

Relocating Ithaca

Alternative Antiquities in Modern Bulgarian Political Discourse¹

Balázs Trencsényi

Modern Bulgarian national discourse emerged during the nineteenth century on an ethno-cultural basis in the absence of any institutional continuity with the pre-modern state structures.² Therefore, references to folk culture and to the continuity of ancient customs assumed the function of establishing a claim of national existence and legitimized the project of establishing separate political and ecclesiastical structures in the ethnically and socially very complex Ottoman imperial context.

A combination of classical antiquity, non-classical antiquity, heroic Middle Ages, and early-modern ‘struggles for liberty’ was present in every Eastern European nation building tradition. The historicist narratives commonly located the Golden Age of the nation in the Middle Ages, but it made a huge difference whether the given national community could claim its own medieval statehood (or participated in a state framework which could be symbolically expropriated). When this was not convincing, the issue of prehistory became topical as early as the nineteenth century, which then became instrumentalized by political-social radicalisms against the old-fashioned conservatives who stressed the prescriptiveness of historical tradition. In the Bulgarian context the myth of the glorious medieval empire was also a self-evident option in the nineteenth century, as the Bulgarian Czarism at the height of its power was comparable to the medieval territorial polities of Western Europe.

That said, Bulgarian national discourse was devoid of a strong sense of normative historicity. While, of course, the national awakening also meant the revival of historical consciousness and brought along a cult of medieval greatness, the knowledge of this past was rather sketchy, and its cultural

¹ The present study draws on a number of subchapters from my forthcoming book, *The Politics of ‘National Character’: A Study in Interwar East European Thought*.

² On modern Bulgarian national ideology see Maria Todorova, “The Course and Discourses of Bulgarian Nationalism,” in *Eastern European Nationalism in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Peter F. Sugar (Washington, 1995), 55–102.

manifestations were almost inseparably intertwined with the aura of Byzantium. Furthermore, the gap of Ottoman domination, a yawning chasm stretching from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century, made any kind of argument built on normative continuity rather feeble.

This made the importance of ethnogenetic constructions in the building of a modern national identity discourse even more obvious. In the Bulgarian context we encounter a triple (Slavic/proto-Bulgarian/Thracian) construction of proto-history: these elements could also be played out against one another, but the dynamism of the discourses of identity tended towards an autochthonist construction that integrated all these ethnic substrates into a continuous narrative. This did not mean complete homogenization—thus, for instance, the extreme right of the interwar period preferred the proto-Bulgarian connection, while the national communist project of the 1970s focused on the Thracians. This plurality of available options led to a proliferation of possible constructions of national antiquity, which however all converged in questioning the normative hierarchy which placed the classical Graeco-Roman tradition at the highest level.

In the following, I am going to provide a couple of snapshots of the political use of such constructions of national antiquity from the period of national revival up to the national communist ideological configuration of the 1980s, seeking to establish the principal lines of continuity but also the considerable ruptures in the use of this ideologue.

Metahistorical Identity Constructions of the Bulgarian “National Awakening”

The Bulgarian national revival is usually connected to the work of the monk Paisij Hilendarski evoking the glory of the medieval Bulgarians.³ It is important to stress, however, that Paisij was not a conscious nation-builder, but rather was rooted in a competition of ecclesiastical factions and sought to relativize the symbolic dominance of Greek ecclesiastical hierarchy. By doing so, he mediated a series of historiographical *topoi* devised by the Dalmatian Catholic humanist historiography (especially Mauro Orbini) regarding the

3 Paisij Hilendarski, *Istoriya slovenoblgarskaya* (Slavo-Bulgarian history) (Sofia, 2000).

Slavs, which eventually were appropriated by the completely new cognitive framework of modern Bulgarian nation-building.

Placing the Bulgarians into the context of the emerging Slavic studies, the Ruthenian-born Slavist Yuri Venelin (1802–1839) identified some specifically Bulgarian character-traits, such as constancy, love of work, fearlessness, even though the general picture he drew was rather negative.⁴ Their historical merits in the beginning of Slavic culture notwithstanding, Bulgarians have not yet been “reborn,” Venelin claimed, so there was not much to say about them in terms of national culture. However, Venelin’s rather restrained remarks could be turned into an argument confirming the sheer national existence of the Bulgarians. Venelin’s book became a key reference in the early speculations on the ethno-genesis of the Bulgarians, in which the theories of Tatar or Slav origins competed as the two main hypotheses. Entering into a critical dialogue with two major Enlightenment authorities, August Ludwig von Schlözer and Johan Christian Engel, Venelin tried to subvert the “Tatar” thesis and rejected the idea that Old Bulgarians had changed their language to Slavonic after having arrived to the Balkans. In contrast, he tried to argue that the Huns (and by implication the Old Bulgarians) were also Slavs, thus constructing a prestigious common “pan-Slavic” root of the Southeastern-European nations.

The main catalyst of hetero- and auto-stereotyping was the problem posed by the “significant others” of the Bulgarian nation-building project. Simultaneously clashing with the Ottoman state structures seeking to engineer some sort of political cohesion and the Hellenized cultural elite of the Empire, which increasingly identified themselves with the Neo-Hellenic nation-building project, the emerging ideologues of the Bulgarian movement in the mid-nineteenth century featured themselves as subjected to a double (Turkish/Greek—political/cultural) oppression, identified as the root of national backwardness. This perspective could be radicalized in different directions, playing out the two “oppressors” against each other or rejecting them simultaneously as two faces of the same coin. It could also be linked to an internal cleavage between the “common people” (described as the “true Bulgarians”) and the emerging socio-economic elite of Bulgarian origins, which accommodated to and profited from the imperial framework (the so-

⁴ Yuri Venelin, *Drevnie i nyneshniye bolgare v politicheskom, narodopisnom, istoricheskom i religioznom ih otnoshenii k rossiyanam*, (Ancient and modern Bulgarians in view of their political, ethnographic, historical and religious relationship to Russians) vol. 1 (Moscow, 1829).

called *chorbadzhii*). Thus, fusing national and social conflicts, the “enlightened” social theoretician Ivan Seliminski (1799–1867) could metaphorically speak of “three tyrants”—the Turks, the *Phanar* (i.e. the Greek bureaucratic and ecclesiastic elite of the Ottoman Empire), and the *chorbadzhii*.⁵ Needless to say, the emerging discourse of national character proved a useful tool in the formulation of these arguments.

Although their dominant position was less obvious, the Greeks were the targets of resentment as much as the Turks in terms of threatening the Bulgarian population with de-nationalization. Seliminski, who started his career as a Greek-language poet, winning even a Hellenic poetic competition, went so far as to claim that the Greeks posed an even greater threat than the Turks, due precisely to their cultural and religious proximity to the Bulgarians. This drive of differentiation could lead to more idiosyncratic reformulations of cultural hierarchy. This motif already appeared in the writings of Konstantin Fotinov, but the most spectacular case is doubtlessly Georgi S. Rakovski (1821–1867), who, drawing on the contemporary understanding of Indo-European culture by Eugène Burnouf, Max Müller and others, was trying to link Bulgarianness to different Oriental antiquities, with the intention of undermining the Greek civilizational supremacy. In his most important essays,⁶ Rakovski’s aim was to autochthonize national history, stressing that a new method was needed to uncover the oldest traces of national life, as the Greek mediation had distorted them by, for instance, describing the non-Hellenic ethnic groups as barbarians.

Seeking to legitimize the project of nation-building and refute the usual claim that Bulgarians were a “young nation,” Rakovski developed a ‘proto-chronistic’ historical vision which put the Slavs, and through them the Bulgarians, into the privileged position of being at the root of European civilization. In a way there was nothing new in these ideas, as they were ultimately rooted in a European tradition of exalting the vernacular by linking it to the primordial and sacred languages, which went back to the humanist tradition,

5 Ivan Seliminski, “Religiyata, duhovenstvoto i tserkovniiyat ni vupros,” (Religion, clergy and our church question) in *Izbrani suchineniya* (Selected works) (Sofia, 1979), 92. Interestingly, Seliminski took the metaphor from the French utopian socialist Henri Lecouturier’s *La Cosmophie*.

6 Georgi Stoykov Rakovski, “Pokazalets ili rukovodstvoto” (Pointer, or instructions) (1859), in *Suchineniya* (Works) (Sofia, 1988), 4:5–138; and “Kratko razsuzhdenie vurhu tumnie i luzhovnie nachala, na koih e osnovana starata povestnost vseh evropeyskih narodov” (Short discussion of the dark and false basis of the old history of all European peoples) (1860), in *Suchineniya*, 4:139–190.

marked by such figures as Henri Estienne or Guillaume Postel. What made Rakovski's construction rather atypical, however, was the fusion of these ideological horizons with the new, more scientific apparatus of comparative linguistics and mythology and the use of these arguments to legitimate a project of carving out a nation-state from a diffuse imperial framework on the basis of this vernacular. He thus talked about a Bulgarian alphabet in existence before Cyril and Method, the rise of Macedonian Christianity⁷ before Greek Christianity, and linked Bulgarian folklore to Indian and Egyptian traditions. Rakovski eventually tried to use all possible available ethnogenetic theories to extol the Bulgarians' antiquity. Exploiting the Pelasgic theory of a European proto-nation in combination with the Indo-Europeanist narrative made it possible for him to describe Bulgarians as the earliest inhabitants of Europe, arriving from India. Using the Indo-European theory he developed an "orientalist" vision asserting that Asia was the cradle of mankind, Sanskrit was the model of all languages, and the origin of European peoples was in "Hindustan".⁸ His key tool of argumentation, in line with the mainstream of comparative linguistics of the 1850–1860s, was etymology: he linked Bulgarian topographic names to Indian ones to prove their antiquity. Most importantly, the prestige of the Bulgarian language was based on its alleged proximity to Sanskrit—Rakovski did not hesitate to assert that Bulgarian was its closest kin among the living languages.

The new methodology, which went beyond conventional political history to establish "national origins," focused on national character as a memory of non-written history. The character of a nation could be reconstructed in view of its orally transmitted ancient knowledge, physiology, physiognomy, and especially with regard to linguistic affinities with other peoples. Using such an etymological argument Rakovski derives the Bulgarian/Slavic notion of "language"—*ezik / jazik*—from "I"—*az*—, thus suggesting that language is the deepest marker of personality. Going beyond, however, the strictly linguistic argumentation linking the Slavs to the Sanskrit proto-language, he fused different Oriental antiquities, from India to Egypt, as his main aim was not so much to create a historical linguistics as to undermine the notion of Greek superiority. He also compared the "Bulgarian character" to that of the

7 Idem, "Bulgarskiy star narod i negova pismenost," (Old Bulgarian nation and its literature) in *Arhiv na Rakovski*, (Archive of Rakovski) 4 vols. (Sofia, 1952–1969), 1:356–359.

The text was written in 1858 in Odessa in the trial issue of Rakovski's review, *Dunavski lebed*.

8 Idem, "Pokazalets," (1859), in *Suchineniya*, 4:15–16.

ancient Jews, marked by hospitality, pastoral life, agriculture, and simple manners.⁹

Turning to folklore, Rakovski sought to prove that Bulgarian popular culture still remembered “Hindistan” and even Christianity had not been able to destroy the ancient Indian customs and beliefs surviving among the Bulgarians. All this is used to undermine Greek cultural authority and appropriate some of the mythological *loci* and *topoi* in the name of a Slavic-Sanskrit cultural substrate. Thus, the Olymp is not a Greek name, the Muses are Bulgarian fairies (*samodivi*), the Bulgarians have inhabited Bulgaria from at least 300 BC, but they might even have participated in the Trojan war.¹⁰ In order to prove these claims, Rakovski fused the Pelasgs, Etruscans, Illyrians, Macedonians and Bulgarians into one and the same ethnic group. Similarly, in the field of religion Shiva, Vishnu and Zeus (through the supposed etymological links between the Gypsy *Devla*, Arabic *djinn*, and Bulgarian *divi*) are decoded as Bulgarian Deities, and in general ancient Hellenic religion is described by Rakovski as an anthropomorphic deviation (featuring its gods as “fornicators and sodomites”) of the more metaphysical and sublime ancient Bulgarian-Indian creed. Irrespective of the linguistic differences between Indo-European and Semitic languages, Rakovski also used Bulgarian etymology to “translate” the keywords of Ancient Mesopotamia and the Biblical world, thus Babylon becomes *Babi-lono* (Lap of the Woman), while Baghdad is *Bogo-dat* (given by God).

The compensatory historical vision proposed by Rakovski went beyond stressing the autochthonism of the Bulgarian population and asserted the Bulgarians’ eminent role in world history. It went so far as to “Bulgarianize” French history—stressing that the *ethnonym* of the Gauls (“*goli*” i.e. naked under the kilt), Bretons (“*brati*”—brothers) and even Druidic religion had Bulgarian roots. If all this was not enough, he also adopted the thesis developed by Jakob Philipp Fallmerayer, used by many Balkan nationalists of the period seeking to argue against Greek cultural supremacy and political claims, that modern Greeks were a mixed race, with mostly Slavic and Albanian components, having nothing to do with ancient Hellenes. Along these lines, Rakovski sought to incorporate Byzantine history, stressing that Constantine the Great was “pure Bulgarian” and the ensuing history of the Empire was actually the history of the Bulgarians. In this typical autochthonist narrative it is not surprising that one finds the conquest of the land in the

⁹ Idem, “Bulgarskiy star narod i negova pismenost,” in *Arhiv na Rakovski*, 1:358–359.

¹⁰ See Idem, “Kratko razsuzhdenie,” 151ff.

seventh century transformed into a brotherly act of Volga Bulgarians coming to help their kinsfolk already living in the Balkans. Rakovski radicalized this autochthonist theory even further—asserting that the ancient Greeks also stemmed from the Bulgarians, pointing out the existence of Homeric words in modern Bulgarian. In a way, this claim signaled the logical end-point of every hypertrophic autochthonism appearing in almost all modern national canons in the region, from the Sumerian theory of the Hungarians to the Kemalist vision of Turkic proto-civilization: extolling the primeval existence of the nation eventually leads to the total encapsulation of the enemy as well.

Beyond the obvious drive to confer prestige on a nationality commonly regarded as uncivilized, Rakovski's para-historical construction had direct political implications. He held that the splendid archaic culture was still present in Bulgarian folk customs but was considerably weakened due to mixing with other nations. While he considered urban culture especially corrupted, Rakovski constructed the village as the repository of archaism, where these ancient customs survived almost untouched. His idealized communitarian vision mixed patriarchal-authoritarian and radical democratic elements: the patriarchal rule of the *starets* (elder—being secular and spiritual leader), the democratically elected *kmet* (community leader), spirit of equality, hospitality, lack of ceremony, and, finally, free spirit (which he held to be “the most ancient and beneficial trait of the Bulgarians’ national existence”). In this sense, while he developed a highly idiosyncratic ethnogenetic discourse, his agenda was similar to the other radical “awakeners” of his generation, such as Lyuben Karavelov or Hristo Botev, all grappling with the task of bringing together the exigencies of modern national building and an appeal to the archaic traits of the national community preserved by the peasantry, guaranteeing the possibility of organic development linking past and future.

New Ethnogenetic Constructions at the Turn of the Century

Apart from being the symbolic figure of the breakthrough of modernism in Bulgarian literature, the poet and essayist Pencho P. Slaveykov (1866–1912), represents an important threshold in the evolution of the Bulgarian national discourse as well. In contrast to the evolutionary organicist model of histori-

cal accumulation prevalent in his generation, Slaveykov's accent on the motif of 'resurrection'—when analyzing "haiduk songs"—clearly evoked the Romantic idea of collective rebirth. At the same time, his Messianic discourse was clad in Nietzschean garb: the "need for a storm to clean the air" implied a break with democratic forms which were "destroying the life" and suppressing the creative individuality of the artist.

Slaveykov advocated returning to folklore not because it is the ontological locus of normativity, but because it provides the only way to reconstruct the Bulgarian tradition, as the "autochthonous" high culture was destroyed by the vicissitudes of history. At the same time, he points out that the emerging modern high culture is gradually erasing the source of popular creation, and so the principal task of the poet is to turn back to folkloristic inspiration before it disappears completely and infuse it into the new elite culture.¹¹ Slaveykov described Christianity as having been violently imposed on the nation and contrasted it with the "sensitive pagan soul" of the people.¹² When turning to the folksongs, he claimed that the most interesting ones are the mythical and legendary fragments.¹³ This also inspired a series of later attempts at describing the folksongs as the reservoir of a popular cosmogony. Furthermore, he also contrasted the "official" historiography with the collective memory of folklore, pointing out that the folkloristic memory—supposedly mirroring the national soul—is archaic-democratic, containing "pre-historic animals, but not a single czar."¹⁴ Moving away from the classical "national awakening" discourse which blamed the Ottoman Empire for every misfortune that fell on the Bulgarians, he also re-evaluated the Turkish rule over Bulgaria in a direction that set the tone for all the subsequent narratives of autochthonism, claiming that the otherwise deplorable 500 years of slavery were instrumental in making it possible for the nation to remain Bulgarian. At the same time, he did not consider the Middle Ages a period of uncontested glory either—"the Bulgarian people indeed possessed a realm for whole centuries, but not for its own benefit."¹⁵

Slaveykov localized Bulgarianness in terms of a symbolic geographical model: an eternal borderland, where cultures meet and where empires clash,

11 Pencho Slaveykov, "Bulgarska narodna pesen" (Bulgarian folk song) (1904), in *Zashto sme takiva? V tursene na bulgarskata kulturna identichnost*, (Why are we like that? Searching for Bulgarian cultural identity) ed. Ivan Elenkov and Roumen Daskalov (Sofia, 1994), 55.

12 *Ibid.*, 58.

13 *Ibid.*, 59.

14 *Ibid.*, 61.

15 *Ibid.*, 69.

and the people is shaped by suffering. This “Biblical” exemplariness of suffering can serve as a catalyst of the potential inversion of the plight, conferring meaning on the past by turning it into aesthetics, formatting a quasi-eschatological modality of the community and devising the corresponding role of the poet as the “herald of new times.” In Slaveykov’s metaphorical language, the Bulgarian soul is ill, but this illness contains the seed of regeneration: “like the soul of a mother under whose heart a new life is to be born.”¹⁶ He also linked this vision of regeneration to an unarticulated vision of Slavic Messianism, rooted in the *fin-de-siècle* cult of supra-national civilizational movements, such as Latinism and Pan-Germanism. With regard to these motives, Pencho Slaveykov’s discourse is crucial in relinking the romantic heritage to the “new irrationalism” that became central in the interwar period.

Another important trend in the attempt to reshape the national discourse at the beginning of the twentieth century is represented by the work of Todor Panov, an ambitious young teacher in a military school.¹⁷ Using the toolkit of *Völkerpsychologie*, Panov strove to redefine the symbolic place of his country in the European concert of powers and cultures. Panov focused on the “people,” describing its psycho-social characteristics and defining it against the upper classes.¹⁸ In contrast with the evolutionist-organicist narrative, for him the people (*narod*) denotes the peasants and the artisans—the “sandaled people”, as he refers to them—who provided “beautiful raw material for the nation”.¹⁹ By symbolically excluding the upper classes from Bulgarianness, he also implies that the culture of this “*narod*” should be the basis of the specific national culture. At the same time, however, this new canon should be more than a cultural framework for the reestablishment of the cohesion of the population—it is also formulated in view of a normative image to “fulfill the Bulgarians’ Messianic mission in the Balkans”, that is to subvert the geopolitical order established after the Balkan Wars.²⁰ This means a sharp counter-position of Bulgarianness with the neighbors, and in a broader sense, the intertwining of the search for national specificity with the questioning of the applicability of the “European” system of values.

16 *Ibid.*, 70.

17 Todor Panov, *Psihologiya na bulgarskiya narod* (Psychology of the Bulgarian nation) (Veliko Turnovo, 1992). Original edition: Sofia, 1914.

18 *Ibid.*, 12.

19 *Ibid.*

20 *Ibid.*, 13.

Seeking to devise a specific cultural pattern for Bulgarians, and in line with his attack on the neighbors, Panov formulated an ethnogenetic model, downplaying the Slavic element in the ethno-cultural composition of the Bulgarian people: “we have almost nothing in common with them in construction or in character.”²¹ He considers the Pan-Slavic theory only a political device of the Russian Empire to buttress its claims of preponderance in Southeast Europe.²² In opposition to these claims, Panov sought to create an identity-discourse built on self-reliance. Obviously mirroring the feeling of abandonment after the traumatic wars, repudiating both the Slavic kinship and also trying to avoid a “Turkic” reference (which could have implicitly supported the claims of the Young Turks, who sought to return to the Turkic roots of the Ottoman Empire), Panov opted for an ethnogenetic discourse built on the uniqueness of Bulgarians derived from their Hunnic origins. Furthermore, seeking to confer a historical legitimacy on the territorial claims of the modern Bulgarian state, Panov’s argumentation leads to the proliferation of autochthonism in the direction of negating the legendary “conquest of the land” by Asparuh. “We are convinced that Asparuh did not come from anywhere”,²³ as these lands were part of the core territory of the steppe nations from time immemorial. If at all, Bulgarians are related to Hungarians, who are also featured by Panov as the progeny of the Huns. This does not mean that he entirely repudiated the Slavic influence on Bulgarian ethnogenesis, and in later sections he continuously refers to the Slavic cultural influences as well, but he definitely put the emphasis on the Hunnic element and considered the Byzantine-Greek and the Slavic impact secondary.

Developing his argument about the ethnogenesis, he devised a veritable counter-characterology. Describing the Bulgarian character as diametrically opposed to the Slavic one, using the vocabulary of social self-criticism of evolutionary organicists, he located the seeds of destruction in the Slavic character. The Slavs are the most uncultivated peoples, marked by an anarchistic spirit towards the sphere of statehood. This is “the hidden agenda” of the Slavophiles, who are buttressing the imperialism of Russia—an “unfortunate country” and the epitome of destruction, marked by “universal Messianism” rather than civic virtue.²⁴ Against this pan-Slavic Messianism, Bul-

21 *Ibid.*, 81.

22 *Ibid.*, 97.

23 *Ibid.*, 79.

24 *Ibid.*, 97. The Messianistic tinge of the new nationalist discourse was not at all uncommon in the broader European context. For instance, Hartmut Lehmann’s study of the religious

garians should formulate a doctrine asserting the “universal” significance of their nation. The first step is to believe in their “Hunnic” Messianism. While this Messianism has a universal claim, it also has a regional aspect—the natural locus of the Bulgarian nation is the Balkan peninsula, and the “universal mission” of the Bulgarians coincides with their regional power-claim.²⁵

Corresponding to the general tendencies of Bulgarian nationalism of the time, which were based on romantic and positivist ideological elements, even though Panov talks of “Bulgarian mythology”, his characterological narrative is permeated by a strong secular-rationalist tinge. He asserts that the nation was marked by weak religious identity throughout its history, both in its pagan and Christian forms.²⁶ Along these lines, Bogomilism, which he considers a splendid episode in Bulgarian history and the precursor of the Western Reformation, is described as a protest against despotism rather than a religious movement. Nevertheless, its impact is not considered to have been unambiguously positive, as it went against the ancient heroic ethos of Bulgarians, but under the Turkish yoke its memory also meant a factor in the process of retaining the national identity against the Greek church, which aspired—according to Panov—to assimilate all the Orthodox believers to its own cultural tradition. This also meant that for Panov religion had more to do with nationality than sacrality. Alongside his praise of the Bulgarian Orthodox church for its vigor in promoting national independence, he makes no qualms about demanding the etatization of the lands of the monasteries.

Similarly, his accentuation of the autochthonous elements of culture did not mean that he was entirely abandoning the position of the “organicist-evolutionist” discourse, since he did not repudiate the idea of cultural reception altogether and also described the normative character of Bulgarian culture in terms of the positivist *episteme* rather than any kind of national ontology. According to Panov, the Bulgarian soul contrasts favorably with the Russian collectivism manifested in the institution of ‘*mir*’, which is built on the despotism of the majority over the minority, whereas the Bulgarian version is based on harmonic interaction.²⁷ Potentially, the Bulgarian char-

overtones of German nationalism at the turn of the century registered an upsurge of the fused eschatological-political modality in this period. See his “‘God Our Old Ally’: The Chosen People Theme in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Nationalism,” in *Many Are Chosen: Divine Election and Western Nationalism*, ed. William R. Hutchison and Hartmut Lehmann (Minneapolis, 1994), 109–114.

25 Panov, *Psihologiya na bulgarskiya narod*, 100.

26 *Ibid.*, 133.

27 *Ibid.*, 178–182.

acter is far from being anarchistic, as it is rather marked by a combination of collective solidarity and “healthy individualism”, close to that of the Anglo-Saxons.²⁸ The aim of the reforms should be to keep this balance of individualism and collectivism, and not to destroy individuality altogether.

Therefore, the suggested deeper involvement of the people in the political system does not mean democratization, but rather the intensification of political education. As Panov’s entire characterological project was rooted in the feeling of failure after the Balkan Wars, his concluding argument returns to this issue. In his opinion, the recovery of the Bulgarian self does not concern only the actual population of the country, but entails the fulfillment of the *irredenta* project. The Balkan peninsula is historically destined to be ruled by one nation, and a rejuvenated Bulgarian nation will be able to realize this program, achieving absolute dominance in the region.²⁹

Autochthonist Projects of the Interwar Period

For the new generation of intellectuals coming of age during the war years, the evolutionary organicist option was hardly viable, not only because of the collapse of expectations concerning a piecemeal engineering of the nation-building that might result in universal harmony, but also because the experience of the Great War and the ensuing transformations all over Europe meant a cataclysmic experience. After 1918, 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 changes, which undermined any kind of unwarranted belief in the beneficial and cumulative effects of historical evolution. Various new ideological trends reached Bulgaria that were based on “cultural morphology”, relativizing the linearity of historical time and stressing the incommensurability of civilizational circles. This overlapped with the emergence of new generational ideologies that also problematized the normative continuity of

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 216.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 282.

their tradition, asserting the fragmentation of the past and the need to reconstruct it under the aegis of a new creative synthesis.³⁰

The discursive shift can be seen in the remarks of the symbolist painter and essayist Sirak Skitnik (1883–1943), who argued that traditionalism did not have a chance, as it was far from being an organic doctrine, trying in vain to upkeep a tradition between past and present. At the same time, he extolled primitivism as a creative gesture of revitalizing the archaic spiritual forces.³¹ Challenging the evolutionary-organicist paradigm thus opened up the space for discourses of radical transformation, historical jumps, and fundamental(ist) returns to archaic origins.

One of the options was to try to recreate a link between Bulgarian culture and classical antiquity. This was the message of the essays written in the 1920–1930s by the literary scholar, Aleksandur Balabanov (1879–1955). He suggested that the only pathway of cultural modernization led through a return to Antiquity, beginning anew, as it were, the entire process of civilization.³² Any national culture was to be based on classical fundamentals. In this context Balabanov refused folk culture as an *Ersatz* antiquity and argued against the aesthetic principles of *rodno iskustvo*, rejecting the “mechanistic transfer” of folklore to high culture. He stressed that real art was by default Bulgarian even if it was using African motives.³³ He also formulated a tentative national characterology—stressing that Bulgarians had a capacity to learn too quickly—which had a positive and a negative side as well, as it facilitated reception of new ideas but also induced laziness.

In the 1930s Balabanov became even more critical of the imitation of Western mass culture. He applied the concept of “footballization” to the developments of Western civilization and eventually came up with a curious combination of classical humanism and anti-modernism, stressing that the classical heritage was abandoned by the West and it was the task of the non-Western cultures to preserve elements of this heritage. He was particularly critical of the trends of “medievalism” and “Orientalism”, stressing that the true mission of Europe was the “kingdom of liberty” and that the dreams of

30 On Bulgarian cultural life in the interwar period, see Dimitar Avramov, *Dialog mezhdu dve izkustva* (Dialogue between two arts) (Sofia, 1993) and Rozalia Likova, *Literaturen zivot mezhdu dvete voyni*, (Literary life between the two world wars) 2 vols. (Sofia, 1995–1996).

31 Sirak Skitnik, “Putishta v nashata zhivopis,” (Travel in our painting) in *Zashto sme takiva?*, ed. Elenkov and Daskalov, 198–199.

32 Aleksandur Balabanov, “Klasicheskata kultura,” (Classical culture) in *Myastoto na bulgarskata literatura* (The place of Bulgarian literature) (Sofia, 2006), 23–35.

33 Idem, “Naroden duh” (National spirit) (1921), in *Myastoto na bulgarskata literatura*, 91.

hierarchical order were extremely self-destructive.³⁴ In line with this ideological orientation, he also rejected radical nationalism and the nationalization of sciences, stressing that while the Romans had linked nation and culture, the ancient Greeks and original Christianity were not national.³⁵ Evoking the spirit of such writings as the “Defense of the West” by Henri Massis, the ideological configuration proposed by Balabanov was a Westernist anti-modernism, although he drew fewer direct political conclusions. He defined modernism as a turn against the classical heritage of Europe and thus contrasted the actual corruption with a potential regeneration of European culture, where the Bulgarians, because of their incomplete modernization, might have a splendid role to play. The trap inherent to this construction was however that the relationship of Bulgarians to the classical heritage was very problematic. As Balabanov himself admitted: Bulgarians had no classical tradition, which was the cause of their half-culturedness and their lack of authenticity and originality.³⁶ Therefore, returning to the Graeco-Roman tradition seemed to be extremely doubtful and the only available ideological reference, going back to the vision of Rakovski, was the tradition of “alternative antiquity,” challenging, rather than confirming, this classic canon.

On the whole, the 1920–1930s saw the proliferation of constructions of a normative past. One of the important developments was the solidification of the proto-Bulgarian ethnogenetic theory, especially due to the work of Hungarian archaeologist Géza Fehér (1890–1955), who found himself stranded in Sofia after the First World War. Drawing on the contemporary Hungarian Turanian ideology, Fehér almost singlehandedly devised a narrative about the formative political and cultural influence of the proto-Bulgarians on the indigenous population of the Balkans.³⁷ Another option was returning to the nebulous Thracian heritage as a parallel culture to the Greek one, underpinning the anti-positivist/irrationalist ideologies of the period with a historical justification focusing on the orphic tradition. A third option was describing Bogomilism as a specifically Bulgarian national tradition, having a universal significance in its alleged anticipation of the Reformation. Finally,

34 Idem, “Bulgariya i klasicheskata kultura” (Bulgaria and the classical culture) (1937), in *Myastoto na bulgarskata literatura*, 374–376.

35 Idem, “Natsionalizum i kultura” (Nationalism and culture) (1931), in *Myastoto na bulgarskata literatura*, 337.

36 Idem, “Antichniyat mir v nashiya segashen zhivot” (1922), in *Myastoto na bulgarskata literatura*, 171.

37 See especially Geza Feher, *Rolyata i kultura na prabolgarite* (The role and culture of the ancient Bulgarians) (Sofia, 1940).

it was possible to construct the period of national Romanticism as a sort of “proxy” classical period, replacing the search for antiquity with the cult of founding fathers of national culture. All of these options became popular with some of the intellectuals searching for a way out of the cultural crisis in the 1930s. What they had in common was their rejection of the construction of organic evolution, the key ideological pattern of the late nineteenth century, creating instead an alternative “regime of historicity”, in which the lack of continuity with the recent past ceased to be an unbearable burden on the nation and became instead an asset in terms of reinstating an even more profound continuity with a subdued “real” national archaism.

The *oeuvre* of Nayden Sheytanov (1890–1970), arguably the most idiosyncratic figure of the Bulgarian interwar intellectual scene, combined these possible solutions in a highly original way.³⁸ Having studied in Leipzig and Prague (he defended his dissertation with the eminent Czech Slavist, Jaroslav Bidlo), Sheytanov was employed as a clerk in the ministry of education, while publishing a number of essays of considerable influence. He consciously turned back to the romantic model of the intellectual, fusing poetic creation and social activity 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 aspects of human existence, be it in a family or a more extended group. In his works, he fused this transcendentalism with some elements of *Völkerpsychologie*, offering a reinterpretation of the Bulgarian national canon, identifying the mystical aspects of folklore as well as of high culture, and finding magic structures in the special rituals as well as in the everyday life-world of the Bulgarians.

In the mid-1920s Sheytanov produced a series of poetic essays about Bulgarianness, continuing the tradition of *narodopshihologia*, but in many ways subverting its message.³⁹ While the mainstream conservative discourse described modernity as a tragic cleavage that undermined the coherence of the nation, Sheytanov projected this coherence entirely on a symbolic-metaphysical plane, thus resolving the contradiction by destroying the linearity of historical sequence. Instead, he created a framework of magic correspondences and a symbolic language which might lead to a new coherence—

38 On Sheytanov’s life and ideas the only available monograph is Erika Lazarova’s somewhat hagiographic work: *Ucheniyat sreshtu politika: Dr. Nayden Sheytanov* (The scholar vs. politics. Dr. Nayden Sheytanov) (Sofia, 2005).

39 Nayden Sheytanov, “Bulgarska magika (Zmeyat, Selo, Chovekut, Voinut)” Bulgarian magic /Dracon, Village, Man, Soldier/ (1923–1926), in *Zashto sme takiva?*, ed. Elenkov and Daskalov, 242–262.

“restoring some of the faces of the many-faced Bulgarian dragon”.⁴⁰ This new discourse was based on a “magic mechanics”, referring the contemporary life to archaic elements and structures of the ancient life (*пражувот*). In his vision, everything is linked to 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/age, rhythm/stillness. We are constantly reviving the archetypal occurrences, running up and down the circle of life. In this sense, life is nothing but memory: the supra-historical Being reviving its own past. Actual history is but an eternal repetition of a finite set of phenomena: for instance, orphism, Bogomilism and the bravery of the *haiduks* were just different manifestations of the same archaic spirit.

The locus of Bulgarian sacrality is, predictably enough, the village. It is endangered by the effects of modern civilization: “the wolves of the new times” were threatening the “valleys of Balkanic existence.”⁴¹ But this danger was more stimulating than destructive—history had repeated itself many times, and throughout its historical itinerary the Bulgarian nation had been exposed to dangers, but had always managed to develop a specific spiritual culture that had been inspiring for the West. In view of this “ontological” harmony, the connotations of the concept of Europe in Sheytanov’s description are definitely positive. What is more, the trajectories of reception are inverted—it is not Bulgaria that got something from Europe, but the values were “traveling” the other way as well. The West imported Bogomilism and turned it into Protestantism, while the people of the Balkans defended Europe against the Asian riffraff throughout the course of history.

In the early 1930s, Sheytanov turned to the problem of Bulgarian national character, which was in the focus of heated intellectual debates at the time. He sought to answer the basic questions raised by these debates about Bulgarian identity, Bogomilism, the rebelliousness of the nation, the lack of social and cultural cohesion, the conflict of the elite and the common folk, and the issue of the “second Renaissance.” As for Bogomilism, he described it in unmistakably positive terms as the manifestation of an autochthonous tradition of revolution. But by radicalizing the usual interpretation, which credited the Bogomils with the launch of the European movement of church-reform (culminating in Protestantism), Sheytanov coined an even more straightforward protochronist argument, describing it as an archetype for

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 242.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 252.

any Messianistic movement of political modernity, the first appearance of the idea of “New Jerusalem”, thus even implying a continuity between Bogomilism and Bolshevism (“a historical fog from the East”).⁴²

Sheytanov was also among the first to tackle the question of a return to the Renaissance. Merging the “official nationalists” with radical Westernizers, he attacked all those interpreters who sought to describe 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 Rakovski, trying to define the Bulgarian language as an *Ursprache*.

At the same time, however, Sheytanov did not give up Western Europe as a source of ideological inspiration. He referred to the Italians, pointing out that the idea of “returning to the period of glory,” formulated in terms of rebirth, was characteristic of many European cultures. But we can see from this example that the ideology of rebirth was not necessarily connected to the period of nineteenth century national awakening.⁴³ The Italians’ return to some great historical period did not target the epoch of Garibaldi, but the Roman Empire.⁴⁴ Similarly, other nations also search for the classical period of their greatness to serve as a catalyst of national regeneration. This implies returning to pagan ancestors in the case of the Germans and Hungarians, but, in the Czech case, the normative epoch is Hussitism. Along these lines, even the nominally internationalist Soviet Union returned to the glory of Russian medieval past. The “new nations”, which do not have a direct continuity with the past, also create their normative images, devising an ideology of Illyrism, pan-Turkism, and pan-Hellenism.

This means that the ideology of the “second Bulgarian Renaissance” should also be liberated from its nineteenth-century fetters and should be placed into a much broader scheme of the cyclical returns of Bulgarian history to its “magical” origins. Instead of searching for some kind of regenerative potential in the actual historical context of the Renaissance, Sheytanov formulated the program of a fundamental return to the “classical antiquity”

42 Sheytanov, “Hilyadogodishninata na Boyan Magesnika” (Thousand years’ anniversary of Boyan the Magus) (1923), in *Zashto sme takiva?*, ed. Elenkov and Daskalov, 263–265.

43 Idem, “Predosvoboditelno ili tsyalostno Vuzrazhdane,” (Pre-liberation or total Renaissance) in *Zashto sme takiva?*, ed. Elenkov and Daskalov, 292.

44 *Ibid.*, 294ff.

of the Bulgarian nation: “the tree of life will only grow if its roots are reaching deep into the Slavo-Bulgarian and old Thracian soil.”⁴⁵

After Sheytanov had published a number of essays over the course of the decade, his synthesis, entitled “Greater-Bulgarian world-view”, appeared in 1939.⁴⁶ The book was the first volume of a never-finished trilogy, which was meant to lay the ideological foundations of a new national identity, comparable to the imperialistic Pan-movements of Europe, bearing the telling name of “Balkano-Bulgarian Titanism.” Sheytanov’s aim was not only to devise a new political ideology or historical interpretation, but something much more fundamental—to recreate the national mythology, from which a “Greater-Bulgarian ideology” could stem, stepping into a 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.”⁴⁷

Sheytanov’s 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.”⁴⁸ It is “a branch of the East” but, at the same time, also the “Guardian of Europe.” Sheytanov’s “Greater-Bulgarian world-view” was thus an attempt to harmonize all the ideological fragments that previously had been played out against one another or had been used primarily 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 had identified as elements of an antithesis Sheytanov tried to describe as a synthesis. The Bulgarians embody all the qualities of metaphysical harmony: they are a new and an old nation, Northerners and Southerners, Slavonic and Hunnic, urban and rural, pagan and Christian at the same time.

According to Sheytanov, the elements of this Balkanic “meta-history” can be studied in the popular language and popular art, which often evoke the cultural memories of pre-historical times. There are special hermeneutic

45 *Ibid.*, 298.

46 Sheytanov, *Velikobulgarski svetogled* (Great-Bulgarian world -view) (Sofia, 1939).

47 *Ibid.*, ii.

48 *Ibid.*, 7.

methods that make it possible to unearth these archaic references from the source-material. Most important for Sheytanov was the “meta-historical” etymology, establishing the intricate trajectories of transformation, connecting divinities, ethnicities and the chthonic forces, indicating the ‘great chain of Balkanic Being’.⁴⁹ One such meta-historical sequence starts with Hermes, who evokes the *Aramaei*, who, in turn, evoke the city of Rome, from which we can jump easily to the Gypsies (Roma), while not forgetting about the Aromanians (Vlachs) either: all of them somehow refer to the pre-historic ethnic substrate of the peninsula. Even more entertaining are Sheytanov’s other examples, connecting the Byzantine general Belizar via the *Valkyrs* to the “Pelag” people, not to mention the meta-historical link of Dionysos—*Phallus*—through the Philistei to the Vlachs.

The archetypal Balkanic divinity, Dionysos plays a central role in the theoretical “domestication” of Christianity as well. He is the “god of democracy”, and here he meets the spirit of the Apostles, as the Gospels were also “democratic”. The idea of a vegetative god, resurrected in a human body, is also a Balkanic mythological trope, so it is not hard then to reach the conclusion that “it was not Palestine, but the religion-creating Balkans, together with the Thraco-Phrygian Asia Minor, that made a world religion out of Christianity.”⁵⁰

While the stress on autochthonism was unusual, the symbolic imagery of identity was obviously not a novelty in Bulgarian culture. Sheytanov himself referred to Pencho Slaveykov as his principal source of inspiration. What made his discourse unprecedented, however, was the radical shift of registers. While Slaveykov asserted the primacy of the poetic self in defining reality, and he inserted a political message into a poetic text, Sheytanov transferred the poetic imagery into a framework rooted in the generic conventions of a political discourse. By devising the myth of an “eternal Bulgaria,” Sheytanov’s main intellectual aspiration was to create an all-encompassing autochthonist narrative for nation-state building.

Of course, a critic could point out that for many hundreds of years Bulgarians had been without an independent state. Sheytanov, however, was referring to the continuity of Bulgarian nationhood, which was in a way transmitting the potentiality of the nation-state even in a period in which it was impossible to realize this aim. Bulgarian nationhood is in fact supra-institutional and even supra-historical: “we existed from time immemorial”, as

49 *Ibid.*, 152ff.

50 *Ibid.*, 189.

the focus of “Bulgarian eternity” was the “ethno-nation”, the *narod*.⁵¹ Consequently, the entire Great-Bulgarian ideology had to focus on the *narod*, the principle of national self-reproduction. Sheytanov collects these elements of the national self, connected to the symbols of procreation, nationalizing Eros, that is, once again, “indigenizing the universal”. From this perspective, he accentuates the strong ties of kinship, the symbols of fertility, the matriarchal memories in the national folklore, and the cult of Dionysus, who had a clear androgynous aspect in his reading. This quasi-religious representation of the fundamental principles of vegetativity links the ethno-national existence of the Bulgarian nation, that is, its androgynism before the formation of a nation-state, to the most archaic civilizational assets of the Balkan peninsula. The cult of Dionysus directs us back to the “beginnings of Balkanic humanity”—a humanism which predates Christianity by many centuries.⁵²

The proliferation of self-descriptive tropes is a crucial trait in Sheytanov’s views concerning the Bulgarian ethno-genesis as well. The available ethnic substrates, which were previously connected to alternative genealogical narratives, were fused into one meta-narrative, which once again legitimized a protochronist stance. The modern Bulgarians do not represent one specific ethno-national community: they are products of various ethnicities, representing, in fact, a unique combination of “Northern” and “Southern” peoples. Thus, they can count among their ancestors the pre-historic Mediterranean tribes, the *Japhethian* Middle Easterners and, finally, the “Nordic” Thracian and Slavic peoples.

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 been reinforcing the autochthonous nature of the population. It is only 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.”⁵³ This makes it possible for Sheytanov to claim that the Bulgarians are a “classical” and a “new” nation at the same time. In their classical form of Balkanic civilization,

51 *Ibid.*, 16.

52 *Ibid.*, 19–20.

53 *Ibid.*, 25.

they have universal significance, since history itself originated here: “the sun of powerful historicity came from our historical lands”.

Throughout Bulgarian history independent statehood was always re-created with the help of rural archaism flocking to the urban space. In this dialectics of the village and the city the villagers always had ultimately urban origins, while, in turn, the city-dwellers always came from the village. This also means an organic relationship of high and low culture, the elite and the people. For instance, the rural *haiduks* of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were descendants 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 psychical maximalism is based on our erstwhile historicity:” under the surface of an a-historical peasant culture, the glorious past is waiting for its turn to become actualized once again.⁵⁴

The same circularity determines Sheytanov’s interpretation of the Bulgarian “historical pantheon” as well. He describes the heroes of the nineteenth century as symbolic re-appearances of ancient deities. Thus, Botev is the reincarnation of Orpheus, Rakovski is that of Zalmoxis, while Benkovski, the leader of the 1876 uprising, is the new Hector. Bulgarianness is “a riddle and an epic”, a focal point of Faustian, Dionysian and Bogomil mythologies.⁵⁵ These legends expanded to the North and the West, thus the Hungarian, the Romanian, and even the Bavarian cultures were formed under Bulgarian influence. Bay Ganyo is also a mythical figure, a reincarnation of the pre-historic titans. The archaic structures of sociability appear in modern context as well: the continuity of the metallurgic philosophy, from archaic times to the village industry, or the “orgiastic” bazar-scenes (*назарлък*), connecting economic activities with a primordial experience of the sacred.⁵⁶

Considering these examples, one can conclude that ultimately history is overcome by meta-history, with a set of symbolic categories organizing the material into a new, supra-temporal and trans-cultural order.⁵⁷ The Madara-horseman, the primordial Dragon, Dionysos and Saint George are just different apparitions of the same pre-historic essence. The “*yunak*”-tradition of arm-bearing freemen was transfigured into the army of *janichars* (who were mostly of Christian origin), and into the outlaw world of the *haidutin*. And

54 Ibid., 31.

55 Ibid., 34.

56 Ibid., 48.

57 Ibid., 63.

this *haidutin*, characterized as a “national” fighter, actually prefigures the national revival. This supra-historical continuity is the main legitimation for the Bulgarian overlordship on the whole peninsula. The Bulgarian participation in the liberation of other peoples was comparable to “the help given by the benevolent lord to his tenants [...]”⁵⁸ The only state-building nation in the Balkans is the Bulgarian nation. The first Bulgarian state was founded 1,200 years before the emergence of Greece.⁵⁹ Moreover, Sheytanov, who explicitly referred to Fallmerayer, excluded the modern Greeks from the inheritance of the ancient Balkanic state-formations. The assertion that Bulgarians were not an eminently state-forming nation was part of the conspiracy of the neighboring peoples and states. The outfit of these “Balkano-Bulgarian” states varied due to the crossroad-situation of the peninsula, but the Bulgarian ethnos never became “ahistorical.”

According to Sheytanov, the ideas of natural borders and historical continuity cannot be played against each other, as they both refer to the very same “Balkano-Bulgarian” entity. This space is not only the center of Bulgarian nation-building, but the very axis of world history. Imperialism itself is a Balkanic invention, linked with the idea of “geo-politic Messianism”, the Roman, Spanish and English empire-builders were all just beneficiaries of a process of “*translatio imperii*” which originated in the Balkans.⁶⁰ Sheytanov’s radical protochronism was also a perfect tool to rephrase the framework of Bulgarian irredentism. While the previous legitimizing discourses of the Bulgarian claims were always shipwrecked on the complexities of the overlapping pasts and ethnicities, Sheytanov could devise a discourse within which this bickering became meaningless in the prism of Balkano-Bulgarian autochthonism. From this perspective, all the neighboring peoples were inheritors of an erstwhile Balkano-Bulgarian nation. Consequently, Serbian, Romanian, and even Hungarian statehood were built on a considerable Bulgarian ethnic element. What is more, even Byzantium was “Thracian and Slavonic”, rather than Hellenic.⁶¹ According to this interpretation, the neighboring peoples all aspired to Bulgarian territories, and even their own core-territory had been a traditional Bulgarian space before.⁶² In Sheytanov’s mind, this state of affairs, however, did not necessarily imply conflict, but on the long run offered the possibility of regional reconciliation, albeit at the

58 *Ibid.*, 81.

59 *Ibid.*, 88.

60 *Ibid.*, 97ff.

61 *Ibid.*, 121.

62 *Ibid.*, 127.

price of acknowledging the natural and historical precedence of the Bulgarians in the Balkans.

While these speculations were rather hilarious, they were still connected to the basic dilemmas of the “mainstream” nationalist discourse. In fact, Sheytanov’s ambition was to offer a fundamentally new solution to the problem that had troubled his entire generation: how is it possible for a small nation, usually not taken into account in the gigantic power-games, to reach a level of world historical significance. According to Sheytanov, the only way of survival for Bulgaria and the only available means to counter external aggression was 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-isolation from the effects of modernity. According to Sheytanov, this stance could only lead to total failure, as the instruments of modernity could easily be turned 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 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 the 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.

National Communism and the rediscovery of archaism

While the period after 1945 witnessed a strong anti-nationalist campaign, eventually many of the ideological patrons of the interwar nationalist project were filtered into the communist ideological reservoir. Along these lines, especially in the 1970–1980s the canon of interwar *narodopsihologija* assumed a legitimizing function in the works of a number of communist ideologues. This appropriation was facilitated by the fact that in Bulgaria the Communist Party professed a certain continuity with the agrarian tradition of the first half of the century, and the ethno-populist rhetoric retained a strong ideological position. This was also possible because the internationalist discourse was gradually substituted by an increasingly nationalist tone (also

triggered by the Yugoslav break with the Soviet camp). Perceiving the 1956 April plenum of the Party—where Todor Zhivkov implemented partial de-Stalinization with greater emphasis on the national context of building socialism—as a fundamental change, the Bulgarian national communist project got new impetus in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The reconfiguration of the ideological field and the formation of a national communist agenda were connected to the profound institutional and personal changes occurring in Bulgarian cultural politics in the 1970s.⁶³ In the identity discourse popularized by the First Secretary's daughter, Lyudmila Zhivkova (1942–1981), and her circle, the stress on national heritage, imbued with a diffuse oriental mysticism, had both a universalist and an autochthonist aspect. While they were stressing the classical roots and European connections of Bulgarian culture, they contributed to shedding the Marxist-Leninist ideological straitjacket. At the same time the compensatory emphasis on national specificity undermined a full-fledged Westernist turn and pushed the cultural elite towards a curious fusion of nationalism and universalism manifested in the para-historical discourse of Thracian antiquity.

As a matter of fact, Zhivkova herself was “evolving” ideologically, from a relatively blunt statement of the need for “patriotic and international education”⁶⁴ to a more syncretistic ideological position. In her speeches from the early 1970s one still encounters a more or less compact *langue de bois* of the regime, stressing the need of cultural propaganda and asserting that culture was the basis of the harmonic development of socialist society. She paid frequent lip service to the USSR but also asserted the importance of national culture and praised the progressive traits of the “1,000 year–old” Bulgarian culture. Step by step, however, she became entangled with a cult of national antiquity. In 1974, opening the representative Thracian traveling exhibition in Paris, she elaborated on the continuity of modern Bulgarian culture with this “alternative antiquity.”⁶⁵ An important member of her circle was the historian Alexander Fol (1933–2006), who established the Insti-

63 On the ideological reconfiguration, see Carsten Riis, *Religion, Politics, and Historiography in Bulgaria* (Boulder, CO, 2002).

64 See Zhivkova's speech held at the Congress of *Dimitrovska Komsomol* in 1972: “Kultura, koyato vuzvisyava choveka,” (Culture, which dignifies the human being) in *S aprilskoto vduhnovenie v borbata za mir i sotsializum, za edinstvo, tvorchestvo i krasota*, (With the April inspiration struggling for peace and socialism, unity, creativity and beauty) 3 vols. (Sofia, 1982), 1:20.

65 Eadem, “Otkritie na trakiyskoto izkustvo,” (Opening of the Thracian exhibition) in *S aprilskoto vduhnovenie*, 2:7–10.

tute of Thracology in 1972 and who eventually became Minister of Culture and Education from 1980. Fol had a key role in popularizing Thracian culture and turning it into a central element of the officially promoted identity narrative.

By 1978 Zhivkova went even further: when in another text she listed the main sources of inspiration for transforming Bulgarian culture she mentioned in first place the Russian emigré metaphysical painter Nikolai Roerich, followed by Tagore, Leonardo, Lomonosov, the Bulgarian revivalist Petur Beron, Goethe, Einstein, Patriarch Eftimy, Comenius and finally Lenin—in this, rather conspicuous order.⁶⁶ 1978 was officially dedicated to the memory of Roerich in Bulgaria, which obviously made the Soviet political leadership suspicious, to say the least. Zhivkova's project reached its peak in the preparations for the 1981 celebration of the 1300th anniversary of Bulgarian statehood, which turned Bulgaria into a sort of Balinese “theater state,” memorably described by Clifford Geertz.⁶⁷

The late 1970s was also marked by the revival of the essentialist discourse of national characterology. The most important step towards the re-canonization of this discursive tradition was an anthology edited by Mincho Draganov and published in 1984.⁶⁸ The preface to the anthology made it clear that the task was to bring *narodopsihologia* together with Marxism-Leninism, creating a “truly scientific” approach to national character. In line with the obsession with early medieval history characterizing the 1981 celebration of the 1,300th anniversary of Bulgarian statehood, Draganov projected the *narodopsihologia* tradition back to the ninth and tenth centuries, while describing Paisij Hilendarski, who reactivated this mediaeval heritage in the eighteenth century, as the direct predecessor of modern social psychology. In line with the interwar projects of autochthonism, Draganov also paid special attention to Rakovski, whom he credited with the beginning of “scientific

66 Eadem, “Opoznavanieto na zakonite na krasotata i harmonichno razvitie na choveshkiyat individ,” (Getting to know the laws of beauty and harmonic development of human individual) in *S aprilskoto vduhновение*, 2:174.

67 On the institutional and ideological context of these celebrations see Ivan Elenkov, “Humanno-klasoviyat vtori Zlaten vek”: 1300 godishnina ot osnovaneto na bulgarskata durzhava i istorizirane na ofitsialnata kultura v yubileynata deystvitelnost (1976–1981 g.),” (“Human-class second golden age.” The 1300th anniversary of the creation of the Bulgarian state and the historicization of the official culture in the jubilee activities, 1976–1981 *Kritika i humanizum* 23 (2007): 33–62.

68 Mincho Draganov (ed.), *Narodopsihologiya na bulgarite* (The ethnopsychology of Bulgarians) (Sofia, 1984).

characterology,” which was followed by a professionalization and stabilization—under the aegis of a revived *Völkerpsychologie*.

The period saw the emergence of a Bulgarian project of national philosophy in the works of the writer and literary critique Toncho Zhechev (1929–2000). Zhechev formed part of the intellectual coterie of Zhivkova and was also among the protagonists of the rediscovery of *narodopsihologia*. All this, however, was of secondary importance compared to Zhechev’s considerable impact on the Bulgarian public with his philosophical writings on “Bulgarian existence.” His most important essay from this perspective is “The Myth of Ulysses,” published in 1985.⁶⁹ Turning to the figure of Ulysses implied reaching back to the romantic topology of Bulgarian national identity, formed in mimetic competition with the Hellenic heritage. The broader context of this was the appropriation of Thracian culture as an alternative antiquity relativizing the primacy of Ancient Greek tradition and thus eventually relaunching the mid-nineteenth century ideologeme of Bulgarian “national antiquity”—one of the main ideological references of the cultural politics during Zhivkova’s “rule”.⁷⁰ Curiously, Zhechev also cultivated cordial contacts with the key figures of the Bulgarian exile community in Paris, such as Julia Kristeva and Tzvetan Todorov. Thus he managed to become an important figure of communist cultural politics with an autochthonist discourse and, at the same time, also to feature among the very few Bulgarian intellectuals who had some sort of prestige in the West.

In “The Myth of Ulysses” Zhechev set himself the task of creating a “Bulgarian myth”—a myth of eternal return, which at the same time could be “progressive.” All this was couched in a complex speculation about historicity occasioned by the growing official cult of national past characterizing the 1981 festivities. Zhechev criticized the antiquarian cult of the past (“past for past’s sake”) and argued for a synthetic image of history that could be used as a guideline for the future as well. He also contrasted the spiral and linear models of development and opted for a position that was rather unorthodox

69 Toncho Zhechev, *Mitut na Odisey* (The myth of Ulysses) (Sofia, 1985). The project of this essay was maturing for a long time as he published a preliminary version as early as 1968.

70 Boyan Manchev, “Odisey i negoviyat dvoynik. Antichnostta, natsionalnata filozofiya na Toncho Zhechev i poeziya na 90te,” (Ulysses and its doppelgänger. Antiquity, the national philosophy of Toncho Zhechev and the poetry of the 1990s) *Kritika i humanizum* 13 (2002): 79–101; see also Albena Hranova, “Rodno, dyasno i lyavo: Anton Donchev,” (Native, right and left: Anton Donchev) *Literaturen vestnik* 10 (2008), available at http://www.librev.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=413&Itemid=9 (accessed on 15 October 2009).

in the Marxist-Leninist ideological context, namely integrating the spiral pattern, arguing for a special spiritual link between modern Bulgarians, engaged in building socialism, and their predecessors who had lived some 1,300 years earlier and had conquered the land and established Bulgarian statehood.

Trying to devise a discursive framework harmonizing return and progress, Zhechev criticized Western Existentialism (mentioning *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* by Camus as a negative example), which tended to construct the human condition in terms of a tragic struggle against the irrecoverable. Instead of a potential challenge to Marxism, Existentialism (which was in fashion in the socialist countries in the 1960–1970s, as the anti-fascist and leftist credentials of some of its protagonists guaranteed some sort of ideological *modus vivendi*) thus became merely a symptom of the crisis of Western civilization. In Zhechev's vision, based on the symbolic opposition of the Balkanic Ulysses and the Occidental Faust, the crisis was eventually rooted in the breakthrough of the linear perception of history after the Renaissance. Instead, the “Ulysses myth,” extolling the Odyssean love of circularity and completed forms, was rooted in the motive of cyclical return not so much in space as in time—overcoming death by re-appropriating the tradition and identifying with the supra-temporal community.

The political context of all this was the debate on the desirable aims of socialist cultural politics—Zhechev made it clear that he considered the “nihilistic stance” towards the national question in the communist movement a serious deviation which needed to be fought by all possible means. Simultaneously, he also attacked the phenomena of globalized youth culture, especially popular music, which he described as a vermin destroying true folk culture. He argued for state involvement in cultivating this folkloric heritage as a crucial component of the future communist culture. In this context he also raised the problem of socialist industrialization, which triggered urbanization and thus potentially threatened authentic folklore. In the given political framework Zhechev could hardly reject it straightforwardly. Nevertheless, his cautious support can be considered a sign of distancing. The message of Zhechev's writings in the 1970–1980s, in line with the orientation of Zhivkova's inner circle, was exactly a two-front war, both against the Soviet tutelage and the emulation of “Western consumerism.” He was thus trying to devise a new ideological project that fused folkish traditionalism and communist futurism within the framework of a metaphysical national discourse—which could be at once particularistic and universalistic.

Conclusion

Nationalizing antiquity has been a common intellectual strategy of every nation-building project from the early modern period onwards. The available ideological resources, however, were rather different in various geographical and temporal contexts. As we have seen, many of the peculiarities of the Bulgarian case were due to the proximity of Greece. The search for a classic cultural matrix interfered with the strong drive to create an “alternative” Greek culture triggered by the Bulgarian nation builders’ desperate mimetic competition with the neo-Hellenic revival. The most spectacular product of this competition for symbolic resources was Georgi S. Rakovski’s parahistorical scheme, which used the Indo-European theory to assert the precedence of the Slavs over the Greeks and defined the Bulgarians as the most ancient Slavic tribe, deeply linked to the common Indian homeland.

In the late-nineteenth century, not unrelated to the geo-political clash with Russia and the forming political alliance with Germany and Austria-Hungary, the non-Slavic proto-Bulgarian component was increasingly accentuated. In the wake of the Balkan Wars the stress on Bulgarian ethnic distinctiveness in the face of the neighbors led to the tentative move towards a Hunnic/Turanic narrative. The interwar period brought yet another turn in the story: the shift of the perception of historicity supported a cyclical vision of the past, allowing not only for genealogical appropriations of antiquity but also for various projects of its reactualization. The Thracian vision, with its reference to a chthonic cult of vegetativity, fit perfectly into this turn towards cultural morphology and offered a possibility of reformulating the Bulgarian geo-political claims in terms of a new symbolic hierarchy.

The early years of Communist rule reinstated the hegemony of the Slavic theory, thus legitimizing the close ties with the “Big Slavic Brother.” At the same time, the post-Stalinist period, searching for a new source of legitimacy, turned back to the constructions of alternative antiquity, eventually institutionalizing the cult of Thracian forefathers as part of the Bulgarian national identity. While the evolution of ethnogenetic theories featured considerable ruptures, the continuity of the ideological patterns devised by the romantic nation-builders is also remarkable. The search for cultural references with which to undermine the Greek symbolic dominance produced the basic patterns projecting Bulgarian archaism beyond classical Hellenic culture in time. The rather fragile and particularistic national culture could thus be turned into a “universal” matrix. In this sense, the romantic constructions of

Rakovski created an ideological path-dependency which reproduced a similar pattern of ethnicized universalism in otherwise very different cultural and political contexts.

Linking the imaginary past to the desired future glory seemed to mitigate the problem of the actual insignificance of the nation in the international political and cultural arena. As every compensatory mechanism, based on shifting the plane of action from one psychological dimension to another, such constructions triggered real efforts and yielded tangible cultural results. Relying on such odd ideological models made it possible for representatives of a given national project to symbolically domesticate the toolkit of Western modernity and create a possibility of cultural negotiation between the local realities and the normative European cultural and institutional patterns. However, the price for achieving such harmony could also be high: the creation of a parahistorical framework made every question concerning the national tradition tautological, eventually eliminating the historical dimension of collective existence. As if Ulysses, instead of searching for the way home to Ithaca, would have chosen to remain with the *lotophagi*, blending Troy, Carybdis and Scylla, Polyphemus and Penelope in the eternal present of hallucination.

Archaeology and Historiography

