BETWEEN SLAVS AND OLD BULGARS: ‘ANCESTORS’, ‘RACE’ AND IDENTITY IN LATE NINETEENTH-CENTURY BULGARIA

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In the Bulgarian quest for origins Romanticism and the study of history both served the needs of forging the nation. The national narrative was marked by the organicist teleologies inherent in the prevailing romantic concept of the ‘tribe-nation.’ In this historical narrative, the national framework and Slavism were of crucial importance. The very idea of Bulgarian nationality was extended back to the ninth and even seventh centuries, referring to the establishment of the medieval state near the Danube. In the very beginning, with the Slavic domination of national ideology, the fact that the establishment of the state was a result of the activities and political tradition of a non-Slavic, Old Bulgar (Proto-Bulgarian)\(^1\) tribe posed a serious problem.

Thus it was not surprising that the origin of the Old Bulgars became a point of contestation and contradiction. The problem of origins and ‘ancestors’ was rife with tensions and underwent substantial reconsideration. It began with the Slavs as the only ‘ancestors’ of the contemporary Bulgarian nation at the expense of marginalized Thracians and Proto-Bulgarians, who in some popular histories were also imagined and represented as Slavs. Even the image of the ethnic mixing that followed did not pose an obstacle to the construction of a linear national high narrative dominated by Slavic and Christian (Orthodox) identity. Ethnic diversity was not only subsumed under the idea of a Slavic and Bulgarian nation, but the medieval Bulgarian kingdom was credited with the mission of the unification of the Slavs, called the ‘Bulgarian Slavs.’ The other basic pillar of the grand narrative remained the Slavic alphabet and literature and the role of the medieval Bulgarian kingdom in its dissemination in the medieval Slavic Orthodox world.

\(^1\) In this text the terms ‘Proto-Bulgarians’ and ‘Old Bulgars’ are used synonymously; in this way they are distinguished from the early medieval Slavic population or contemporary Bulgarians.
The Herderian idea of a Volk (people) that formed a Blutsgemeinschaft (community of blood), the Volksseele (national soul), and the Volksgeist (national spirit), prevailed in the newly developing Bulgarian national identity. Therefore a highly romanticized and imagined abstract image of the Slavic Volk that was simple and pure emerged as a projection of the intelligentsia seeking emotional identity as a substitute for a more complex reality. For this reason the idea of a ‘national character’ that has been fixed once and for all through its immemorial laws and customs was accepted as the essence of the nation.\(^2\) Thus the crucial concept of ‘national character’ emphasized moral values and actually became a-historical.

This study is based on primary sources, such as historical studies, more popular historical notions and descriptions, studies in the field of physical anthropology, historical accounts and references from newspapers and journals, memoirs, parliamentary debates, and political speeches. In consulting these sources, I try not only to follow the internal historiographical development on the topic of origin (Slavic/Old Bulgar) within supposedly professional Bulgarian scholarship, but also to investigate the political instrumentalization of the quest for origins in the modern political public sphere. How were the Bulgarian medieval period and the topics such as ‘origin’ and ‘race’ appropriated, used and misused by contemporaries in the last decades of the nineteenth century? How did different public figures in Bulgaria use the topics of ancestors and ‘race’ (Slavs/Old Bulgars) to energize the process of forging the nation, to interpret national unification, to legitimize foreign policy, to create intimacies with the subjects, to place individuals and groups in social hierarchy, and to interpret processes of modernization in the period under examination.

The National ‘Revival’ and the Historiographical Heritage

The Bulgarian myth of common ancestry and origin was markedly more closely connected to the political context, ‘Aryan myth’ and international politics than to intellectual achievements in the nineteenth century. It was dominated by the idea of ‘our Slavic ancestry,’ and notions of the ‘Tartar’, ‘Hun’, ‘Turkic’, ‘Finn’, or ‘Hungarian’ origins of the ‘Old Bulgars’ were either rejected, neglected or marginalized. Even authors like Gavril Krâstevich, who in his History regarded the Old Bulgars as Huns, considered the very

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\(^2\) Donald Kelley, *Fortunes of History: Historical Inquiry from Herder to Huizinga* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 325.