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**THE BALKANS AS HOMELAND?
VERSIONS OF THE TERRITORIAL IDENTITY
OF BULGARIANS UNDER OTTOMAN RULE**

The purpose of this essay is to investigate the meaning of “homeland” for Bulgarians under Ottoman rule. The formation of a collective territorial identity can be traced to the period between the late 18th century to 1878 and the creation of a sovereign Bulgarian state. The transition from pre-modernity to modernity is marked by the gradual emergence of an educated elite, a network of schools, and a Bulgarian-language press. The system of mass education is a classical mechanism for homogenizing communities at the supra-local level, and the formation of the Bulgarian nation is no exception to this rule. In other respects, however, the development of Bulgaria’s system of mass education had several peculiarities, and this is what makes it interesting to study. First, the educational system developed free of bureaucratic supervision. It *was* controlled neither by the Church nor by the state, and it comprised schools maintained and governed by local village and town parishes. Second, the people employed in this system studied at lyceums and universities in different foreign countries and introduced elements from the respective country’s educational standards in Bulgarian schools. None of these countries however controlled the transfer of textbooks and programs.

In consequence, the educational system did not develop as a pyramid but as a network – a decentralized system of schools. Teachers moved from one school to another, bringing their own personally selected textbooks. Without a central authority governing the choice of books, virtually every text could answer differently the questions: “who are we” and “what is our homeland.” One must therefore look to the journalistic press of the time to discern which versions of national identity prevailed. The Bulgarian press, however, did not serve as an alternative to the educational sphere; instead, it tended to duplicate the latter’s functions. Similar to Bulgarian schools, newspapers were financed by voluntary contributions, written mainly by teachers, and read collectively in coffee shops or in “*chitalishte*” (literally, “reading room”) or special schools for adults.

In short, the modernization of education in Bulgaria was not regulated by the state. Instead, different visions of collective identity competed for public recognition through textbooks and the press. The purpose of this essay is to attempt to understand the process and results of this debate. The analysis covers sixty-six textbooks on geography and history (Bulgarian, Ottoman and World) along with articles on the relevant subjects published in the press during the period in question.

1. The Shared Land: Bulgarian Names for the Balkan Peninsula

What strikes one first in an analysis of these texts is how ineffective classical ideological resources were in creating a bond between territory and population. For example, myths of an autochthonous origin are difficult to employ. As early as the mid-19th century, we can see how history textbooks reject attempts to identify Bulgarians with ancient tribes in the region (e.g. Illyrians and Pelasgi). According to the standard version, Slavs and, later, Proto-Bulgarians, came to the Balkans after the end of Antiquity and found here peoples who became their neighbours. Second, cults of sacred places are almost wholly ignored. While the result of many factors, the main reason for this is the Patriarchate's neglect of Bulgarian monasteries. Historical geography also failed to play an important role in the formation of national consciousness. No maps of the medieval Bulgarian state existed, and its long forgotten boundaries were not reconstructed during the period in question.

By contrast, the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire were well known but they were not used to visualize the idea of homeland. We cannot find one single map of the whole Ottoman Empire in Bulgarian textbooks of the period. Students learned the European or the Asian part of the Empire, but never both at the same time. Census data are cited even more selectively in textbooks and press, but are limited to the Balkan provinces. Hence, the Balkan Peninsula remained the only possibility for the emerging nation to imagine a particular territory as its homeland.

But what does this mean? We can start to answer this question by first considering four popular names used to identify the collective territorial identity in educational institutions and the press: *Stara Planina* Peninsula, Balkan Peninsula, European Turkey, and *Vostok* (literally "East," also implying Orient). The name "Bulgaria" does not figure at all here. It is used as a designation solely for the lands between the Danube and the Balkan Mountain Range. Neither the maps nor the textbooks contain anything that indicates that *this* is the centre of native Bulgarian territory. A large part of the most developed Bulgarian population centres are *de facto* outside Bulgaria. This explains why the ethnic name is insufficient to identify "the heart" of the homeland.

The heart of the homeland is assigned to the mountain range, which crosses the peninsula from west to east and itself is known by three names – *Stara Planina* (Old Mountain), Balkan and Haemus. The first name is Bulgarian, the second Turkish, and the third Greek. The Greek Haemus however, is very rare. It is used only in some textbooks translated from Greek or French originals, and it is invariably placed in brackets after one of the other two names. The Russian originals, from which most textbooks were translated, refer to the mountain range as “Balkan”. In some cases, translators retained this name; in others, they have replaced it by the Bulgarian variant “*Stara Planina*”. Hence, the peninsula is also called either “the Balkan Peninsula”, or “the *Stara Planina* Peninsula”.¹ We can also find cases in which both alternatives are given without commentary. These designations are located in the first part of the textbooks devoted to physical geography. The second part dealing with political geography refers to the same territory as “European Turkey”. The problem here is that the passage from the first part to the second part reflects a qualitative difference in the identity of the homeland.

When viewed as a peninsula, the Balkan homeland is not distinguished from the rest of the European continent. The Balkan homeland has no distinctive features. Instead, it is subsumed under the definition of Europe, which includes the following four attributes: 1) white race; 2) Christian religion, 3) several language families, of which the Slavic is the most numerous, and 4) highly advanced civilization. When viewed as European Turkey, however, although the homeland is again in Europe, it is now distinguished from the rest of the European continent and from the rest of the Ottoman Empire located in Asia and Africa. According to statistical data, in terms of race, religion and language, the territory is populated mainly by “Europeans.” The Achilles’ heel is the economic and cultural backwardness of the region. By this indicator there are no “Europeans” in European Turkey, even though the general standard of living is nevertheless higher than that of the Sultan’s Asian and African subjects. Yet as noted above, in the Bulgarian textbooks on geography from this period there is no lesson devoted to the whole Ottoman Empire. Thus, we can conclude that the real boundaries of the state do not play a central role in the construction of identity.

How does the press respond to these alternative names? Which name do the contributors to the press prefer, who either teach or have at least studied with the above-mentioned textbooks? It is noteworthy that they normally use the different names as synonyms instead of choosing a particular variant. The context is the only thing that suggests whether the “light” or the “dark” side of the region’s identity is employed in each particular case. The most typical case of the permanent hybridization of the two semantic potentials is the use

1 For a detailed analysis of the different names of the peninsula in the European academic discourse and the press, see Todorova (1997).

of the fourth name, i.e. *Vostok*. This name is used in the press only and can mean either the stigmatized “defectiveness” of the Balkans or the prestige and independence of this civilizational sphere. The first meaning is found in the stereotype “dark Orientals” (“*tumni vostochnitsi*”). Let me offer a single example. In a fuming article, the editor of the newspaper *Narodnost* (*Nationality*) Ivan Kassabov (1846-1911) exclaims: “As a French paper, *Etoile d’Orient* has been brought by providence to shine here amongst us unenlightened and stupid Orientals (...) No, we dark Orientals want to believe the contrary, namely, that patriotism is something pure and spiritual or more ideal. The Bulgarian intelligentsia does not have a material existence, but it has an indefatigable spirit for its fatherland” (Kassabov 1869).

By contrast, the second meaning is compensatory and turns the name “*Vostok*” into an emblem of a new geopolitics, which transforms the Balkans and Asia Minor into an alternative “continent”. One of the main articulators of this tendency is Marko Balabanov (1837-1921). His homily on 11 May, the Day of Cyril and Methodius, the creators of the Slavonic alphabet, is a keynote in character: “America neither was nor is, nor is Eastern Asia or scorched Africa, the centre around which the whirl of human development, of historical events spins. This centre is the Orient, the Orient which infinitely and indefinitely – as the spirit is infinite and indefinite – stands between the West and the Far East. This centre, this Orient is like a guiding star in the development of mankind.” (Balabanov 1875)

Obviously, the native territory is not imagined here as a peripheral peninsula of Europe, but as a territory with its own independent gravitational orbit. Historically, that orbit originated as *Pax Byzantica*, whose natural successor is the *Pax Ottomanica*. This version is not particularly popular, and its marginality is definitely due to the unacceptable historical genealogy.

In fact, genealogical origins seem to constitute the most serious impediment to any vision of homeland becoming the norm. Classical Antiquity provides an optimal version for affirming a European identity, but this version is very difficult to employ because, for objective reasons, the Bulgarians are excluded from that chronotope. Unsuccessful and abandoned attempts to trace Bulgarian ancestry to autochthonous tribes are followed by an attempt to “de-ethnicize” Ancient Greece. Two strategies are here of primary importance: 1) the idea that there is no continuity between the Ancient Greeks and the modern Greeks; 2) a belief that civilizational experience is “passed on” like a “baton” from “old” to “young” peoples – the Ancient Greeks learned from the Egyptians (today’s Gypsies), the Slavs assimilated the culture of the Greeks, and the Turks succeeded them all. Here, the narrative remains incomplete, and the Bulgarians ultimately fail to imagine themselves as “sons” of ancient heroes.

More persistent claims are made on the prestigious Byzantine legacy, which is based on the presence of Slavs in the Byzantine Empire’s ethnic composi-

tion. This is the only version of the common past of Balkan peoples that finds a standard account in history textbooks and the press. The thesis is that the Slavs constituted the majority of the population on the Empire's Balkan territory. The Slav population was eventually Hellenized, but its "young blood" was infused into the "exhausted state," lending the latter a number of emperors and generals. For its part, the Empire accepted the barbarians within Christendom. This exchange of gifts, however, has a counterpoint. The medieval Bulgarian state was constituted on lands seized from Byzantium, and the history textbooks reconstruct this conflict as the beginning and primary cause of the antagonism between Bulgarians and Greeks in modern times. Thus the image of the first large empire to unite the region territorially is portrayed as a hostile alien sphere rather than as a zone of shared cultural exchange.

Beginning in the late 1860s, another version of the origin of a regional community circulated. Here, the regional community is presented as resulting from the Ottoman conquest of the Balkan states. It reproduces motifs of textbooks on Ottoman history that abound in tales of flexible, mobile coalitions formed by people who were until recently enemies – for example, Serbs and Turks against Tamerlane; Christians and Islamic sects against the Sultan; the Sultan and the Romanians against Count Dracula, etc. After the lessons on the conquest of the Balkans, however, the local peoples disappear from the textbooks on Ottoman history.

Attempts are made to compensate for this absence by re-employing the thesis of interethnic synthesis through "blood infusion" into the dominant community. The Janissary corps and the harems are interpreted in this manner. The most typical example is the speech made by Petur Odjakov (1834-1906) in the Bulgarian *chitalishte* in Constantinople: "Many pashas married Bulgarian women; many Bulgarians adopted Islam (the son of the last [tsar] Shishman adopted Islam at Nikopol in 1394), and only in this way have we become related to the present ruling people in Bulgaria, i.e. the Turks, and not, as some people claim, that in the 7th century Bulgarians were one and the same people as Tatars, Turkmens and Turks" (Odjakov 1871).

Similar versions circulate in other periodicals but are met with resistance, because at the popular level the propagated "blood synthesis" is interpreted as forced assimilation. Greater agreement is reached only on the issue of Turkish as the preferred *lingua franca*. The debates on this issue are very heated, because newspapers constantly reprint articles from the Greek press that call for adoption of the Greek as the official language. In practice this prospect is highly unlikely, but the Bulgarian elite takes it seriously and rallies for a counterattack. Two alternatives are suggested: the adoption of French or a variant of Slavic as the official language. Ultimately, however, arguments in favor of Turkish gain the upper hand as a compromise between the prestige of the Greek language and the large size of the Slav population.

On the whole, the otherwise persistent efforts to find a paradigm that can provide adequate ideological meaning to the reality of the shared Balkan lands were only partly successful. Nevertheless, the idea of reducing the scale of the homeland arrived very late. The alternative ways that led to this are analyzed in the next three sections of the article.

*2. Cohesion / Fragmentation of Ethnic Groups:
The “Bulgaria, Thrace and Macedonia” Triad*

In the history of the Bulgarian press under Ottoman rule there are two newspapers named after particular regions: *Bulgaria* (1859-1863), edited by Dragan Tsankov (1828-1911), and *Makedonia* (*Macedonia* 1867-1872), edited by Petko Slaveykov (1827-1895). The former is closely associated with the rise and fall of the futile project of converting Bulgarians to Catholicism. It is not accidental that the opponents of this idea called the newspaper *Latina*, which is an irony of the lacking commonality between the “Latin” faith and Bulgarian identity. Noteworthy here is that both parties to the dispute used the name “Bulgaria” in abstract terms. They referred to symbolic spaces that were not associated with the geographical location of the region between the Danube River and the Balkan Mountain Range. The second newspaper deserves greater attention, especially since it was the paper with the largest circulation in the period under review. Why was the most influential Bulgarian periodical called *Makedonia*?

Let us start with what teachers taught as the basics about Macedonia. In all geography textbooks “Macedonia” is identified as a region of European Turkey. Each region is discussed in a separate lesson that varies in length and detail. In this comparative context, the lesson on Macedonia is not given priority status. In practice the only region that might claim such status is the territory between the Danube and the Balkan Mountain Range, known in those days by the name “Bulgaria”. Still, several points need to be made even in this particular case. On the one hand, the connection between the region and the Bulgarian ethnonym is undoubtedly a strong factor of identification. There are also direct associations with the historical past. Interestingly enough, no textbook omits to mention the old capitals of Preslav and Turnovo. The information is succinct, but that is the general style of geographies. Detailed historical background is rarely provided: it can be found in just seven of all forty-one geography textbooks. Nevertheless, half of those accounts supplement the lesson on the region of Bulgaria.

On the other hand, however, the description of Thrace matches and very often exceeds the section on Bulgaria by length. Here, historical reminiscences are rare, but there is an area all authors identify as “purely Bulgarian”; namely, the population centres at the foot of the Balkan Mountain Range, which are

described in greater detail than other towns. Another factor that heightens the interest in the Thracian region is the existence of well-developed economic and cultural centres with mixed ethnic composition but with a large percentage of Bulgarians. On the whole, the geography textbooks create the impression that the hierarchy between Bulgaria and Thrace is largely relative.

It is obvious, however, that the section on Macedonia pales by comparison. As a rule, this is the third longest lesson in the section on European Turkey and it is longer than those devoted to Epirus, Thessaly, Bosnia, Herzegovina and Albania. However, there are exceptions here too. These exceptions are due to the vague boundaries of the separate regions, as a result of which Ohrid is located very often in an unidentified area between Thrace, Bulgaria and Macedonia, or directly in Albania. During this period, Ohrid represents for several reasons an important town in the imagination of the Bulgarians. First, it is the seat of an archbishopric that is populated mainly by Slavs and that remained relatively autonomous from the Constantinople Patriarchate until 1767. In the struggle for an independent Bulgarian Church this fact acquired tremendous importance and was repeatedly noted in the press. Second, the town was the capital of the Bulgarian State during the reign of Samouil (976-1014). Third, Ohrid is known as the home town of the Byzantine emperor Justinian (c. 482-565), who is considered to be a Slav and is often cited as an example of the Slavic presence in the glorious past of Constantinople. And finally, the town has a Bulgarian elite, which actively contributes to the press, therefore the problems of Ohrid citizens are constantly debated in the public sphere. These factors explain the importance in identifying Ohrid's precise location. The symbolic capital of the lesson on Macedonia decreases significantly when the author localizes Ohrid in Albania. In those cases Albania appears to be a "more Bulgarian" land and is not accidentally called sometimes "Old Bulgaria."

Equally difficult is to judge how statistical data were taught and perceived. Textbooks usually have lists of the ethnic groups found in the big cities, but do not indicate which ethnic group prevails in a particular area. In fact, the authors rarely discuss questions concerning the territorial distribution of the separate peoples. Despite this, we can identify several tendencies. For example, about one-third of the textbooks claim that Bulgarians are the majority in the region between the Danube and the Balkan Mountain Range. As noted above, the population centres at the foot of the Balkan Mountain Range in the region of Thrace are clearly defined as Bulgarian. By contrast, data on Macedonia invariably accentuate the multiethnic composition of its population.

If one browses through the newspaper *Makedonia*, the exact opposite impression is conveyed to the reader. Almost every issue contains protests against the attempted assimilation of Bulgarians in the region. Accusations are leveled against the Serbian government and the Constantinople Patriarchate. Most of

these written comments are found in anonymous letters of witnesses, who speak on behalf of a large homogeneous community subject to discrimination by foreign institutions. This notion conflicts with the cosmopolitan idea of the homeland that is predominate in the educational sphere. When the native land is identified by names such as Balkan Peninsula, European Turkey or *Vostok*, this presupposes that you might live anywhere in it irrespective of whether you are Bulgarian, Greek, Tatar, Armenian or Kutzo-Vlach. The range of possible identities includes about a dozen ethnicities listed in the statistical tables. Bulgarians are invariably said to be a majority among the Sultan's European subjects, but there are seldom data on the particular part of the Balkan homeland populated by this large group.

Makedonia refers to the Balkans when commenting on the idea of a Bulgarian fatherland. The corpus of texts on the status quo and future of this shared land includes keynote editorials and lively debates of contributors. There is no reason to assume that any of the Balkan regions has substituted the peninsula as a whole. What has changed are the notions of *cohesion* and *localization* of the ethnic groups. In other words, the main elements required for the classical equation of the bond between territory and population appear gradually. Until the end of the 1860s, the conditions for formulating such an equation are extremely negative. The dominant unit of cohesiveness is the small population centre, such as the towns at the foot of the Balkan Mountain Range, or in the boldest variant, the region "Bulgaria" – but even in this case the separate population centres are presented through the prism of their Babel-like mixture. The imagination of the emerging nation employs the liberal but very complicated parameters of *fragmentation* and *dispersion*.

How did the competition between the two paradigms of imagining the homeland develop and ultimately end? This question does not have a simple answer. On the one hand, the process was strongly influenced by the struggle of the Bulgarian Church for independence from the Constantinople Patriarchate. In practice, this meant redrawing the Orthodox map on the Balkans through redistribution of eparchies, which reinforced the idea that the peninsula is a territory populated by cohesive and ethnically homogeneous groups. For decades, the press covered the large-scale political campaign, which resulted by the end of the 1860s in the formation of a collective image of Bulgaria, Thrace and Macedonia as a Bulgarian triad.

On the other hand, during this same period we can note a visible tendency in the educational sector to ignore regions to the benefit of vilayets as a valid format of describing the homeland. This change was initiated by the influential figure Yoakim Grouev (1828-1912), and as a result just two of the last ten textbooks adhere to the traditional division by regions. The names of the state administrative units are not associated with ethnonyms or with the historical geography of the Balkan lands. Instead, they are usually determined by the

name of the town in which the representative of the central imperial government is seated, and sometimes by large rivers (e.g. the Danubian vilayet); either way, they do not encourage associations between the particular territory and the ethnic composition of its population. On the contrary, visualizing the homeland as an organization of administrative units ought to create a sense of belonging to the State and its imagined community of citizens.

Nevertheless, it is implausible to contrast textbooks and the press only on the basis of the oppositions between regions and vilayets. In this context, the maps in Hristo Danov's (1828-1911) atlas published in 1865 are revealing. Here, the vilayets' boundaries are marked but without names. There are inscriptions, but they are actually names of regions. The boundaries of the latter are not marked, so the letters of the names cut across different vilayets. Some authors of textbooks employ a similar technique. For example, Nikola Mihailovski (1818-1892) and Ivan Momchilov (1819-1869) use parallel statistics and lists of towns – first by regions and then by vilayets. Through a careful reading of their textbooks, both published in 1869, we can readily see overlaps given between the two types of territorial units. And an even more radical variant can be found in Kouzman Shapkarev's (1834-1909) geography book, published in 1868. Here, both the vilayets and the regions are reduced to seven, and their names are duplicated in brackets. On the whole, such unconventional approaches suggest the formation of a teaching method, which allows imperial administrative units to be instrumentalized for advancing the national project.

3. The Homeland and Its Population: Statistical Instruments

Statistical data are another question concerning the ambiguous signals sent by the educational sphere. First, only five textbooks contain a paragraph on the distribution of the Balkan population by ethnicity. Second, this evidence is provided in the form of a commentary on the statistical tables, which, as noted above, list approximately a dozen ethnic groups. Each of these groups must be located somewhere; ultimately, we see that virtually the entire land of the Balkans is shared. Ethnic dispersion is documented in the data on Greeks, Turks, Armenians, Jews, Tatars, Circassians and Gypsies. According to the authors, these groups are spread all over the Balkan territory. Other groups are presented as cohesive masses, but even here there is no complete overlap between regions and ethnic communities. For example, in Bulgaria we find not only Bulgarians but also Gagaouz, in Serbia and Wallachia not only Serbs and Romanians but also Bulgarians, and in Macedonia Bulgarians, Tsintsars and Albanians.

Third, although the ethnic tables might not be supplemented with a commentary, they are invariably supplemented with statistics on religion. This

factor leads to a regrouping of the population and naturally questions the cohesiveness of ethnic communities. One part of the Albanians, for example, is classified as “Muslims” and another as “Christians”. According to language, Bosnians are often categorized as “Slavs” along with the Serbs, Croatians and Bulgarians. But with respect to religion, Bosnians are separated from their language family. From the 1830s to the 1850s, the authors do not register an internal division within the Bulgarian community by religion. The only exception is Ivan Bogorov’s (1820-1982) *Kratka geografiya* [A Short Geography] from 1851. This changes in the 1860s and 1870s, when Muslim Bulgarians are introduced in the textbooks.

At the same time, *Makedonia*, as well as the other periodicals, display the opposite tendency. Here the religious criterion of classifying the population comes under closer scrutiny. The unconditional priority of religion as an identity marker is regarded as a grim legacy of the pre-modern age and criticized along two lines: as a basis for discrimination against Christians by Muslims and as a prerequisite for assimilation of Bulgarians with Greeks, who dominate the Orthodox Church on the Balkans.

Among the emblems of identity, spoken language acquires priority status, and helps us explain why the press shows such a lively interest in Greek-speaking Bulgarians but barely takes notice of Muslim Bulgarians. Obviously, a change in spoken language unambiguously signals a loss of identity. Hence, it is not surprising that over decades the press offers headline coverage of campaigns supporting the use of Bulgarian in religious services and schools, as well as of fierce protests against the use of Greek as the *lingua franca* in urban centres. Nor is it accidental that articles about Muslim Bulgarians, rare as they are, focus mainly on the linguistic identity of this group.

There is another noteworthy difference between the statistical instruments used by *Makedonia* and the geography textbooks. Slaveykov’s newspaper drastically reduces the number of ethnic groups on the Balkan territory, and this tendency is representative of the press in general. Here the interest is focused on four ethnic groups only: Bulgarians, Greeks, Serbs and Turks. Their relations are discussed regularly, whereas the other Balkan neighbours are mentioned only sporadically. An important exception is the series of speeches by Romanian prime minister Ion Bratianu (1821-1891) concerning the natural fraternity of the peoples from the so-called East.² And yet, when Slaveykov publishes his own series of articles on the same subject, Bratianu’s compatriots are not identified on the regional map.³ The reason for this is associated with his attempt to construct a history of the Balkan homeland. Slaveykov

2 See “Noviy panslavistkiy manifest na g. Bratianu” [“Mr. Bratianu’s New Pan-Slavic Manifesto”] 1869; “Slovo na rumunskiya premier Bratianu” [“Speech by Romanian Prime Minister Bratianu”] 1869.

3 See Slaveykov 1869a, 1869b. The quotations below are from those articles.

is compelled to reduce the ethnic composition of the region to those groups, including the Greeks, the Bulgarians, the Serbs and the Turks, whose states have ruled a large part of the peninsula at some point in time.

Historical geography is a classical device use to make claims on a particular territory. Here, however, historical geography is not deployed in a traditional way. No data are provided about the territorial scope of the four states; nor is there any evidence offered concerning the length of time each of the four ethnic groups dominated the region. They are not even rated according to the hierarchical division of “indigenous/immigrant.” This is due to the fact that belief in the autochthonous origins of the Greeks is countered with discussions of the multiethnic character of the Byzantine Empire. In other words, the basic indicators by which one of the above-mentioned peoples might be declared a “rightful owner” of the Balkans are eliminated.

Instead, claims to such a status are considered to be problematic. The equation, “one peninsula = one state for one people”, is recognized as irreconcilable with the reality of the Balkans, and the bloody history of the region is summoned as a witness. Respectively, accusations are brought against those who still find it “hard to believe that on the Balkan Peninsula they are not the only factors.” According to the author, the Turks (because of the notion that “every Turk is a master”), the Greeks (because of the so-called “Megali Idea” concerning the Hellenization of the Balkan Christians) and the Serbs (because of the project on restoring the Serbian state within its boundaries under Tsar Stefan Dušan [1331-1355]) fall into this group. Other ethnic groups however are considered innocent. Those are the Armenians (because they lack “hereditary entitlement”) and the Bulgarians (because they have voluntarily relinquished their claims). Petko Slaveykov maintains that Bulgarians “do not have their own *great ideas* or God knows what *missions*”, and their only aspiration is to avoid assimilation by means of Bulgarian-language education and economic progress.

It is arguable whether Bulgarians are as innocent in reality as they appear to be in the newspaper *Makedonia*. For any nation formed with an image of the homeland covering the entire peninsula, it is predictable, if no doubt also dangerous, that ambitions to rule will emerge. From this perspective, we should not regard Slaveykov’s position as a symptom of some kind of “inborn immunity” of Bulgarians to “imperial” aspirations. Instead, it reflects the development of alternative visions of identity, which marginalize the “imperial” potential.

4. Local Memory:

The Project on a Geographical Dictionary of the Bulgarian Lands

It is very difficult for us today to determine how ordinary Bulgarians responded to the diverging pressure coming from the educational sphere and press. Thus, I will focus on a comparatively large but as yet unstudied corpus of texts: namely, circa 130 descriptions of population centres printed in various periodicals. The majority of these texts are anonymous, but we have good reason to assume that the authors come from the grassroots cadre of the educational system. These publications date from 1846 to 1876, i.e. from the first days of the Bulgarian press to its end at the outbreak of the Russian-Turkish War (1877/1878).

The early emergence and stable characteristics of this genre can be explained by the long tradition of education in geography. The descriptions strictly follow the pattern of the geography lessons: coordinates of the respective town or village, climate, rivers, mountains, natural resources, trades, language, size and composition of the population, data about its educational level and, possibly, brief notes of historical landmarks. The formal matrix however is used in a peculiar way. It is symptomatic, for instance, that the majority of authors do not try to represent their “little homelands” as pure Bulgarian towns or cities. Let me give some examples. Every fourth description is devoted to large or small administrative units, but none of them is presented as Bulgarian-only. On the contrary, villages populated entirely by Turks, Greeks, Vlachs, Arnaouts, Yuruks, Gagaouz, Circassians and Tatars are scrupulously recorded; in Dobroudja, in particular, population centres of Germans and Russians are also noted. In addition, all these descriptions contain lists of ethnically mixed population centres, which normally outnumber the ethnically homogeneous towns and villages.

Analogous observations can be made about the descriptions of particular population centres rather than administrative units. Most of the accounts in the press are devoted to towns and villages, where Bulgarians live together with other ethnic groups. The statistical ratio of descriptions of mixed to purely Bulgarian population centres is 2 to 1. From this perspective, even small villages prove to be too large a unit for ethnic cohesiveness.

The criterion of ethnic identity itself does not always overlap with the strict norm postulated in geography textbooks and ideologically expounded in the press. The most obvious example is the combination of religion and language, whose elements by rule form the amalgam of identity. In many descriptions these combinations vary on an unconventional scale. For example, a text about Dobroudja expressly notes that Armenians and Gagaouz speak Turkish, but the former use the Armenian and the latter the Greek alphabet (Ganchev 1876). The Christians in Zilyahovo and Rossilovo (Seres Sanjak), as well as in Beydaut (Dobroudja), also speak Turkish, but according to the authors they

have built Bulgarian schools and subscribe to Bulgarian newspapers (D...iev 1870; Djansuzov 1870/1871). Debur Bulgarians are called *Miyaks*, which actually means Albanians, because their dialect sounded exotic to their compatriots from Ohrid (Djinot 1859). By the same logic, Greeks from Serres are called Darnaks. According to the description of the Sanjak, standard Greek is spoken only in Alistrat, although the majority town's population is Bulgarian (Djansuzov 1870/1871).

According to a description of the coastal city of Varna, local Bulgarians speak Greek and live together with Gagaouz, who speak Turkish. Both ethnic groups send their children to Bulgarian schools, even though both "do not know a word of Bulgarian." Nevertheless, an anonymous Gagaouz declares that his compatriots are actually Bulgarians – descendants of children who were orphaned during the Ottoman invasion (S. S. T. 1861). A similar version documenting ethnic origin without reference to linguistic identity is also given in Arbanassi. The local Bulgarians speak neither Albanian nor identify themselves as Albanians, but this does not prevent them from considering themselves descendants of Albanians who founded Arbanassi. They call them "the Arnaout ancestors", and are proud of their fabulous wealth. They view their migration to Wallachia as a disaster (Munzov 1872).

Either way, more important is the following peculiarity. Linguistic "deviations" are treated as a problem foremost in statistical generalizations describing large administrative units. Consequently, the use of a language not identical with the ethnonym is less likely to be regarded as a defect of identity when the description deals with a concrete population centre. This suggests that such texts reflect the local norm of an ethnic community, which in turn is constructed in a more complicated manner than simply by combination of language and religion. The answer to the question "who are we" is answered in practice by overlapping factors absent in official descriptions of identity. Hence, it is not surprising when nations are formed without recourse to or even recognition of these factors of identity.

In a sense, however, this general rule was broken in the formation of the Bulgarian nation. There were not only dozens of descriptions of population centres containing examples of local intuitions of identity. There was also a project designed to transform the collection of concrete descriptions into a textbook of "homeland studies" for the Bulgarian nation. This unconventional idea was advanced in late 1869, when an unknown young teacher called Mosko Dobrinov (1847-1909) published an appeal to his compatriots to send him (directly or through the press) descriptions of their places of birth.⁴ His goal was to compile a geographical dictionary of the lands populated by Bulgarians.

4 See Dobrinov 1869.

Dobrinov intended to start his description of the Balkans with Bulgaria, Thrace and Macedonia, even though he was familiar only with the small territory between Turnovo and Vidin. This explains his call for assistance of the public. Dobrinov's method thus presupposed no predefined boundaries; instead, the map of the homeland would be drawn by the respondents who represent their birthplace as falling within its boundaries. Influential opinion-makers supported this campaign, which became popular with the masses. In just six years, approximately ninety items on the subject were published, i.e. double those published throughout the period from 1846 to 1870.

The pragmatic design of Dobrinov's project yielded a further, more significant result. With the launch of the "query," micro-levels of collective memory otherwise unnoticed were revealed to the public eye and imagination of the emerging nation. Predictably, this collective memory had nothing to do with Antiquity or Byzantium, with the kings of Bulgaria or the elite Janissaries and harems of the Sultans. Asked to speak on behalf of small local communities and not the nation as a whole, grassroots members of the educational system wrote a history made up of migrations, natural disasters, and the fateful events of life under the control of local Turkish lords. These stories assigned an individual role to all kinds of ethnic groups – even nomads such as the Gypsies – once recorded in the memory of the local community. We should not underrate the fact that precisely such "personal files" were submitted repeatedly in the bid for "membership" in the imagined homeland. Moreover, these reports were trusted without further question and published verbatim in the press. This suggests that, irrespective of the effort to claim ownership of a particular territory, the presence of other peoples was accepted and ultimately became part of the notion of native Bulgarian land.

Of course, this collective mapping of the native Bulgarian lands remained unfinished. Political liberation found Bulgarians without a book containing a final answer to the question, "which is our homeland." Nevertheless, some basic coordinates *were* established. First, the vision of the Balkans as homeland, standardized by the schools and press created the idea of a shared territory, which limited the possibility of forming a national myth based on the classical bond between "blood and land." Furthermore, the presence of other ethnic groups was recognized as an acceptable condition of territorial belonging. This explains why – despite internal tensions and mounting rivalry among neighbours – the idea of a regional community was nevertheless debated in the public sphere. It would be certainly an exaggeration to claim that those debates lead to a fixed image of the *Homo balkanicus*. However, they did give rise to a sense of identity that resists notions of "pure race" and "pure territory". This outcome is not insignificant. Yet we only stand to gain from this if we stop imagining it as "inborn tolerance," and see it instead as a legacy of the life of several generations of Bulgarians in a homeland of alternative names.

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