

THE BULGARIAN STUDIES ASSOCIATION

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Statement of Purpose: The Bulgarian Studies Association is a non-profit scholarly organization which promotes the study and exchange of knowledge about all aspects of Bulgaria and Bulgarians: language, literature, culture, history, politics, economics, and international relations.



LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Dear BSA Members:

The second issue of 2012 of the *Bulgarian Studies Association Newsletter* has now arrived! The President's letter along with a conference report submitted by John Leafgren will update you on the latest news regarding the Bulgarian Studies Association. Also included in this issue are interesting articles on Bulgarian history, literature, and drama. For those interested in staying abreast of Bulgarian-related items online, be sure to check out the search engine developed and hosted at Uppsala University.

Start thinking now about possible submissions for the third issue of the *Newsletter*. Send us your pictures, announcements, and even proverbs for inclusion. Also, if you have any suggestions of things to include, please let us know.

Best regards,

Blake & Don

BULGARIAN PROVERB

**И ВЪЛКЪТ СИТ И
АГНЕТО ЦЯЛО.**

*It can't be that
the wolf is full,
and the lamb is alive.*

Source: wikiquote.org

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Letter from the President	2 - 3
Bulgarian History	4 - 7
Review Article	8 - 15
Bulgarian On Stage	16 - 19
Bulgarian on the Web	20
Conference Report	21 - 22
Contact Information	22

LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

Dear Members:

The big news this spring is the successful conclusion of the Ninth International Meeting of Bulgarian and North American Scholars was held on May 31—June 1. A conference report by John Leafgren appears on p. 21 of this issue. This was the first year that the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences did not have the funds to provide the Bulgarian delegation with airfare to the conference and the first time that the BSA paid a large portion of the international travel costs. Thanks to your dues and the registration fee that the BSA conference participants paid this year, we were able to underwrite the tickets for six individuals from the Bulgarian delegation, in addition to the hotel and meal costs and excursion fee to Crater Lake for the whole delegation.

The conference this year would not have been possible without the generous financial contributions we

received from the American Research Center in Sofia, which funded the travel for three Bulgarian delegates; from the University of Oregon Academic Affairs Office, College of Arts and Sciences, Oregon Humanities Center, Department of Linguistics, Medieval Studies Program and Russian/East European and Eurasian Studies Program; and private contributions from Professors Frederick Chary and Victor Friedmann. We are very grateful for this support. Sincere thanks also go to Linda Campbell, Budget Manager of the UO Department of Linguistics, for the smooth on-the-ground organization of the conference, to student volunteers Petar Iliev, Julia Dimitrova-Ilieva, Ryan Perkins, and Holly Lakey for meeting delegates at the airport and driving them to the hotel, running messages on foot between the conference hall and the Linguistics Dept office throughout the course of the conference, and for providing on-the-spot technical

LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

assistance during Power Point and sound presentations by panelists. And thanks also to the BSA's Conference Committee members, Evguenia Davidova, Tatiana Kostadinova, and Carol Silverman, for overseeing the selection of papers for the BSA delegation and making the policy decisions, and, last but not least, to BSA Secretary/Treasurer Martha Forsyth for overseeing the finances from the BSA side.

By the way, at the conference banquet Martha was presented with two awards, from the BSA for 30 years of outstanding service, and by the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences delegation in gratitude for her work.

We will be publishing a refereed conference volume, and will be contacting the conference participants this summer with the submission deadline and instructions.

Now that the conference planning and the conference itself are

out of the way, you should be receiving e-mail ballots this summer for the election of the BSA president and vice-president for the term 2013-14. The nominating committee has not received any nominations for either position and we have not been able to find members willing to run for them, so if you are a member in good standing and would like to run or would like to nominate another member who has agreed to run, please contact Martha Forsyth immediately at <<theforsyths@verizon.net>> so that Anisava and I don't have to hold the posts of President/VP for life. We will be on the ballot again this year only if no one else is nominated or self-nominated.

With best wishes for a good summer,

Cynthia M. Vakareliyska

BULGARIAN HISTORY

A Bulgarian Institute of National Remembrance – Will There Be One?

Detelina Dineva

Institute for Historical Studies

Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

On November 30, 2011, the members of the Bulgarian National Assembly voted down on its first reading a bill that would establish a Bulgarian Institute of National Remembrance. This was not the first time that a bill for setting up a national memory institution failed to gain parliamentary support. Such has been the fate of similar attempts on the part of former Prime Minister Philip Dimitrov (1991-1992) and former President Petar Stoyanov (1997-2002).

In 2009, Union of Democratic Forces Member of Parliament Lachezar Toshev brought back to life Dimitrov's 2005 idea and submitted a bill on the establishment of an Institute for National Remembrance of Crimes against the Bulgarian People committed during the period 1944-1989. This initiative brought to light once again the precipice dividing Bulgarian society with regard to the assessment of the not-so-distant past. One of the arguments voiced by the opponents of the bill concerned the

possibility they saw of the Institute duplicating the activities of the Committee for Disclosing Documents and Announcing Affiliation of Bulgarian Citizens to the State Security and Intelligence Services of the Bulgarian National Army (COMDOS), the law on which had been adopted by the National Assembly on December 19, 2006. The main task of the COMDOS was said to be to collect, protect, and preserve the documents of the former secret services and to give citizens access to them. "History is the best teacher for the future. But only when the society finds out the truth – be it pleasant or unpleasant. When the secrets are unveiled and the lessons of the past are followed" ("It's Our Task to Lift the Curtain"). Despite this being the declared creed of the COMDOS, and not withstanding its work on publishing collections of State Security documents, its research activities were perceived as inadequate by the supporters of the INR bill. In the words of MP Veselin Metodiev, former Deputy Prime

BULGARIAN HISTORY

Minister (1997-1999) and head of the Central Department of Archives (1992-1993), the Committee had the obligation of conducting historical research, but in the two-year period since its establishment it had not done that (Fileva).

The real bone of contention, though, seemed to concern the very attitude toward the Bulgarians' past, and, consequently, its assessment. Discord arose even with regard to the terms used for denoting the previous regime. Had it been communist, totalitarian, or state socialism of the Soviet type? Moreover, the opponents of the INR bill said they were apprehensive of the possibility of such an institution being used by its proponents for politicizing historical research (Fileva).

The attempt to pass the INR bill in 2009 failed already at the Legal Affairs Parliamentary Committee's sitting, the voting being three for, five against, and fourteen abstentions (Komisiya po pravnite vaprosi, 2009). The fact that they did not acquiesce says much about the determination of the bill's authors, and two years later they again submitted an INR bill. The new bill envisioned setting up an Institute of Na-

tional Remembrance whose task would be to gather, research, and popularize the documents of the state repression apparatus and other institutions of the totalitarian state related to crimes against Bulgarian citizens, including crimes against humanity and other crimes committed by the communist regime during the period between September 9, 1944 and December 31, 1989 (Zakon za INP, Article 2). The bill was modeled on the law with which the Polish INR had been established. There were considerable differences, though, due to the fact that in Poland the Persecutor's Office is part of the executive branch of government, while in Bulgaria it is a component of the independent legal system. The authors also had taken into consideration the respective Hungarian law, determined to follow the best examples there were. They took care as well to point out that the documents kept at the INR would be used in a way that would not infringe upon the rights of the persons concerned or of third parties (Zakon za INP, Article 25). An essential characteristic of the Institute would be the fact that the Council that would be in charge of it was to be elected

BULGARIAN HISTORY

and removed from office by the National Assembly, thus making it independent of the state authorities (Zakon za INP, Article 5, Paragraphs 2 and 3, and Article 6, Paragraph 1).

Among the arguments put forth by the authors of the bill was their conviction that there was a need by both current and future generations for the kind of national reconciliation reached not through opportunism or forgetfulness, but on the basis of the common condemnation of all the crimes, atrocities, political persecutions, and violations of human rights that had taken place in the country during the communist rule. Such a step would facilitate the consolidation of democracy in Bulgaria on the basis of the understanding of the rights and responsibilities of every member of society (Zakon za INP).

During all the discussions on the bill its authors placed an emphasis on the educational functions the INR would be expected to fulfill. At the plenary sitting of the National Assembly on November 30, 2011, Lachezar Toshev reminded his fellow-MPs that while the bill was being debated, the

Council of the European Union had adopted a Platform of European Memory and Conscience, a project bringing together government institutions and organizations doing research and raising the awareness of EU citizens about the crimes of totalitarian regimes. The Platform had been joined by institutes from the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Germany, Romania, Latvia, Lithuania, Sweden, the Netherlands, and others, and Bulgaria had been represented only by one small NGO, the Hannah Arendt Center (Plenarno zasedanie).

Lachezar Toshev's reminder that Bulgaria was the only one among the EU member states that had been ruled by totalitarian regimes without an Institute of National Remembrance did not sway the opponents of the bill. One of them stated that in the old days Bulgarians used to study the history of the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP) and there had been an Institute of the History of the BCP, and now Mr. Toshev was suggesting setting up an Institute of Anti-BCP History (Plenarno zasedanie). Not unexpectedly, the INR bill was not passed, largely due to the fifty abstentions on the part of the MPs

BULGARIAN HISTORY

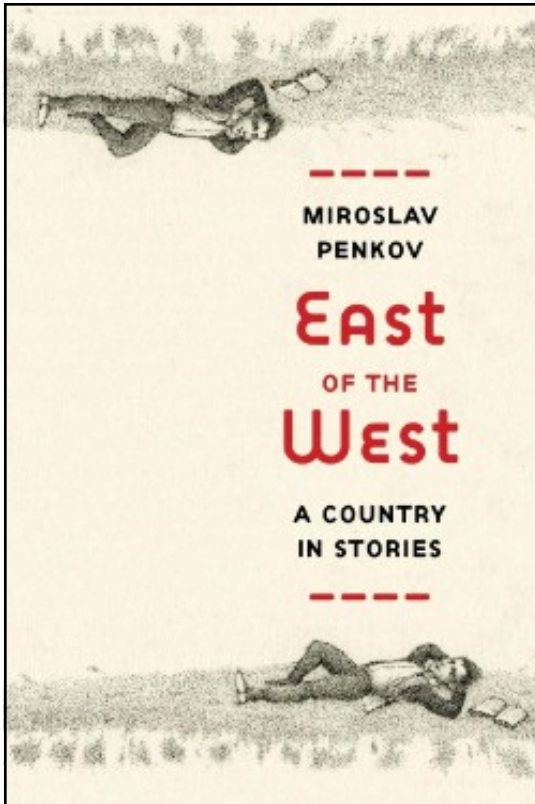
from the ruling Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria party (GERB). Despite their party's membership in the center-right European People's Party, whose policy is to support the condemnation of the crimes committed by totalitarian regimes (Report), GERB MPs had acted similarly during the sittings of the Legal Affairs Committee. It would appear that it was not only the left-wing MPs who were in favor of preserving the status quo with regard to the activities of documenting and researching the totalitarian past.

It is true that Bulgaria has the COMDOS. Bulgaria also has the Institute for Studies of the Recent Past, a non-governmental research organization founded in 2005. Still, there is a void that only a well-organized and sufficiently financed independent Bulgarian Institute of National Remembrance could adequately fill. It remains to be seen whether the opponents of an institution of this kind in Bulgaria will continue to get the upper hand in this debate or whether the supporters of the preservation of national memory will finally manage to make a successful step toward reaching their goal.

REFERENCES

1. Fileva, M. "Oshte sporyat v komunizam li sme zhiveli ili v darzhaven sotsializam" (<<www.vsekiden.com>>, September 17, 2009).
2. "It's Our Task to Lift the Curtain. COMDOS" (<<www.comdos.bg/p/language/en>>).
3. Komisiya po pravnite vaprosi. "Doklad ot nosno obsazhdane na parvo chetene na zakonoproekt za INP, Nr. 954-01-14" (<<parliament.bg/parliamentarycommittees/members/226/reports/ID/1483>>, September 17, 2009).
4. Plenarno zasedanie. "Parvo chetene na Zakon za INP" (<<parliament.bg/bg/plenaryst/ID/2674>>, November 30, 2011).
5. "Report. Need for international condemnation of crimes of totalitarian communist regimes" (<<assembly.coe.int/documents/workingdocs/doc05/edoc10765.htm>>, December 16, 2005).
6. "Zakon za INP za prestapleniyata sreshtu balgarskiya narod 154-01-90" (<<parliament.bg/bills/41/154-01-90.rtf>>, August 8, 2011).

REVIEW ARTICLE



Review by

Vessela S. Warner

University of Alabama at Birmingham

Miroslav Penkov

East of the West. A Country in Stories

New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2011

ISBN: 978-0-374-11733-7

Image Source: <<www.miroslavpenkov.com>>

East of the West, A Country in Stories is a captivating collection of eight bold and original stories (more like chaptered novellas) by Bulgarian-born writer Miroslav Penkov (b. 1982). Upon arriving in America in 2001, Penkov earned a bachelor's degree in psychology and an M.F.A. in creative writing at the University of Arkansas and currently holds a teaching position at the University of North Texas. *East of the West*, his first major publication made available by Farrar, Straus and Giroux of New York, is well-prepared by the author's

early success: Penkov received the Eudora Welty Prize in Fiction and his story "Buying Lenin," included in this volume, was selected and published in *The Best American Short Stories 2008*, edited by Salman Rushdie.

The cultural hybridity in *East of the West*, suggested in the title's ironic ambiguity, is anticipated and surprisingly exciting; it supports the uneasy task of presenting histories, personal as well as national, and conveying images and voices from times remembered as well as buried in the past.

REVIEW ARTICLE

Each of the stories is intricately built on the principle of temporal multiplicity and often explores the dual cultural consciousness of the literary speaker, producing a postmodern narrative of political, nostalgic, intertextual and poetic discourses. The book's leitmotif — the journeys through real and imaginary spaces — is underlined in the motto with a quote by the inimitable Balkan storyteller, Nikos Kazantzakis: "My soul, your voyages have been your native land!"¹ The quote also establishes the literary foundation — classical as well as specifically Balkan — from which Penkov questions "glocal" realities, cultural authenticity and the artistic authority of modern storytelling.

The first and referentially densest story, "Makedonija," introduces the model of temporal and discursive juxtapositions observant in the rest of the book. It presents in a single-person narrative the reflections of a Bulgarian retiree living uneventfully with his paralyzed wife, Nora, in a morbid rest home during the late 1960s. His depictions of a world of senile redundancy and material drabness are interlaced with tor-

mented memories from the tumultuous Bulgarian past: the Balkan Wars (1912, 1913), when his father died, and World War I in which his brother fought before joining the anti-fascist resistant movement of the early 1940s. Occasionally, the master narrative yields to the text from love letters sent to Nora by an "old flame," a poet who in 1905 volunteered to fight for the liberation of the Bulgarian-populated territories of Macedonia from the Turks. In "Makedonija," the name of the country told "in stories" — Bulgaria — first appears only casually dropped as an adjective and following information about the Ottoman colonization in Europe and the Balkan wars. These early references immediately map a geo-cultural space familiar to the western reader through the Balkanist stereotypes of backwardness, exoticism, ethnic diversity and intolerance.

The Balkan space of shared national histories and identities provides a vivid content for three more stories: "East of the West" deals with the arbitrary boundaries and the borderlines of Bulgaria and Serbia; "The Night Horizon" recounts the Commu-

REVIEW ARTICLE

nist Party's xenophobic act of renaming Bulgarian Turks in the 1980s; and "Devshirmeh" presents a mythological take on Bulgaria under Ottoman suppression. The Balkan milieu is shown in its oddity and hybridity; whether belonging to the past or to the present, the characters represent an exotic, multiethnic and often anachronistic community. Such are the lively and mysterious Bulgarian gypsies ("The Letter" and "A Picture with Juki"), the tragic young lovers sharing the political "guilt" and estrangement of their communist countries, Bulgaria and Serbia ("East of the West"), the lost identity of the Bulgarian-Turkish bagpipe-maker ("The Night Horizon"), and the janissary Ali Ibrahim, the medieval Bulgarian convert into Islam ("Devshirmeh").

In his depiction of the Balkans and contemporary Bulgaria in particular, Penkov's does not capitalize on orientalizing stereotypes of backwardness and cultural otherness: he asserts the foreign and awkward as familiar and logical by positioning himself in the stories as an insider-outsider. The culturally-specific characters and their acts are distinguished as different to the western tra-

ditions as a result of the geo-political isolation and rigid traditionalism of the totalitarian society. In "Makedonija," the Cold War detachment of communist Bulgaria from the egalitarian West is depicted by the old man secretly listening to foreign radio stations at night: "The voices crackle and buzz, because the Party is distorting the transmission, but at least at night the voices are strong like a single long word to me, a word devoid of history and meaning, completely free" (6). In "Buying Lenin" and "A Picture with Yuki," the voice of the narrator, a Bulgarian immigrant in the United States, conciliates the two Cold War adversaries, tearing down the boundaries of miscommunication and prejudice, and exposing the universality of the human condition. The curiosity and misunderstanding in the encounter of a Bulgarian villager with the similarly exotic Japanese-American Juki ("A Picture with Yuki") is sparked by humor:

"My God," the woman said, and clapped her hands. "She is so tiny." Then she studied Yuki, head to toes. Yuki stood, flaming red, smiling.

"They aren't that yellow," the woman

REVIEW ARTICLE

told me at last.

“What did she say,” Yuki asked.

“What did she say?” asked the woman. Inevitably, she plunged herself forward with unexpected agility and took Yuki’s hands. She kissed them and then she kissed Yuki on the cheeks. (102)

In “Buying Lenin,” the young character who changes his Bulgarian post-communist reality with the “American dream” amicably argues on the phone with his grandfather, a hard-core communist who cannot forgive him for leaving the fatherland and accepting the values of the “class enemy.” Freed of any doctrines and nationalist sentiment, the cosmopolitan grandson teases the family elder by making him a subject of his academic research on ideological dependency and group identity, and even jokingly buys him “Lenin’s corpse” on eBay. In the last story of the book, “Devshirmeh,” the Bulgarian immigrant, Mihail, and his American side-kick, John Martin, are placed on equal levels as blue-collar, social outcasts and lonely fathers in split families.

Bulgaria’s communist past – the revolutionary struggle against a reactionary bour-

geois regime, the collectivization of the land, Lenin’s doctrine, as well as the anti-communist protests in the early 1990s and the ideological vacuum which followed the collapse of the political system – infuses content into all the stories of the book. Penkov avoids social commentary or judgments on Bulgarian communism which he himself hardly remembers and dissociates his subjects from the documentary discourse already exhaustingly exploited in Eastern European literature. In “Cross Thieves” the author synthesizes the experience of post-communist euphoria and chaos, depicting the communist period as a dusty museum of stolen — authentic or fabricated — memorabilia, traded on the black market: “[A] shoe without the proper history to back it up,” says one of the juvenile thieves, “is nothing” (133). The search of history had become the author’s search of identity in the new cultural environment as the character in “Buying Lenin,” an exchange student in the United States, says: “No one knew where I was from, or cared to know. I had nothing to say to this world” (60).

REVIEW ARTICLE

In *East of the West*, Penkov offers random accounts on early, modern and contemporary Bulgarian histories: flashbacks, stories -within-the-story, heroic acts, legendary names, local symbols and vocabularies, which unobtrusively intertwine with the fictional content of the stories. The writer is not concerned with constructing a linear historical narrative, underlining instead his postmodern denial of cultural homogeneity and historical causality. Penkov's *post histoire* of Bulgaria is composed of linguistic idioms which often remind us of textbook entries and convoluted memories. The perfect image of this non-essentialized, deconstructed history is Amazing Drago's photographic memory for facts and dates: a pointless and futile resource which cannot prevent the character's intellectual and spiritual degradation ("Cross Thieves"). Bulgaria is presented as a "lost land" and objectified in a quizzing game played between the two Gypsy girls, Magda being a debilitated orphan: "Magda, when was Bulgaria founded?" "Six eighty-one," she says. She smacks her lips, the swollen tongue rolls. Spit trickles.

I tell her, 'Two thousand and seven is when Bulgaria ends; Grandmoms said that. Once we join the EU, Bulgaria ends. Do you know what the EU is?' 'EU, EU,' she repeats, and I say, 'Stop saying it. It makes you sound inarticulate'" (85). Other stories also present Bulgarian history through the disengaging and cunning image of a postmodern "game": it is a freak-show of Drago's amazing memory and a pseudo-antique shop ("Cross Thieves"), a prank about Lenin's corpse being put up for sale ("Buying Lenin"), and a bedtime story mixing national legends and family history ("Devshirmeh"). The speaker's consistent pursuit of the past and recovery of personal memories is manifested in a plethora of quotes — documentary but also literary —woven in a postmodern pastiche.

The historical references serve as a mytho-poetic background from which the fictional stories draw apocryphal validity and ethical comparisons. In "Makedonija," jealousy and curiosity drive the old man to continue reading the love letters of the mysterious poet and a revolutionary to his wife. In these letters, he finds stories about

REVIEW ARTICLE

devastation, bravery and revenge, and images of men greater than him. Similar to this dual historical frame of reference is the composition of “Devshirmeh.” In this story, Mihail’s economical disadvantage and indecisiveness as his family grows apart are juxtaposed with Ali Ibrahim’s heroism and passion in protecting his stolen bride. The two narrative planes — the historical and the contemporary — accentuate the contrast between heroic romanticism and modern conformity, and between the sacrificial love for a woman or a social idea, and today’s dying idealism.

A reader familiar with Bulgarian history and culture could also detect some ironic “inaccuracies” in Penkov’s borrowing of texts and mixing of art and fact. “Makedonija,” deliberately spelled in its transliteration and not as the English word for the geographical and political entity, is rich in postmodern intertextuality and simulations: The subplot of the love affair between a certain poet, Peyo Spasov, and Nora closely refers to the relationship of the famous Bulgarian poet, Peyo Yavorov, a participant in the Macedonian revolution-

ary struggle, with Lora Karavelova. The text of the letters is nevertheless fictional, revealing a less heroic image of the poet, but the poem in Spasov’s last letter to Nora is a famous verse by Yavorov, translated into English. Also different from Penkov’s character, Yavorov did not die in a battle somewhere in Macedonia. By conflating history and fiction, the author highlights the misery of the old man’s life in the socialist rest-home, but also depicts in a self-referential way the wondering and pain of his creative mind. The image of the anti-hero, who is not exempt from shameful mistakes, human Bulgarian weaknesses and prevailing survival instinct, inhabits the contemporary as well as historical plots in the stories. Penkov de-romanticizes the present as well as the past, often insinuating that man’s involvement in acts that change the course of history is often accidental or regretted (*e.g.*, Peyo Spasov’s mission in Macedonia, grandfather’s revolutionary background in “Buying Lenin”). The characters of the stories conflate into one image of a vulnerable and humiliated human being, tragically defeated by the social and political circum-

REVIEW ARTICLE

stances.

The *heteroglossia* in *East of the West*, the polyphony of voices and styles, is emphasized as a literary technique. From Lenin's socialist theories to trivia from Bulgarian popular culture, to literary quotes and Bulgarian-language words, each story is a tapestry of dense intertextuality. Either exploiting the postmodern "death of the author"² or exhibiting the victory of episteme over creative originality, the author opens his "glocal" discourse to influences from other literary sources. The story of Kemal, the Turkish girl raised in a mountain village during the 1980s to be a man and a bagpipe-maker, echoes the famous Bulgarian work "The Goat Horn" (*Kozijat Rog*, 1965) by Nikolai Haitov. While the original tale is set in the time of Turkish oppression of the Bulgarian population and features the young heroine as an avenger of her mother's death and father's humiliation, in "The Night Horizon" Kemal writes letters to the Bulgarian Communist Party to protest the forceful change of Turkish names to Bulgarian (Christian) names, but is unable to help her impris-

oned father. Left alone and desperate, she expresses her helplessness through the monotonous "cry" of the bagpipe and finally lights herself on fire like a human torch. The kaleidoscope of Balkan stories produces even more complicated mixtures of plots in "Devshirmeh," where Ali Ibrahim, the hero of Mihail's story told to his young daughter somewhere in Texas, is a distant replica of the frightful and tragic Karaibrahim, the character of Anton Donchev's highly acclaimed novel *Time of Parting* (*Vreme Razdelno*).³ Karaibrahim returns to ravage his native Bulgarian village, having been forcefully taken away as a child and turned into janissary in the seventeenth-century Ottoman Empire. The plot of the classical Bulgarian novel takes an unusual twist and mixes time-periods as well as fact and fiction in the father's bedtime story, in which Ali Ibrahim falls madly in love with Mihail's great grandmother, "the most beautiful of all women," but falls defeated by the vizier who has also desired her for his harem (197). The title of this story, *devshirmeh*, comes from the Turkish word for "blood tribute" or

REVIEW ARTICLE

“blood tax.” Being the last piece in the collection, the story speaks with much feeling about the price paid for living in exile and in a chase of old memories and new dreams. The nostalgia of the ex-patriot and ex-husband transcends into an epic myth about human longing, departures and sad romances. The juxtaposition of the musicalized, high speech of the medieval legend and the daily jargon and Bulgarian-English of the contemporary characters, becomes a linguistic sign of a certain intercultural harmony and universality.

In *East of the West*, the postmodern gesture of mimicking or referring to literary masterpieces reaches beyond the boundaries of Bulgarian fiction; fans of Slavic literature may draw stylistic comparisons between grandfather’s and grandson’s ideological battles and their final, all-encompassing and all-forgiving laughter (“Buying Lenin”) and Milan Kundera’s in-

telligent philosophical debates, absurd plot twists and poetic density in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*.⁴ The symbolic washing of the “living corpse” by the two thieves in the dark Orthodox church (“Cross Thieves”) plunges into the metaphysical chasm of Dostoyevsky’s spiritual and philosophical novels. The familiar images and motifs in Penkov’s prose emerge faintly, but it is their exuberant variations that hold the reader’s attention.

Amazingly different in each of the eight stories, the “polyglot” author of *East of the West* demonstrates artistic confidence in weaving complex plots with cinematographic clarity of detail and suspenseful, unpredictable developments. *East of the West, A Country in Stories* is an impressive debut by a courageous and seeking young writer with an astute sensitivity to cultural and linguistic diversity.

Endnotes:

¹ Nikos Kazantzakis, *Odyssey: A Modern Sequel*, Book XVI, line 959.

³ Anton Donchev, *Time of Parting* (New York: Morrow, 1968).

² Roland Barthes, “Death of the Author,” *Image-Music-Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (Hill and Wang, 1978), 142-49.

⁴ Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, trans. from the French by Aaron Asher (New York: Harper Perennial, 1996).

BULGARIAN ON STAGE

Bulgarian Folklore and Artistry in a New York Theatre Production

by Vessela S. Warner

For over ten years, Overground Physical Theatre Company, founded in New York City by Bulgarian native Antonia Katrandjieva, has posed urgent social questions in thirty-eight experimental productions. The company's multimedia and dance-theatre performances blend kinetic sensibility with esoteric vision in an attempt to reconnect theatre to its ritualistic roots. Under the leadership of Dr. Katrandjieva — a theatre scholar, director, choreographer, and actress, Overground Company has performed at established art venues in New York City like John Ryan Theatre, La Mama Experimental Theater, Judson Dance New Amsterdam, Ballet Arts at City Center, Salvatore Capezio Theater, and New Dance Group, to name a few. The company has also presented at many national and international festivals. Antonia's scholastic and artistic interest in dance and theatre began in Bulgaria, where she earned her M.F.A. and D.Sc. in Physical Theatre from the National Academy of Theatre and Film Arts; she further cultivated her interests during her study at the Zurich Tanz Theater Schule in Switzerland and through extensive field research of dance traditions in Asitsa,

South America, Europe, and the United States. Since 2008 Antonia Katrandjieva has been on the faculty of PeriDance Capezio Center, where she teaches physical theater and her original "artflow" yoga style, *Yogea*. In each of her productions, she employs vast knowledge of various spiritual philosophies and ethno-contemporary dance to train and lead multi-ethnic casts of dancers, actors, and singers.

Overground's most recent production, *Ecocentric* (Manhattan Movement and Arts Center, June 21-22, 2012) draws an anthropocentric and holistic paradigm of human relationship to/through nature, posing it as ubiquitous, inherent, and ever-evolving. The nine characters of this eco-drama are contemporary women who have been affected by global overproduction, consumerism, and techno-s(t)imulated environment. They live isolated from one another in an apartment building managed by a mysterious garbage-lady and singing elevator. During their allegorical journey — historical, existential, and imaginary — the women embody ancient and modern archetypes, seeking the delicate balance between the "heart" and the "mind" in order to re-establish their broken connection to the Earth.

The musical score for *Ecocentric* is a mix of the songs by the Syrian composer and singer Bisan Toron, a performer in the show, and re-

BULGARIAN ON STAGE

cordings from the Bulgarian ethno-contemporary group “Isihija” as well as the world-renowned female folk choir “The Mystery of Bulgarian Voices.” Director Antonia Katrandjieva worked closely with Dora Hristova, the conductor of the choir, to select and edit excerpts from their rich repertoire of traditional songs. The musical style of “The Mystery of Bulgarian Voices” (registered as a trademark under “Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares” by French producer Marcel Cellier) is a mixture of authentic folklore and classical harmonization. The history of choral arrangements of traditional songs and the creation of new music in the Bulgarian folkloric style was started by Philip Kutev in 1951. In his compositions for the State Ensemble for Traditional Dance and Song, Kutev took “traditional village songs, which are monophonic in most of Bulgaria or have drone-based harmony in the southwest region of the country, and arrange[d] them into four- or five-part Western harmonies.”¹ Dora Hristova calls this type of adaptation a “quotation” of traditional songs into a complex multi-voice structure and free polyphonic harmony, which nevertheless remains true to the traditional rhythm, metrics, and melody of the Bulgarian folklore.² After Kutev’s groundbreaking endeavor, other composers and conductors applied different methods to the adap-

tations of authentic songs for a *cappella* choirs: for instance, Krasimir Kjurkchijski used dissonant and diaphonic structures while Ivan Spasov and Georgi Andreev achieved a more contemporary synthesis of traditional motifs.

The Bulgarian State Radio and Television female choir became a world sensation after 1975 when a quarter of a million copies of their first album, titled *Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares*, was released in Western Europe and then in the United States. The vocals of “The Mystery of the Bulgarian Voices” were declared “the most beautiful music on the planet” and in 1990 the ensemble won a Grammy for Best Traditional Folk Performance, followed by another Grammy nomination in 1994.³ Through the 1980s and the 1990s, the international success of the choir was enhanced by the emerging trend of “world music”: a new word for the globally marketed ethnic music which also infused popular genres and created unique musical hybrids. Motifs from the songs of “The Mystery” were artistically incorporated in songs authored by British pop singers Peter Gabriel and Kate Bush. After the fall of the communist regime and its idealization of folkloric culture, many Bulgarian musicians, the group “Isihija” being one of them, also began to experiment in contemporizing traditional music.

Although the marketing strategies for

BULGARIAN ON STAGE

“The Mystery,” including tropes of gender and cultural otherness and adjectives like “exotic,” “ancient,” and “spiritual,” were strongly critiqued,⁴ the uniqueness and emotional impact of the singing is nevertheless hardly explainable in common terms. Thus, Silverman states: “No doubt the dissonant harmonies, additive rhythms, expressive ornamentation, throat-placed vocal style, and superb technical abilities of the singers were all very striking.”⁵ Bulgarian traditional choral singing has changed the way local as well as international musicians think about music. Its synthesis of ancient and modern rhythms, intrinsic connection to dance, and direct lineage to communal (anthropological) ceremonies inspire theatrical symbolism and visual expressions as well. The role of the Bulgarian music in Overground’s production of *Ecocentric* is to “usher both performers and their audiences into the archetypal memory of the collective subconscious, creating a feeling of universal space and divine wisdom.” The music complements the borrowings of Bulgarian as well as Asian, Maori, Aboriginal, and African ritual movement; it amalgamates them into a post-modern theatrical choreography in an effort to bridge tradition and modernity.

Ecocentric also features the work of other Bulgarian artists. Antoaneta Atanassova, cos-

tume designer, is a graduate of the Parson’s School of Design in NYC who has worked on the interior design of the Spanish TV at Radio at City Hall and the Music Hall. Previously, she designed costumes for the Art Studio and Charles Mason Studio as well as for the Ballet Stage of the New York Opera and Carnegie Hall. The video artwork for the show was created and edited by Kalin and Ana Ivanov, who are both long-time collaborators in many of Overground’s productions: *Lactobacillicum Bulgaricum*, *Blueprint*, *Peripheral Visions*, *Shifters*, *Avatar*, and *Urban Tao*. Kalin holds a B.A. and M.F.A. in Cinematography from the National Academy of Theatre and Film Arts in Sofia, Bulgaria, and an M.F.A. in Television Production from Brooklyn College CUNY. His film and television credits as a director of photography, cameraman, director, producer, photographer, and editor include: *Irish Writers in America*; *Theatre Talk*, *Canape*; *Nueva York* (two Emmy Awards); *Even the Score*; *The Gates of Jeanne-Claude and Christo*; *The Beaches*; *The Girl, the Boy and the Frog*; and others. Since 2000 Kalin Ivanov has been a senior videographer, producer, and editor at CUNY TV, Channel 75 in New York. Ana Ivanova is a graduate of the Faculty of Journalism and Communications at Sofia University with a master’s degree in Communications. Since 1997 she has worked

BULGARIAN ON STAGE

in the field of advertising, film production, multimedia, and photography. Karamfil Atanassov is responsible for the set design for *Ecocentric* while Nevena Atanassova is in charge of the conceptual artwork. The production

dramaturg, Vessela Warner, a graduate of Sofia University, has published extensively on Bulgarian theatre and literature and is currently a theatre instructor at University of Alabama at Birmingham.

Endnotes:

¹ Carol Silverman, “‘Move Over Madonna:’ Gender, Representation, and the ‘Mystery’ of Bulgarian Voices,” in *Over the Wall/After the Fall: Post-Communist Cultures Through an East-West Gaze*, eds. Sibelan Forrester, Magdalena J. Zaborowska, and Elena Gapova (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004): 212-238, esp. 213.

² Dora Hristova, *Misterijata na Bŭlgarskite Glasove: Fenomen i Vokalen Ansambŭl* (Sofia: Bul Koreni, 2007), p. 16.

³ Quoted in Silverman, p. 212.

⁴ See the critique of gender trade and global marketing mechanisms in Silverman, “‘Move Over Madonna,’ Gender Representation, and the ‘Mystery’ of Bulgarian Voices.”

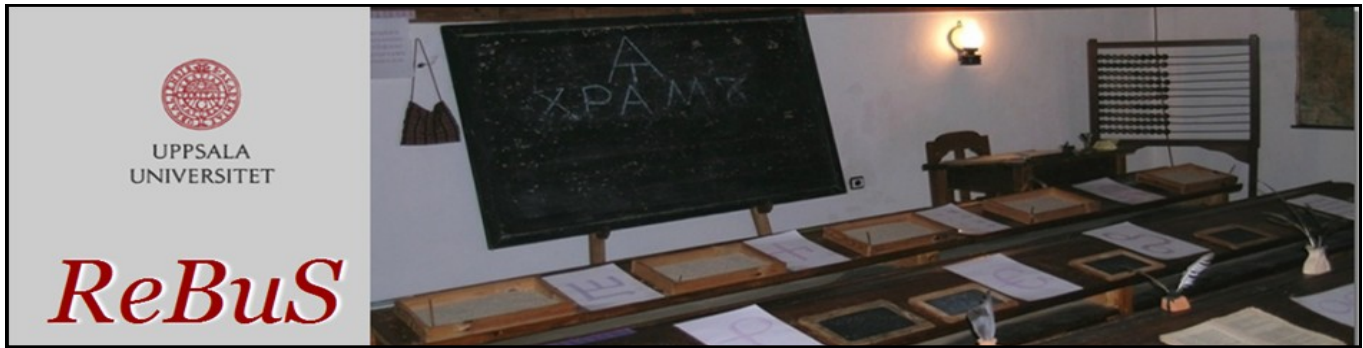
⁵ Ibid, 216.

⁶ Antonia Katrandjieva, an e-mail to the author, May 26, 2012.

More information about

Overground Physical Theatre Company can be found at
<<<http://www.overground888.com/index.php?id=7>>>.

BULGARIAN ON THE WEB



As for most small languages, the academic community working with various aspects of Bulgarian is randomly spread all over the world. In the “Google-era” one can quickly obtain many individual pieces of information on Bulgarian studies, but it is no doubt difficult to get a systematic overview. A cyber home for academic studies in Bulgarian, *ReBuS* can help provide a global view for Bulgarian studies outside Bulgaria.

The idea behind *ReBuS* – *REsources* for *BULgarian Studies* – is to develop a non-commercial site focusing on academic studies in Bulgarian. *ReBuS* is intended to compile information, which is useful for both scholars and students. While open to the general public, the main users of the site are expected to be at universities outside Bulgaria. The main difference between *ReBuS* and many other similar projects is the intention to create a database by distributing the work between the users of the database. This way the database can be filled with relevant information faster and hopefully be much more up to date than if the system relies on the work of a few administrators.

ReBuS includes a database where information about educational and research resources can be found. Registered users can input data about courses, books, journals, tools, publications, etc., in the database. In addition, *ReBuS* provides a calendar with important events in the area of Bulgarian studies and a map showing the locations for the different activities.

ReBuS was developed at Uppsala University during the summer of 2011. It was a joint project between two departments: the Department of Information Technology and the Department of Modern Languages. The site was implemented by a Master’s student, Mariana Bustamante, supervised by Ivan Christoff and Daniela Assenova.

ReBuS can increase the visibility of the different areas in academic studies and research outside Bulgaria and become a virtual home for this information. The main condition for this is the active participation of its users, *i.e.*, you.

<<<http://rebus.moderna.uu.se>>>

by Ivan Christoff & Daniela Assenova

CONFERENCE REPORT

Report on the
**Ninth Joint Meeting of Bulgarian
 and North American Scholars**
May 31 - June 2, 2012
Eugene, Oregon
 by **John Leafgren**

The Ninth Joint Meeting of Bulgarian and North American Scholars took place May 31 - June 2, 2012, on the beautiful University of Oregon campus in Eugene. Held by the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and the Bulgarian Studies Association, and co-sponsored also by the University of Oregon Humanities Center, Academic Affairs Office, College of Arts and Sciences, Department of Linguistics, East European and Eurasian Studies Program and Medieval Studies Program, this was a most informative and enjoyable conference. Thirty-four papers were presented in the areas of history, literature, linguistics, ethnic studies, folk and contemporary music, art, other cultural studies, educational resources and medieval manuscripts and texts.

In attendance and making presentations were Daniela Assenova (Uppsala University), Andrey Bobev (BAS Cyrillo-Methodian Research Center), Andrej Bojadžiev (Sofia University), Frederick Chary (Indiana University Northwest), Ivan Christov (BAS Institute of Literature), Evguenia Davidova (Portland State University), Margaret Dimitrova (Sofia University), Detelina Dineva (BAS Institute for Historical Studies), Dena Fehrenbacher (Harvard University), Martha Forsyth (independent scholar), Steven Franks (Indiana University), Richard Hall (Georgia Southwestern State University), Kjetil Rå Hauge (University of Oslo), Elizabeth Hawthorne (independent scholar), Dilyana Ivanova (The Field Museum), Kalin Kirilov (Towson University), John Leafgren (University of Arizona), Claire Levy (BAS Institute of Art Studies), Traci Lindsey (UC Berkeley), Eran Livni (Indiana University), Mila Maeva (BAS IEFEM), Kate Maley (University of Iowa), Anissava Miltenova (BAS Institute of Literature), Gregory Myers (Vancouver),

CONFERENCE REPORT

Gergana Panova-Tekath (BAS Institute of Art Studies), Roumiana Preshlenova (BAS Institute for Balkan Studies and Center for Thracology), Catherine Rudin (Wayne State University), Carol Silverman (University of Oregon), Liliana Simeonova (IBCT-BAS), Vania Petrova Stoyanova (BAS Institute for Historical Studies), Ivelina Tchizmarova (Simon Fraser University), Mariyana Tsibranska-Kostova (BAS Bulgarian Language Institute), Cynthia Vakareliyska (University of Oregon) and Alexander Yanakiev (BAS Institute of Art Studies).

The conference program also included a reception with Bulgarian piano music being played by Anna Levy and a banquet with Bulgarian folk music by Trio Slavei (Kalin Kirilov, Mark Levy, Carol Silverman and friends). It ended with a day-long excursion to Crater Lake. This conference was wonderfully organized, run and catered, and Cynthia Vakareliyska and all those who helped her plan and execute it deserve the sincere thanks of the conference participants and other attendees.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Officers of the Bulgarian Studies Association 2010 - 2012

Cynthia Vakareliyska, President, <vakarel@uoregon.edu>

Anisava Miltenova, Vice-President, <amiltenova@gmail.com>

Martha Forsyth, Secretary-Treasurer, <theforsyths@verizon.net>

Editorial Board of the *Bulgarian Studies Association Newsletter*

Donald L. Dyer, Editor, <mldyer@olemiss.edu>

Blake Shedd, Associate Editor, <cshed@ku.edu.tr>