
*The Ghosts of Fieldwork Past*

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I am thrilled that the editors of the journal *Southeastern Europe* chose my 2009 book, *Muslim Lives in Eastern Europe*, to be the subject of this issue’s debate section. I am even more delighted that two such esteemed colleagues, John Eade and Ilia Iliev, took the time to write such thoughtful and provocative responses to the book. In this brief essay, I will engage with their comments and criticisms as well as reflect on the arguments of the book over a decade after I began my initial fieldwork among the Muslims in the deindustrializing Bulgarian city of Madan.

In retrospect, I believe that it is very significant that I did my fieldwork in the years between 11 September 2001 and the beginning of the global financial crisis in 2008. I had done my dissertation fieldwork on women’s labor in the Bulgarian tourism industry in 1999 and 2000, and I was seven months pregnant and on the job market when the two planes hit World Trade Towers One and Two on that tragic autumn morning. The destruction of the Trade Towers was a very personal event because one of my best and oldest friends worked for Cantor Fitzgerald on the 105th floor of the North Tower. I spent two weeks desperately hoping that he had survived the attacks before the city of New York issued an official death certificate although there were no remains of his body. Only months later would the forensics team find a DNA match from a bit of leg they unearthed from the debris.

After 11 September 2001, there was an explosion of scholarly interest in what policymakers called “Islamic fundamentalism,” the sudden assertion of piety among Muslim communities across the globe. The preemptive (and stupid)
wars in Afghanistan and Iraq further radicalized Muslim populations, and the 11 March 2004 bombings in Madrid and the 7 July 2005 bombings in London fueled Islamophobic hysteria in Europe. The national legislature of France passed the headscarf ban on 15 March 2004, and the Danish _Jyllands-Posten_ cartoons and the riots that ensued made it seem that the world really was on the precipice of a clash of civilizations. Even in Bulgaria, where Christians and Muslims had been living side by side in relative peace for centuries, sectarian tensions were rising.

I returned to Bulgaria in the summers of 2002 and 2003 while I was in the process of revising my dissertation into a book. Having secured a tenure track position, I was already beginning to think about a second ethnographic research project. During this time, I heard about something called rural tourism, which was just starting to become popular in Bulgaria. Villages and towns across Europe were marketing themselves as places where hectic professionals could get away from the pressures of city life. In the summer of 2004, I drove throughout the Rhodopi to check out potential field sites for my research. I wanted to find a village or a town that was just beginning to develop a rural tourism industry and to investigate the gender dynamics in what was (and remains) a largely women-controlled sector of the Bulgarian economy.

For the three weeks that my husband and I traveled through the Rhodopi Mountains, we stayed each night in small, family bed and breakfasts where I would have the opportunity to conduct interviews with the owners. I can remember staying in one house on the outskirts in Devin called the Villa Magdalena. The owners were a married couple in their sixties and the interior décor consisted almost exclusively of Christian Orthodox icons. We shared drinks with the owner that evening, who, after a few glasses of strong homemade brandy, decided to show us his collection of shotguns.

“When they come, I am going to be ready for them,” he told us.

“Who?” I asked.

“The Turks,” he said. “They are coming back and they want our land and our women. Haven’t you seen all of the new mosques that they are building everywhere?”

In villages and towns throughout the Rhodopi Mountains, there was indeed a religious construction boom going on. Although populations were shrinking, new mosques with shiny new minarets were springing out of the earth like mushrooms after a rainstorm.

In another village, we stayed in the home of some secular Muslims who discussed a controversy about their own new mosque. Foreign foundations had offered to pay for its construction, and the mayor had agreed to have it built