A Response to Ivaylo Ditchev’s and Stefan Troebst’s Comments on Bones of contention. The living archive of Vasil Levski and the making of Bulgaria’s national hero (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press: 2009)

Maria Todorova
Gutgsell Professor of History at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

Intentions and effects

My biggest error with this book may have been its title, or rather the lengthy subtitle: “The Living Archive of Vasil Levski and the Making of Bulgaria’s National Hero.” Bones of Contention was appropriate enough and captivating, and I should have left it at that. Yet, I listened to editors who urged me to specify it geographically and in terms of subject matter, so as to make it user-friendly for library cataloguers. As a colleague of mine here in the US remarked, you put “Bulgaria” in the title and you ring the death-knell for a broader audience; in addition you lose four fifths of your East Europeanist readership (which is anyway not so large in academic terms), and by specifying it further, you also lose half of the Bulgarianist one. I should have known better, since much of the production in the East European field is usually based on one case study and then generalized on the whole area, but it is advertised in the title in the broadest possible terms. My aim was even more ambitious: to show explicitly that by concentrating in detail on a single case, the general problems it engages in are of universal significance. This is why I called this thick and heavy volume, in the view of some an (unusual) attempt at a total history of modern Bulgaria, almost tongue in cheek, a microhistory, able to universalize the most minute and localized details to a broad macrosocial scale.

I accordingly organized my argument on several levels of abstraction. At its basic and most transparent, this was a Bulgarian story: the history of the life,
death and posthumous peregrinations, i.e. the consecutive and simultaneous appropriations by different social platforms, political parties, secular and religious institutions, ideologies, professional groups and individuals of Bulgaria's foremost hero Vasil Levski in the course of almost two centuries. Luckily, this story had a par excellence detective plot, so it could be told engagingly: the story of the archeological excavations and the loss of the bones; the diachronical survey of the different and sometimes controversial hypostases of the hero, as a revolutionary, martyr, saint, role model, symbol, banner for any, often contradictory, political cause, dissident, but also criminal and terrorist. What was unique about the Bulgarian case was the elevation of a sole figure, providing me with a rare focus or lens thorough which to send probes in different directions, both synchronically and diachronically. The story in itself is so rich that it had the markings of all major emplotments posited by Hayden White: romance, satire, comedy and tragedy (White 1973).

On a higher level of abstraction I "emplotted my plot" in Victor Turner's notion of social drama and analyzed it as a universal processual form. I further added several additional and comparative contextual dimensions of analysis – Balkan and East European nationalism, Western European nationalism and nationalism in general, positing the usefulness of the category of weak nationalism– all along highlighting not Levski's uniqueness but his exemplariness in a comparative context, and how his story serves as a gateway into a number of theoretical and historical debates involving nationalism, communism, especially the argument for the existence of a specific socialist public sphere, the mechanics of hero worship, saints and canonization, thus establishing a missing link in the nexus nationalism/religion, the sacralization of politics, and, finally, the relationship between history and memory.

A third level engaged in questions at the very core of the historical discipline: the nature of historical truth, questions about the production of historical knowledge, of who “owns history,” the relationship between academic history, popular history and parahistory, notions of professionalism and dilettantism, the problems of personal memory, lived experience and participant observations (in this particular case, the author's), and ultimately the methodological question of how to write history. I wanted to experiment with different genres of writing and stretch the borders of the conventional historical narrative.

The use of the specifying subtitle resulted in the fact that all journals sent the book for review to Bulgarian(ist)s, including the present Debate in Southeastern Europe. Not that this is intrinsically regrettable; on the contrary,