Evguenia Davidova


In this book Evguenia Davidova explores merchants and merchant networks in the Ottoman and post-Ottoman Balkans in the nineteenth century. She focuses specifically on the central Balkans and inland trade, and Bulgarian merchant communities. The study is based on detailed research of Bulgarian, Serbian and some British archival sources mainly in Bulgarian, Greek and Serbian languages, as well as published primary sources and secondary works. The bulk of archival material used is commercial correspondence, yet there are also other sources, such as family chronicles and financial accounts. The book engages with relevant historiography in both Balkan and Ottoman studies. The author’s goal is to explore the experiences of merchants, and shift the focus from intellectuals, revolutionary groups and state actors that have traditionally dominated narratives of the period; thus, the book provides an alternative perspective on the history of the late-Ottoman and post-Ottoman Balkans. Davidova’s study builds on and provides a re-evaluation of the arguments put forward by Traian Stoianovich in his seminal article “The conquering Balkan Orthodox merchant” published in 1960.1 Balkan merchants, she stresses, were not a distinct class, in contrast to what previous studies have suggested. In reality, in addition to commerce they were engaged in a variety of activities, such as crafts, tax farming and money lending. Such entrepreneurial versatility was necessary in order to survive and to thrive in a climate of economic uncertainties and competition which also involved other social groups, such as peasants, bureaucracy and clergy.

One of the author’s main goals is to “add human features to the ‘faceless’ image of Balkan merchants” (p. 197). The book frequently uses examples of

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individual merchants, the main case study being one particular family, the Tǔpchileshtovs. She follows the activities of three generations of merchants labeled “fathers,” “sons,” and “grandsons,” devoting separate chapters to each of them. The book’s purpose is to steer away from the familiar narratives focusing on the rise of nationalism, yet she does address the question of nationalism using Miroslav Hroch’s sociological study of small nations nationalism. The generations of the “fathers” belonged to a Balkan and Ottoman cosmopolitan entity where they identified with the larger Greek Orthodox world (pp. 158–9). By the time of the “grandsons” the situation had changed. It was the lack of economic and political perspectives in the Ottoman empire that made them consider alternative political projects (p. 176).

One of the original points in Davidova’s study is that she draws attention to the fact that merchant networks were not composed exclusively of the representatives of one particular religious entity. Economic collaboration among Christians, Muslims and Jews was not uncommon throughout the period under discussion. In Istanbul such partnerships amounted to larger multi-ethnic coalitions. However, inter-communal tensions also affected business dealings. There were fewer cases of Bulgarian-Greek cooperation except in the Ottoman capital following the Crimean War (1853–56) presumably because of the escalating church disputes (pp. 74–5). Economic activities involving various communities went hand in hand with inter-communal socialization (pp. 40–1). One should be careful, though, about the motives underlying such inter-communal dealings, particularly those involving Muslims and non-Muslims. The “fathers”, Davidova notes, partnered with ayan, whereas the “sons” collaborated with Muslim mültëzims and merchants, and in turn were appointed as members of local councils (p. 65). But were not such interactions to a great extent born out of necessity? During the turbulent ayan period merchants, particularly non-Muslim ones, could operate only with the favour of the local ayan; making such notables part of the business enterprise guaranteed its security.

Another original and interesting feature of Davidova's work is the chapter titled “Gendered Business” exploring the ways through which women participated in commercial enterprises. The role of women in various economic ventures during this period is a topic we know little about, so this is a very welcome discussion, and Davidova makes the most of the limited information the sources offer. To be sure, the author is careful to stress that women’s role was limited, but this does not mean that they did not participate in entrepreneurial activities. After Hristo Tǔpchileshtov’s father Petko suddenly died in İzmit in 1822, his widow Doda took the brave, and highly unusual step for a woman, of travelling from Kalofer to İzmit. There she personally saw to collecting his merchandise and repaying his debts before returning home to be