PART TWO

CONVERTING INSTITUTIONS:
EDUCATION, MEDIA AND MASS MOVEMENTS
In 1869, urban educated Bulgarian women across Ottoman Europe (the province of Rumelia) founded fourteen associations to advocate for female educational reform. By 1874, their number had reached forty. Scholars of the Bulgarian women’s movement before Bulgarian independence from Ottoman rule claim that women’s associations were founded as a result of changing ideas about the status of women in society, but they have not traced those ideas.¹ Historian Margarita Cholakova has suggested that some women organized specifically to resist the inroads of Protestantism and Catholicism among Orthodox Christians, but she has not explained how or why their resistance emerged.² Cholakova’s suggestion seems reasonable: several of the early women’s associations emerged in towns that experienced contacts with a significant American Protestant missionary presence.³ Yet an analysis of the speeches and writings of the women who founded those first associations illuminates a more complex encounter than simple resistance. As a consequence of their interaction with American evangelicalism, urban Bulgarian women experienced not the religious conversion that American Protestant missionaries hoped for, but a transformation of social identity through their reconfiguration of the American cultural ideal of educated Christian womanhood.

² Cholakova, The Bulgarian Women’s Movement.
³ As Cholakova shows, the first six associations for which evidence is extant emerged in Lom, Eski Zağra (Zhelezni, Stara Zagora), Kazanluk, Gabrovo, Veliko Turnovo, and Tulcha. Only Lom had no mission connection. Evidence for the short-lived associations in Eski Dzhumaya (Turgovisht) and Lovech is no longer extant.