

BULGARIAN FOLKLORE STUDIES AND THE FORMATION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY AND CULTURE

THE CONTRIBUTION OF GEORGI SAVA RAKOVSKI

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This article presents the work of Georgi Sava Rakovski (1821–1867), one of the most outstanding, well-rounded, and interesting personalities of the Bulgarian Revival. It examines his ideas about the origin and specific character of the Bulgarian people and folklore as a resource for the beginnings of ethnic history. Special attention is dedicated to the role of this man of letters in the establishment of folklore studies in Bulgaria and his contribution to shaping standard Bulgarian and introducing comparative studies in Bulgaria.

Keywords: *narodouka (ethnology); folk culture; ethnic history; national character; national culture; national identity.*

V članku je predstavljeno delo Georgija Save Rakovskega (1821–1867), ki velja za najbolj izjemno, celovito in zanimivo osebnost bolgarskega narodnega prebujenja. V članku so raziskane njegove zamisli o izviri in svojevrstnem značaju Bolgarov, folklorja je predstavljena kot temelj narodne zgodovine. Posebna pozornost je namenjena vlogi pisatelja in znanstvenika pri oblikovanju bolgarske folkloristike in ustvarjanju bolgarskega knjižnega jezika ter uvajanju primerjalnih raziskav v Bolgariji.

Ključne besede: *narodouka (narodoslovje); ljudska kultura; etnična zgodovina; narodni značaj; narodna kultura; narodna identiteta.*

I would like to start with a metaphor used by Ernest Gellner, one of the authorities in studying nations and nationalisms. He presents the relationship between the state and culture as one of marriage. In Europe, Gellner sees this marriage in three forms. In Atlantic Europe (dynasty states on the Atlantic coast: France, England, Spain, and Portugal), which represents the “first time zone” for Gellner, the state and culture have lived together for centuries. There was only a need to legitimize the relationship by educating the peasants into the “high culture” (thereby making them, for example, Frenchmen).¹ In the second zone (the lands inhabited by Germans and Italians), culture and the state were fiancées, but there was still the lack of marriage customs (i.e., states and territorial definitions).² In a third zone, called Ruritania (the remaining part

¹ The political boundaries encompassed relatively homogeneous territories, in cultural terms. In fact, there was high culture on a relatively broad basis and its distribution was connected with leveling the local differences in the village culture. This process was carried out easily and without major conflicts.

² A common high culture (a standard language and a relatively high level of education) was also present, but until the nineteenth century there was no territorial or political unification. Achieving this became a major task and it replaced the other one: imposing high centralized culture on the village strata.

of central and southeastern Europe), neither of the fiancées were present. It is characterized by a lack of both high culture and independent political formations until the nineteenth century. The key role here was played by the educating elites, who, without the help of the state, created “national” culture and consciousness on the basis of the spoken language and traditional culture. Like any generalizing periodization, Gellner’s model contains many contradictions and raises many questions, but its main lines rely on existing social, cultural, and political realities.

An analysis of the development of folklore studies in the Balkan countries would reveal many shared moments in the circulation and spread of ideas. These are determined by commonalities in the social conditions, which engendered and stimulated interest in folklore as artistic creation of the people and as a “reflection of the folk genius” through the efforts of the Balkan intelligentsia to form and develop the national consciousness of its peoples through the use of folklore as a means of expression for the most prominent representatives of the nascent national cultures.

In the processes of creating nation-states, traditional culture has a significant role as a symbolic resource for accomplishing the national culture project. The traditional culture is an object of scholarly studies, but it is also “used” for political purposes. The explorations themselves are also projected at the political level.

In Bulgaria there is a historically evolved national scholarly tradition connected with construing folklore and traditional culture as an object of investigation. In the first decades of its development, this scholarly exploration was called *narodouka* (literally, ‘knowledge about the people’) and in the spirit of Romanticism it regarded the “unofficial” and “other” culture as an expression of the people’s genius and its creative spirit.

The national revival was an epoch of *narodouka*, or the study of the folk, in the literal sense of the term. It was characterized by a primary synthesis of observations and general statements about the Bulgarian people, which was determined by the idea of national character. National consciousness was expressed in the *narodouka* movement, which united the scholarly vision with the political idea, and the search for facts about Bulgarians with poetic inspiration. In a very specific way, the figures of the revival combined the political involvement, literary activity, and scholarly research of folklore. Their work followed the mission of creating a national culture that maintains awareness of folklore as heritage; that is, as prehistory.

Through folklore, they affirm the unity of ethnic and cultural processes as both a past and as a national aspiration. Through this, the intellectuals of the revival sought to show the deep Bulgarian roots, the Bulgarian cultural presence in Europe, and the unity of the Bulgarians as a people throughout the centuries. They regarded folklore as united and inseparable, like the Bulgarian people. Striving for the creation of folklore materials from across the Bulgarian lands followed the idea of convincingly showing the unity of Bulgarian folklore. Such an attempt could already be seen in the work of

brothers, Dimitar and Konstantin Miladinov. Particularly noteworthy examples also included the collection of proverbs and sayings by Petko Slaveykov and the dictionary by Nayden Gerov, where one finds not only the richness of Bulgarian, but also almost the entire set of folklore culture (kinship terminology, the ritual system, beliefs, sayings, riddles, swear words, etc.).

Here I would like to outline in particular the contribution of Georgi Sava Rakovski (1821–1867), one of the most well-rounded, multi-talented, and distinguished personalities of the Bulgarian Revival, a unique combination of a revolutionary, poet, linguist, folklore specialist, and historian. His theses were either received enthusiastically or repudiated as being amateurish by his contemporaries and by following generations. He did not become the Bulgarian Šafárik, but he had his followers among Bulgarian and foreign intellectuals.

A contemporary reading of Rakovski shows him to be the first Bulgarian man of letters, who was able to foresee the great importance of folk culture for scholarship, and he can thus be regarded as one of the forefathers of developing Bulgarian ethnology (along with Todor Ivanov Zhivkov and Guncho Stefanov Guenchev). His theses had enormous significance as an aspiration to reveal the ethnic character of the Bulgarians, an aspiration that was determined by the idea of the Bulgarians being seen by others, possessing an ethnic character, and being distinguished from other peoples.

Rakovski was the first to propose a comprehensive theory of the origin and characteristics of the Bulgarians. He traced the connections between language and ethnic development, between historical and cultural fate, and between social institutions and spiritual life.

As a man of letters, he was erudite and had a rich language background. He knew, cited, and interpreted the most distinguished historical, philosophical, and linguistic studies by European scholars such as Max Müller, Anketil Dupéron, Eugen Burnuf, Frantz Bopp, August Schleicher, Pavel Šafárik, Franc Miklošič, and Václav Hanka. In his works he supplied numerous references to ancient authors such as Homer, Strabon, Thucydides, Tacitus, and so on, and to the Vedas and the Avestas; he made comparisons of the culture, mythology, and linguistic variety of the proto-Bulgarians, Slavs, Celts, Jews, Hindus, and Iranians.

Rakovski captured the general movement in the ethnosphere of Eurasia, from east to west. His ideas about the link between language and ethnicity, and the language status of the nation, bring him close to the notions proposed by Wilhelm von Humboldt (Zhivkov 2000: 491).

At the time when Rakovski was working, India was considered the most ancient cradle of human culture. Sanskrit became a key for comparative linguistic research. Similar to Friedrich Schlegel, Rakovski believed that new discoveries about the genealogies of languages would be made through comparative grammar. He embraced the idea that the original homeland of humankind was Hindustan. In the spirit

of the philosophical and linguistic parallels between language and thought, which were in vogue at the time, he investigated the interdependence between the semantic, morphological, and phonetic structure of speech. He compared Bulgarian, Old Church Slavic, Modern Greek, Ancient Greek, Sanskrit, and other languages and proposed a number of his own etymologies for various personal names and proper nouns. Discussions about their origins are still ongoing today. In some cases, Rakovski's etymological studies are not without justification. He correctly identified the Indo-European origin of Bulgarian and properly determined the origin of a number of words and forms. This gave him the courage to advance the thesis that Bulgarian is the oldest language in Europe, that it has a literary character even richer than Greek, and that the common Indo-European roots and forms of the modern European languages can be established through Old Church Slavic (known as "Old Bulgarian" in Bulgarian).

Rakovski always considered fatherland (*Otechestvo*), nationality, language, and state to be independent in line with Herder's Romantic notions about the sovereign right of every people to build its political and cultural development on the basis of its own traditions. In the first and only issue of the journal *Bulgarska starina* (Bulgarian Antiquity) in 1865, he formulated the idea of the special ethnic character of traditional culture and its ethnically distinguishing role. He idealized patriarchal customs and material culture, and highly assessed the qualities of Bulgarian folklore. For him, folklore was above all a source of information about the beginnings of ethnic history. The ethnos is developing, it comes into contact with other ethnic groups and their culture, but its spiritual heritage preserves the memory of the original homeland, the most ancient history of the Bulgarians.

Rakovski denounced the hypotheses about Scythian or Tartar origins of the Bulgarians. According to him, the Bulgarians were the first and most ancient citizens of Europe and are the purest heirs of the Aryans. They are considered to have come from Hindustan, where Shiva was their supreme God. With their resettlement to Europe, they brought their religion, customs, and songs, and also named their new sites with the same names as those in their original homeland. Christianity could not efface their older Hindu customs and beliefs. The Bulgarian historical folk narratives were distinguished—in Rakovski's view—by the greatest antiquity in comparison to the historical folk narratives of the other European peoples. They preserved a memory of the time when all people of Indo-European origin inhabited India. Only Bulgarian could compare in form and vocabulary to the Sanskrit. Only Bulgarian could most truthfully reveal the etymology of the ancient language. Rakovski interpreted Sanskrit as *sam-skrit* 'hidden by itself'; that is, the most concealed and secret language. To defend his theories, he allowed himself to make "little" and "insignificant" corrections to words.

Rakovski proposed the following model for scholarly knowledge through folklore:

Rakovski's solid knowledge of folk culture permitted him to note phenomena that are not disputed among scholars: the significance of the god Perun and his identification as a "thunder-bearer," the special place of the deer in Bulgarian beliefs, rituals, and notions, the characteristics of the demons and the "unclean days" (the period between Christmas and Epiphany), and so on. *Pokazalets* was significant for introducing Bulgarian material in international Slavic scholarship, and it became the foundation for learning about Bulgarians and their culture (e.g., Bozhana Nemtsova translated ethnographic descriptions, folklore material, and other texts from *Pokazalets* into Czech).

In the Bulgarian *personalia ethnica*, the name Rakovski will always be connected with the formation of standard Bulgarian. His theoretical views were orientated towards the creation of a general Bulgarian standard, equally familiar to Bulgarians from Moesia, Thrace, and Macedonia. A guiding principle in his literary activity was archaization towards Old Church Slavic, and not—as with some of his contemporaries—toward the Church Slavic liturgical language. In his later publications, his ideas changed along the line of turning the living language and functional language forms into general standardized norms.

When analyzing Rakovski's work, one must not forget that a major part of his worldview was the patriotic idea. His scholarly work was always guided by practical purposes. As a scholar he was a Romanticist and was close to thinkers that considered history to be a guarantee for the future. Despite some absurd theses and conclusions, Rakovski was in fact the first Bulgarian scholar to introduce comparative research into Bulgarian scholarship, only several decades after it took hold in Europe.

Bulgarian *narodouka* developed as part of European scholarly trends and Bulgarian folklore studies played a role in creating the national culture in connection with ideas about the nation state. The folk arts were also seen as parts of official culture, and they were reproduced and sustained institutionally. The enshrinement of folklore within the realm of official culture was a long historical process that did not run smoothly or follow one straight direction. In the first half of the twentieth century a movement developed among the Bulgarian intelligentsia and the educated circles with the goal of preserving elements of material culture and masterpieces of Bulgarian folklore, and publicly acknowledging them as holding special value. These objects became worthy of conservation and exhibition, turned into a sign of Bulgarian style, and the Bulgarian folk genius became an object of lively discussions in the search for a basis for creating Bulgarian national identity. These processes are characteristic of the interwar period, and the place of the preserved traditions is the village, as a sort of preserve for what is specific and authentic to the nation. However, the town was the place where the discussion about the values of authentic Bulgarian culture took place and where a place was provided for conserving and exhibiting it.

Folklore thus turns into a cultural resource for appropriation at various levels. The development of these processes can be observed in the communist period, especially after

the 1960s. In cultural policy between the 1960s and 1980s, the understanding of folklore as art was established; folklore inherited from ancient times can serve as a basis for creating “the national,” “the intransient,” and “the Bulgarian.” This was the period when the town started producing folklore culture through educational institutions, cultural activities, and the media, and gradually turned into the new environment of folk culture.

In the 1990s, in the post-communist period, folklore again played a specific role as a symbolic resource providing images and an instrument for redefining identities and public expressions of diverse cultural characteristics.

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BOLGARSKA FOLKLORISTIKA IN OBLIKOVANJE NARODNE IDENTITETE IN KULTURE. VLOGA G. S. RAKOVKEGA

Pri nastajanju nacionalnih držav na Balkanu so imele tradicionalne kulture pomembno vlogo, saj so bile pomemben vir simbolov za oblikovanje nacionalnih identitet. Tudi v Bolgariji lahko sledimo zgodovinskemu razvoju znanstvene tradicije, povezane s preučevanjem folklorne in tradicionalnih kultur.

Za obdobje narodnega prebujenja sta značilni sinteza opazovanj in generalizacija konceptov o Bolgarih, ki jih je spodbujala ideja o narodovi enkratnosti. Nacionalno samozavedanje se je izrazilo v gibanju, im. narodouka, ki je združevalo znanstvene zamisli s poli-

tičnimi vizijami, vse skupaj pa je povežalo še s poetičnim navdihom o Bolgarih. Osrednji predstavniki tega obdobja so na svojevrsten način povežali politično delovanje, literarno dejavnost in znanstveno raziskovanje folklore.

V članku je posebej obravnavano delo G. S. Rakovskega (1821–1867), enega najbolj razgledanih in izjemnih akterjev bolgarskega preporoda. Bil je prvi bolgarski literat, ki je uvidel vlogo ljudske kulture v znanosti, zaradi česar ga uvrščajo med utemeljitelje etnoloških raziskav o bolgarskih ljudstvih. Rakovski je prvi predstavil celovito teorijo o izviru in značilnostih Bolgarov, pri čemer je skušal poiskati povezave med jezikom in etničnim razvojem, med zgodovinsko in kulturno usodo ter med družbenimi institucijami in duhovnostjo.

V duhu filozofskih in lingvističnih primerjav med jezikom in je Rakovski raziskoval soodvisnost med semantičnimi, morfološki in fonetičnimi strukturami govora. Primerjal je bolgarščino, staro bolgarščino, grščino, staro grščino, sanskrt in druge jezike ter predlagal več etimologij za osebna in lastna imena, o katerih izviru se še vedno razpravlja. Pravilno je identificiral indoevropske korenine bolgarskega jezika ter določil izvir številnih besed in njihovih oblik. To mu je dalo zagon za postavitev teze, da je bolgarščina najstarejši evropski jezik, saj ima besednjak, ki naj bi bil celo bogatejši od grškega. Poleg tega naj bi v korenih in izpeljankah besed različnih evropskih jezikov našli skupne indoevropske korenine, ki jih je imela tudi stara bolgarščina.

Folklorja je bila za Rakovskega predvsem pomemben vir podatkov o začetkih etnične zgodovine, zaradi česar je zasnoval model znanstvenih raziskav folklore. Kot literat je pripravil osnutek programa, ki je bil pomemben za razvoj bolgarske folkloristike. Poleg tega je organiziral široko mrežo zbirateljev folklorja (učiteljev, doktorjev idr.) ter pripravil podroben in poglobljen vprašalnik za zbiranje folklornega gradiva.

Rakovski je določil tudi kompleksne povezave med ljudsko kulturo, etničnim ozemljem, etnično zavestjo in samoidentifikacijo. Poudaril je osrednje bolgarske etnične skupine ter njihova imena in razlike med njimi, in sicer na podlagi govora in kulture, pri čemer pa je poudaril, da imajo te skupine tudi skupno bolgarsko identiteto. Bil je med prvimi, ki so se zanimali za regionalno in lokalno raznovrstnost bolgarske ljudske kulture. Dobro poznavanje ljudske kulture pa mu je omogočilo, da je razkril pojave, ki so jih drugi znanstveniki spregledali ali zanemarili.

Kot znanstvenik je Rakovski sledil načelom romantike ter bil blizu mislecem, ki so zgodovino razumeli kot najpomembnejši temelj prihodnosti. Navkljub nekaterim absurdnim tezam in sklepom, ki jih je predstavil v svojih delih, pa je bil dejansko prvi bolgarski znanstvenik, ki je predstavil metodo primerjalnih raziskav, in sicer le nekaj desetletij po razcvetu turovstnega pristopa v Evropi.

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