

Dragostinova, Theodora (Hrsg.): *Between Two Motherlands. Nationality and Emigration among the Greeks of Bulgaria, 1900–1949*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press 2011. ISBN: 978-0-8014-4945-1; 304 S.

**Rezensiert von:** Fedja Buric, History and Political Science Department, Bellarmine University

Theodora Dragostinova's book is a study of national identity in twentieth-century Europe that treats nationality not as a fixed category, but as a process that is constantly defined, negotiated, and contested by different social actors. Dragostinova's superbly researched and elegantly written book investigates the fate of the Greeks of Bulgaria during the first half of the twentieth century, a time when the violent transformation of the Ottoman Empire into nation-states forced people into the straight-jacket of national identity often forcing them to abandon their homes and relocate to their purported homelands. Dragostinova's investigation of official Greek and Bulgarian policies between 1900 and 1949 as well as the reactions of ordinary people to these policies shows, quite convincingly, the difficulties the national activists had in first defining what it meant to be Greek or Bulgarian, and once they did settle on a definition, convincing ordinary people to feel and act Greek and Bulgarian. The reluctance of the Greeks of Bulgaria to abandon Bulgaria for Greece and the bitter disillusionment of those who did shows the hesitance and ambivalence of ordinary people vis-à-vis nationalism.

The Greeks of Bulgaria we meet in the book behave in ways similar to other Europeans at times of nationalist mobilization: the self-proclaimed Bohemians in the town of Budvice/Budweis who, in the late 19th century, struggled to fit into either Czech or German national identity; the Central European parents from the early 20th century whose bilingual children infuriated the Czech and German nationalist activists; or mixed Romanian-Hungarian couples from the Transylvanian town of Cluj/Kolozsvár who in the polarized environment of late 20th century Romania shrugged off the provocative gestures of a rabidly nationalist mayor.<sup>1</sup> Dragostinova's

book is especially important because it integrates the Balkans into the cultural orbit of Europe, pushing against the view that sees the peninsula as a place whose „ancient ethnic hatreds“ set it apart from the supposedly less violent Europe. In this respect, Dragostinova's book is a continuation of the efforts to deconstruct the discourse Maria Todorova has famously called Balkanism<sup>2</sup> and to, in the words of Dragostinova, „refute the clichés of 'primordial animosities' circulating around me“ (p. x).

In the first two chapters, Dragostinova traces the escalating tensions between the nascent nation-state of Bulgaria and Greece in the first decade of the twentieth century, caused by the overlapping territorial claims of the two expansionist nationalisms, and illustrates the impact these tensions had on the Greeks of Bulgaria. In Chapter 1 we are reminded that in addition to language, the original point of contention between the Greeks and Bulgarians within Principality of Bulgaria was religion as most Bulgarians were loyal to the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, or the Exarchate, while the Greeks adhered to the Greek ecclesiastical establishment or the Patriarchate. Despite this fragmentation of loyalties many Greeks continued to express more regional allegiances, calling themselves Thracians, Rumelians, or simply Christians. Reversely, some descendants of Bulgarian speakers adopted the Greek language and expressed loyalty to the Patriarchate, earning themselves a burning hatred from Bulgarian nationalist activists. Chapter 2 shows that the overlapping loyalties became harder after the Ilinden uprising in Macedonia in 1903 triggered an all out-war between Bulgarians and Greeks over the contested province, causing an exodus of Bulgarian refugees from Macedonia and into Bulgaria. The influx of the radicalized refugees caused anti-Greek riots throughout Bulgaria leading to the burning of an entire Greek town in the summer of

<sup>1</sup> Respectively: Jeremy King, *Budweisers into Czechs and Germans. A Local History of Bohemian Politics, 1848–1948*, Princeton 2002; Tara Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls. National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands, 1900–1948*, Cornell 2008; Rogers Brubaker et al., *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town*, Princeton 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, Oxford 1997.

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1906. However, many of the 20,000 Greeks who decided, or were forced, to flee their homes would soon be bitterly disappointed by their treatment at the hands of their purported motherland. The Greek government settled many of the refugees in swampy lands and provided inadequate financial support, causing such misery amongst the refugees that some 5,000 of them decided to return to Bulgaria. Although this experience may have „reinforced the Bulgarian Greeks’ ambivalence toward Greece as the unifying center of the Greek nation“ (p. 57), the following chapters show the helplessness of ordinary people when faced with the might of the modern state.

The next two chapters detail the harrowing experiences of populations unfortunate enough to be classified as minorities at a time of wars, population exchanges, and perpetual border adjustments. For nationalists dreaming of a Greater Bulgaria this was a time of emotional ups and downs as Bulgaria gained territories during the First Balkan War, lost them in the Second, gained them back during the First World War when it sided with the Central Powers, and finally lost them again after its defeat at the hands of the Entente. For the Greeks in Bulgaria, Bulgarian loses at the battlefield entailed a drastic downgrading of their status as they became labeled „treacherous ally“ (p. 86) and were often targets of legal discrimination and physical violence. But despite their worsening situation and the international regulations making it easier for them to leave for Greece after World War I, the overwhelming majority of those inhabiting the old territories of Bulgaria, refused to do so. The population exchange between Turkey and Greece in 1923, engineered in the aftermath of the brutal Greek-Ottoman War, doomed the remaining Greeks of Bulgaria. The hundreds of thousands of Greeks who had to leave their ancestral homes in Asia Minor often resettled in Greek territories previously held by Bulgaria, displacing those Bulgarians who had remained under the Greek rule. In turn, the Bulgarian refugees were often resettled in Bulgaria near or in Greek towns where they created unbearable conditions for the Greek minority, forcing many of them to file desperate petitions asking to be

relocated to Greece.

The next two chapters show that despite the wars and population exchanges perpetrated in the names of nation, ordinary people continued to use nationality in highly pragmatic ways. For example, we learn in Chapter 5 that those very Greeks who in the early 1920s had filed the petition to emigrate to Greece were, in the second half of the decade, hastily withdrawing their petitions, appealing to Bulgarian authorities, in highly nationalist language, to be allowed to stay in their homeland. Dragostinova points to the economic hardships and social alienation of their Greek relatives who had relocated to Greece, the loosening of anti-Greek discrimination in Bulgaria, and the history of good relations with their Bulgarian neighbors, as factors influencing their decision to stay in Bulgaria. But as the relations between the two countries worsened once again in the prelude to World War II and Bulgaria lurched in the direction of right-wing authoritarianism, many leaders of the Greek community were deported and others followed, leaving behind a minuscule Greek population. As the Epilogue shows, the Bulgarian state’s minority policies after the Second World War eventually shifted mostly towards the sizable Muslim minorities given that Greeks were too small and for the large part supportive of the Communist regime.

The narrative thread between Chapter 6 and the Epilogue, however, is interrupted by Chapter 7, which seems a bit out of place. The story of the Greek minority suddenly becomes a textual analysis of narratives of the past written by exiled historians but also personal recollections of ordinary people. The point of the chapter is Dragostinova’s argument that while historical pamphlets adopted a more nationalist and anti-Bulgarian tone, the personal recollections were more nuanced and included recognition of generosity of some Bulgarians and disillusionment with the Greek state. Although the accounts themselves are interesting, and Dragostinova’s analysis of them is convincing, it is less convincing that an entire chapter was needed in support of her statement that „nuances of everyday life complicated the image of a monolithic nation“ (p. 245), a rather commonsensical conclusion.

These minor quibbles notwithstanding, Theodora Dragostinova has written an important book for anyone wanting to understand how in the first few decades of the twentieth century nationalism hemmed ordinary people into categories of identity that were, more often than not, straightjackets which limited their life choices and often forced them into traumatic exile. Dragostinova's research shows that while ordinary people have been quite creative and pragmatic in using nationality for their own purposes, when faced with the overwhelming power of a modern national state they always had to acquiesce into becoming national subjects.

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