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Bulgaria Imagined: English Travelnotes on Bulgaria from Mid 19th Century

Въобразената България: англоезични пътеписи за България от средата на XIX век

Резюме

Статията тръгва от съвременната политическа ситуация във Великобритания, от съпротивата срещу приемането на имигранти от бившите „източноевропейски“ страни. Ситуацията изглежда странно позната; оказва се, че отказът да възприемеш „другия“ като свой има прецедент в един от най-ранните пътеписи за България, написани от английски пътешественици. Представен е сравнително подробно и самият пътепис: *Residence in Bulgaria; or Notes on the resources and administration of Turkey: The Condition and character, manners, custom, and language of the Christian and Mussulman populations, with reference to the Eastern Question*; негови автори са Станислас Сейнт Клер, пенсиониран капитан, и Чарлс Брофи. Втората част на статията прави типологическа съпоставка на културната ситуация с едно явление от началото на XXI век: романи върху комунистическото минало на България, създадени и публикувани най-напред в чужбина от български писатели имигранти. Изводите са направени с методологията на съвременните постколониални изследвания.

A couple of years ago the UK Independence Party launched a political campaign against immigrants from Bulgaria and Romania. The campaign fell in tune with the dissatisfaction of UK membership in the European Union and fueled lively discussions on the shortcomings of the local system of social benefits. At the beginning of 2013, the campaign came to a new height when British Euro deputy Nigel Farage, leader of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), threatened British people that 29 million people from both countries are packing their luggage to leave for the UK after January 2014 when they will be eligible to work there without restrictions. Even Prime Minister David Cameron, in a special speech given on March 25th, accused the newcomers of “benefit tourism” thus invigorating the paranoid feelings throughout the country. Petitions against mass immigration from Bulgaria/Romania are spread throughout a number of sites.

According to a recent poll, about 60% of the English citizens think that the worst result of their membership in the European Union is the possibility of East-European people migrating to England in a search of better living conditions. At the same time about the same number of English people think that the greatest benefit of their membership in the European Union is the possibility to find a job throughout the rest of Europe. Imagining the other as an enemy of order and civilization is a social mechanism, which has a long history even when the politically modest relations between small Bulgaria and a great kingdom are concerned. It has roots as deep as mid 19th century when the first literary documents on contemporary Bulgarian lands and people were published in English.

My paper goes back to the time when English people knew of Bulgaria only that it is “something of a country, which although but five or six days distant ... is almost as little known as the interior of Africa”. I am

quoting from a book of travel notes, which was published in London in 1869 under a long and descriptive title *Residence in Bulgaria; or Notes on the resources and administration of Turkey: The Condition and character, manners, custom, and language of the Christian and Mussulman populations, with reference to the Eastern Question*. Generally, it is situated in the mainstream of British travel literature on the Balkans; the difference is in the claims of its authors to know “the plain and literal truth” (p. VII). Unlike usual travelers, who cross some foreign place and write down what they have seen ad hoc, they pretend openly to possess exclusive competence, extreme thoroughness and an impeccable sense of responsibility: „there is not a single instance of mere hearsay, nor have they ever received the allegations of either Mussulman or Christian without inquiring into and satisfying themselves of their accuracy” (p. VII).

The book was of certain importance at its time, not lastly because it was proclaimed as the only complete and realistic representation of Bulgarians before English readers. As far as Bulgarian readers are concerned, the situation is different. The book has never been translated into Bulgarian, and it is highly improbable that it will ever be. Historians also have no habit of using it. It is exactly this discrepancy, this lack of cultural communication between two national traditions, which I will try to read.

First, the book should be situated in the context of the international historical and political situation in Europe in mid 19th century. International politics was focused on a problem named “The Eastern Question”, i.e. the beginning disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and the struggles of Christian nations, who populated its North-Western periphery, for national independence. For the great West-European countries at that time, The Eastern Question meant a combat for influence and control over the politics of the new Christian states, which were to emerge on the map of Europe; also an enormous possibility to profit on the modernization of Turkish economy. The leading players in this game of politics were Russian and British empires; understandably, on the map of political interests they were situated at the opposite ends. Unlike governments, the social opinion in West-European countries needed not only interests but also some realistic facts and representations in order to imagine the lands and peoples of South-Eastern Europe; it needed popular literature, which could clearly and directly speak to a broader audience.

This explains the wave of West-European travelers heading for the Balkans, as well as the appearance of many travel notes published in English, German and French. The bulk of this travel literature on the Balkans from the third quarter of the 19th century is object of research of an influential book written by Bulgarian historian Maria Todorova¹. Still, due to the vast number of documents she investigates, Maria Todorova pays little attention to the book I am speaking about.

Generally it could be said that all travel notes, while making use of different ideological and literary strategies, unreservedly produce “The Balkans”, and more specifically “Bulgaria”, as a discursive space

¹ Todorova, Maria. *Imagining the Balkans*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

where the East and the West, The Ottoman Empire (standing for some traditional ideas of the Other), and Europe meet and interact.

Concerning The Eastern Question, the British government assumes a position, which is different from that of the other West-European states. It is the only one to support the political *status quo* of The Ottoman Empire. Victorian England energetically opposes the national liberation movements among Christian peoples and fights the appearance of new national states in South-Eastern Europe. Its most cherished political aim is Turkey in its present boundaries but thoroughly dependent on the British Crown; a vast space, moreover, only “five or six days distant”, to be economically colonized, as “Residence in Bulgaria” says. As a matter of fact, Great Britain is far from unique in cherishing a colonial ideal on the Balkans; it was more or less the same with the rest of the 19th century monarchies. Even before the middle of the century, the economical theory of the sociologist Friedrich List became popular in Germany². It elaborated the idea that Germany had a mission to civilize the south-eastern part of Europe. List goes as far as working out the economic mechanisms and the specific steps that will establish the colonial supremacy of Germany. The political aim is termed “most natural”, its naturalness being based on the belief that the lands situated along the Lower Danube could provide the sustenance of twenty million diligent Germans³.

List’s economical theory was considered “capital”; it became very popular among German society and was backed up by many writers and journalists. One of them was Hans Wachenhusen, journalist and author of popular fiction, traveler in the Balkans, who published among other things a book of travel notes on Bulgarians and their places of inhabitation, very similar to “Residence in Bulgaria”⁴. In both books as in the majority of the travel notes published by the same time, the image of the Balkans, and of Bulgaria in particular, is constructed in a way that proclaims some colonial strategy, persuading at the same time readers in its own rationality and logical consistence, naturalizing its ideological motivation as a “natural” step in the progress of the European civilization.

Now let us go back again and focus on the Victorian book entitled “Residence in Bulgaria”. It was written by Stanislas St. Clair, a retired captain of the “Late 21st Fusiliers”, and Charles A. Brophy. The former states that he had lived in Bulgaria for three years and was “thoroughly acquainted with all Slavonic languages and dialects”. Such a claim could be but an overstatement; it might have been plausible only in the mouth of a man of arms. Brophy played the second violin in the authorly couple; he was no more than a civil person having lived in Bulgaria for eighteen months only. The task of both writers, as they see it, is to shock and

² See: List, Fr. *Das National System der politischen Okonomie*. Stuttgart: Cotta’sche Verlag, 1841.

³ Quoted after: Чернокожев, Николай. *България: стереотипи и екзотика. Техники на сглобяване на българския образ в немскоезичната книжнина от 19 век*. Университетско издателство “Св. Кл. Охридски”, София, 2013, с. 105.

⁴ *Von Widdin nach Stambul. Streifzüge durch Bulgarien und Rumelien* von Hans Wachenhusen. Leipzig: Verlag von Carl B. Lorck, 1855.

deconstruct “the preconceived ideas of many people in England”, especially their “sympathy for a people who are falsely supposed to be suffering and oppressed” (p. VII).

Despite having travelled through many Bulgarian towns and villages, St. Clair and Brophy never distinguish neither people from one another, nor their homes. They all look the same: dull men dressed in somber colours, incomprehensive and suspicious to the extent when a decent man should always carry a gun on him, “for of course you are not foolhardy enough to travel without one”. The authors never call their characters by their real names; they give them “typical” names, only personal, not a single family name ever mentioned. Most often Bulgarians are called “Rayah” (a pejorative Turkish word, literally “members of a flock”, used to call members of the tax-paying lower class of Ottoman society). The houses look similarly impersonal; they “resemble one another so strongly that to describe one is to give a fair idea of all” (p. 5). Both writers are fond of appropriating the new foreign place by comparing what they see with what they know of other places. There are two types of comparison. In the first case, it is based on popular literature on other exotic and primitive places in the world, such as those inhabited by African and North Indian tribes. The Bulgarians are successfully inscribed in the image of the inferior one who lives, breathes and smells in a different way: “for the Rayah, like the negro, diffuses around him a peculiar aromatic odour by no means Sabaen, which makes one feel inclined to apply to the whole race Dante’s description of Geryon” (p. 7). Food, clothes, manners and traditions among the Bulgarians are also strange, uncivilized, and irrational. St. Clair and Brophy devotedly construct an imaginary space where many ethnic groups, representative of what might be termed primitive and appalling, live together: “negroes”, Japanese, American Indians, even Germans fall prey to this search of the other: when you enter a Bulgarian home you are being asked questions “in a Prussian frontier manner” (p. 21).

The second type of comparison situates Bulgarians on a plane with civilized representatives of Europe, usually of English and French origin. The outcome of this assessment is catastrophic and totally foreseeable. I will quote one among many similar examples: “When a quarrel arises, the Rayah, instead of trusting his cause to *jugement de Dieu* as manifested in a duel with knives, prefers to stab his adversary at an advantage, or to adopt the more silent vengeance of poison, one always safe in a country where the police, seldom seen outside the walls of the towns, is looked upon by the Christian as his natural enemy [...] and where postmortem examination have yet to be introduced with the many other civilizing agents from France and England, which are, as the newspapers inform us, soon to raise the standard of Rayah education and morality to a par with that of the Nations of the West” (p. 3).

Most unexpectedly, there are some cases when the Rayah stands at a par with representatives of English Victorian society; it happens when the authors speak of women and their typical manners. Bulgarian girls, for example, while waiting to draw water from a village fountain, “indulge in the gossip inseparable from a meeting of the fair sex, whether in the Balkans, or in the chairs of Rotten Row, or in the Botanical Gardens”

(p. 4). Gender transcends geo-political boundaries and lays the foundations of a worldwide empire of human shortcomings and disadvantages. Children are also semi-human; they inhabit a space where humans look alike though only because of their resemblance with an animal species: “dusky monkey-like little imps naked as when they were born” (pp. 8-9).

The anthropological research of St. Clair and Brophy is crowned by an observation on the shape of the head, specific of Bulgarian women. They are used of wearing, especially on feast days, “a little cap of cardboard covered with red cloth”, “this cap being worn from earliest infancy, and fitting very tightly upon the head, gives the skull a peculiar and unsightly conical form, which is however unnoticeable so long as the cap and handkerchief are not removed; this process is just the reverse of that adopted by the North American tribes of Flat-head Indians” (p. 17).

The religious traditions of the Bulgarian people, though supposedly Christian, also serve to illustrate their incessant ignorance and primitivity: “the Bulgarian does not even distinguish in his own mind between Heaven, Hell, and the Purgatory ... considering the world beyond the grave as a species of chop-house in which the souls of the dead are perhaps, but ill fed, and where he can send contributions of baked meat by the simple process of leaving them upon the tomb of his defunct friends” (p. 60). Bulgarian religion as a whole proves to be an anti-religion; instead of assisting its professors transcend into some higher world of spirit, it stimulates them to indulge in laziness and ignorance: “And is a religion which absolutely prohibits labour during 183 days of the year, and during the other 182 weakens its professors by such fasts as are unknown in Europe, except perhaps in a Trappist monastery, likely to encourage civilization to any great extent?” (p. 97).

“Residence in Bulgaria” methodically and inflexibly sets the belief that Bulgarians are not only ignorant and primitive but could be a contagious sore in the flesh of European civilization if left to their own. They deserve to exist only as far as their land makes part of the Ottoman Empire. The rest – all that romantic staff about religious oppression, political independence and national traditions – is but “Russian phantasmagoria” (p. 158), “as it appears when seen by the deceptive light of sentiment or of political interest” (p. 159).

What I quoted thus far seems enough to explain why St. Clair-Brophy’s book has not been and will not be translated into Bulgarian. It is counterbalanced by a long local tradition of national romanticism, backed up by a bulk of appropriate literature and historical documents, which idealize the past. The third quarter of the 19th century – that same time when St. Clair and Brophy visited Bulgaria – is sanctified in Bulgarian history and literature as The National Renaissance, a period of great spiritual upheaval and economic progress. Of course, there are more travel notes published by West-European travelers; they imagine Bulgaria in other ways, each way informed by some ideology popular at that time. Most popular among them was The Turkish Atrocities in Bulgaria, also written in English with the aim to enlighten Victorian society by pronouncing “the

plain and literal truth”; its author was Januarius Macgahan, an American journalist of Irish origin⁵. He visited Bulgaria seven years after St. Clair and Brophy, in 1876, after a national uprising for political independence was suppressed by the Turkish authorities. As a “special commissioner” of the Daily News, Macgahan visited the places where massacres had taken place, searched through a bulk of documents, took tens of interviews. His “letters from Bulgaria” challenged the British foreign policy, even Prime Minister Disraeli personally, and turned over the social attitude towards Bulgarians and their struggle for national independence⁶.

Despite all differences there is something, which unifies all 19th century travel notes on Bulgaria, and that is the discordance of the way, in which Bulgarians perceive their own world with the way traveling foreigners imagine it. My last example serves the same conclusion though in a different epoch and in a different way. The books I am to speak about are authored by people who are natives and foreigners at the same time. They are immigrant writers who left Bulgaria after 1989, most often about the age of twenty, and graduated some higher school abroad. At the turn of the new century, when Bulgaria was to become, or became member of the European Union, a modest wave of interest towards it arose in some West-European countries. Sensing that interest as well as the blank space it opened in the book market, some Bulgarian immigrants (or children of ex-emigrants) published books – novels or short stories, or just a mixture of travel notes and memories of Bulgaria. I will mention Dimiter Dinev in Austria, Ilija Trojanov and Sibile Levicharoff in Germany, Kapka Kasabova in London, Rouja Lazarova in Paris, as well as Miroslav Penkov and Nikolay Grozdinsky in the United States. Although these writers narrate in different ways, there are a few things common to all of them:

All of them strive after success first and foremost in their new home countries.

All of them write on **communist** Bulgaria, since this is the only period in Bulgarian history which begets the interest of the West for its’ specific totalitarian exotics.

All of them narrate how Bulgarians lived in communist era by reproducing the Western stereotypes of what it means to be a Bulgarian/Balkaner and what life was like under communism.

The narrative strategies sway between irony, caricature, hyperbole of ugly and depressing experiences, all this paradoxically tinged with notes of easy sentimentality. The only thing that’s missing is realism of representation, that realism, which a reader expects when reading of situations he has lived through. There is a curious exception, a book written by Evelina Lambreva-Jecker, a psychoanalytically oriented psychiatrist, who now lives and teaches in Zurich. True to her profession, she tried to reveal the psychological intricacy and controversy of life in a communist country. The book was not published for three years; neither in

⁵ Macgahan, J. *The Turkish Atrocities in Bulgaria. Letters of the Special Commissioner of the Daily News*. London: Bradbury, Agnew and Co, 1876.

⁶ For more detailed information on Macgahan’s mission, as well as on Residence in Bulgaria see: Стойчева, Татяна. *Български идентичности и европейски хоризонти. 1870-1912*. София, Изток-Запад, 2007, 65-105.

Switzerland, nor in Germany, nor in Austria. The manuscript went around 24 publishing houses until it was finally published in 2014.

Cultural colonization, as we see, has adopted a new and subtler politics of influence; it needs no more a retired captain to imagine a foreign place in his straightforward and honest (in his own way), manner. Colonialism nowadays does not intrude, does not squawk, it has overtaken long ago the conceptual frame of Victorian anthropology. Now it attracts, tempts with success, speaks with the voices of the motherland in order to imply the ideologies of the foreign.