

BULGARIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY AND WORLD WAR I

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I. Introduction

How does historiography contribute to the creation of the official narrative? What is the relationship between historical study and nation building? How does historical writing affect collective memory? How do historians deal with events that fit uncomfortably into the official narrative? This paper addresses such issues focusing on Bulgarian historiography and the paradigm of World War I (WWI). Almost one hundred years after its end, WWI is still not a popular topic in Bulgaria despite its serious impact on the country's political, socio-economic, and ideological developments. It has attracted little scholarly attention over time, being thus understudied. In contrast to World War II (WWII), there is no separate entry on WWI in the old library catalogue cabinet of the St Cyril and Methodius National Library in Sofia, which is still in use, although it is gradually being replaced by an electronic catalogue. In addition, there are only a few relevant publications displayed in Bulgarian bookshops, which include translations of foreign books dealing with various international aspects of the First World War rather than Bulgaria's involvement. The remark made by Richard Crampton in 2007 that "The first world war remains the area of modern Bulgarian history most in need of further research and analysis" (468) still holds to a great extent. In this context, the aim of my paper is twofold: on the one hand, to shed light on the ideological factors that have made WWI an overlooked issue, and on the other, to show how this war is represented and interpreted by the historians who wrote about it.

II. Historiography and Memory

In postmodern thinking, it is widely accepted that "...history is an art of memory because it mediates the encounter between two moments of memory: repetition and recollection. Repetition concerns the presence of the past... Recollection concerns our present efforts to evoke the past... It is the opening between these two moments that makes historical thinking possible," as Patrick Hutton showed in his seminal book (1993:xx-xxi). Moreover, "History extends and enriches, confirms and corrects memory through records and relics" (Lowenthal 2015:334).¹ History is thus an intellectual reconstruction of the past undertaken by historians. They "have the capacity for selectivity, simultaneity, and the shifting of scale: they can select from the cacophony of events what they think is really important; they can be in several times and places at once; and they can

¹To what extent history can rely on memory and under what limitations and which circumstances is a problem that has attracted scholarly attention and has been discussed recently (Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi and Levy 2011).

zoom in and out between macroscopic and microscopic levels of analysis” (Gaddis 2002:22). Or as David Lowenthal puts it, “to ‘explain’ the past, they are bound to go beyond the actual record, couching it in contemporary modes of thought and speech” (2015:338). Historians choose to recall or emphasize certain events while they deliberately forget or downplay others through a selection process that follows three diverse paths. The first singles out one or more among several would-be *lieux de mémoires*,² the second highlights certain aspects of a specific *lieu de mémoire*, and the third has to do with temporality, i.e. the way the same events come to the fore or fall into oblivion at different periods of time (Péporté 2011:14). This conscious selection process has also been described as a twofold strategy involving *performative inclusion* of the past into the present and *performative exclusion* (Lorenz 2010: 66). In this way, silences or “family secrets” are inherent in the historical writing of every state, nation, community, institution, etc. (Ferro 1855:52; Trouillot 2015:49). But how do historians decide what to include and what to exclude? There is no single answer to such an intricate question. Selectivity depends on the interplay of multiple ideological, political and socio-economic factors each time. In the case of Bulgarian historiography, this is mostly related to national ideology and the consolidation of national identity, as will be shown below.

Another issue concerns the interrelation between history and collective memory defined as the *social framework for memory*.³ Eric Hobsbawm noted that historians “compile and constitute the collective memory of the past” (2011:25). However, historiography is by no means the only way to recollect the past (Todorova 2009:6), given that history is also produced outside of academic institutions to a greater or lesser extent (Trouillot 2015:18-20). Moreover, it has been argued that, despite its recognized significance, professional historical writing is not the main contributor to the molding of public views. Rather, it influences the attitudes of the ruling elites to whom many professional historians usually belong or are in some way associated with (Passmore, Berger and Donovan 1999:282-283). In this way, while historiography is one of the “tools” employed to produce mainly the official version of the story each time, collective memory also draws on tradition and counter-memory (Todorova 2010:394). Given the broadness and complexity of the topic, my paper focuses on the historiography-memory nexus. It examines how a specific *lieu de mémoire*, namely WWI, is remembered and narrated by Bulgarian historiography over time⁴ adopting what Maria Todorova would term a *functionalist approach*.⁵

² A famous notion introduced by Pierre Nora meaning realms or sites of memory. (Paris 1997).

³ Although revisited and reinterpreted by modern scholars, the term “collective memory” was introduced and given theoretical status by the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs in his book *Social Frameworks of Memory (Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire)* in 1925. Halbwachs argued that “it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize memories... It is in this sense that there exists a collective memory and social frameworks for memory” (Halbwachs, 1992: 38).

⁴ Another important aspect concerns monuments and commemoration, also an understudied topic. However, some significant studies have been published lately, most of

III. Bulgarian Historiography and WWI

“Historical writing has been connected to the process of nation-building across Europe ever since the concept of the modern nation was first formulated in the American and French Revolutions of the late-eighteenth century” (Berger, Donovan and Passmore 1999:3) was the main thesis of the collective volume *Writing National Histories. Western Europe since 1800*, which was the outcome of a conference held in Cardiff, Wales in 1996. This assumption was also demonstrated and broadly endorsed by recent historiographical literature (Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi and Levy 2011:24). The Bulgarian case makes no exception to this relation between historiography and national ideals, as Ivan Elenkov and Daniela Koleva have shown (2007:409).

Bulgarian historiography developed as a scientific field after the emergence of the autonomous nation-state in 1878.⁶ It was based on earlier, nationally oriented representations of the past which had already been under construction by national intellectuals and activists during the period of the Revival.⁷ From its very inception, it was placed in the service of national policies. Promoting the creation of a master narrative inspired by national ideology, it contributed decisively to the dissemination and consolidation of national feelings among Bulgarians (Naxidou 2015:151-167). This was an important task to accomplish because it was through the political principle of nationalism that the newly born Bulgarian Principality claimed legitimacy.⁸ Therefore, history writing, together with institutions such as the church, the military, the judiciary etc., were among the main “mechanisms” that the political and intellectual elites utilized in order to cultivate and bolster the national identity of all citizens, justifying in this way the right to self-government (Todorova 1995:77-78).⁹ In this way, political and national agendas coincided at least during the period of the Tirnovo Constitution (1879-1944). At the same time, apart from “nationalizing” nationalism, which sought homogenization of the entire population into a core nation, another form of nationalism was also prevalent: this was

them by foreign academics. (See: Dimitrova, 2002:15-34; 2005:175-194; Lory 2007:37-49; Schulz 2014:42-51; Vlasidis 2015:242-255).

⁵ Todorova distinguishes between a functional approach, which refers mostly to the official historical narrative, and the unofficial version of memory, based on tradition, oral history etc. (Todorova 2010:394).

⁶ The Bulgarian nation-state was granted autonomy with the Treaty of Berlin in 1878 and declared independent in 1908.

⁷ The term *Bulgarian Revival* (*Bălgarskoto Văzrazhdane*) refers to both the “nationalizing” process and the period of Bulgarian history during which it occurred, i.e. roughly the last 100 years of Ottoman rule (Daskalov 2004:11 ff.).

⁸ The political principle of nationalism dictated the concurrence of political and national entity (Anderson 1991:6; Gellner 1994:1).

⁹ For the creation of national institutions in the Balkans see also Kitromilides 1994:159 ff.

transborder or “external national homelands’ nationalism,”¹⁰ which had a twofold aim. On the one hand, it promoted the cultural identity and interests of the ethno-national kin living in the Ottoman Empire; on the other, it triggered irredentism.¹¹

Within this ideological framework, national historiography was engaged in emphasizing the glorious and heroic moments in the history of the nation in order to exalt national pride and self-confidence. For the same reason, it paid lesser attention to unfortunate events such as defeats on the battlefields, territorial losses, etc., which might evoke feelings of shame and embarrassment.¹² WWI was among the episodes that fell into the latter category.

III.1. The Interwar Period (1919-1944)

For the Bulgarians, WWI was a prolongation of a period of warfare which had begun with the Balkan Wars in 1912-13. Bulgarian involvement in all three military operations was motivated by transborder nationalism. In other words, it was the longing for territorial enlargement, in order to include within the state borders the co-nationals who were still under Ottoman rule,¹³ that is, the entire alleged nation. It was the plan for the Great Bulgaria of San Stefano (1878) which had remained on paper that both political elites and public opinion envisioned. However, due to the poor gains obtained by the Treaty of Bucharest (1913) at the end of the Balkan Wars, the Bulgarians placed all their hopes on the outcome of WWI for the accomplishment of national unification. With such expectations, they chose the side of the Central Powers which compelled them to enter into an alliance with their traditional enemy, the Ottoman Empire, and to fight against Russia, the Great Power to which they owed their national liberation. The consequences were disastrous. It was not only that Bulgaria had to confront the bitter and painful

¹⁰ I use the terms “nationalizing” and “transborder” or “external national homelands” nationalism according to Brubaker, who refers to a triadic nexus of three distinct and mutually antagonistic nationalisms, the third being minorities nationalism (2009:4 ff.)

¹¹ Both ventures were initially met with success. It was the Bulgarian Church (Exarchate) established in 1870 that assumed the role of the protector of the ethno-national kin in the Ottoman Empire. Having retained its see in Constantinople, it soon extended its authority and influence over the Slavic populations in Macedonia and Thrace. As for irredentism, unification with the Ottoman province of Eastern Rumelia was proclaimed in 1885. Eventually, transborder nationalism brought Bulgaria into sharp conflict with Serbia and Greece over the future possession of the contested territories of Macedonia and Thrace, which culminated in the Balkan Wars (1912-13). For an overview of Bulgarian history during this period in English see Crampton 2007.

¹² For example, most historical contributions during the period of the Tirnovo constitution dealt with the Middle Ages and the Revival, whereas little interest was shown in the Ottoman past, which was perceived as the period of the Ottoman “yoke” (Naxidou 2015:157).

¹³ Irredentism was fueled by the perception of Ottoman rule in the Bulgarian lands as a period of enslavement, which was initiated by the intellectuals of the Revival. For the notion of the Ottoman “yoke” see Neuburger 2004:24-25.

consequences of having sided with the defeated camp and having made disagreeable compromises into the bargain; worse than that was the failure to achieve the irredentist goal. The dominant political and national program had suffered a heavy blow since aspirations for expansion in Macedonia, Thrace and Dobrudja were nullified. On top of this, both the economy and political system collapsed. Even then, however, the Bulgarians refused to abandon their revisionary plans. Transborder nationalism remained at the top of Bulgarian policies for the following decades, playing a determining role in the country's stance in WWII.

More specifically, in 1919, the country came out of the Great War deeply wounded and disoriented. The quest for the imputation of liabilities and/or scapegoats led to trials and convictions, sharp conflict between the old and the new political and military elites, division of the nation, and attempts by the protagonists to defend themselves by narrating their version of the story, whether orally or through the writing of memoirs and in the press (Dimitrova 2002:23). Political turmoil culminated in the overthrow of the agrarian government of Alexander Stamboliiski by a coup d' état in 1923 and the granting of amnesty the following year (Lory 2007:44).

Under such circumstances, there was no ground for scholarly research or unbiased narration and analysis of the events relating to Bulgarian involvement in WWI. Therefore, before the abolishment of the constitutional regime in 1944, historiographical production mostly concerned the Bulgarian military contribution to WWI.¹⁴ Numerous books and articles were devoted to the operations of the army and various regiments, most of which were written by officers and soldiers in the form of memoirs.¹⁵ Many such publications were hosted by the journals *Voенноисторически сборник (Military-Historical Digest)*, *Voенни журнал (Military Journal)*, *Нашата кавалерија (Our Cavalry)* etc. (Minkov 2014).¹⁶ The most significant among them appeared on the eve of and during WWII under the title '*Bălgarskata armija v Svetovната vojna 1915-1918*' (*The Bulgarian Army in the World War 1915-1918*) in nine volumes. It was released by the Ministry of War between 1936 and 1946.

Under the influence of the above-mentioned works, the idea of WWI as a justified patriotic fight predominated in public discourse. This perception, however, was filled with regret, because defeat had not been foreseen due to the military and economic strength that Bulgarians believed they possessed (Dimitrova 2002:23). Furthermore, the courage and self-sacrifice of the soldiers who did their patriotic duty were contrasted with the faults and incompetence of the political authorities who were held responsible for the catastrophe (Schulz 2014: 44-45).

At the same time, no scholarly studies addressed any matters other than those relating to the military, such as the motives for the Bulgarian alliance with the Central Powers, political and socioeconomic parameters, consequences of the defeat and the peace

¹⁴ This can be observed in the entry "*Părva svetovna vojna*" (WWI) in the online catalogue of the St. Cyril and Methodius National Library in Sofia.

¹⁵ This is evident in the bibliographies on Bulgarian military history (*Voenna Istoriya* 1977:218 ff.; 1987:189 ff.; *Uchastieto na Bălgariya v Părvata svetovna vojna* 1994; *Bălgarskata Armija* 1994:16 ff.)

¹⁶ I transliterate the Cyrillic alphabet as follows: ъ-ă, ш-sh, щ-sht, ц-c, я-ya, ж-zh, ч-ch, ю-iu, ѝ-i.

treaty, etc. Due to this deliberate “silence,” the documents concerning Bulgaria’s entry into the war, published as early as 1921, did not receive any scholarly attention (*Diplomaticheski dokumenti* 1920-21). Moreover, the memoirs of Premier Vasil Radoslavov (1914-1919) (Radoslavov 1923), which, apart from being an attempt to justify the author’s decisions and constituted the unique account of domestic policies, was also ignored. In this way, neither an official narration nor any counter versions of the events developed.

III.2. The Period of the Communist Regime (1944-1989)

National ideology did not decline after the communists assumed power in 1944. “In general, state socialism was much more national than many contemporary observers in West and East imagined during the Cold War,” as Hannes Grandits and Ulf Brunnbauer observed (2013:19). The ruling Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP) adopted Marxist nationalism, a combination of Marxist principles and national ideals, which was the new doctrine already endorsed by the Comintern and promoted by the USSR (Sygkelos 2011:5-6). This approach aimed to employ national tradition in order to establish continuity between the new and the old political order and to win popularity for the communist policies among Bulgarians who had been brought up with national ideals. By introducing themselves as the genuine defenders of national interests, communist leaders sought to strengthen and maintain their rule (Grandits, Brunnbauer 2013:19-20). National discourse became even more pronounced in the 1960s after the ideological rectification resulting from the de-Stalinization process, and especially more so in the 1970s, when the BCP declared the resolution of the class struggle, initiating the creation of a classless society of national character (Naxidou 2015:161-162). For this reason, ethnic minorities were subdued to assimilative practices which culminated in the 1980s in the “Revival Process” enforced upon Turks and Muslims (Bell 1999:237-268).

Being one of the vehicles for the propagation of official ideology, history writing was state controlled. From the very beginning, historians were advised to revise the fascist and chauvinistic bourgeois narrative, applying historical materialism. In addition, they were urged to focus on previously ignored socioeconomic phenomena and topics related to the rise of the communists to power, such as the formation of a working class in Bulgaria; the national liberation struggle against the inter-war fascist and monarcho-fascist authorities; the revolution of September 9, 1944; etc. (Mutafchieva, Chichovska 1995: 280-281). These general directions were in effect until the collapse of the regime, although they were adapted to fit the changes in the ideological profile of the BCP after the death of Stalin: namely, the gradual abandonment in the 1960s of reading the past based on class stratification, and stressing the dual character of historical events along the lines of bourgeoisie and proletariat conflicts (Elenkov 2009:633).

In this context ,WWI was an unpleasant theme to engage in, not only because of the defeat and concomitant thwarting of national goals, but for three additional reasons. First, it did not fall within the politically correct communist repertoire; second, it was related to the anti-popular policies of a chauvinistic bourgeois government;¹⁷ and last,

¹⁷ As professor and academic Hristo Hristov noted in 1984, after WWII, there was no interest among historians in the period between 1913-1918, because the Second Balkan War

because the Bulgarians fought against Russia, their traditional ally who had contributed decisively to the spread of communism in Bulgaria and protected the country in the international forum after the end of WWII in order to prevent further loss of territories (*Istoriya na Bălgariya* 1964:508, 518; Bozhinov 1965:510). Therefore, most publications focused on the reactions against the war, mostly the soldiers' discontent, unrest, and desertions, which culminated in the Radomir Rebellion of 1918 and the activities of the left wing of the Socialist Party—the “Narrows” as they were nicknamed by their contemporaries—which was later to become the BCP (*Voenna Istoriya* 1977:242-245; *Voenna Istoriya* 1987:220-227; Lory 2007:46-47).

A gradual relaxation of the restrictions did occur in the decades of the 1970s and 80s. It was facilitated by the intellectual and artistic circles that were influenced by Liudmila, Zhivkov's daughter, who was not overtly committed to communism (Elenkov 2008:307), and then by *perestroika*. This resulted in the publication of several memoirs referring to military operations during WWI, as well as books and articles about Bulgarian relations with the Central Powers, the USA, peace negotiations, the Treaty of Neuilly in 1919, etc.¹⁸

At the same time, an official account of what had happened during WWI was developed in the collective *History of Bulgaria*, which initially appeared in two volumes in 1954 and 1955, and was revised into three volumes from 1961 to 1964.¹⁹ According to the first version of this account, the Cabinet of the Radoslavov liberal coalition was opposed to any collaboration with the Entente and the other Balkan countries, which was in line with the view among the bourgeoisie that the unique possibility for Bulgaria to accomplish national unification was an alliance with Germany and Austria-Hungary. This stance evolved following the failure of the policy pursued during the Balkan Wars. Having relied on the aid of the Entente and, under Russian patronage, the governing Russophile parties had failed to attain unification (*Istoriya na Bălgariya v dva toma*, v. II 1955:296). In this way, the initial neutrality was only a pretext in order to win time to recover from the wounds of the earlier conflicts and reorganize the armed forces in preparation for the coming war (*ibid.*:300-301). It was also claimed that the bourgeoisie was unanimous in its determination to participate in the imperialistic World War, with the aim of establishing its hegemony in the Balkan Peninsula. The only difference of opinion, at least initially, concerned the choice of camp (*Ibidem*:301). The Radoslavov government and Tsar Ferdinand made their pro-German inclinations evident by obtaining a loan from a German banker. In contrast, the parties of the opposition were in favor of signing the agreement

and WWI were related to two national disasters. In this way, Bulgarians were estranged from these issues, ignoring at the same time the heroism, hardships and self-sacrifice of the soldiers who fought these anti-popular, imperialistic and opportunistic wars. See the preface of the book (Tonchev 1984:11-12).

¹⁸ For example: (Pantev & Petkov 1983; Lalkov 1983; Tonchev, 1984; Hristov 1984; Damyanov 1986).

¹⁹ In 1965, the task of writing a ten-volume Bulgarian history was initiated, after Todor Zhivkov had resumed full control of the BCP leadership. After several revisions of the initial plan, 14 volumes were scheduled, of which only 8 had been published by 1989 (Koleva and Elenkov 2004:121-122).

proposed more than once by the Entente, the terms of which foresaw territorial gains in Macedonia and Thrace (ibid.:302-305). They changed their mind, however, and sided with Radoslavov's decision to join the Central Powers soon after Bulgaria's entry in the war. The first victories on the Serbian front and the occupation of the Serbian part of Macedonia whetted the appetite for expansionism of the entire bourgeoisie (ibid.:316). Subsequently, the opposition criticized the government merely on the administration of its domestic policies during the sessions of the National Assembly at the end of 1915 (ibid.:317).

As far as the Bulgarian people were concerned, the communist narrative placed great emphasis on their objection to the participation in the war (ibid.:303) and, in particular, to their opposition to the alliance with Germany, which would alienate the country from the Russians, who were their traditional friends and allies (ibid.:296). In order to prevent public backlash, the government enforced military law. At the same time, anti-Russian and pro-German propaganda were launched through the liberal press, though to no avail (ibid.:303-304). The call for national mobilization augmented general discontent and, in some cases, this turned into open resistance, with sections of the army rioting, which was dealt with by the military courts (ibid.:312). Such incidents occurred throughout the war coupled with the rising frustration of the masses due to severe food shortages (ibid.:319 ff.). In this setting, the Narrows were the sole political party that continuously fought decisively against Bulgarian involvement in a war that they considered to be the outcome of imperialistic state antagonism and especially between Germany and England. Undertaking various anti-war initiatives, such as the organization of meetings, demonstrations, and rallies, the Narrows attempted to oppose Bulgarian imperialistic plans for national unification. In its place, they put forward the counterproposal of the creation of a democratic federation of the Balkan peoples (ibid.:309-310).

In the revised edition of the *History of Bulgaria*, there are a few differences in the representation of WWI, the most important of which concern the motivations of the bourgeoisie. It was emphasized that this class was driven by purely egoistic and self-seeking class aims. Concealing its warlike, hegemonic, revanchist and anti-popular policy under the banner of aspiration for national liberation and unification, which was a just and progressive goal, it endeavored to expand the domestic market in the quest for new sources of profit. In this way, it was claimed that the relations of the bourgeoisie with foreign capital determined the preference of allies: those dependent on German and Austro-Hungarian capital favored the Central Powers, whereas those financially associated with England, France and Russia opted for the Entente (*Istoriya na Bălgariya v tri toma*, v. II 1962:293).

Even though the revised narrative on WWI was still in keeping with the communist interpretation of the alleged dichotomy between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, the nationalistic shift is evident. The assertion that the aim at national unification was justified is indicative of the gradual "nationalizing" of historiography.

III.3. The period following the Restoration of Democracy in 1989

After the fall of the communist regime and the establishment of a democratic system of governance in 1989, national ideology continues to predominate in the historical

narrative. It lies at the core of both the new historical representations²⁰ and the political agenda, because the state is still considered as the political organization of the one nation (Naxidou 2012:100). This time, nationalistic discourse is mainly addressed against minorities, especially those having a kin state (Turks), who are seen as a potential threat to national integrity (ibid.:89-90).

Within the democratic environment, which allows complete freedom of expression by not imposing any restrictions on historiography, WWI is still absent from the list of popular topics, although it must be noted that relevant production has increased considerably.²¹ Most editions tend to deal with the Bulgarian military involvement in the Great War. These include many articles hosted by the journal *Voennohistoricheski sbornik*²² and the publication of war memoirs, some of which had initially appeared during the interwar period.²³ The most significant contribution is the collective volume entitled *Bălgarskata armiya v Părvata svetovna voina 1915-1918 (The Bulgarian Army in the First World War, 1915-1918)*, which provides a comprehensive overview of Bulgarian military operations during WWI (2015). Memoirs of political protagonists have also been issued or reissued with commentaries (Radoslavov 1993a; Maleev 1993; Radoslavov 1993b). Several studies focus on specific issues, such as Bulgarian relations with Turkey, Germany, the Entente, the peace talks at Brest-Litovsk etc. (Kalchev 2011; Ivanov 2002; Ilchev 1990; Aleksandrov 2009; Markov 2006). In addition, some collections of documents have been released (*Bălgariya v Părvata svetovna voina* 2002; *Bălgaro-turski voenni otnosheniya* 2004; *Bălgariya na mirnite pregovori* 2007), as well as the proceedings of three academic conferences: two international conferences in 2005 and 2014, and a students' conference in 2009 (*Părvata svetovna voina na Balkanite* 2006; Georgieva 2014; *Goliamata Voina 1914-1918*, 2009). A bibliography was also published as early as 1994 covering only the first years of the post-1989 period (Yanakieva and Harizanova 1994). Lately, for the 100th anniversary of WWI, some editions, mostly by non-academic historians²⁴ along with Bulgarian translations of relevant books by foreign authors, made their appearance on bookshop shelves. Furthermore, chapters on WWI have also been included in the *History of Bulgaria* by the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and other collective historical works. However, there

²⁰ An indication is that the Institutes for Historical Studies of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences form part of the thematic field Cultural-Historical Legacy and National Identity. See *Godishen otchet* 2011:26; Todorova 1992:1117; Elenkov & Koleva 2007:441-445).

²¹ An indicative example is the case of the international conference 'The Romanian Campaign 1916/17-Experience and Memory' 26-28 September 2016 held at St. Cyril and Methodius University in Veliko Tarnovo. However, only 4 out of the 28 presenters were academics working in Bulgarian universities.

²² See some recent article titles: Petkov 2012:47-52; Liubenova 2012:83-96; Dinev 2013:81-92; Nenkov 2014:101-118; Yanchev 2016:37-44; Sazdov 2016:55-70.

²³ See indicatively: Nedev & Biliarski 2009; Toshev 2007).

²⁴ For example, Kremenarov 2015. Among them was the revised edition of a book on Bulgaria and WWI written by the academic Georgi Markov (Markov 2016a; 2016b). In this enlarged, deluxe publication in two volumes, the author added new material obtained from German and Russian archives as well as the personal archive of Tsar Ferdinand, failing, nonetheless, to offer any new insights into the topic.

are still no comprehensive studies that examine the multiple domestic facets of the war overall. Studies that include the political, diplomatic, military, socio-economic, and ideological facets with regard to the international (European and Balkan) setting, in conjunction with the impact that the war had on the country's future developments, do not as yet exist.

The notion of Bulgaria's engagement in WWI as serving the national cause and descriptions of Bulgarian military heroism are still prevalent in public discourse. This mindset is encapsulated in the following lines on the cover of the above-mentioned publication *Bălgarskata armiya v Părvata svetovna voina 1915-1918*:

“Bălgarskata Armiya v Părvata Svetovna Voina 1915-1918” is the most thorough scientific publication in Bulgaria dedicated to this titanic battle. For our army and people, this was a serial war for national unification, for assembling Bulgarians into one state. With regard to the greatness of the self-sacrifice and its tragic consequences, nothing can compare to this war in our modern history. Little Bulgaria mobilized more than one million souls. Although the First World War is very often vilified and doomed to oblivion, nobody can deny that in this war the children of Mother Bulgaria showed exceptional heroism, stood up against numerous attacks by the elite of the enemy armies, and defeated the armed forces of bigger states than Bulgaria. This book is for the thousands of the beloved victims who left their bones on the battlefields. It is for honor and virtue, for the love of the motherland, for the glory of the Bulgarian arms.

By examining the sum of the above-mentioned publications on WWI, some significant observations can be made. Firstly, the two most prestigious academic institutions in Bulgaria, namely the Academy of Sciences and the State University of Kliment Ohridski in Sofia, have made a very small contribution in this particular area.²⁵ This is also evident from the contents of *Istoricheski pregled*, the Academy's journal, where only three articles concerning specific aspects of WWI have been published during the period 2005-2012. In contrast, most of the publications have been launched either by military establishments²⁶ or by private, little-known publishers, several of whom have their offices in provincial towns, usually publishing works on battles fought in their localities.²⁷ Moreover, WWI is likewise not among the popular topics being revisited by historians who are associated with the newly founded private universities and research centers that challenge the traditional precedence of the state academic organizations.²⁸

²⁵ For example: Koneva 1995.

²⁶ Voенноисторическа komisiya (Military-Historical Committee) which has published the journal *Voенноисторически сборник* since 1927—with a pause between 1999-2004—stands out.

²⁷ For example: Kazandzhiev et al. 2006; Boichev 2010.

²⁸ Some of these research centers are associated with NGOs such as the Institute for the Study of the Recent Past and the Centre for Advanced Studies. The most popular research topic within these circles is the period of communist rule. See: Elenkov and Koleva 2007:457-458.

Despite the fact that there is divergence regarding the interpretation and evaluation of various aspects of WWI, the main assumptions about the war in these newer representations—whose degree of impartiality also varies—actually converge.²⁹ The focal points of this post-1989 narrative, which is still in the making, are the following: Bulgarian participation in the war was considered by the political elites of that time as the best way to realize national unification through revision of the territorial arrangements of the Treaty of Bucharest, which was a national disaster. This was the view held by the governing coalition which most parties in the opposition gradually adopted with the exception of the Narrows, staunch proponents of peace and the creation of a Balkan federation. The initial declaration of neutrality, therefore, aimed on the one hand at gaining time to get it into people's minds and prepare them and the army for war, and on the other, at assessing the situation in order to enter into the alliance that best served national interests. Choosing sides was the most crucial dilemma which agitated political circles and instigated sharp confrontations both in Parliament and in the press in the summer of 1915. While the monarch and the government were favorable toward the Central Powers, most parties in the opposition preferred an agreement with the Entente and were strongly opposed to the formers' pro-German initiatives, such as the conclusion of a loan with a German bank. However, after the final decision and the concomitant territorial expansion in Macedonia, the pro-Entente tendencies were quelled. The final choice of who to side with is attributed less to the pro-German disposition of both the tsar and his prime minister, which is always mentioned, though with differing emphasis, and more to two other, major factors. Firstly, the terms of agreement proposed by the Entente were vague; neither was it specified when Bulgaria was to obtain the promised territorial "rewards," nor were there any guarantees of it happening. Moreover, the Entente did not have the approval of either Serbia, already a member of the alliance, or Greece, a potential ally, which both categorically refused to consent to any territorial concessions in favor of Bulgaria. In contrast, the offer of the Central Powers was more concrete in the sense that it allowed for the occupation of Serbian Macedonia immediately after Bulgarian entry into the war. Another plus was that the Ottoman Empire, which was already fighting on the side of the Germans, had been convinced to sign a treaty with Bulgaria handing over part of Eastern Thrace. Secondly, due to their victories on almost all the battlefields in the course of 1915, the Central Powers gave the impression that they were going to win the war. As concerns the unrest of the people and the soldiers, and the Radomir Rebellion, little attention is paid to either, while the influence of the Soviet revolution in 1917 on Bulgaria's stance in the war is downplayed too. Overall, WWI is considered as a second national catastrophe. Besides the failure of irredentism, it is maintained that Bulgaria was reduced to a second-rate country in the Balkans, being punished too harshly for the decisions made by its political leadership, which proved to have been gravely mistaken in its choices.

²⁹ Besides the studies already mentioned, the following collective histories have also been taken into account in order to present an overview of the post-1989 narrative on WWI: *Istoriya na Bălgariya* 1999; Sazdov, Lalkov, Popov & Migevev 1995; Bozhilov, Mutafchieva, Kosev, Pantev & Grancharov 1998; Statelova & Grancharov 1999.

IV. Conclusions

Perceived in context as a continuation of the military endeavor for national unification which had started with the Balkan Wars, WWI is treated as one of Bulgaria's national disasters. Given that history writing is still imbued with national ideals, it has remained on the margins of Bulgarian historiographical pursuits. Remembering the outcome of WWI neither boosts national morale nor arouses national self-esteem, since the Peace Treaty of Neuilly in 1919 brought irreversible consequences to Bulgaria's national claims, which made the deeply desired unification unattainable. Only memoirs and studies relating to military campaigns were produced during the interwar period, as these were the sole heroic moments of this significant but frustrating and painful event in the country's history. During the period of communist rule, WWI was charged with heavier negative connotations of an imperialistic conflict that served the profits of the bourgeoisie at the expense of the people, which made it an even less enticing topic. Emphasis was given mostly to the reactions of the masses against the country's participation in the war, focusing on the anti-war activities of the Narrows, as well as the anti-war demonstrations and riots of both the people and the soldiers. Nevertheless, the general assumption was that Bulgaria fought the war for the right cause, in the wrong way. After 1989, with the establishment of democratic rule, there was a new approach to certain facets of WWI. However, this post-1989 reading of WWI is in keeping with the national context of both the interwar and communist representations: Bulgaria joined this war on the side of the Central Powers with the goal of national unification through territorial expansion. Moreover, a comprehensive narrative and interpretation of domestic policies at the time is still lacking.

All in all, the paradigm of WWI shows clearly how historiography has contributed to the formation of the Bulgarian master narrative over time. At the same time, it demonstrates how professional historical writing, being under the strong influence of national ideology, promotes the national cause. As regards the interplay between historiography and memory, there are clearly discernable divergences in the WWI narrative through the course of time, with the most prominent being the communist and democratic representations. As for selectivity, the process follows the three distinct paths which were described in the introductory section. In the first, WWI, although understudied, is included among the *lieux de mémoire*, in the second, certain, mostly military aspects of this *lieu de mémoire* are highlighted, while in the third, this very same *lieu de mémoire* is at various points in time remembered and forgotten to a greater or lesser extent. In this way, *performative inclusion/exclusion* keeps pace with national priorities; in other words, silences always serve national ideals and policies.

In terms of temporality and spatiality, WWI does not constitute a discontinuity or an empty space in Bulgarian historiography, since certain aspects are recalled and analyzed over time. I would argue, therefore, that it is more a space that is half-empty, or to put it in terms of the inclusion/exclusion categorization, it would come under half-exclusion, which is not affected by temporality but stands in time. On the whole, it is apparent that for Bulgaria, WWI is an event of major significance to be ignored or forgotten. It is thus a *lieu de mémoire* whose different "areas" are visited at different—perhaps only opportune—times.

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