

# NATIONAL HISTORY AS A FAIRY TALE

## A STUDY OF BULGARIAN HISTORICAL MEMORY

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The study of collective historical memory<sup>1</sup> is pivotal for understanding the present configuration of a society. The construction of a memory – or a forgetting – of specific historic places, events, and protagonists, which we shall call the realms or topoi of history, indicates social tendencies, for these topoi are the sources both of the society's self-confidence and of deficiencies of that self-confidence. People's choices of their own realms of history can reveal underlying social attitudes, and demonstrate important political and socio-psychological tendencies as well.

The results of the present study, the first of its kind in Bulgaria, demonstrate the scope of the historical memory of Bulgarian citizens. The work reveals how consolidated and coherent the historical memory of the majority group is, and at the same time how fragmented the memories of the minority groups can be. The factors that determined these discrepancies reveal the relation between the historical memories and the cultural inclinations of contemporary Bulgarian citizens.

The aim of the research project<sup>2</sup> was to identify the places, the events, and the persons (protagonists, actors) in history which are formative for the contem-

porary identity of Bulgarian citizens today. We have tried to answer the question whether there exists a single coherent and normative "grand historical narrative" of Bulgarian national identity, and if so, how it functions; or whether there are diverse narratives in circulation among the various social, ethnic, and religious groups, corresponding to their own value systems.

**THE STUDY EMPHASIZES** the memories of the most numerous linguistic, ethnic, and religious minority groups. The stratified random sample for them is larger than for the majority group of ethnic Bulgarians. We interviewed 1009 people, including 575 Eastern Orthodox Bulgarians, 152 Turks, 111 Roma, 94 Bulgarian Muslims, and many other smaller minority groups: Russians, Armenians, Jews, Greeks, Vlachs, etc. The aim is to understand to what extent these minority groups relate to the "Bulgarian" past as "their own", and to what extent they project the past of their group as pivotal for Bulgaria's past. Is there a "boom of minority memories",<sup>3</sup> or do tendencies towards integration fabricate a new memory of its own kind by mimicry? It is precisely the choice of what to include in historical memory that outlines the parameters and

reveals the strength of tendencies towards integration.

Last but not least, my personal goal was to explain the reasons behind contemporary Bulgarian citizens' specific "choice of history".

In a questionnaire, the respondents were asked to name the most important place, person, and event in history, and to state where they learned about those facts. If the Bulgarian historical memory has been able to produce a coherent narrative, it should be illustrated by the respondents' answers to these open questions.<sup>4</sup>

### Memory or memories?

The principal tendencies found by our research project can be summarized as follows:

- A few common topics were predominant among the responses.
- A high proportion of individual responses were dispersed; that is, they named realms of memory that were not common to a large group of respondents.
- Places, persons, and events from or related to national history were predominant.

- Places, persons, and events related to wars, revolutions, and politics in general predominated over those of intellectual, artistic, or spiritual importance.
- The realms that the respondents indicated as the most important ones are:
  - Mount Shipka (26.9%)<sup>5</sup>
  - Vasil Levski (32.4%)<sup>6</sup>
  - Bulgaria's liberation from the Ottoman Empire in 1878 (34.4%)

The frequency with which these three leading realms were mentioned is 16 to 30 percentage points higher than that of the next most common response in the given category.

The concentration of these leading realms in one tiny chronological period and in one typological area in the majority of the responses could be interpreted as a crucial condition for the construction of a grand historical narrative.

However, the sum of the frequencies of dispersed answers that were given by over 3% of respondents is overwhelmingly high – over 50%. This could cast doubt on the existence of a grand national narrative altogether.

**THERE IS ANOTHER** question: whether this asymmetrical dispersion of answers is evidence of a postmodern mosaic memory (in the sense of Nora's study), or whether it indicates that a coherent (consensus) national memory has yet to be constructed.

The answers given by diverse minority groups are strikingly similar to the answers given by the majority group. Mount Shipka, Levski, and the Liberation are frequently named among almost all minority groups. In fact, although these three leading realms receive only half as many endorsements among minority groups as among the majority, they are still the predominant topoi.

Among the most numerous minority groups – Turks, Roma, and Bulgarian Muslims – the only exception is the Turks. The realm of memory they chose most frequently (15.1%) was the ancient sanctuary of Perperikon, located near Kardzhali, one of the Bulgarian towns with the highest proportion of ethnic Turks among its population. This fact indicates clearly that their local history was much more important for them than the national history. Still, Levski and the Liberation remain the realms named most often.

The preferences among Roma closely follow those of the majority group. If we exclude Muslim Roma (also called Turkish Roma), then the majority of the Roma responses refer to Bulgaria, Todor Zhivkov<sup>7</sup> and communism.

It is surprising that Muslims of both Bulgarian and Turkish ethnicity chose emblematic realms of memory associated with the climax of the struggle against the Ottoman Empire for national liberation. Many of them explained that they chose Levski because he fought, not against the Muslims, but against the Ottoman Empire, which they perceived as "evil". Muslims also indicated the Liberation, which ended the rule of the same "evil" empire. None of the respondents referred to the famous declaration by Levski that in the future "pure and sacred" republic, all would have equal rights – Christians and Muslims, Bulgarians and Turks, etc.

One might think that the majority of these cases represent a certain mimicry: the respondents gave answers that they thought we the researchers would know and expect, and that would please us. Some were quite explicit in their explanations: "Isn't that the answer you wanted to hear?" Another fact that should be mentioned is a growing tendency (in comparison with previous periods, when we have done research focused on them) of groups, especially the Turks, to encapsulate themselves and to refuse to communicate.<sup>8</sup>

Minority groups much more rarely chose specific topoi of their own. The only such example is Kemal Ataturk among the Turks (10.5%), but even he is second to Todor Zhivkov (12.5%). We should not forget that Zhivkov was the architect of the infamous "Regenerative Process", the policy of forced assimilation that was to annihilate the identity of Turks in Bulgaria, which eventually led to the exodus of 350,000 Turks in 1989. The almost unanimous approval of Zhivkov and communism – especially among Muslims<sup>9</sup> – is another surprising finding. The percentage of answers expressing approval for the communist dictator is almost the same as the percentage of the answers that referred to the trauma of the "Regenerative Process".

**THERE IS A CLEAR** tendency: the leading realms predominate over the combined dispersed answers only among the majority group, the Orthodox Christians. Thus there is a consensus of memory only among the majority.

If a national grand historical narrative is identifiable only among the Eastern Orthodox Bulgarians, while the minority groups have much more dispersed realms of memory, this raises the question whether the dispersed answers are evidence of a disintegrated memory or of a postmodern memory, or whether they reflect the group's level of integration. A closely related question is whether Bulgarian society lacks an institutional center, a classic instrument of modernization which would be responsible for forming tendencies of identity and integration.<sup>10</sup>

## Generators of memory

All the classic generators of memory – educational institutions, the family, media, literature, informal Internet circles – construct or invent memory by specific mechanisms. Their study provides us with information about the relations between the different realms of memory (places, events, and protagonists) and the diverse mechanisms of construction of memory.

The fourth question in the survey form, after the questions about the respondent's preferred place, event, and protagonist in history, asked about the source of the respondent's knowledge. The majority

answered "school", "history", or "textbooks": together these accounted for 53.5% of the responses. "Old people", "my own experience", "I was there", "born there", etc., made up another 28.9%. Answers that mentioned media, Internet, literature, and cinema totaled 6.3%. This indicates that the most powerful generators of memory are the classic mechanisms of compulsory general education. Let us remember "the monopoly of the diploma", in Ernst Gellner's words,<sup>11</sup> as the most instrumental factor in the "invention" of

the nation. Second to education are the pre-modern mechanisms: individual, family, and "clan" experience. The postmodern generators of memory still play only a modest role in Bulgaria.

The memory of the most important topoi – Shipka, Levski, and the Liberation – is overwhelmingly generated by school education. Media and personal experiences are the least

frequently mentioned generators of memory in these cases.

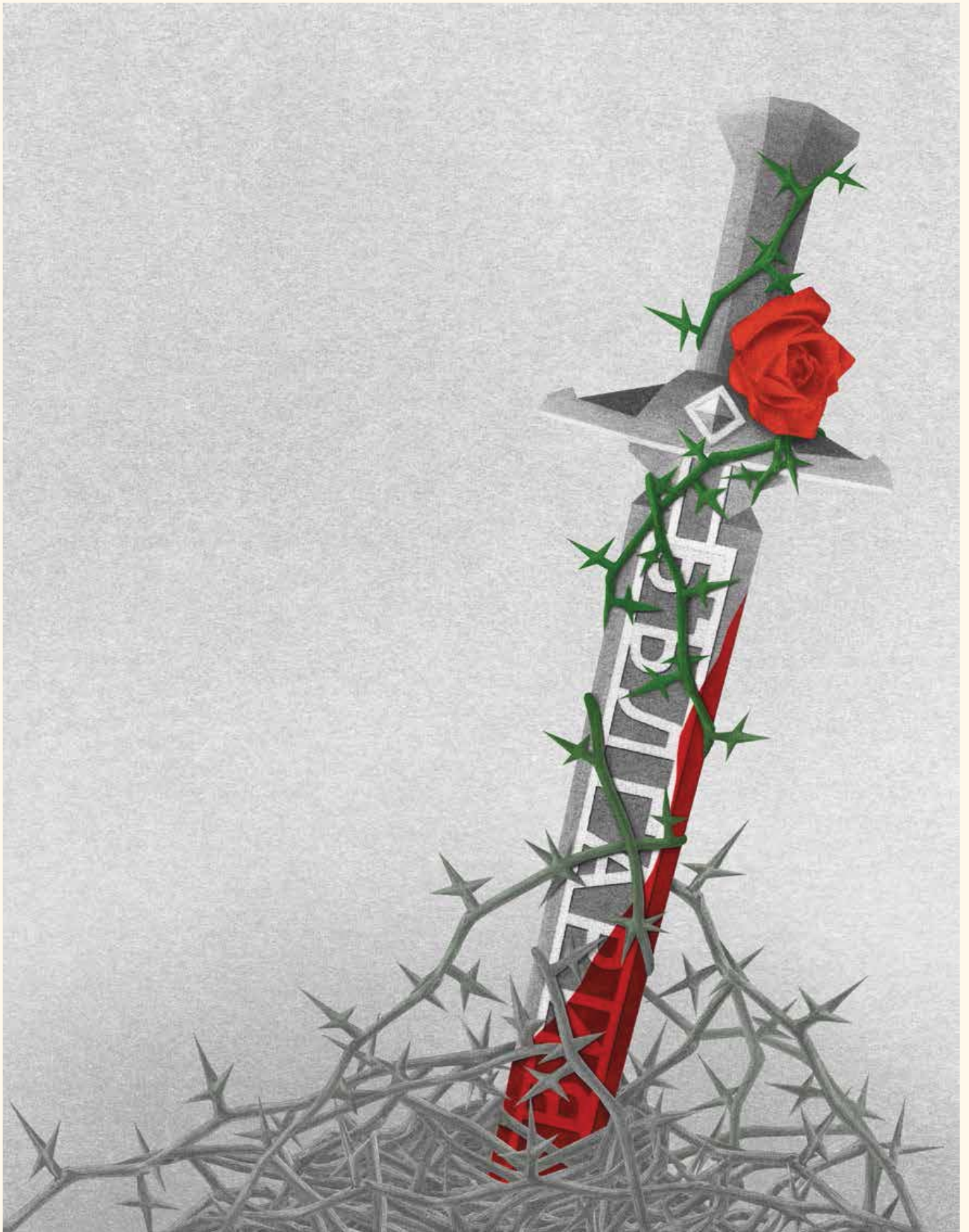
Education also plays a leading role in the memory formation of the Roma minority. The answers given by Roma who went to school (predominantly older people) correspond to the answers given by the majority of the Bulgarians and the Turks: Shipka, Levski, and the Liberation. Again, these answers may be influenced by mimicry. Among the younger people, who, unfortunately, are much less educated, the answers are extraordinarily diverse: important places ranged from "church" to "the public bath"; historic persons ranged from "God" to "my children"; events ranged from "the destruction of the Twin Towers" to "my friend's engagement party".

The results clearly indicate that the most important source of historical knowledge or memory is school education, textbooks, and history lessons. These sources are indicated much more frequently than the media, family (or "elders"), and personal experience.

**FEWER THAN 3%** of the respondents named Ivan Vazov,<sup>12</sup> despite the fact that Vazov is the demiurge who initiated the pantheon of historic figures of the Bulgarian National Revival. His works fixed the heroic images of the freedom fighters for Bulgarian national liberation, primarily Levski and Botev,<sup>13</sup> closely followed by the Opalchenzi, the Bulgarian volunteers at the Battle of Shipka. The pantheon created by Ivan Vazov was later sanctioned by the system of national celebrations, state festivities, and numerous monuments.

Still, the pivotal question remains, why history textbooks (and school education in general) are capable of creating identity, and why they determine people's own choices of historical topoi. One of the most valuable explanations of the "canonical" character of history textbooks in Bulgaria is the predominant essentialist model of thinking: "Essentialism is one of the safest and most comfortable harbors for the human

## “THE MOST IMPORTANT SOURCE OF HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE OR MEMORY IS SCHOOL EDUCATION, TEXTBOOKS, AND HISTORY LESSONS.”





mind. . . . In relation with myth-making, essentialistic thinking represents a functional fantasy which creates nationalistic fictions in order to secure national solidarity".<sup>14</sup> Thus, history textbooks can be regarded as canonical texts with a clear "missionary character", and as fundamental narratives for Bulgarian history. It is also clear that history textbooks are deeply influenced by the dominant political and ideological goals of the state: only few textbooks have been revised since the fall of communism over 20 years ago, and the nationalistic discourse is still predominant. As a rule, the sacred figures of the Bulgarian national pantheon established at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century have remained "untouchable" to both historiography and the mass media.

## The making of the Grand National Narrative

We can trace the process of the making of the grand national narrative in two directions:

- By the chronology of the realms of memory;
- By the taxonomy of the realms of memory: wars and revolutions, state and politics, religion and culture.

THE CHRONOLOGICAL distribution of the answers shows how, in Ernst Renan's words, "Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation".

The following table divides the three realms of memory into chronological periods:<sup>15</sup>

**Table 1:** The chronology of the three realms of memory

	Anti- quity	Middle Ages	Ottoman Period	Revolu- tionary Decade (1867– 1878)	Third Bulgarian Kingdom	Commu- nist Period (1944– 1989)	Post- Com- munism
<b>Places</b>	14.7%	24.1%	0.6%	38.8%	3.4%	2.2%	1.8%
<b>Person- alities</b>	5.2%	22.5%	0.9%	50.4%	11.8%	5.7%	2.4%
<b>Events</b>	4.3%	12.9%	0.9%	40.8%	14.8%	8.4%	13.9%

Source: author's research

This chronological analysis of the responses reveals the following tendencies:

Events from prehistory and antiquity are largely absent from Bulgarian memory, according to the answers given to us by representatives of all different groups. Antiquity was represented by a place in 14.7% of the responses, by a person in 5.2%, and by an event in 4.3%. Perperikon, a newly rediscovered majestic fortress and allegedly a Dionysian sanctuary near the town of Kardzhali, was the only place associated with Classical antiquity mentioned in the responses.<sup>16</sup> Practically all other places mentioned referred to the Middle Ages or the Revival Period. The fact that 2% of the Bulgarians questioned mentioned Jerusalem is an exception that proves the rule.

THE RESPONSES TO the question about the most important historic person also indicate that antiquity is totally absent from the Bulgarian historical memory. Biblical or Christian figures were also rare. Answers naming

Christ as the most important historical figure were minimal: 5% of Bulgarians and 7% of Roma. The latter apparently belong to various Protestant denominations, which have only recently proliferated among the Roma.

Every historical narrative about the "Bulgarian lands",<sup>17</sup> as absurd as it may sound, starts with prehistory and Thracian antiquity (the second and first millennia BC). The most commonly named realm associated with prehistory is the "oldest gold treasure in the world", which dates from 4560–4450 BC, the Aeneolithic Age. It was discovered accidentally in 1972 near the city of Varna on the Black Sea, and includes the oldest known gold artifacts. The narrative continues with a description of the major archeological findings up to the Thracian civilization, which has a different status. The major idea is that historical development follows an uninterrupted line that ultimately leads to the emergence of the Thracian civilization – a concept that is quite problematic, like any autochthonic theory of national genesis.

The Thracian period is perceived as a prologue to Bulgarian history. But since when? Have the Thracians always been understood as an organic, inseparable part of the Bulgarians, who have only been present in the Balkans since the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD? In the mid-1970s, the leading Bulgarian Byzantologist Dimiter Angelov published his work *Formation of the Bulgarian Nation*, in which the holy trinity of Bulgarian ethnogenesis appeared for the first time: Angelov called Thracians, Slavs, and Bulgarians the "three components of the Bulgarian nation".<sup>18</sup>

The appearance of Angelov's volume and its

prompt incorporation in the history textbooks is closely linked to another new wave in Bulgarian archeology and history, the study of the Thracian past, which was institutionalized with the founding of the Institute for Thracian Studies in the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences under the leadership of Alexander Fol.<sup>19</sup> Thus the wholesale inclusion of Thracian an-

tiquity in the grand narrative of Bulgarian history has a precise date: the early 1970s.

We are faced here with a small paradox: despite the huge propaganda efforts that surrounded each and every one of the discoveries concerned with Thracian antiquity, especially during its "golden decade" from 1970 to 1980 (and another in the past 10 years), despite the triumph of the exhibitions of "Thracian Gold" around the world, despite the dozens of forums organized in Bulgaria and abroad, Thracian history and culture were present only sporadically in the responses to our survey.

IN COMPARING THE attitudes and the preferences of the interviewees, we are also struck by another phenomenon. The dominant tendency is a kind of obsession with the past, first with the Revival period, and second with the Middle Ages, but almost without references to antiquity. Our results clearly indicate that the nucleus around which contemporary Bulgarians'

historical self-image has been built was shaped during the Revival period. And it is nationalistic, anti-Turkish, pro-Russian, hero-worshipping, and apologetic of its own past.

The most numerous answers (38.8% of the places mentioned, 50.4% of persons, and 40.8% of events) refer to the last decade of the Revival period. The climax of the national liberation movement in Bulgaria between 1868 and 1876 thus stands alone as a period of towering importance in the national history. Although by date this decade could be considered part of the Ottoman period, the Revival period, or both, it has been interpreted as a period in its own right in order to form the contours of the grand national narrative, because it is the decade when that narrative was first outlined.

The second most numerous topoi are those associated with the Middle Ages. This epoch is personified first by Tsar Simeon (891–927),<sup>20</sup> who is remembered in connection with the "Golden Age of the first Slavic literature", and second by Khan Asparuh (681–701), who founded the Bulgarian state in 681. The places mentioned as the most important realms of memory, Pliska, Preslav, and Veliko Tarnovo, are the capitals of the First (681–1018) and Second (1186–1393) Bulgarian Kingdoms. Medieval places were named by 24.1% of the respondents, medieval persons by 22.5%, and events of the Middle Ages by 12.9%. These results indicate that the Middle Ages are persistent in the historical memory in the form of monuments and a few outstanding figures, rather than as historical events or processes. All of these realms of memory can be traced back to the great "History of the Bulgarian Slavs" by Father Paisii,<sup>21</sup> the foundation of Bulgarian national identity since the National Revival period.

These responses show that the most sustainable ideological and national myths of the Bulgarian grand narrative are still in effect. These myths can be considered both as evidence of weakness and as compensation of this weakness.<sup>22</sup>

WE MAY ALSO interpret this fixation on the past as a kind of a social neurosis in which the society looks back and exaggerates its past glory to escape from the unsolvable problems of the present.

The answers given by Bulgarian citizens of all ethnic and religious groups generally exclude the Ottoman period as a historical realm of memory. Places related to the Ottoman period were named by 0.6% of the respondents, persons by 0.9%, and events by 0.9%. The respondents may be avoiding a traumatic and unpleasant memory, and replacing it in their consciousness with more pleasant ones.

Thus the "dark centuries under the yoke of slavery" are not associated in the common memory with specific places, persons, and events; there is no concrete remembrance and no chronology of the events. The inglorious period is compensated for by the towering importance attached to realms of memory related to the Late Revival and the peak of the National Revolutionary Movement against the Ottoman Empire. Paradoxically, Ottoman rule is generally perceived as the most tragic and fatal phenomenon of Bulgarian history, in spite of its almost total omission here. What is more, Ottoman rule is invoked as the cause of almost all the failures and vices of Bulgaria's contemporary social and political life.

The knowledge of the general public, formed by traditional textbooks and a snowball of media, preserves the conviction that the Bulgarians were enslaved for five centuries by the Sultan, that the *devşirme*<sup>23</sup> took a million Bulgarian children as Janissaries, that the Bulgarian people carried on a permanent and heroic struggle against the invaders, that the Ottoman policy was to convert every Bulgarian to Islam, and that this process was accompanied by horrible atrocities. In these representations of history, the victim syndrome mingles with the desire for self-glorification or hero-worship.

The canonical historiographic representation of Ottoman rule, once created during the Revival Period in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, has remained unaltered in the popular consciousness. Even attempts at relatively modest changes in terminology and in the assessment of the period are either rejected or immediately misused for campaigns aimed at “defending the Bulgarians and the Fatherland”. Despite the significant achievements of modern Bulgarian historiography, the canon of victimhood and hero-worship is still reproduced.<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, only few attempts have been made to infuse the new achievements of Ottoman historiography into the grand national narrative.

**THE PROBLEM REMAINS** that almost all other historical myths and contradictions can be discussed in a calm, academic manner except the Ottoman and the communist period. The artificially fueled fire against contemporary “revisionist historians” reflects the “national instinct”, which will not allow an academic reassessment of the period between the 15<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. In distinct contrast to the previous period, Bulgarians perceive the Bulgarian Revival as a founding myth of the Bulgarian nation. The Bulgarian Revival has always been spoken of with an optimistic pathos, again in contrast to the previous “ages of darkness and violence”. The whole period is marked by a special holiness, and the leaders of national movements have been made institutions and worshipped as heroes at the altar of the nation. It is impossible for Bulgarian historians to be neutral on issues con-

cerning the Bulgarian Revival period, and hence for academic discourse to dominate over nationalistic excitement. Liberal attitudes cannot prevail over nationalistic mentality.<sup>25</sup> This may be one of the most logical explanations why more than one third of the responses to our questions centered on the national revolutionary movement, which is perceived as the most heroic chapter – and an episode with a happy ending – in Bulgarian history.

My hypothesis is that contemporary Bulgarian historical memory is based, not on modern historiography and the achievements of scholarship, but on the fairy tale motif, deeply rooted in the consciousness of Bulgarians, of the heroic collision between the forces of Good and Evil, represented by the Bulgarians and the Turks, and the happy redemption from “slavery” with the help of Russia. That is why Mount Shipka is the most important historic site for Bulgarians, and the Liberation the most important event.

It is interesting to interpret the responses that show Bulgarians’ attitudes towards the historical memory of the Third Bulgarian Kingdom, or the “Bourgeois period” (1878–1944). Only 3.4% of those interviewed named a “most important historical place” associated with this period. The Third Kingdom supplied 11.8% of respondents’ most important persons, and 14.8% of respondents named an event in this period. The prevalence of events among the realms of memory associated with bourgeois Bulgaria is related to another trend indicated by the research: namely, the fixation on violent historical events, like wars and revolutions. These account for 57.7% of all the events named, while only 26% refer to politics and state institutions. The same trend is seen in the most important persons named. In general, about 80% of the answers are connected with war, violence, or politics, while about 20% are related to religion, culture, nature, or other spheres.

The most important event in this period is the Second World War, mentioned by 5% of the respondents, followed by national unification,<sup>26</sup> 3.4%; the most important person is Stefan Stambolov<sup>27</sup> according to 3.5% of those interviewed. The predominance of these answers is an indication that the change in some history textbooks and the extraordinary media commitment to the national unification and the leading role of Stefan Stambolov have influenced the shaping of historical memory in regard to the building of the Third Bulgarian Kingdom. Until twenty years

ago, the name of Stefan Stambolov was almost taboo in Bulgarian historiography, and that taboo was hardly broken in the 1980s. One should not underestimate the establishment of Unification Day as an official holiday in Bulgaria in 1995. It is noteworthy, however, that the other similar topos, the Bulgarian declaration of independence<sup>28</sup> in 1908, is weakly represented in the answers to our inquiry (0.5%), in spite of the fact that this date also was proclaimed an official holiday in Bulgaria, and in spite of the vast media campaign for the celebration of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Bulgaria’s inde-

pendence. One possible reason for the almost total absence of Bulgaria’s independence as a historic realm is the waning popularity of Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha,<sup>29</sup> the major initiator of the commemoration of this event. On the other hand, the declaration of independence was a formal act of Bulgarian foreign policy. It is not explicitly related to important and heroic events; that is, it is not included in the fairy tale version of the country’s past. Nor are the Balkan War and the First World War.

Because there is neither a grand narrative nor a fairy tale of the communist period, there is neither a traumatic nor a heroic memory of it. Only 2.2% of respondents indicated a most important historical place associated with the communist era; 5.7% of the persons named were from this period; and 8.4% of events. The last result is strongly influenced by the fact that 15.1% of respondents in the Turkish minority and 11.1% of the Bulgarian Muslim respondents indicated the “Regenerative Process” as the most important event.

Communism was named as the most important historical event by 1.8% of the Roma respondents, the highest percentage of any minority group that named a given event during the whole study.

Communism is absent as a memory realm for the majority of ethnic Bulgarians. The absence of such a reflection disparages and domesticates the memory of communism, reducing it to the popular, anecdotal, day-to-day experience. That also explains why Todor Zhivkov remains the principal realm of memory of this period, and not the sinister People’s Tribunal<sup>30</sup> or the concentration camps. Zhivkov was named in 4.6% of the responses on historic persons, and in 12.5% of responses from members of the Turkish minority and 4.5% of those from Roma respondents.

**TOPOI REFERRING TO** the postcommunist period are very few, making up 1.8% of the places named overall, 2.4% of persons, and 13.9% of the events. The most frequently named topos is the fall of communism (also indicated as “Democracy” or “10 November, 1989”), which was named as the most important event by 3.6% of the ethnic Bulgarian respondents, 13.8% of the Turks, 5.4% of the Roma, and 14.4% of the Bulgarian Muslims.

**“ALMOST ALL OTHER HISTORICAL MYTHS AND CONTRADICTIONS CAN BE DISCUSSED IN A CALM, ACADEMIC MANNER EXCEPT THE OTTOMAN AND THE COMMUNIST PERIOD.”**



The absence of the communist period as a general memory in the majority of the answers to our inquiry raises a number of historiographic as well as legal and socio-psychological problems. The most numerous responses related to this period refer either to the beginning of the communist period on September 9, 1944<sup>31</sup> (and thus more broadly to World War II), or to its end in 1989. But the essential characteristics of communism as a historical era – a mono-party totalitarian regime, unlimited violence, political terror, and ubiquitous propaganda – are not found in the answers to our questionnaire. An exception is the persecution of Muslim communities in Bulgaria, and the “Regenerative Process” in particular, which was naturally mentioned by members of Muslim minorities. How this fact is to be explained?

**THE PRESENT STUDY** indicates that there is no grand narrative about the communist period, nor a consensus on what it was in essence; and that the Bulgarian audience has no interest, desire, or curiosity, much less a need for catharsis, regarding this period.

The major reason for this huge blank spot in the Bulgarian historical memory is most likely the lack of historiography regarding these issues that has prevailed until recently. This vacuum reflects directly on the textbooks and on those institutions that are responsible for revising the textbooks in use before 1989. Some of the revised postcommunist textbooks show an attempt to introduce an academic tone regarding the Ottoman period, yet the communist period is still untouched by historical reassessment.

The concentration camps in Bulgaria that closed as late as 1962 are assessed no differently than the repressive communist system. Immediately after the fall of communism on November 10, 1989, a few modest volumes of memoirs of people who had survived communist concentration camps and prisons appeared, but not a single one of these stories has found its way into any of the new history textbooks.

The first serious historiography on communism has only appeared in recent years, treating the period broadly, including its economic, financial, political, and cultural aspects.<sup>32</sup>

**THE BIG QUESTION**, however, is why Bulgarians in general are reticent to focus their attention on communism. Is it due to skillfully managed media policies that slowly, gradually, and inevitably neglect the subject of communism in Bulgaria, or is it the “original sin”, the failure to revise history textbooks? Is it due to the age, fatigue, and disappointment of the generation that lived through this period, or is it a misunderstood “Bulgarian tolerance” that will again squander the chance for a historical and social assessment of our recent past?

The chronology of the realms also illuminates the major role that schools play in imposing memory. The anti-Ottoman National Revolutionary Movement and the Middle Ages, which are intensely represented in the school curriculum, are the periods best remembered. Conversely, the Ottoman period and the communist period (not to mention postcommunism), which teachers rarely touch upon, are consigned to oblivion. And while the communist and postcommunist periods are at least present in personal and family experience, the historical memory of Ottoman

rule has faded. It remains only as source of traumatic memory, as it was studied during the communist period. In this case, the “adults” mentioned by our respondents as the sources of memory are not eyewitnesses or contemporaries, but the generations raised with the grand narrative myth, “The Turks massacred and raped us for five centuries.”

## Taxonomy of the realms of memory

We classed the places, personalities, and events that dominate historical memory by general types, including heroic and traumatic, related to wars and revolutions, related to state institutions and politics, related to culture in general, and global and national topoi.

This classification contains a great degree of relativity, as it is difficult to precisely differentiate realms associated with violence and the loss of human lives from those classed in the field of politics. Often acts that seem to be “purely” political, or even of a spiritual character, such as the conversion of Bulgarians to Christianity, are accompanied by the loss of human lives, and many actors have alternated peaceful actions with violence. It is not easy to differentiate topoi in the area of spirituality and culture because one and the same person can be a revolutionary and an artist simultaneously (Botev is the most popular example, but by no means the only one). In spite of such ambiguity, we attempted to analyze the responses by taxonomy as shown below:

A more general classification, such as political vs. spiritual, would be simpler, yet still not free of ambiguity.

**Table 2:** Taxonomy of responses

	Wars, revolutions, violence	State institutions, politics	Religion, science, culture	Other (nature, lifestyle, economics, sports)
<b>Places</b>	39.9%	21.2%	22.9%	13.1%
<b>Personalities</b>	45.5%	37.4%	13.4%	1.8%
<b>Events</b>	57.7%	25.9%	9.2%	3.1%

Source: author's research

We separated wars and revolutions from state institutions and politics in order to make a deeper distinction between memory related to “legitimate violence” and memory of violence in general. A different issue is that revolutions and even wars (the Russian-Turkish War of 1877–1878 in particular) were not interpreted by most respondents as “violence”, but as “striving to establish justice”. Regardless of the various classifications that we could apply, the field of spirituality in the broadest sense, encompassing religion, science, and culture, will always lag behind politics and violence in general.

It is evident that spirituality (at least at the present moment) is not the most essential sphere for the Bulgarian historical memory. The realms of memory most often named are mainly related to violent, coercive turning points in national (or, less frequently, global or local) history.<sup>33</sup>

This “preference” begins to appear understandable when we compare the answers to our questions about

memory generators. Among those whose memory is fed predominantly by lessons at school, 59.5% mentioned topoi associated with wars, revolutions, and violence, and 13.9% mentioned topoi related to religion and culture. Among those who named textbooks as a source, 54.6% mentioned wars and revolutions, and 13.5% mentioned spiritual topoi in the broad sense. Cultural memories in particular are generated to a greater degree by the media (51.8%) and fiction (51.5%). Personal impressions are also a source of memory in the field of spirituality (51.8% of such responses were coupled with the source “I was there” – probably in reference mainly to archaeological sites).

In addition, in spite of the high degree of ambiguity in the classification of realms on the scale from the heroic to the traumatic, we come to the inevitable conclusion, also reached by other studies,<sup>34</sup> that the Bulgarian national memory (national in the French sense of a political nation) adamantly gives priority to the heroic. Trauma is more likely to be repressed and forgotten rather than identified as a national code. This observation provides further support for the concept of the perception of Bulgarian history as a fairy tale.

A large proportion of responses evidently refer to realms of national history. This is true not only of responses by members of the Bulgarian majority, but also of minorities’ responses. That is to say, the realms of memory associated with a Bulgarian national grand narrative or fairy tale are also a major historic center among minority groups in Bulgaria.

A conspicuous gap is the paucity of universal and global topoi in the historical memory of the interview subjects. Only about 16% of the “most important historical places” mentioned go beyond the boundaries of Bulgarian national history. The proportion of non-Bulgarians among the historical persons named is about the same. About 27% of respondents indicated events outside Bulgarian history as most important.

The results seem to be logical, as the questions were open, yet it became clear that most people instinctively choose national topoi as the most important landmarks of their historical identity. Few answers reflect global thinking in a historical perspective. This shows once again that realms of memory that have become integral parts of Bulgarians’ subjective self-identification are a direct result of the proliferation of the grand narrative or fairy tale of national history.

## The Grand Narrative as a fairy tale

If the textbook is the classic, concentrated, most commonly accessible form of the national grand narrative, then why are more than one third of Bulgarian citizens fixated on the historical memory of the late Bulgarian Revival and the Liberation War?

According to one line of reasoning, the success of the textbook grand narrative would depend on its turning into a fairy tale. “Exactly as the Fairy Tale tellers in pre-script and pre-literature societies, history textbooks are charged with the duty to transmit to the generations to come what the elders (their predecessors) thought about what the youngsters should know of their own culture and their societies.”<sup>35</sup> We have seen how powerful the history textbook is for the construction of public knowledge about history in Bul-



garia. And the analogy between textbooks and fairy tales does not end here.

In addition, history is perceived by the majority of the people almost as a sacred knowledge, which cannot be subjected to analysis or discussion, let alone criticism. In this sense, the historians – especially those who create textbooks – have a special legitimacy and influence. The responsibility for the construction of public knowledge is above all theirs – up to the point where their influence is overshadowed by the invasion of what we may call parahistory. Parahistory is the domain of populist and manipulative variation of historiography, which is easy to understand, to obtain, and to “swallow”, and which as a rule is dominated by a strong nationalistic self-glorifying discourse, and projects the successful and happy ending of historical events. This domain of public knowledge is extremely well proliferated by all media, and is well received because of its “therapeutic” effect on society. Parahistory was especially prevalent during the first decades after the fall of communism, when Bulgarians suffered all kinds of hardship during the “transitional period”.

Last but not least, the few nonconformist historians speak a highly sophisticated academic language that alienates the public from academic historiography and further facilitates the victorious march of parahistory for mass consumption.

Thus, the ground has already been laid for a specific reception of history in Bulgaria.

**AT THE SAME TIME**, the infantilization of today’s society is well known.<sup>36</sup> The same process is also visible in the incredible influence of Hollywood’s movie clichés, in which “the happy ending” is a mandatory recipe for success, on mass consciousness all over the world. This type of narrative recalls the good old fairy tale in which, after a long and unequal battle between the forces of Good and Evil, Good wins in the end. Hence, it is no surprise that the fairy tale, the model followed when the narrative of Bulgarian history originated, is still so attractive today.

There is no other period of Bulgarian history that is told as a tale of the victory of Good over Evil, with a happy ending, besides the one of the National Revolutionary Movement and the Bulgarian Liberation in 1878.

The prologue to this narrative also includes all the elements of the folklore fairy tale. (Bulgarian folklore also includes strong and expressive songs on this subject.) The historical narrative created later follows, step by step, the logic and the structure of the fairy tale: in dark times of bloody battles (“under the Turkish yoke”) between Good (the Bulgarians) and Evil (the Turks), there appeared heroes (*haiduti*, revolutionaries, freedom fighters) whose selfless bravery led to victory. All possible obstacles to the victory of Good – the cruelty of the Turks, the “enslavement” of the Bulgarians,

the “blood levy”, the massacres – are also present. Everything works out in the end, just as it does in fairy tales. In our case, the happy ending is the Liberation, forged by the joint efforts of Russians and Bulgarians, which is why the topos of Mount Shipka is the most popular one registered in our inquiry. Besides being essentialistic, this narrative is completely in the spirit of fairy tales with its immortal heroes, battles, trials, and final victory.

This also explains why an almost cryptogenic, folkloric, clearly pre-modern form of historical self-image dominates the way a huge proportion of Bulgarian citizens, including members of minority groups, perceive the most important realms of their history.<sup>37</sup>

Neither a Grand Narrative nor a Great Fairy Tale has been generated to date for other periods of Bulgarian history. For the period of Antiquity only isolated archaeological monuments are presented; for the Middle Ages; narratives are concentrated around the establishment of the state and the Golden Age during the rule of Simeon and the capitals of the two Bulgarian states, but even these are not frequently chosen topoi. This is because the two medieval Bulgarian kingdoms end with the destruction of the state and the imposition of foreign rule. The Grand Narrative cannot become a Great Fairy Tale because it lacks the initial primary component: the happy ending. The same logic can be traced in the formation of the narrative for the period 1878–1944 (the Third Bulgarian Kingdom), where many victories are overshadowed in the historical perspective by the unfortunate endings of World War I and World War II.

If the Grand Narrative and the Great Fairy Tale of the “Ottoman Yoke” and the liberation from it are intertwined and mutually complementary (thus creating the most sustainable space for memory of Bulgarians), communist propaganda has so reinforced a falsified memory of the communist period, 1944–1989, that the fragmentary efforts to correct it have regrettably been futile.

For the communist period, a variety of contradictory narratives exist,

but the tendency to obscure the memory of conflicts, terror, and the economic and financial crimes of the political elite is prevalent. The absence of clearly defined Good and Evil roles also attenuates the memory of communism as a historical period.<sup>38</sup>

**THIS MEMORY IS** sharply opposed to the memory of the Ottoman period. Thus the two most traumatic realms of memory for Bulgarians – Ottoman rule and communism – are dislocated in symmetrically opposed ways. Let us not forget that it was during communism



that the traumatic memory of the “Turkish Yoke” was recreated in even darker tones.

The Grand Narrative on communism has not yet emerged because there is no consensus in present-day society on the historical assessment of this period. The latest academic historiography – in the absence of broad social debate and a genuine interest on behalf of the media – still cannot correct the distorted reflection of the historical memory of that time. Almost half a century of our recent history presents no realm of memory for the vast majority of Bulgarians.

If we consider again the problem of Bulgarian historical memory as formed by a Great Fairy Tale, it becomes obvious that there exists neither a Grand Narrative nor a Great Fairy Tale about communism. If historiography is to be blamed for the lack of a coherent narrative, then the lack of a fairy tale must be explained by the lack of clarity about who is good and who is evil, who is fighting whom, who punishes whom and for what – and ultimately, about whether the ending is happy or sad. The fairy tale is still far off and unlikely to be written. But will the new generations of Bulgarians need more fairy tales? ❌

Note: All essays are scholarly articles and have been peer-reviewed by specialists under the supervision of Baltic Worlds’ editorial advisory board.

## references

- 1 I am using the term “memory” here only for convenience, since the discussion of its inadequacy is a subject for another study. Instead of “historical memory”, I would rather use “constructed public knowledge”. For me, “memory” is a personal cognitive and emotional process, rather than a collectively formed consensus. In addition to this consideration, the study presented here has shown clearly that respondents named local *topoi* of memory as a result of direct, practical experience rather than education and propaganda.
- 2 The research project “Topoi of Historical Memory”, carried out from October 2009 to June 2010, and expanded among the Muslim minorities from October 2010 to January 2011, is a joint project of the New Bulgarian University (NBU) and the

## “THE ABSENCE OF CLEARLY DEFINED GOOD AND EVIL ROLES ALSO ATTENUATES THE MEMORY OF COMMUNISM AS A HISTORICAL PERIOD.”

- American University in Bulgaria (AUBG). The methodology used was complex, and included standardized and non-standardized interviews, observations, and life stories. The stratified random sample (1009 people) is representative by gender, age, and social status, yet its emphasis is on the minorities. Director of the project: Evgenia Ivanova. Participants: Evelina Kelbecheva, Ivan Evtimov, Dmitrii Varzonovzev. Students from the Department of Political Sciences of the NBU and the History Program at AUBG also took part in the fieldwork and the discussions. The results of the survey and the discussion were published in Bulgarian in the volume *Minalo nesvarchvachto* [Unending past], Sofia 2011.
- 3 Pierre Nora, "Svetovniiat vuzhod na pametta" [The global rise of memory], in: *Okolo Pierre Nora: Mesta na pamet i konstruirane na nastoyasheto* [Around Pierre Nora: Realms of memory and the construction of the present], Sofia 2004, p. 29.
  - 4 The core methodology of the research consisted in questions that did not specify periods or geographical or cultural areas, nor contain any hints about Bulgarian, European, or world history. These entirely open questions allowed the respondents to answer in accordance with their own priorities, so that we were able to analyze the times and places in which their preferred historical realms were situated. The intentional absence of examples prevented the danger of the researchers' influencing the construction of a uniform narrative. Thus, we were able to record our respondents' first spontaneous reaction.
  - 5 Shipka Pass is the site of the most decisive battle of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878 (also called the War of Liberation), fought in August 1877, where the Bulgarian Volunteer Corps (Opalchenzi) alongside Russian troops won the day against far superior numbers commanded by Suleiman Pasha.
  - 6 The most venerated Bulgarian historical figure, called the "Apostle of Freedom", Levski organized the Internal Revolutionary Organization for national liberation from the Ottoman Empire. He was hanged in 1873. For a detailed analysis of the cult of Levski in Bulgaria (in Bulgarian), see Maria Todorova, *Zhivijati Arkhiv na Vasil Levski* [The Living Archive of Vasil Levski], Sofia 2010.
  - 7 Todor Zhivkov was the longest-serving leader of the Bulgarian Communist Party and national government. He came to power in 1956 and was deposed in November 1989.
  - 8 The explanation for this dismal finding has yet to be found. Most probably, the withdrawal is due to the nationalistic rhetoric instrumentalized by most political parties as propaganda against the Movement for Rights and Freedom (DPS), which is popular among Turks in Bulgaria.
  - 9 In the majority group, nostalgia for the communist period becomes more and more evident especially during an economic crisis: most acutely in 1990–1993, and again in 1997–1998. Nevertheless, Todor Zhivkov received much less support in this group than among the minority groups. It is apparent that the economic crisis, which struck the regions populated most densely by Muslim minorities, became the prime factor for the choice of memory about what was good and what was bad during communism.
  - 10 Evgenia Ivanova, "Consensuses of Bulgarian National Memory", in *Minalo nesvarchvachto* [Unending past], Sofia 2011, pp. 3–9.
  - 11 Ernst Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford 1997, p. 50.
  - 12 The most popular and productive Bulgarian poet and writer (1850–1921), called the patriarch of Bulgarian literature.
  - 13 A famous poet, anarchist revolutionary, and hero of the last phase of the National Revolutionary Movement against the Ottoman Empire, killed on June 2, 1876.
  - 14 Murat Belge, "Essentialism", in Murat Belge & Jale Parla (eds.), *Balkan Literatures in the Era of Nationalism*, Istanbul 2009, p. 15.
  - 15 The sum of percentages is far from 100% because some answers were classed as neutral or ambiguous.
  - 16 More than 15% of the population in the Kardzhali region are Turks, and 5% of them indicated Perperikon as a topos of memory. The proportions of Bulgarians and Turks who named this as the most important place are almost equal at about 5%.
  - 17 Bulgarians, or Proto-Bulgarians, did not settle in the Balkan Peninsula until the sixth century AD, and founded the First Bulgarian State in 681.
  - 18 Dimitar Angelov, *Formation of the Bulgarian Nation* [Obrazuvane na bulgarskata narodnost], Sofia 1973.
  - 19 Professor of Ancient History at Sofia University, Deputy Minister of Culture (1971–1981), Minister of Education (1981–1989). During the communist period Fol was the founder of the major educational and cultural program called "1300 Years of Bulgaria", sponsored by the Minister of Culture at the time, Ljudmila Zhivkova (the daughter of Todor Zhivkov). The program presented a new wave of nationalistic propaganda.
  - 20 Simeon I is considered the greatest Bulgarian medieval ruler, having greatly enlarged the territory of Bulgaria, fought successfully against Constantinople, and built the centers of the earliest Bulgarian (and hence the first Slavic) literature and education.
  - 21 A monk at Hilandar Monastery on Mount Athos, the "Holy Mountain" on Halkidiki Peninsula in northern Greece. His history, completed in 1762, is commonly considered to mark the beginning of the Bulgarian Revival period.
  - 22 Schopfflin, George, *Nations, Identity, Power: The New Politics of Europe*, London, 2000, p. 92.
  - 23 The infamous "blood levy" which lasted for 160 years. Every four years, young Christian boys were taken away from their families and trained to become Janissaries, the elite corps of the Ottoman army.
  - 24 Evgenia Ivanova, *Izobretivane na pamet i zabrava: "Padnaloto tzarstvo" i "posledniat vladetel" v nazionalnata pamet na Sarbi i Bulgari* [The invention of memory and oblivion: "Fallen Kingdom" and "the last ruler" in the national memory of Serbia and Bulgaria], Sofia 2009.
  - 25 Rumen Daskalov, "Die Wiedergeburt als bulgarischer Nationalmythos", in Martina Baleva & Ulf Brunnbauer (eds.), *Batak als bulgarischer Erinnerungsort*, Sofia 2009, pp. 84–98.
  - 26 The Principality of Bulgaria (with its capital in Sofia) was united with Eastern Rumelia (with its capital in Plovdiv, or Filibe) by Bulgarian elites and the people in September 1885. This was the first breach of the Berlin Congress resolutions of June 1878.
  - 27 Founding father of the modern Bulgarian state, revolutionary, Chair of the National Assembly and prime minister, assassinated in 1894. Stambolov was regarded as a fervent anti-Russian and turned Bulgaria towards the West. His name was banned during communism.
  - 28 The formal act rejecting Bulgaria's vassalage under the Ottoman Empire, and claiming the title *Tzarstvo* for Bulgaria and *Tzar* for Ferdinand of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha.
  - 29 Tsar of Bulgaria (1943–1946), exiled in Spain, prime minister of Bulgaria (2002–2006).
  - 30 Initiated by the Fatherland Front government dominated by the communists in 1944–1945. The 2618 death sentences issued by the People's Tribunal and 1046 resulting executions virtually eliminated Bulgaria's previous political and cultural elites. For comparison, the Nuremberg Tribunal issued death sentences against 12 out of 24 defendants; seven people were executed out of 28 defendants before the Far East Military Tribunal; during the purges in Hungary, 476 people were sentenced to death, and in Slovakia five. See R. Daskalov, *Ot Stambolov do Zhivkov: Golemite sporove za novata Bulgarska istoriia* [From Stambolov to Zhivkov: the great debates about the new Bulgarian history], Sofia 2009, p. 398.
  - 31 The date of the coup d'état which imposed the government of the Fatherland Front, with the Bulgarian Communist Party playing a leading role, after the invasion of the Soviet Army.
  - 32 This new historiography became possible thanks to the new Institute for Studies of the Recent Past (ISRP), established in 2005, which relies on authors born after the middle of the twentieth century. The exceptionally valuable studies of the ISRP are not distributed widely enough, which raises the question as to their ability to influence a mass audience in Bulgaria and to initiate a debate and create new knowledge of this period. So far, we are not aware of any findings or assessments by the institute's authors that have been included in textbooks or school literature, nor of any discussion on the new archival discoveries outside the periodic conferences organized by the institute.
  - 33 Evgenia Ivanova, op. cit., Sofia 2011, pp. 14–16.
  - 34 Evgenia Ivanova, op. cit., Sofia 2009.
  - 35 Volker Berghahn & Hanna Schissler (eds.), *Perceptions of History: International Textbook Research on Britain, Germany, and the United States*, Oxford 1987, p. 141.
  - 36 See Sven Hillenkamp, *Das Ende der Liebe*, Stuttgart 2009.
  - 37 Evelina Kelbecheva, "Kakvo da, kakvo ne: The Present of the Bulgarian Historical Memory", in *Minalo nesvarchvachto* [Unending past], Sofia 2011, pp. 35–57.
  - 38 There are numerous reasons for this, but the principal reason is the very skillful substitution of the narrative on communism by a certain communist and postcommunist elite that dominates the public space and disrupts the channels of knowledge and the assessment of contemporary Bulgarian history. And ultimately, non-communist circles have not succeeded in providing a sound and coherent strategy for studying this period, nor for disseminating knowledge about it in Bulgarian society.

