The April Uprising in Bulgarian Historiography

The April, 1876, Uprising occupies an important place in Bulgarian historiography, just as the Uprising itself is important to the history of Bulgaria. It has always aroused great interest, sentiment, and emotion, and has confronted its students with a number of problems. The literature dedicated to it is not only voluminous; it is also varied in character, aspect, and genre, and is contradictory in its attitude and interpretation. It includes poems, ballads, short stories, novels, memoirs, studies, monographs, summarizing works, and publications of documents.

It becomes obvious that even one hundred years are not enough to grasp in all its fullness a major event like the April Uprising, to study it in a comprehensive manner, and to arrive at final conclusions. During the first period of study, things seemed clear and well defined, and no particular attention was paid to many aspects of the phenomenon. Later on, however, these self-evident aspects tended to disappear from the collective memory of the affected population which had been directly involved in the events, and their restoration requires an appreciable effort of research. Besides that, each subsequent generation, arguing within the context of its time and of its particular struggles and interests, turns to the past by posing new questions to it, for which it is not always easy to obtain the correct answers. For instance, in the case of the first authors who wrote mainly memoirs and in the case of the participants who had survived the events, it was necessary—both on personal grounds and for considerations of national and international character—to stress their sufferings, to express their affliction, and to arouse compassion. That is why their writings are full of descriptions of the horror that they had to go through and of the calamities and losses they suffered. As time went by, the historians studying these events felt more removed and detached from them and from their tragic end. They felt the need to subdue the reminiscences of the horror, to forget them, to attach minor significance to them because they were out of tune with the tasks facing Bulgaria at that time, namely, the impending battles for solving the problem of national unification. The need therefore arose to stress the heroism of the struggle. The first attempt in this respect was made by D. Strashimirov, although it was not fully successful.

Viewed in a general manner, the research literature dealing with the April Uprising may be divided into three groups, namely: 1) literature originating from witnesses and participants in the events, consisting mostly of
memoirs; 2) literature left by bourgeois historiography up to 9 September 1944; and 3) Marxist historiography written before and after 9 September 1944. There are some exceptions. For instance, the bulk of the books belonging to the first group were written after the country’s liberation and up to the first or second decade of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, books essentially belonging to that group continued to appear sporadically even up to 1942, which saw the first edition of the Memoirs of an eminent activist of the Bulgarian national revival, the revolutionary, Nikola Obretenov. Marxist historiography existed and developed parallel with and in opposition to bourgeois historiography from the end of the nineteenth century until 1944. After that, under socialist rule, it developed vigorously. The difference between the three groups lies not so much in their chronological sequence as in the approach and methods employed in studying the Uprising, in the attitude to it, in its evaluation, in the scope of the problems dealt with, and in the sources used.

The first group of historians studying the April Uprising were categorically and solidly behind the cause of the April heroes. All these authors, writing with varying degrees of talent, comprehensiveness, and argumentation, demonstrated a positive attitude toward the event and correctly appraised its great significance for the fate of the Bulgarian people. Although the treatment was naive and superficial, they did express their understanding about its fundamental causes, namely, the national oppression, the onerous economic and political situation of the rayahs, the “yataghan system” of the Ottoman Empire—in the words of Zakhari Stoianov—and the aspiration for a free and dignified life. With some exceptions, the writers of this group have little to say regarding the driving forces of the Uprising. The information presented is scanty, scattered, and accidental, usually involving attitudes expressed by peoples about themselves, their associates, their fellow-citizens, and the events.

One fundamental and positive aspect of this literature is the fact that it created the factual background of the events. It brought to light thousands of facts and descriptions from that time of the immediate preparations for the battles, the armed encounters themselves, and the suppression of the Uprising. It describes that fate of thousands of Bulgarian revolutionaries—teachers, priests, peasants, craftsmen, chorbadzhii—men and women, old people, and children. This literature makes it possible for future generations of Bulgarian historians to work with abundant material collected and related in an unbiased manner (from a scientific point of view, though not socially or politically), which enables them to work confidently on the restoration of the historical truth.

The main shortcoming of this literature is due to its narrow scope of treatment, fragmentation, and descriptive character. Most of the authors, themselves participants in the events, write only about those events in which