one hand, modernization implied a growing distance between the emerging “nationalized” middle-class and the rural population; it also raised the question of how to transmit this “national” culture to the masses. On the other hand, it meant the relativizing of traditional role-models, threatening the newly-formed nation-state with apparent chaos caused by the permanent dislocation of the principal actors, leading to “misunderstood” forms and veritable mutations of the Western civilizational framework.

The political task of creating Bulgaria was intertwined with the pressing issue of deciding who the Bulgarians actually were. From the 1860s onwards, then, some sort of characterological rhetoric has been influential for Bulgarian na-

- 1 The present study is an extract from my longer manuscript on inter-war Bulgarian political discourse, entitled “Symbolic Geographies and Normative Pasts: The Search for the True Bulgarian Self,” resulting from the research conducted within the framework of the *NEXUS Project* at the Centre of Advanced Study Sofia (September 2001 – June 2002). I would like to thank especially Diana Mishkova, Boyan Manchev, Alexander Kiossev, Alexei Kalionski, Blagovest Zlatanov, and Ivan Elenkov for their ideas, suggestions, and the intellectually extremely stimulating company, which made my immersion into Bulgarian culture and history not only a matter of bookish research, but also an unforgettable personal experience.
- 2 On the social and ideological roots of Bulgarian nationalism in the nineteenth century, see Meininger, *The Formation of a Nationalist Bulgarian Intelligentsia, 1835-1878*; and Todorova, “The Course and Discourses of Bulgarian Nationalism.”

tional discourse. The early attempts usually concentrated on folk customs as the repository of the “national soul” or focused on the “national self” in view of a comparison between ancient and modern patterns of life. By the turn of the century, an “evolutionary-organicist” discourse emerged – trying to harmonize a modernist perspective with the protection of “national specificities” –, which criticized the superficial signs of imitation but firmly believed in the “civilizational” agenda.

In turn, the 1910s witnessed another significant twist in the evolution of the characterological discourse, giving birth to more “scientific” attempts of “theorizing” about the nation, adapting the German and French paradigms of the psychology of peoples (in Bulgarian: *narodopsihologia*). The first important work aiming at the creation of a self-standing national characterology was written by Todor Panov ( ), a young teacher in the Sofia military academy. Written just after the Balkan Wars, which resulted in a serious setback to the Bulgarian national aspirations, the book noted the general propensity of national characterology to flourish in the wake of great collective traumas. Panov’s characterology – based on the public narrative of the Second Balkan War as being a “*Dolchstoss*” in the back of the heroic nation that sacrificed its best forces against the Turks – , used a self-stereotyping, which was intended to prove that the Bulgarians were a heroic, but politically yet immature nation, easily abused by their cowardly but cunning enemies. In Panov’s vision, still rooted in an evolutionary narrative, the negative traits are not ontological but caused by the overflow of positive energies: the nation is overly democratic, often given to debate and hesitation instead of concentrated action, and it is also much too straightforward and heroic, while lacking sufficient political and diplomatic sense to realize its advantages fought out on the battlefield. (Panov, *Психология на българския народ (Psychology of the Bulgarian People)* 105-117).

The underlying preoccupations of the writer, Anton Strashimirov (1872-1937), who wrote the other key work of *narodopsihologia* in the 1910s, entitled *Book for Bulgarians*, were in many ways similar to those of Panov, even in the sense that the appearance of the book coincided with the catastrophic ending of Bulgaria’s next military involvement, i.e. the First World War. The work was published for Christmas 1918, when the war, bringing further humiliation for Bulgaria, was already over. Nevertheless, the articles were part of Strashimirov’s war publications and were not permeated by the feeling of total failure, but rather that of a heroic fight. In contrast to Panov, Strashimirov sought to devise a socially more encompassing characterology, which did not identify the national character completely with that of the rural lower classes. At the same time, he called attention to other social divisions, which were less accentuated in Panov’s text. The most important novelty of Strashimirov’s narrative was the unprecedented stress on the regional differences in devising a characterology, which was obviously in marked contrast to the

“unitarism” of Panov, and all those who tackled the national character before him. Most importantly, according to Strashimirov, Bulgarianness is manifest in the colorful variety of regional types and not in terms of a division between the “elite” and the “people”. (Strashimirov, *Книга за българите* 10ff.)

After the catastrophic end of World War I, alongside with the rise of agrarianism, there were other voices of social criticism, which instrumentalized the vocabulary of *narodopsihologia*, pointing out the social and political incoherence of the country, while concentrating mainly on the rural aspect of the national character. This does not mean, however, that the national characterology was used necessarily by all political camps. In fact, in the early twenties, while both the agrarians and the socialists resorted sometimes to its sweeping rhetorical characterizations concerning the features of this or that social group, they did not find a way to integrate the complexity of the discourse into their political propaganda, which was devised in terms of rigid class-barriers. Thus, alongside with the general anti-intellectualism of these ideologies, their perspective relegated the problem of the mediating role of the cultural elite, the focal point of the previous characterologies, completely to the margins of the public discourse.

In the wake of the fall of the agrarians, this solution to the dilemma of characterology became extremely popular, contributing to the formation of an “*ex post facto*” agrarian-populist discourse extolling the peasantry as the principal focus of the nation’s essence.<sup>3</sup> The most important representative of this discourse was the writer Konstantin Petkanov (1891-1952), who returned repeatedly to the question of national character throughout the twenties and thirties. Petkanov described the interaction of the peasantry and the intellectual elite as the principal question of the national culture. He also used the vocabulary of *narodopsihologia* as a basis of his character-discourse. There is, however an overall shift in his narrative compared to the characterologies of the previous decade. While the principal agents of his narrative were the same (i.e. the modern cultural and social structures breaking through the traditional life-world of the peasantry, causing a feeling of *anomie* and collapse of social coherence), his tone was markedly darker and he did not cherish a belief in the ultimate harmony brought along by a more patient, organic and evolutionary development on the part of the political elite.

In the late-twenties, the semi-authoritarian regime of the *Democratic Alliance* became increasingly unpopular and was slowly but steadily disintegrating. This reopened space for various political formations that were marginalized by the regime to formulate their cultural and political agendas. At the same time, the public sphere was rather limited and party politics had a strongly negative connotation in popular consciousness. As a result, the intellectu-

3 See, for instance, the work of Ivan Керов, *Интелигенция и народ*.

als, who preferred to define themselves as free from daily political struggles, tended to assume a more encompassing position of cultural criticism to express their opinion. Throughout the inter-war period, one can observe the translation of the political dilemma concerning the ideal form of government into the characterological language, focusing on the question of the ideal match of political structure and Bulgaria's national specificity. This discursive situation, in essence, remained unaltered also during the short revival of the parliamentary regime (1931-34), which was marked, after a moment of enthusiasm, by an ever increasing distrust of party-politics. It was also naturally fitting the post-1934 autocratic period, which once again acted to limit the actual political involvement of the public sphere. Therefore, the period witnessed an intensification of the characterological debates, and these years produced an impressive number of divergent intellectual proposals, coexisting in the same discursive field.<sup>4</sup> One has to place the new turn in the debate around the interpretation of the "national icon," Bay Ganyo, into this context as well.<sup>5</sup>

Some of the elements of this discourse became incorporated into the more general philosophical attempts of creating a "new identity" for the nation.<sup>6</sup> In the 1920-1930s, Bulgaria was hit by the general crisis of evolutionary historical consciousness in a similar way as other Central and Southeast-European countries. This crisis was due to the traumatic events at the end of the war and the ensuing whirlwind of violent social and political change, which undermined any kind of unwarranted belief in the beneficial and cumulative effects of historical evolution. Various new ideological trends reached Bulgaria, based on "cultural morphology", relativizing the linearity of historical time and stressing the incommensurability of civilizational circles. This also overlapped with the emergence of new generational ideologies that problematized the normative continuity of their tradition, asserting the fragmentation of the past and the need to reconstruct it under the aegis of a new creative synthesis.<sup>7</sup>

4 For this symbolic negotiation in the artistic sphere, see Avramov, *Диалог между две изкуства*; as well as Genova and Dimitrova, *Изкуството в България през 20-те години Модернизъм и национална идея. Art in Bulgaria during the 1920's. Modernism and National Idea.*

5 The debate was launched by Gerhard Gesemann whose text, in turn, was a reaction to Petkanov's interpretation (Gesemann, "Der problematische Bulgare"). The most interesting reactions can be found in *Философски преглед*, 4 (1931): 349-363. For a recent interpretation of this debate, see Kiossev, "The Debate about the Problematic Bulgarian: A View on the Pluralism of the National Ideologies in Bulgaria in the Interwar Period."

6 The best study on the Bulgarian "metaphysical" nationalist discourses is Elenkov's *Родно и дясно*. See also Dimitrova "Опити за националнокултурна самоидентификация на българина. Историкофилософски поглед," (*Attempts on the National-Cultural Self-Identification of the Bulgarians. Historical-Philosophical Overview*) and Daskalov, "Populists and Westerners in Bulgarian History and Present."

7 One of the protagonists of this new *Kulturphilosophie*, fused with a generational discourse, was Konstantin Galabov (1892-1980). See especially his *Живот, истина, творчество. Литературни опити (Life, Truth and Creation. Literary Essays)*.

At the same time, the positions of this new “meta-historical” discourse were rather constrained. In the twenties and thirties, alongside the growing sensibility to the problematic nature of the normative past,<sup>8</sup> the agents of “official” nationalism were busy establishing a historical canon to buttress their efforts of nation-building. As a matter of fact, as it befitted a culture with a rather belated institutionalization of “national sciences,” the Bulgarian historical canon, built mostly on positivist grounds, was to a large extent created in the inter-war period.<sup>9</sup> It is due also to this fact that most attempts to undermine this framework of historical narrativity and the corresponding national characterology remained rather idiosyncratic. On the whole, although the discursive potential was there, even those who sought to subvert the official narrative were trying to reach a compromise between the (symbolic) geographical and temporal aspects of defining Bulgarianness.<sup>10</sup>

Another direction for development of the *narodopsihologia*-discourse was towards “compartmentalization”, which came to border on the very dissolution of the genre, as the authors produced an extremely wide range of studies on the character of different social classes and types. Thus, apart from the more normative discourses about the character of the peasants or intelligentsia, one could read about the character of hooligans, prostitutes, bureaucrats, and even about that of bachelors and spinsters. This proliferation did not mean, however, that the characterological discourse lost entirely its innovative potential. Building on the previous traditions, but also reshaping them to a considerable extent, various narratives, ranging from “official” nationalism to fundamentalist autochthonism and radical leftism,<sup>11</sup> sought to expropriate it in order to legitimize their position with a reference to the “national essence.”

Of all this colourful variety, I am going to present here one of the most interesting instances of the complex interplay between the characterological discourse and the drive to create a “national philosophy,” which was so prevalent in interwar Central and South-East Europe. The works by Nayden Sheytanov

8 The best document of the “negotiation” between official nationalism and the “metaphysical” crisis-discourse, is Kazandzhiev, *Прег извора на живота* (*In Front of the Source of Life*), printed in 1943, which contains texts written in the twenties and thirties.

9 The most representative author for this “official” narrative, instrumentalizing history for constructing a new identity is Boris Jotzov, who also served as minister of culture in the early 1940s. See Jotzov, “*Народен будител*,” (*National Awakener*) and “*Българската история, нейната разработка до освобождението и значението ѝ за пробудата на българския народ*,” (*Bulgarian History: Its Practice before Independence and its Significance for the Awakening of the Nation*). The most coherent attempt to create a historical-characterological narrative was by Petar Mutafchiev, which remained however unfinished due to the death of the author. See his *Книга за българите* (*Book for the Bulgarians*).

10 A good example of this attempt of “compromise” is Iliev, *Национално възпитание* (*National Education*).

11 The most important attempt to reshape the Bulgarian national character along a left-wing political agenda is by Ivan Hadzhiyski. See also Meshekov, *Ляво поколение* (*Leftist Generation*).

(1890-1970) and Janko Janev (1900-1944)<sup>12</sup> can be considered as Bulgarian counterparts to the philosophical attempts by Lucian Blaga, Mircea Eliade, Mircea Vulcănescu and Emil Cioran in Romania, Lajos Prohászka and Sándor Karácsony in Hungary, or Vladimir Dvorniković and Nikolaj Velimirović in Yugoslavia, all striving to devise an ontological scheme based on the specificity of their nation, dwelling especially close to the locus of “Being” itself. This, however, does not mean that all these authors had overlapping methodological and epistemological frameworks – on the contrary, while the aim was common, the intellectual solutions were highly divergent. As a matter of fact, Sheytanov and Janev had also fairly divergent itineraries – both due to their specific intellectual dispositions and their social-institutional environments. In the following, I am going to analyze Sheytanov’s project of ‘national ontology’ against the background of the alternative discourses of Bulgarianness prevalent in the interwar period.

## 2. Nayden Sheytanov: The Magic Realism of Nation-Building

While emerging from the mainstream “official nationalist” ideological camp, Nayden Sheytanov was one of the most idiosyncratic figures of the inter-war intellectual scene. He was a clerk in the ministry of education, and an essayist of considerable influence, contributing to many important cultural magazines of the period, including *Златорог*, *Просвета*, *Българска мисъл*, and *Философски преглед*. Studying his works, one can grasp the intricate connections of the “official” discourse and the more radical formulations of anti-modernism, which was a peculiarity of the Bulgarian intellectual climate.

Sheytanov turned consciously back to the romantic model of the intellectual, fusing poetic creation and social activism in the framework of shaping an identity-discourse – for himself as well as for his nation. He was mainly interested in collective magic and the ritual aspect of human existence, be it in a family or a more extended group. In his works, he fused this transcendentalism with elements of national characterology, offering a reinterpretation of the Bulgarian national canon, identifying the mystical aspects of folklore as well as of high culture, and finding magical structures in the special rituals as well as in everyday life-world of the Bulgarians.

From his first appearance as an essayist there were certain permanent elements in his texts, such as the willingness to identify “specific national traits” and the repudiation of the values taken to be imposed by the West. Probably, the only major shift in his oeuvre was that his mysticism, which for

12 His most important works are *Върху ирационалното в историята* (*On the Irrational in History*); *Философия на Родината* (*Philosophy of the Fatherland*); and the books written in Germany, putting forward a new version of “Balkanism” in the service of the Third Reich: *Der Mythos auf dem Balkan*; *Aufstand gegen Europa*; *Dämonie des Jahrhunderts*; *Zwischen Abend und Morgen: eine Balkanrhapsodie*.

some time had a more personal aspect, was gradually taken up into the nation-building ideology. In some of his poetic works, published in 1930-1931, the overlapping of microcosmic and macrocosmic concerns could still appear separately from the national ideology. The poetic cycle, entitled “Love,” written together with his wife, offered a cosmological vision, fusing a pan-sexual symbolism and a vegetative-organicist language, without too much reference to nation-building, even though evoking national symbolism as building-material for its metaphoric texture. (See Sheytanov and Sheytanova, *Любов, космогония, вселеноглед* (*Love, Cosmology and the Universal Vision*) and *Любов, вселеноглед, начало* (*Love, Universal Vision and the Beginning*).

However, already in the mid-twenties he produced a series of poetic essays about Bulgarianness, continuing the tradition of *narodopsihologia*, but in many ways subverting its conventional message. While mainstream national characterology described socio-economic modernity as a tragic split undermining the coherence of the nation, Sheytanov projected this coherence entirely on a symbolic-metaphysical plane, thus resolving the contradiction between the primordality of the national self and the structures of modernity by eliminating the linearity of the historical sequence. Instead, he created a framework of magic correspondences and a symbolic language which might lead to a new coherence – “restoring some of the faces of the many-faced Bulgarian dragon.” (“*Българска магия: Змеят, Село, Човекът, Воинът*” (“*Bulgarian Magic: Dragon, Village, Man, Warrior*”), in: Elenkov and Daskalov, *Защо сме такива? В търсене на българската културна идентичност* (*Why are we like that? In Search of Bulgarian Cultural Identity*) 242). His proposed discourse is based on “magic mechanics,” referring the elements of contemporary life to the structures of archaic existence. In his vision, everything evokes everything in the endless cycle of meanings and occurrences. This eternity of creation and dissolution can be grasped through archetypes, and especially through archetypal polarities: male/female, youth/aged, rhythm/stillness. We are constantly reviving the archetypal occurrences, running up and down on the wheel of life. In this sense, existence is nothing but memory: the supra-historical Being reviving its own eternal past in its eternal present.

While in his early essays Sheytanov tended to use the ethnic material in a poetic and seemingly apolitical register, his texts obviously had a “meta-political” message, redefining modernity, tradition and identity. The most important question of Sheytanov’s early works was to what extent it was possible to bring together the three registers he was operating with: that of the poetic-metaphysical language, the Bulgarian adaptation of the European crisis-literature, and the official canon of nation-building.

The first attempt at a synthesis was probably his article written back in 1925, entitled “The Transfiguration of Bulgaria,” which sought to put the metaphysical narrative of Bulgarianness into a broader European cultural-political

context. (“Преображение на България,” in: Elenkov and Daskalov, *Защо сме такива?* 266-269). The principal message of the essay was that modernity is unstoppable, but its effects must be somehow integrated into the magic structures of supra-historical circularity of the primordial collective self. “The winner is the thousand-headed monster, called city” – the task is not to eliminate it, but to “tame it.” (Sheytanov, “Преображение на България” 266). The new inventions and life-forms reinforce archetypal social hierarchies – the “aristocrats of the present” are the ones who master the mechanical dynamism of modernity, manifested in such spheres as sport, which is the “mobilization of the body”, or cinematography, which is the mobilization of the image. Caught in a transitional moment, Bulgaria is marked by a “tragicomical” fight “for the new world-view,” resulting in a total disorientation of the intelligentsia, following foreign examples, marked by egoism and self-serving exclusivism. The solution was to bring together Western technique and local symbolic assets – to turn “local reason” into universal knowledge, creating a Bulgarian “high culture,” bearing an uncontestable value for the entire humankind.

By the turn of the decade, the problem of national character became even more important for Sheytanov as he turned to the constitutive issues of the characterology-debate. He revisited the basic questions these debates raised about Bulgarian identity, such as the issue of Bogomilism or that of the “second Renaissance.” As for Bogomilism, he described it as the manifestation of an autochthonous tradition of revolution, thus giving it an indisputably positive connotation. But, radicalizing the usual interpretation, which credited the Bogomils with launching the European movement of church-reform, culminating in the rise of Protestantism, Sheytanov coined an even more straightforward protochronist argument, describing it as an archetype for any messianistic movement of political modernity, the first appearance of the idea of “New Jerusalem,” thus even professing a continuity between Bogomilism and Bolshevism. (“Хилядогодишнината на Боян Магесника” (1923) (“The Millenium of Boyan Magus”) in: Elenkov and Daskalov, *Защо сме такива?* 263-265).

Sheytanov was also among the first to tackle the question of returning to the ‘Renaissance.’ Merging “official nationalists” with radical Westernizers, he attacked all those who sought to discuss the Bulgarian Revival in terms of foreign influences and the “adaptation to Western modernity.” According to him, this perspective implied a “slavish methodology” – attributing everything automatically to external influence. Instead, he extolled some of the cultural creations of the Revival period which were subsequently dropped from the national canon due to their idiosyncrasy, such as the linguistic speculations of Georgi Rakovski, trying to define the Bulgarian language as an *Ursprache*.

In the thirties, however, Sheytanov opted for bringing together his “magic”

collectivism with the canon of “official nationalism.” After a number of essays published throughout the decade, his synthesis, entitled *Великобългарски светоглед* (*Great-Bulgarian World-view*), eventually appeared in 1939. The book was the first volume of an unfinished trilogy, which was meant to lay the ideological foundations of a new national identity, bearing the telling name of *Balkano-Bulgarian Titanism*, designed to compete with the imperialistic Pan-movements of Europe.

The starting-point of the book was the assertion that until that moment there had not been any all-encompassing attempt to create a new Bulgarian ideology in line with the profound ideological transformation in Europe. In order to face the challenge, it was not enough, as the old-fashioned nationalists believed, to strengthen the state or develop more effective means of propagating the Bulgarian national position at home and abroad. What had to be done, instead, was a fundamental change in the very basis of allegiance on the part of the Bulgarians to their nation-state. A new world-view was needed – “to determine the laws of the past and to proceed in tune with the contemporary spirit.” (*Великобългарски светоглед* Preface, I).

Thus, Sheytanov’s aim was not only to devise a new political ideology or historical interpretation, but something much more fundamental – to recreate the entire national canon, from which a “Great-Bulgarian ideology” could stem, stepping into mimetic competition with other national essentialisms. The work was intended to be not a mere characterization, but a normative image, “not a historical study, but a national and nourishing book” – a “law-book,” “expressing the world-view of every Balkano-Bulgarian.” With all the excentrism of his ideas, Sheytanov was deeply rooted in the local debates on national character and national identity. In a sense, he was seeking to fulfill what, among others, the cultural philosopher and psychologist Spiridon Kazandzhiev (1882-1951) expected from the new perception of history, when asserting that it is not the factual side which is important, but the way this historical narrative shapes the community. What in Sheytanov’s work exceeded Kazandzhiev’s wildest speculations was the attempt at total indigenization, not only of the aesthetics of nation-building, but of the very “meta-historical” system of categories, which were meant to structure the historical narration.

Similar to the conventional identity-discourses, the source-materials of this new ideology were mostly historical and geographical. His narrative is couched in a symbolic geographical frame – based on the proliferation of some classical Bulgarian *topoi* of self-description – which provides the ultimate framework for the arguments. The Balkans feature as the principal meeting-point of the four geographical directions, a kind of *axis mundi*, “a focus of world history”, “a bridge between three continents.” (*Великобългарски светоглед* 7). This symbolic geographical narrative, however, does not lead to a full-fledge anti-historicist vision, where the past is frozen by the eternity of spatial

determinants of identity. Sheytanov's conception can be called rather "historiosophic" – analyzing the symbols in a key of a normative historical canon – even though this canon is not linear, but, as we have already seen, it is envisioned in terms of cyclicity.

The principal aim of the book was thus to harmonize all those ideological fragments which previously were played out against each other or were used mainly to illustrate the incoherence of the national self. In this sense, it was a program of "internal identity-building," as much as a project of territorial expansion. What his predecessors identified as antithetical elements, Sheytanov tried to force into a synthesis. The Bulgarians embody all the qualities of metaphysical harmony: they are a new and an old nation, Northerners and Southerners, peaceful Slavonic and bellicose Hunnic, urban and rural, pagan and Christian – at the same time. Along these lines, he stressed that, contrary to the followers of *narodopsihologia*, the three historical regions of Bulgarian-ness, Moesia, Thrace and Macedonia were harmonically fit into the unitary national type, as regional versions.

This ethnic mixture, the elements of which constitute "the geo-biological forces of our country", makes the Bulgarians not only the unquestionable lords of the peninsula, but in a way the most complete conjunction of the different types of human civilization, where – paradoxically – every new influx has reinforced the autochthonous nature of the population. It is a matter of perspective which aspect of this self-perpetuating continuity we stress: if we want to accentuate the pre-historic and antique face of the inhabitants, they are Balkano-Bulgarians, if we emphasize their confluence and "common historical destiny," they are "Bulgaro-Balkanic." (*Великобългарски светоглед* 25).

The "symbolic geographical" turn in his identity-discourse, fused with a cyclical vision of Bulgarian history, led to a highly original solution of the dilemma posed by *narodopsihologia* concerning the dissolution of the unitary character. Sheytanov rejected the principal assertion of the organicist nationalists, according to which the city is "alien", while the village is authentic. In fact, the Balkans provides a unique space, characterized by the organic intertwining of the village and the city. This organic relationship, once again, unfolds in a circular pattern – the village becoming a city, and then the city turning into a village. According to Sheytanov, there is a specific pulsation in the "Balkano-Bulgarian" history or, better, an interference of two histories, which connects these two "ontological" spaces. In times of foreign invasions, the slopes of the mountains often served as a refuge for the inhabitants of the plain, triggering the "ruralization" of an urban population.

In this scheme, the villagers always had ultimately urban origins, while, in turn, the city-dwellers were coming from the village. This implies an organic relationship of high and low cultures, the elite and the people. For instance, the rural haiduks of the 18-19<sup>th</sup> century were progenies of the erstwhile knights

(*bagaturs*). Rooted in this circularity, the potentiality of greatness is always there, even in the most modest manifestation of the Bulgarian soul. “Our psychological maximalism is based on our erstwhile historicity”: under the surface of an ahistorical peasant culture, the glorious past is waiting for its turn to become actualized once again. (*Великобългарски светоглед* 31).

While these speculations were rather amusing, they were still connected to the problems of the “mainstream” nationalist discourse. In fact, Sheytanov’s ambition was to offer a fundamentally new solution to the problem which was troubling his entire generation in Central and South-Eastern Europe: how is it possible to reach the level of existence of universal significance for a small nation, which was usually not taken into account in the gigantic power-struggles?

According to Sheytanov, the only way for Bulgaria to survive, and the only available means to counter external aggression, is to subvert the symbolic hierarchy between the local and the universal. The classical organicist solution did not seem to be viable, since it advocated an artificial self-enclosing from the effects of modernity. According to Sheytanov, this stance could only lead to total failure, as the instruments of modernity could be turned easily into symbolic – and real – weapons in the hands of Bulgaria’s enemies. His offer was, therefore, to indigenize the very framework of modernity. Of course, this was a variation on the central theme of the interwar meta-political literature, all over Eastern-Europe, concerning the domestication of Western achievements. But Sheytanov was quite unique in pushing this to a logical extreme, asserting that it is not at all a problematic venture to localize the achievements of European modernity, as they were “rooted in Bulgarian soil”, and thus the very gesture of identifying them as “native” breaks the spell and liberates the community from the painstaking work of harmonizing them with their own life-world.

Sheytanov’s ultimate aspiration was to create an “ethnic philosophy”: a meta-physical legitimization for autochthonizing history and geography. In order to make his interpretation intellectually coherent, he had to push it to its extreme: “indigenizing” the very categories of thinking, creating a “national ontology.” In contrast to some Romanian philosophers (such as Mircea Vulcănescu or Constantin Noica), who developed “scholarly” philosophical texts, fusing the traditional “European” patterns of argumentation with the unusual material, Sheytanov was inserting his project into a more all-encompassing, and therefore “softer,” spiritualist texture. He sought to devise a kind of interdisciplinary organon of the “national soul,” trying to fuse every potential register of - collective - identity into a “meta-signifier” of Bulgarianness, and also following the local Bulgarian tradition which usually subsumed philosophy and ethnography into *narodopsihologia*.

The “Great-Bulgarian world-view” was supposed to function as a religious system, defining the Bulgarians as an “elect nation,” and the Balkans as the

“holy land of Europe.” (*Великобългарски светозглед* 130). Sheytanov was attempting to devise a mimetic religious discourse, where any historical manifestation of sacrality ultimately converged into the cult of the national community. This syncretism, in his opinion, was not at all a problem, in fact it fitted very well into his cultural morphology stressing the eternal return of pre-historical archetypes. The “circularity” of different religious traditions confirmed his claim that the Balkans were somehow “closer to the heavens” than the other regions. The central mechanism of Balkanic spirituality is its anthropomorphism, personifying these essences, giving them such mythical forms as that of Dionysos. All these figures form part of a “meta-historical” (Sheytanov actually uses this term) framework, which connects the different divinities to different constitutive layers of our collective memory. (*Великобългарски светозглед* 135).

The archetypal Balkanic divinity, Dionysos, plays a prominent role in the theoretical “domestication” of Christianity as well. The idea of a vegetative god, resurrected in a human body, is also a Balkanic mythological trope, so it is not hard to reach the conclusion that “it was not Palestine, but the religion-creating Balkans, together with the Thracio-Phrygian Asia Minor, that made a world religion out of Christianity” (*Великобългарски светозглед* 189). Its main ideas are rooted in the “tragic titanism” of the orphic movement, thematizing “poetic self-destruction.” This “titanic” spirit of self-negation can still be traced in the everyday life of the Bulgarians, if not elsewhere, at least in their unusual way of saying yes while shaking their head. (*Великобългарски светозглед* 201-202).

Sheytanov thus inserts his quest for a national philosophy into this quasi-ethnographic context. The manifestations of the national mindset can be reconstructed from proverbs and stories of folk wisdom and wise villagers (whom he calls “Socratics” – *Сократовци*). (*Великобългарски светозглед* 224). While these speculations cannot be equated with the mainstream “national canon”, Sheytanov’s vision about the dissemination of this new national creed fit very well into the framework of “national education” as discussed by the “official nationalist” establishment. He emphasized the transmission of “national knowledge” through education, and the creation of mass-organizations, especially for the youth, which were intended to shape the coming generations.

In the book about the “Great-Bulgarian youth”, which he published a year later, together with Nayden Pamukchiev, one of the protagonists of the imitative-totalitarian youth movement, Sheytanov was trying to implement some of his ideas in the context of the “etatization” of radical nationalism. (See Sheytanov and Pamukchiev, *Великобългарска младеж* (*Great-Bulgarian Youth*)). The book was once again a complex negotiation between the canon of “official nationalism” and Sheytanov’s own philosophical interest in “corporeality” as

an eminently political issue. The preface of the book was written by Prime Minister Bogdan Filov, who was a crucial figure in the official nationalist establishment around Tsar Boris. Filov used the typical bureaucratic language of this ideological trend, fusing the authoritarian and the “constitutional” idioms in a peculiar way. He greeted the “quasi-totalitarian” youth movements as being “in line” with the new law on youth organizations, appealing to the “civic duty” of every citizen to prepare for the defense of the motherland.

The main text of the booklet was also supporting the authoritarian project of “national reintegration,” hailing the Germans for making it possible to create finally Greater-Bulgaria. In fact, the entire argument was an attempt at “domesticating” the generational impetus and turning its “revolutionary energies” into the service of the official nationalist project. This meant that many elements of Sheytanov’s previous essays about the “youth as the source of life” or “love as the principal force” were re-iterated, but their original “anarchic” potential was significantly tamed. Rather than devising a totalitarian project fusing the nation’s body into an organic entity under some kind of *Führerprinzip*, the book retreated to a corporeal aesthetics, recalling the ideas of the German *Jugendbewegung*, which had a considerable cultural impact mainly in the 1910-20s.

The task of the Bulgarian elite was to devise a “generational indoctrination”: i.e., reshaping the community in view of the new challenges. Sheytanov’s own intended contribution to this epochal work was the formulation of a new canon of identity. In fact, he was re-iterating the main elements of the “Great-Bulgarian world-view,” but now his “national ontology” became an “applied science”, subordinated to the “generational” perspective. He thus evoked the continuity of the Thracians, the first and the second Bulgarian Empires, the legendary heroes (*bagaturs*) of the Middle Ages, the *haidutins* and finally the Renaissance as the periodical manifestation of the regenerative potentials of the young generation.

But, instead of devising a “Great-Bulgarian world-view”, Sheytanov formulates rather vague ideas about the constitutive elements of such an ideology. Bulgarianness is defined here in terms of the cult of the “motherland”, the knowledge of the national past and racial properties, respect for the state, love of war, and appreciation for culture. In any case, the vision of a “new Bulgarian man” is less of an ideological problem here than a matter of “*physis*”: most of all, the “Great-Bulgarian” will need to have a “healthy body”, a “fiery soul”, and “an iron will.” But to reach this it is not enough to formulate an ideological matrix: the canon has to be projected on the community. Hence, Sheytanov’s discourse became much more institutional – he returned to the framework of “national education”, soliciting teachers to mediate between the creative elite and the people, helping to bring the identity to the surface of consciousness and eventually “turn our already unified mother-

land into a real nation.” When it came to the dissemination of the national ideology, he had to make even further concessions to the official canon and tone down some of his heterodox formulations. One can follow this “negotiation” in his books from the early-forties, which, contrary to “Great-Bulgarian world-view”, were couched in established institutional frameworks. The *Knowledge of the Fatherland* (*отечествознание*) textbook, co-authored by Sheytanov, was an attempt to translate the “creed” of new nationalism to the language of school-children. His tone became normative (“Bulgaria is our fatherland”...“we love our fatherland”), without, however, the previous philosophical ideas about the ontological specificity of being Bulgarian. The aim was rather to introduce the readers to the ethnographic-geographic specificity of the nation; providing, as it were, a “guidebook” on Bulgaria – for the locals. In this process of conversion, the character-discourse got simplified to a series of “basic truths” concerning the essence of Bulgarianness: “we speak Bulgarian, we have a common past and identical interests.” (Sheytanov and Vasilev, *Отечествознание за четвърто отделение* (*Knowledge of the Fatherland – Textbook for the Fourth-Class*) 75).

Sheytanov’s textbook on history, published in 1943, was also retreating to the traditional nationalist canon. In the book we find markedly different views about the Buglarian ethno-genesis than in the pages of the *Great-Bulgarian World-view*. Thus, the book stressed the conventional Slavic/Proto-Bulgarian fusion, leaving the Thracians entirely out. The book also reverted to the traditional catalogue of national virtues and vices, contrasting the Bulgarians’ magnanimity, heroism, peace-loving, love of science and cult of work to the lack of care for the common good, the aping of the foreign models, or their haughtiness. Instead of the holistic strategy of describing Bulgarianness in terms of a metaphysical perfection, the language of the textbook is typical for the “official nationalist” pattern of indoctrination, fusing national characterology and the “language of civil duties”: “every good Bulgarian should help root out the negative qualities.” (Sheytanov and Vozhkov, *Българска и обща история за трети прогимназиален клас* (*Bulgarian and Universal History for the Third Class of Pro-gymnasium*) 112).

While it was not a problem for him to fuse the socio-cultural imagery of the tsar and the *haidutin*, thus creating a symbolic continuity of the modern rulers through the popular tradition in the time of non-existent statehood, religious orthodoxy posed major limitations to the prospective institutionalization of Sheytanov’s “Balkano-Bulgarian” doctrine. Abandoning the positive tone of his previous works, the textbook retreated to the more mainstream image of the “harmful influence” of Bogomilism upon the historical development of Bulgaria. The ideological setting was close to that of the most important historian of the period, Petar Mutafchiev (1883-1943), who posed the question of Bogomilism from the perspective of national unity, asserting that the division of this unity, through internal discord and faction in Church,

always led to the “alienation of the nation from the state”, and ultimately to decline. The textbook also returned to a more mono-linear vision of cultural development. Radical protochronism gives way to a “milder” formulation of historical achievements, intended to evoke the feeling of “national pride.” The “universalist” tinge of Sheytanov’s autochthonism is also qualified, while the intra-regional comparisons come to play a much more important role. For instance, in this scheme the Turks were declared to be “less cultured” than the Bulgarians.

All in all, his idiosyncratic role of a “national metaphysician” put him into a respected, if marginal, position. Ultimately, his ideas could neither reshape the national identity-discourse, nor could they emerge as the focus of an alternative cultural-political project in opposition to the establishment. His essays were read mostly for their peculiar poetic language, and the innovative combination of philosophical and ethnographical material, regardless of the “meta-political” ideas he formulated. The originality of Sheytanov lies in the specific way he brought together all these elements – such as generational ideology, authoritarianism, “*Konservative Revolution*”, cultural morphology, radical protochronism, *narodopsihologia*, ethnography – under the aegis of a national identity-discourse. Nevertheless, his synthesis remained a “personal” ideology, lacking real followers and – one can perhaps add here: fortunately – without any chance to turn into reality.

### 3. Conclusion

In sum, from the case studied above we can see that the positions of this new “meta-historical” discourse were rather constrained. In the twenties and thirties, alongside the growing sensibility to the problematic nature of the normative past, the agents of “official” nationalism were just establishing a historical canon to buttress their efforts of nation-building. As a matter of fact, as it befitted a culture with a rather belated institutionalization of “national sciences,” the Bulgarian historical canon, built mostly on positivist grounds, was, to a large extent, created in the interwar period. It is due also to this fact that most of the attempts at undermining this framework of historical narrativity and the corresponding national characterology remained rather idiosyncratic. In contrast to the Romanian situation, where the discourse of national character mutated to a new version of “national metaphysics”, in the Bulgarian case, although the discursive potential was there, even those who sought to subvert the official narrative were trying to reach a compromise between the (symbolic) geographical and temporal aspects of defining Bulgarianness. While it problematized the conception of normative continuity, the mainstream discourse, seeking to “define the national self,” never turned to the “ontologized” categories of atemporal symbolic geography.

## Works Cited

1. Avramov, Dimitar (Аврамов, Димитър). *Диалог между две изкуства*, София: БП, 1993.
2. Blaga, Lucian. *Spatiul mioritic*. București: Humanitas, 1994.
3. Daskalov, Roumen (Даскалов, Румен). *Между изтока и запада. Български културни дилеми*. София: ЛИК, 1998.
4. Daskalov, Roumen (Даскалов, Румен). *Как се мисли Българското Възраждане*. София: ЛИК, 2002.
5. Daskalov, Roumen (Даскалов, Румен), "Populists and Westerners in Bulgarian History and Present." *Central European History Department Yearbook*. Budapest: Central European University, 2002. 113-142.
6. Dimitrova, Nina (Димитрова, Нина). "Опити за националнокултурна самоидентификация на българина. Историкофилософски поглед." *Универсално национално българската култура*. Анна Кръстева, Нина Димитрова, Нонка Богомилова, and Иван Кацарски eds. София: IMIR, 1996. 48-91.
7. Elenkov, Ivan (Еленков, Иван). *Родно и дясно. Принос към историята на несбъднатия десен проект в България от времето между двете световни войни. /Native and right. Contribution to the history of the unrealized „rightist project“ in interwar Bulgaria/*. София: ЛИК, 1998.
8. Elenkov, Ivan and Daskalov, Roumen (Еленков, Иван & Даскалов, Румен), eds. *Защо сме такива? В търсене на българската културна идентичност*. София: Светлоструй, 1994.
9. Galabov, Konstantin (Гълъбов, Константин). *Живот, истина, творчество. Литературни опити*. София: Акация, 1926.
10. Galabov, Konstantin (Гълъбов, Константин). *Зовът на родина*. София: н.р., 1930.
11. Genova, Irina (Генова, Ирина) and Tatyana Dimitrova (Татяна Димитрова). *Изкуството в България през 20-те години. Модернизъм и национална идея. Art in Bulgaria during the 1920's. Modernism and National Idea*. София: Институт за изкуствознание при БАН, 2002.
12. Gesemann, Gerhard. "Der problematische Bulgare." *Slavische Rundschau*. 3 (1931): 404-409.
13. Hadzhiyski, Ivan (Хаджийски, Иван). *Бит и душевност на нашия народ*. Том 1. София: Лик, 2002.
14. Hadzhiyski, Ivan (Хаджийски, Иван). *Оптимистична теория за нашия народ*. Том 2. София: Лик, 2002. (original edition: София: Хемус, 1940, 1945).
15. Hadzhiyski, Ivan (Хаджийски, Иван). *Гражданска смърт и безсмъртие*. Том 3. София: Лик, 2003.
16. Iliev, Athanas (Илиев, Атанас). *Национално възпитание*. София: Министерство на народното просвещение, 1944.
17. Janev, Janko (Янко Янев). *Върху ирационалното в историята*. София: 1927.
18. Janev, Janko (Янко Янев). "Философия на Родината." *Златорог*. 6. (1934): 263-266.
19. Janeff, Janko. *Der Mythos auf dem Balkan*. Berlin: Verlag für Kulturpolitik, 1936.
20. Janeff, Janko. *Aufstand gegen Europa*. Berlin: Verlag für Kulturpolitik, 1937.
21. Janeff, Janko. *Dämonie des Jahrhunderts*. Leipzig: Heling, 1943.
22. Janeff, Janko. *Zwischen Abend und Morgen: eine Balkanrhapsodie*. Leipzig: Heling, 1943.
23. Jotzov, Boris (Йоцов, Борис). "Народен будител." *Отец Паисий*, 19-20 1930: 287-295.
24. Jotzov, Boris (Йоцов, Борис). "Българската история, нейната разработка до освобождението и значението ѝ за пробудата на българския народ." *Отец Паисий*, 8-9 (1933): 6-11.
25. Kazandzhiev, Spiridon (Казанджиев, Спиридон). *Пред извора на живота*. София: Хемус, 1943.
26. Kevov, Ivan (Кепов, Иван П.). *Интелигенция и народ. Бележки по културната история на България. /Intelligenstia and people. Notes on the cultural history of Bulgaria/* Пловдив: н.р., 1925.
27. Kiossev, Alexander (Кюосев, Александър) – "The Debate about the Problematic Bulgarian: A View on the Pluralism of the National Ideologies in Bulgaria in the Interwar Period." *National Character and National Ideology in Interwar Eastern Europe*. Katherine Verdery and Ivo Banac, eds. New Haven: Yale UP, 1995. 195-217.
28. Meininger, Thomas A. *The formation of a nationalist Bulgarian intelligentsia, 1835-1878*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1987.
29. Meshekov, Ivan (Мешеков, Иван). *Ляво поколение*. София: Братя Миладинови, 1934.
30. Mutafchiev, Petar (Мутафчиев, Петър). "Дух и завети на Възраждането." *Отец Паисий*. 7 (1934): 197-200.

31. Mutafchiev, Petar, (Мутафчиев, Петър). *Изток и Запад в европейското Средновековие*. София: АИ „Проф. Марин Дринов“, 1999.
32. Mutafchiev, Petar (Мутафчиев, Петър). *Книга за българите*. София: Издателство на БАН, 1987.
33. Panov, Todor (Панов, Тодор). *Психология на българския народ*. В. Търново: Издателство Унив. Св. Св. Кирил и Методий“ 1992.
34. Petkanov, Konstantin (Петканов, Котнстантин). “Бунтарски настроения у българина.” in: *Философски преглед*. X.1 (1938): 52-61.
35. Petkanov, Konstantin (Петканов, Котнстантин). “Държава и писател.” *Възход*. 4 (1935): 30-32.
36. Petkanov, Konstantin (Петканов, Котнстантин). “За родното в литература.” *Възход*. 2 (1935): 30-31.
37. Sheytanov, Nayden (Шейтанов, Найден). “Святовна България.” *Златорог*. 4 (1926): 168-176.
38. Sheytanov, Nayden (Шейтанов, Найден). *Култът на тялото. Борба за нова култура и нов мироглед*. София: Държавна печатница, 1928.
39. Sheytanov, Nayden (Шейтанов, Найден). “Сексуална философия на българина.” *Философски преглед*. 3 (1931): 241-256.
40. Sheytanov, Nayden (Шейтанов, Найден). “Към проблема на възраждането ни.” *Отец Паисий*. 4 (1933): 114-118.
41. Sheytanov, Nayden (Шейтанов, Найден). *Великобългарски светоглед* София: Родна мисъл, 1939.
42. Sheytanov, Nayden (Шейтанов, Найден) and Vozhidar Vozhkov (Божидар Д. Божков). *Българска и обща история за трети прогимназиален клас*. София: Министерство на народното просвещение, 1943.
43. Sheytanov, Nayden (Шейтанов, Найден) and Ivan Vasilev (Иван Василев). *Отечествознание за четвърто отделение*. София: П. Мартулков, 1941.
44. Sheytanov, Nayden (Шейтанов, Найден) and Maria Sheytanova (Мария Шейтанова). *Любов, космогония, вселеноглед*. София: Гладстон, 1930.
45. Sheytanov, Nayden (Шейтанов, Найден) and Maria Sheytanova (Мария Шейтанова). *Любов, вселеноглед, начало*. София: Гладстон, 1931.
46. Sheytanov, Nayden (Шейтанов, Найден) and Nayden Pamukchiev (Найден Памукчиев). *Великобългарска младеж*. София: Ф. Чипов, 1941.
47. Strashimirov, Anton (Страшимиров, Антон). *Книга за българите* (Book for the Bulgarians). София: Военен журнал, 1918.
48. Todorova, Maria. “The Course and Discourses of Bulgarian Nationalism.” in: *Eastern European Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*. Peter F. Sugar ed. Washington: The American University Press, 1995. 55-102.