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Parameters of national identity in Bulgarian Revival-period dramaturgy

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Abstract. The text presents, in broad strokes, the main figures and events from medieval Bulgarian history that Revival-period dramaturgy uses to construct its plots. It traces how the most indisputable moments of victories and glory are omitted from the general dramatic narrative and how this narrative focuses on historically more problematic events from the past. During the 19th century, Bulgarian national identity was being formed intensively. How does the dramatic narrative participate in this process? This is the main question that the article seeks to answer.

Keywords: Bulgarian National Revival, historical dramas, theatre, Dobri Voynikov, national identity

The historiographical project finds its place and broad scope for development during the Bulgarian National Revival period. Historiography, through which the narrative of a nation's past is constructed, is among the first mechanisms for providing the tools necessary for forming the national community consciousness. It is no coincidence that in various literary periodizations, Paisiy Hilendarski's *Istoriya Slavyanobolgarskaya* (*Slavo-Bulgarian History*) is placed at the beginning of the Bulgarian National Revival. For historiographical purposes, in addition to historiography, various genres of modern culture are also used – school textbooks, literature, performing arts – with theatre being the most powerful among them in the 19th century. Through historical themes, works of art maintain the gallery of images that participate in the creation of national memory.

The narrative about the national past is developed in all literary genres from the Revival period. Historical dramaturgy is at the heart of Voynikov's concept for the valorization of the Bulgarian theatre. It is the key that the playwright and theatre figure Dobri Voynikov finds to quell the tensions among some members of the intelligentsia against a theatrical practice perceived as "foreign" to Bulgarian society. Resistance to theatre manifests itself as early as the first real theatrical attempts, connected with D. Voynikov's initiative to organize an amateur Bulgarian theatre in Brăila (after the mid-1860s). The emergence of dramatic texts in Bulgarian receives encouragement when they

are viewed as literary works, as attempts to develop young Bulgarian literature. But when they begin to fully serve their purpose and are performed on the improvised community centre "stages", the publicity of theatrical performances violates the norms of the patriarchal closedness of the community model and arouses discontent, voiced in publications in the periodical press. Thus begins the noisy Revival-period debate "for" and "against" the theatre (Patova 2023). Historical dramaturgy, however, is among the strongest arguments that mitigate this resistance. Dramas with historical plots are some of the most successful literary attempts to construct the notions of the people's common ancient past. Moreover, the theatrical realization of these dramas visualizes the word and thus enhances its effect. In the field of historiography, historical dramaturgy plays one of the main roles as a nation-forming foundation. This is the reason why the historical dramas of the Bulgarian Revival period are particularly significant, regardless of their obvious artistic shortcomings.

Dobri Voynikov is considered and recognized as the "father of Bulgarian theatre". His active theatrical work, the troupe he organized in Brăila, and especially the historical dramas which he first staged, and which were then performed in many places, provide solid grounds for distinguishing Voynikov as the creator, the "father", of drama and theatre among Bulgarians. His theatrical career did not go smoothly and without obstacles. As a young teacher in his native Shumen, because of tensions with the local wealthy men, provoked by his extracurricular cultural initiatives, Voynikov felt compelled to leave the city. He sought his place in Romania, and eventually settled in Brăila, where he began to write plays, gathered a troupe of like-minded people and organized performances based on the dramas he had written. Writing plays for him was more of an educational undertaking, an extension of his literary and teaching activities, than a creative impulse. Whatever the artistic result of the dramatic texts he created and the performances based on them may be, Dobri Voynikov's dramas were the first to spark theatrical curiosity among Bulgarians.

The staging in Brăila of Voynikov's drama *Rayna Knyaginya* (*Princess Rayna*) (1866) gave rise to strong agitation against the theatre. Opponents of the theatre idea regarded it as an unnecessary activity for Bulgarians. Their argument was that, lagging behind in its economic development, the nation had no time for wasteful, frivolous pursuits and entertainment. A public debate on the harms and benefits of the theatre began, finding its way into the periodical press. Initially, D. Voynikov did not participate in the discussion. He joined it two years later, when he had written and was preparing to stage his next historical drama, *Pokrashtenie na Preslavskiy Dvor* (*Baptism of the Preslav Court*) (1868). His conviction that the theatre is a school, that it provides useful knowledge and, through historical dramas, directs this knowledge to the subject of Bulgarian history, is an argument in favour of theatrical work and one that his opponents were unable to refute.

What follows is a broad outline of the narrative about the past, as composed by Bulgarian Revival-period playwrights. Which important historical events are present in the dramatic historiographical plot and which are omitted? What image of Bulgarianness do they present? These are questions whose answers will delineate the parameters of national identity in the historical dramas of the Revival period.

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The selective choice and interpretation of facts from the existing narrative about the past construct a narrative that serves the ideological causes of the present. Such a cause in the second half of the 19th century is the formation of national consciousness. The way in which events from the past are interpreted is the way in which a society clarifies its present. Of the various theories about the emergence of nations, the most applicable to the Bulgarian context is the matrix of the so-called East European type of nation, also defined as a cultural nation[1]. This model is particularly effective in multinational empires, where individual nations unite around their own cultural movements. The absence of their own state organization and state territory in such cases is compensated for by placing emphasis on the common roots, the idealized common past, cultural traditions, language and religion. These emphases are most conveniently situated in the historiographical narrative, regardless of the genre in which it is developed.

Popular history textbooks from the Revival period and historical dramaturgy of the time are the two genres most strongly engaged with the task of producing the content of collective memory. The nation draws emotional strength from the past, which is filled with experience that must be shared, with examples of ordeals, joys and sufferings, with pride in victories and anger over defeats. People are instilled with the symbolic image of the state and its military power. A peculiarity of the dramatic narrative is that it often "removes" the royal institution from the realm of the sacred. In most of the early Bulgarian historical dramas, the ruler is the central character or at least actively involved in the unfolding of the plot but he is not presented as a hero of indisputable personal virtues. The examples of Ivanko from Vasil Drumev's *Ivanku, Ubietsat na Asenya I (Ivanko, the Murderer of Asen I)*, George Terter from *Velislava, Balgarska Knyaginya* (*Velislava, Bulgarian Princess*) and Tsar Peter from *Princess Rayna* by D. Voynikov are royal characters who fail to fulfil their sovereign duty and protect their state and people from foreign invasions, i.e. they are far from the heroized image of the ruler.

Historical dramaturgy creates a nostalgic narrative that contains storylines both with moments of triumph (of glory and prosperity) and moments told in an angrily pathetic register (the betrayals and conflicts from which the Bulgarian kingdom suffered). By reconstructing Bulgarian statehood, historical dramaturgy "proves" that having their own state is an inherent form of political unity for Bulgarians, and suggests that there is nothing more natural than for them to return to this form once again. This seems to be the most important message of historical dramas. And it is more important than the specific content of the individual storylines in them.

The Bulgarian Revival-period drama omits some of the key historiographical events that form any national mythology. For example, in the Revival-period

[1] Miroslav Hroch, a Czech historian and researcher of national movements, developed a theory of their emergence and development in Central and Eastern Europe on the basis of various cultural initiatives (Hroch 1985).

texts, we do not find a dramatic account of the Bulgarians' origin. There is no dramatic narrative about our ancestors' migration from their legendary homeland to their present lands, or about the Golden Age – the story of the cultural dominance of "one's own" group over "the others" is a common formula used to sanctify the deeds of the nation's cultural heroes. Also, the dramatic plots do not follow the most indisputable moments of military glory and state-political greatness, which are otherwise present in the historical narrative of textbooks.

None of the Revival-period playwrights turns to the story of Asparuh, the Founder of the state, which is one of the fundamental myth-making plots. Instead of Asparuh, dramaturgy uses the plot of Khan Krum and, through it, with certain modifications of the historical narrative known from textbooks, interprets the myth about the Founder. According to Voynikov's drama *Vaztsaryavaneto na Kruma Strashniy* (*The Enthronement of Krum the Fearsome*), Krum comes from the lands of the Tisza river into the Bulgarian territories and saves Asparuh's state, which is torn apart by internal problems. Krum successfully imposes his state order and, after resolving certain internal conflicts, he is recognized by the Bulgarians south of the Danube as their desired ruler.

Another Revival-period man of letters and prolific playwright, Todor Hadzhi Stanchev, also uses Krum as the central character in his drama *Kardam Strashni* (*Kardam the Fearsome*). The Bulgarian ruler appears here under a different name but the story underlying the dramatic plot is about the victorious battle of the Bulgarian army against the Byzantines led by Emperor Nikephoros. In this version, the Bulgarian khan is not portrayed as a right-minded, determined and unwavering ruler. Despite his victories against the enemy, instead of the expected expensive gifts, he receives from the defeated a cloth filled with horse manure. Kardam/Krum in Todor Hadzhi Stanchev's version dies strong and glorious, but devastated by constant betrayals and assassination attempts that take place in the Bulgarian camp. The dramatic image of the ruler here differs from the monolithic and indisputable leadership qualities of Krum's image in history textbooks, and even from the portrayal of Krum suggested by D. Voynikov's drama. The two dramatic plots – *The Enthronement of Krum the Fearsome* and *Kardam the Fearsome* – present an ambiguous image of Khan Krum.

The dramatic presence of the brothers Cyril and Methodius is the other major historiographical plot used by the playwright Voynikov. It is focused on the role of the Brothers from Thessaloniki as Christian missionaries and ambassadors of the Christian religion rather than on their role as enlighteners and creators of the alphabet. Although the drama *Baptism of the Preslav Court* was written to mark a school celebration dedicated to the Day of Saints Cyril and Methodius, it does not glorify their work as Slavic teachers. And indeed, this play was used for many years to celebrate the holiday, even though the text does not emphasize the importance of Bulgarian culture for the dissemination of Slavic writing. The dramatic plot is not centred on the significance and spread of the Bulgarian alphabet and writing among the Slavs. It draws attention to the adoption of Christianity as an act of political decision by the Bulgarian ruler. Boris, the Baptizer tsar, is a sagacious statesman who, despite internal resistance, imposes his will, because he is convinced that conversion to Christianity will ensure the integrity of his kingdom and his people. In Voynikov's dramatic plot,

Methodius and Cyril are executors of the Christian political cause, and their image as enlighteners remains unemphasized here. The dramaturgical choice is to highlight their Christianizing mission. In both their forms of presence in medieval history, they emerge as a "key cultural-historical resource" (Spasova 2020, 244). The "memory" of Cyril and Methodius's Bulgarian origin is cultivated around the two brothers and consistently noted in history textbooks, including in Voynikov's *Kratka Balgarska Istoriya* (*A Brief Bulgarian History*) from 1861 (Voynikov 1861). In D. Voynikov's drama, not only does their image as enlighteners fade, but so does the usual emphasis that they are specifically Bulgarian saints. In the drama, Methodius is referred to by the nationally neutral term "Christian", while in *A Brief Bulgarian History*, Voynikov calls him a "Bulgarian Apostle" and repeatedly emphasizes the Bulgarian affiliation of the two brothers. The play glorifies their work, placing emphasis not on the Bulgarian language, literacy and literature, but on the Bulgarian presence in the Eastern Orthodox Christian community. It was precisely the Christianizing activity of the Holy Brothers Cyril and Methodius that was politically relevant on the eve of the 1870s – a time when Bulgarians were increasingly demanding ecclesiastical independence from the Greek Patriarchate[2].

Among the major plots omitted from dramaturgy is that of the Golden Age of Bulgarian culture. The cult of education during the Revival period presents the figure of the enlightened ruler as particularly prestigious. In medieval Bulgarian history, this is Tsar Simeon. But like Asparuh, Simeon does not appear as a character in drama. This is despite the fact that Voynikov himself describes Simeon's reign as "the most glorious era", and the Bulgarian tsar as an exceptionally educated ruler. These characteristics distinguish the time of Tsar Simeon in *A Brief Bulgarian History*. The playwright, however, chooses as his characters other Bulgarian tsars whose reigns bring the state to instability, internal and external conflicts, and leave the author with no grounds for heroizing the royal figures – George Terter in *Velislava*, *Bulgarian Princess* and Tsar Peter in *Princess Rayna*.

Dobri Voynikov is not the only author who focuses on the problematic periods of his homeland's past. Bulgarian Revival-period dramaturgy tells the story of the medieval era through the tragic events surrounding the conquest of the First Bulgarian Empire (*Radan Voyvoda* by P. I. St-va, 1871) and through the internecine strife and power struggles during the Second Bulgarian Empire (*Princess Rayna* and *Velislava*, *Bulgarian Princess* by D. Voynikov, *Ivanko, the Murderer of Asen I* by V. Drumev, *Vladislav, kral balgarski* (*Vladislav, King of the Bulgarians*) and *Velikiy Knyaz Boris* (*Grand Prince Boris*) by I. S. Vladikin, *Nevyanka i Svetoslav* (*Nevyanka and Svetoslav*) by Konstantin Velichkov). In fact, the listed dramatic works and their plots contradict the hypothesis that history told with nationalistic pathos must remain silent about defeats. Revival-period dramaturgy interprets these events not as disgraceful, but as tragic. The founder

[2] The brothers Cyril and Methodius are also presented as Christianizers of the people of Great Moravia in the epic narrative of several songs *Cirillo-Metodiáda* (1835) by the Slovak author Ján Hollý (see Zhelev 2020).

of the lineage/state and the Baptizer are important figures from the sacred mythological times. It is from history that Bulgarians learn about these and other mythologized figures. Dramaturgy does not concern itself with them.

Revival-period historical drama changes the perceptions of the heroic and its subjects by abandoning the classical mythologization of heroism. This tendency is not a specifically Bulgarian phenomenon. It is a consequence of similar cultural processes in European literature. In the early stages of the emergence of national consciousness, a successful ruler always symbolizes a successful state. The ruler's power illustrates the power of the community. Literature, however, increasingly allows itself to place the Warrior Hero in a privileged position (according to Thomas Carlyle's classification – Carlyle 1997), which is the result of a peculiar process of democratization, even within the sphere of the heroic, usually perceived as the privileged domain of the elites. Bulgarian Revival-period dramaturgy offers more indisputable images of the Warrior Hero than of the Bulgarian rulers (Militsa from *Velislava, Bulgarian Princess*, Svetoslav from *Nevyanka and Svetoslav*).

The glorification of the ruler-heroes remains in history textbooks. Dramaturgy adopts a different strategy for structuring the historical narrative. It does not disrupt the monolithic nature of historical figures, who are considered indisputable in the national discourse, but instead focuses on less sacred events and characters from the emerging Bulgarian pantheon of heroes. In this way, it does not betray its genre nature and freely deals with human hesitations and fears, without encroaching on the Heroes from the realm of the sacred.

Literature demonstrates that the Past can be resurrected not only through the mythologization of heroic situations and characters. The more modern stage of historical and literary thinking gradually abandons the manner of mythologizing heroes and, accordingly, of personalizing history. The Golden Age of medieval Bulgarian culture is commonly referred to as Simeon's Golden Age, and the adoption of Christianity as the official religion in Bulgaria is described through the narrative of Tsar Boris, the Baptizer of Bulgarians. Among the main dramatic characters are representatives of different social groups who humanize the notions of the past and bring them down to earth. Replacing heroic poses with human experiences shortens the distance between the past and the present, and interprets history in understandable language. It transforms history from an awe-inspiring abstraction into an intelligible collection of interpersonal conflicts and alliances, hopes and disappointments, ups and downs, loves and sorrows. The mythologization of the heroic as an attempt to explain the past gradually gives way to the clumsy attempts at psychologism in Revival-period literature and, in particular, in dramaturgy.

Despite the prevailing understanding of Revival-period drama as one-dimensional, with its characters devoid of psychological depth and their colouring reduced to black-and-white traits, it turns out that in the choice of plots, a significant part of historical dramaturgy tends to avoid those that would provide it with the easy declamatory power of suggestion. Thus, on the one hand, the authors choose characters, who, with their emotional or life drama, are a stronger artistic provocation, and, on the other hand, they do

not encroach on the monolithic nature of the iconic heroes of History, by not making them central figures in their plots and, accordingly, not subjecting them to psychological analysis that would destroy their integrity. This is one of the Revival-period authors' likely motives for the discrepancy between the emphasis of the historical narrative in history textbooks and the emphasis found in dramatic works. The imitation of the psychologism and themes in foreign dramaturgy also sets a model that Revival-period playwrights seek to adopt.

Bulgarian Revival-period dramaturgy utilizes its nature as a successful propaganda tool, despite making plot choices that complicate the authors' tasks. Although their inept interpretation does not meet high artistic criteria, it does not weaken the power of their messages. Even the earliest Bulgarian historical dramas follow the relevant European trends in their movement towards a modern type of literary creation and go beyond the stage of straightforward mythologization of history. Between mythologizing and problematizing, they make the more difficult choice – to supplement the historical narrative in such a way as to suggest analogies with the present and translate the intrigue in the play into the language of contemporary events.

With the help of the theatre, Revival-period historical dramaturgy successfully manifests one of the important markers of every national community – its ancient past. From this past, dramaturgy draws a series of plots that correspond to the political, moral and ethical problems of the Revival period. Updated in the present, the plots from the medieval Bulgarian past "work" beyond mere teaching and edifying. Viewed superficially, they ignite the patriotism of the audience. When considered in depth, however, they can be perceived as a political school for their contemporaries, because they problematize messages about responsibility towards the homeland, about the duty of the ruler/leader, about the participation of all classes in the common cause, which in the 19th century is recognized as a drive for national consolidation.

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