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The Kidnapped Identity and the Myth of the Book Burning

The national identity could be seen as an outcome of the deliberate efforts of some kind of élite to consolidate an ethnic community¹. Every identity needs a mythology to legitimate it for the others and in the consciousness of its members. Such mythology defines the Own and distinguishes it from the Alien, it combines several elements —the glorious past, some key figures, which could be named as the Founder, the Baptist, the Saint (The Divine Defender), the more numerous group of the Heroes, and the Enemy, who must always be available. To obtain the status of mythology the narratives about them must manifest a universally recognized through about the community, to define its identity and the laws it submits to. The mythical thought believes that today's events repeat the mythical events which occurred in *illo tempore*, as Mircea Eliade said.

One typical myth from the time of the Bulgarian national Revival (18th and 19th centuries) tells us the story of the burning of some old Bulgarian books and manuscripts. Nowadays it could be read through Jorge Luis Borges and Umberto Eco (*The name of the Rose*) but such an intellectual excursion will draw us away from the meaning that the plot had for his contemporaries. For its contemporaries its deep meaning was to explain one significant absence and to point at the guilty kidnapper. These two operations must forge the national identity. The events took place in the 1820s and 1830s in the town of Turnovo at the time of Ilarion from Crete (1821-1827, 1831-1838, “Exarh of the Holy Bulgaria”), but they were repeating something happened in *illo tempore*. As Thomas Mann said in the introduction of the novel *Joseph and His*

1. See B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflection on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London 1983; E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford 1983; E. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780. Programme, Myth, Reality*, Cambridge 1990; A. Smith, *National Identity*, London 1991.

Brothers, as much further we go into the depth of the past, that much the archetype of the repeating events evades in some kind of abyss that has no bottom.

For many of the narrators of this story the archetype was the fall of the Ohrid Archbishopric (1767). Perhaps the first who wrote about Book Burning was Yuri Venelin in his *About the beginning of the new Bulgarian Literatur* (*O zarodishe novoj bulgarskoj literature*, 1839, Bulgarian translation 1842). Christo K. Daskalov went even more backwards in the past and recalled the archetype of the Library in Alexandria which was destroyed in flames.

Neophyte Bozveli², Georgi Rakovski³ and Grigor Parlichev⁴ spoke in general about book burning but they did not tell us about the auto-da-fé in Turnovo. There was no lack of information though. Victor Grigorovich reported about book burning in Zograph and other monasteries⁵. Konstantin Irechek mentioned about similar events in the Bulgarian lands, etc.⁶

The situation could be described like this:

The old books as symbol and testimony of the desired and prestigious identity were missing or were not enough. Some scholars even clame that the absence is a main constitute of the national identity for such peoples like Bulgarian⁷.

There was an Enemy for whom they thought that this absence was favourable, hence he must be blamed for it and his guilt was accepted a priori.

Someone threw up a piece of unconfirmed information from the past and it was repeated willingly by many other people.

The expectation such a plot to appear was *post factum* manifested by Rayko Guinsifov as if he did not know the Turnovo legend. In the introduction to his translation of the *Manuscript from Kralედვორ*

2. Neophit Bozveli, *Sachinenija*, Sofia 1968, pp. 103-104.

3. See G. Rakovski, *Sachinenija*, 3, Sofia 1984, pp. 31 and 172. See also the poem "Traveller in the Forest", G. Rakovski, *Sachinenija*, 1, Sofia 1983, pp. 263 and 390.

4. G. Parlichev, *Dokoga, bratja mili? Izbrani proizvedenija*, Sofia 1980, p. 179.

5. See V. Grigorovich, *Ocherk puteshestvija po Evropejskoj Turcii*, Kazan 1848 (Sofia 1978²); K. Irechek, *Istorija na bulgarite*, Sofia, s.d., p. 389.

6. More details in N. Aretov, *Vasil Popovich. Life and work*, Sofia 2000.

7. See A. Kiossev, *Spisaci na otsastvashtoto*, In: *Bulgarskijat kanon? Krizata na literaturnoto nasledstvo*, Sofia 1998, p. 14.

(*Kraledvorski rakopis*) Guinsifov revealed his preliminary conviction that such Bulgarian manuscripts had existed and then they had been destroyed by the enemies, but if one searched hard enough one should find some treasure resembling to the Russian *The Song of Igor's Campaign* (*Slovo o polky Igoreve*), or the Czech Manuscript from Kraledvor⁸.

With such expectations one could not miss the opportunity to find such books or an explanation for the fact that they were missing. Actually not everybody was inclined to think so. Lyuben Karavelov, who was modern liberal and even radical, objected to such illogical expectations⁹.

The story about the destroying of some valuable old Bulgarian manuscripts by Greeks is a typical myth, which can be described in the moment of its forging which is very well testified. One could track its appearance and shaping, to find out its mental and psychological roots and even the attempts some disagreements to be expressed. One could not miss to notice its connection with the climax of the struggle for independent Bulgarian church. The main variation of the myth *Mono-logue or thoughts of Metropolitan Ilarion before burning the Bulgarian books from the Metropolitan's library in Turnovo* by Vasil Popovich appeared only months before the independent church was proclaimed in 1860.

The legend about Ilarion from Crete and the book burning became popular due to Christo K. Daskalov who treated it in two texts¹⁰ where he even put some dialogue and some additional characters. The long article *Revival of Bulgarians and Reaction in European Turkey* dealt with the advance of the literature and enlightenment and with the resistance ("reaction" in his terms) against the Greek and Turkish aspirations. The author presented his work as undoubted truth extracted from his own observations and from books, in some cases —from Bulgarian

8. R. Zinzifov, *Sachinenija*, Sofia 1969, p. 171.

9. L. Karavelov, *Sabrani sachinenija*, 6, Sofia 1985, pp. 27-28.

10. "Vozrozdienie bolgar ili reakcija v Evropejskoj Turcii", *Russkaja beseda*, 1858, no.

10. (See also *Bulgarski avtori v ruskija periodichen pechat. 1854-1864*, Sofia 1982). "Otkritija v Tarnove, drevnej stolice bulgarskoj. Pismo k O. M. Bodjanskomu", *Chtenija imperatorskogo Obshtestva istorii i drevnosti rossijskih*, 1859, no. 2. The second text is the pamphlet mentioned in Y. Trifonov, "Predanie za izgorenata starobulgarska biblioteka v Tarnovo", *Spisanie na BAN*, no. 14, Klon istoriko-filologicheski i filosofsko-obshtestven, no. 8, 1917.

folk songs and legends. He managed to stick to an objective voice in most of the time.

The episode about the book burning was one of the only two episodes where plot and even direct speech were used. The author dealt with several types of events that formed the basis of the national mythology - the conversion to Islam ("making Turk" in popular speech) in which Greek clergymen played infernal role, europeization of Bulgarian beauties, building Bulgarian churches and schools, the glorious results of the Bulgarian schoolboys and schoolgirls at the exams at the end of the school year, etc.

But the book burning took the central place. It is worth mentioning that the auto-da-fé itself was not treated as something negative, the bad thing was that the burned books were Bulgarian. When the author mentioned the burning of the new Bulgarian translations of the Gospel, which Patriarchate said that were "heretical" because of the assistance of the Protestants, he said among other things: "instead of them one could point at [for burning?! —note N.A.] different Catholic works, French atheistic writings and even Greek anti-orthodox books published in Malta".

The episode about the burned books was presented without indicating the sources, but at length and with attempt to introduce the psychological experience of the participants. The craftsmen called by the Metropolitan knew in advance that something bad was going to happen. The old Patriarchate was a sinister place reminding of the neo-gothic literature. The demonic Metropolitan intentionally wanted to make the Bulgarians to burn their "own" books and even refused a bribe. The author was inclined to suppose some "instructions ... from the Patriarch in Constantinople". Perhaps the biggest retreat from the objective narration could be found in the introducing of an element known from the religious literature. It turned out that when after three years the mortal remains of the Metropolitan were exhumed according to the custom they testified to his evil deeds and the God's punishment. "I only know that they exhumed —it is terrible to say it— not bones but dead body, black as tar, with long hair, with eyes fallen from the eye-sockets and long and curved nails."

In the second text Ch. Daskalov claimed that he had learned about this criminal deed from Emanuil Vaskidovich, whose name was hidden

behind initials. According to a Vaskidovich' letter he had come across some manuscripts kept by the "sheikh of the mosque" (former church) in Turnovo, but he had not enough money to buy them all, that is why he sought help from Ilarion, who successfully deluded the teacher, sent him back to Svishtov and burned or made some Bulgarians burn the old manuscripts¹¹. As far as I know Vaskidovich never told this story to anyone else. K. Irechek, who believed to similar legends about burned books, defined as fairytale the Daskalov's paraphrase of the adventure of Vaskidovich in his *History of the Bulgarians*, published in Czech and German in 1876¹².

The myth found its final variation in the work of Vasil Popovich. The scholars of the Bulgarian theater and the publishers often deal with *Monologue or thoughts of Metropolitan Ilarion before burning the Bulgarian books from the Metropolitan's library in Turnovo*¹³ for it is one of the first Bulgarian dramatic works. When one text has enough interpretations the desired qualities are eventually found.

The author knew Daskalov's article in "Russkaja beseda" magazine. Ilarion was portrayed in the tradition of the other works from the period with similar plots. At the same time the character was not flat, many feelings motivated his actions - greed, bulgarophobia (too strong Greek patriotism), revengefulness ... Popovich really achieved to dramatically represent the psychological experience of the character, who was frightened by the crime he was committing. Side by side with the psychology there was a gloomy neo-gothic atmosphere in the work. And it was typical for the other variations of the myth. Simultaneously all the other events of the plot were removed so that only the sinister evil deed, seen through the eyes of the perpetrator remained.

The plot about the book burning was willingly taken on by many other writers. The next witness was Petko Slaveykov, who exposed his

11. See T. N. Shishkov, "Dr. Christo Daskalov", *Sbornik na BAN* 8 (1892). Shiskov did not quote precisely the text of Daskalov, according to Yurdan Trifonov.

12. K. Irechek, *Istoriya na bulgarite* ..., 391. The author emphasized that Emanuil Vaskidovich is Greek by birth.

13. *Mesecoslov na bulgarskata kniznina za 1859 g.* Later "Monologue or thoughts of Metropolitan Ilarion ..." has been included in a reader for children without the author's name - Pavel Kaljandgi, *Drugar za decata* (Odesa 1863). In the 20th century the work is published in some anthologies like *Bulgarska dramaturgija do Osvobozhdenieto* (1962-1966), *Vazroghden-ski stranici*, *Bulgarski vazroghdenski stihove* (1978), *Vazroghdenska poezija* (1980), etc.

variation in a range of newspaper articles named *The memoirs of an old bagpiper*¹⁴, where the names were slightly changed and the plot was told as in a fictional work. The episode with the burned books was one of the many anecdotes about the Metropolitan. Even the treatment of the authenticity of the events was ambiguous. The event was introduced briefly, without additional characters and without psychology. If one read it closely, one could find some kind of nuances in the sinister character, something that was missing in the portraying of the other Metropolitans in the work. The merits of Ilarion for the Bulgarian education were recognized here and the author affirmed that Ilarion became more soft at the end of his life, that he began to consult fortune-tellers, etc.

The work of V. Popovich gave rise to another drama *The Burning of the Library in Turnovo*, written by Nikola Patoev (1833-1874). The author was a craftsman from Shumen and a passionate man of theater, who had prepared other plays as well that were lost. He had put on stage some dramas, played in the local orchestra, wrote some small reports in the newspapers, took part in the struggle for independent Bulgarian church, etc. *The Burning of the Library in Turnovo* was put on stage in Shumen in 1871 and was published in 1884 after the author's death. The book had many subscribers, so it was popular. This drama repeated the plot and even some parts of the text of *Monologue or thoughts ...* On the other hand Patoev introduced new characters and new episodes and developed the plot. The work was directly linked with the struggle for independent Bulgarian church and reflected the demands of the Bulgarians and their idea for the crimes of the Phanariots: bribe-taking for ordaining and marriage ceremonies between relatives, illiteracy of the priests, discrimination of the educated Bulgarian teachers, the dispute for the language used in church, and even a murder in a street quarrel about the rights of the Bulgarians. It is worth mentioning the unusual motivation of the Metropolitan who was afraid of a possible alliance between Bulgarians and Turks against Greeks.

Although mechanically added, the story of the auto-da-fé was repeated several times. Initially it was performed in front of the spectators, accompanied by the comments of the servant Ivan, who was

14. See also P. R. Slaveikov, *Sachinenija*, 2, Sofia 1978, pp. 117-118.

listening secretly behind the door. Then Ivan went to the tavern and mentioned the crime, but made Petko tell it. Petko had already written the story from him. In the meantime a fiddler had come to know it and even had made a song about it. While discussing the event in the tavern, the song was heard from outside and this seems to be a special approval of the truthfulness and the importance of the event. Petko's narrative referred to other similar events and thus mythologized the plot.

Who was actually Ilarion from Crete? The contemporaries —Bulgarians and Greeks— and the scholars discussed him passionately and their evaluations were very different. Recently the negative evaluations predominate. Among Bulgarians Vasil Aprilov was especially well disposed. He did not miss any opportunity to pay tribute to the Metropolitan.

Yuri Trifonov, who had studied in detail the facts, noted that actually a Russian connection could be traced in the basis of the legend of the book burning. As a matter of fact there were two "libraries" in Turnovo and their history was merged. The first one was part of the church "St. 40 Martyrs" and the second was the Metropolitan Library. The information about the repair of the metropolitan church was added. The first who mentioned the book burning was Y. Venelin in *About the beginning of the new Bulgarian Literature* (1838) and this was years before the moment that Ilarion took the chair. Then the story was deliberately repeated by Victor Grigorovich (*Ocherk puteshestvija po Evropejskoj Turcii*, 1848), Ch. Daskalov and Rakovski¹⁵.

The only one more detailed presentation of Ilarion in Bulgarian language —an article of Philipos Eliou¹⁶— was dedicated to another problem and had only indirect connection with the person in question. According to Eliou a central role in censuring the Greek literature was attributed to Ilarion (at that time he was named "from Sinai") even around 1820. The story went that he burned a radical pamphlet of the Enlightenment, that he had the intention to eliminate the enemies of the Patriarchate, in the first place Adamantios Korais and his circle, among them Nikola Picolo —one of the main adversaries of Ilarion. The Greek enlighteners accused Ilarion of all kinds of sins —that he supported

15. See Y. Trifonov, *op.cit.*, pp. 31-32.

16. Ph. Eliou, "Predrevolucionnite krizi i N. S. Pikolo", *Balkanistika* 3 (1989) 99-125.

mistresses, that he betrayed the Greek people, that he tried to create something like the Inquisition, etc. Ph. Eliou wrote that these accusations were undoubtedly exaggerated and that Ilarion was “a man with remarkable education and bold spirit”, who personified and to a great extent created the politics of the Patriarchate against the new ideas coming from Europe. This made him “the main enemy” and even “the easiest target” for the enlighteners.

The situation in which Ilarion was in Constantinople towards the year 1820 appeared to be not very different from the situation, in which he was going to be some years later in Turnovo. Eliou described it this way: “It was very typical for the state of the spirits from that time that a part of the Greek society, perhaps a very small part but always exceptionally dynamic was ready to accept in 1820 that the Orthodox church was capable to proceed to elimination of its enemies or to use false reports to the authorities when it could not manage with them in another way. If we replace the word “Greek” with the word “Bulgarian” and change the year, this will describe quite accurately the Bulgarian attitude towards Ilarion.

Nadia Danova put the plot about Ilarion and the book burning among “the myths that exist in our folk legends and historiography”, myths that are connected with politics of Hellenization carried out by the Greek clergy. She sought the explanation in the fact that Ilarion from Crete was “the inspirer and the organizer of the printing establishment of the Patriarchate and in the first place of the Censorship”. Danova advanced one unexpected hypothesis that deserved attention. “It seems to me that the auto-da-fé that the Church organized to burn some Protestant’s books had helped a lot to the creation and the rapid spreading of the myth about the book and manuscript burning by the Metropolitan of Turnovo Ilarion from Crete and by other Phanariots in our towns. And this myth was so precious for some figures of the Bulgarian national revival”¹⁷.

Another point of view sought the origin of the legend in an auto-da-fé in Yannina (or Janiana, now Ioannina). It was organized by another Greek high clergyman and was commented in the press of Athens in

17. N. Danova, “Knigata i dvizenieto na ideite na Balkanite prez XVIII i XIX v. Nabljudenija varhu njakoi nalagani ogranichenija”, *Literaturna misal*, 1985-1986, no. 3.

1830s¹⁸. One even more unexpected point of view proposed a connection with burned Turkish books in Turnovo and somewhere else in Ottoman empire¹⁹. However Petko Slaveykov knew some similar facts and he was one of the people that were connected with the version that Ilarion had burned Bulgarian books. In his unpublished memoirs Kiro Tuleshkov wrote that in 1858 his Turkish teacher had taken him to the library of the Medrese and had shown him Turkish translations of the historical books, that have been burned in the past²⁰.

The question about the particular historical authenticity is interesting. But of course no less important are the ideas of the people from the time of the Bulgarian national revival, the mental constructions that constituted the basis of their texts and determined the motives of their deeds. The way in which these ideas were constructed, deserves attention too. The discussed case gives us the chance to observe one chain of events that brings to the creation of one literary work that had strong influence over its contemporaries. Today we could hardly judge about the authenticity of the plot, but we could not miss the opportunity to mark that the plot, such as we know it, corresponded to the preliminary expectations of a considerable part of the Bulgarian intelligentsia from that time. Perhaps Ilarion from Crete had indeed come across some manuscripts, perhaps everything was a result of the suspiciousness of the Bulgarians. One way or another, one problematic letter of Vaskidovich had provoked the interest of Ch. Daskalov, who retold the story. V. Popovich picked it up and immediately wrote "Monologue or thoughts of Metropolitan Ilarion before burning the Bulgarian books from the Metropolitan's library in Turnovo". His work was twice published before the Liberation (1878) and it had obviously a wide response among its contemporaries. The next generations were also interested and made other variations of the myth. Even nowadays we could trace the myth in the

18. See Leslie Collins, "Book Burning, the First Braila Revolt and Other Matters Relevant to Bulgarian History, Covered by the Greek Press of Athens, 1839-1841", In: *The Second Anglo-Bulgarian Symposium. Blagoevgrad, September 1985. Proceedings*. Ed. L. Collins, School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University of London, 1993, pp. 21-23.

19. M. Stajnova, "Njakoi svedenija i predanija za biblioteki v Tarnovo po vreme na osmanskoto vladичество", In: *Izsledvanija v chest na prof. Dr. Christo Gandev*, Sofia 1983, pp. 173-178.

20. See M. Stajnova, *op.cit.*

book *Zotik* (1974), written by Vencislav Nachev, in the drama *The Passion Week*, by P. Pavlov, staged in Vidin and on national TV in the 70s, etc. The agitation caused by the returning to Mount Athos the manuscript of the *Slaveno-Bulgarian History* (*Istoriya slavyanobolgarskaya*) by monk Paisiy from Khilendar (1762) testified that even nowadays the problem of the national identity could be put in the context of some kidnapped manuscript. However the plot was slightly different —as the kidnapper was “own” he turned to be a hero and the kidnapping a heroic deed. But the mental basis is constant and has nothing to do with the manuscripts, only with their status in the society and in the popular mentality and imagination.