

'UNCONSCIOUS HISTORICIZATION'?
HISTORY AND POLITICS IN INTERWAR BULGARIA THROUGH THE EYES OF
LOCAL VISIONARIES *

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'Unconscious historicization' is a concept introduced by British anthropologist Charles Stewart (2003), who works for years on dreams as a symbolic mirror of collective behavior and consciousness. Drawing on examples of 'dreams of treasures' in modern Greece, he shows that such dreams, especially ones that show people (or the act of) finding treasures, "arise as unconscious by-products of the intense historical consciousness". They may be seen "a divinatory look into the future to discover a past that will enrich the present" (Stewart 2003: 481). Taken as sociocultural facts, treasures in Greece, as elsewhere, may be considered as 'sediments' of History. According to the common knowledge, they are buried in the earth in times of crisis and despair, or "when people fled away". To put it in other words, they are 'hidden' in critical periods of History, which, according to historians and archeologists, coincide with invasions, conquests, wars, and all that might represent one or another form of 'death' of a culture¹. Seen from this perspective, their bringing to light is an attempt to restore and reconstruct historical continuity.

It is not difficult to find Balkan examples of 'treasure hunting' to which this logic might be extended. Yet applying Stewart's reasoning fosters a new approach to the figures, and the trope, of 'treasure' in

* The Bulgarian version of this text is a more developed version of an article initially published in *Historical Future* № 1-2, 2004, 152-170. The present English translation is substantially reworked: further elaborating the argument in the second part, I added new references, and removed a segment of the first part of the paper.

¹ In Bulgarian context, these theories operate with the notion of archeological treasure, a deposit of valuable artifacts set up (and found) in a specific historical context that suggests 'rupture'/ 'break' and/or 'cultural hiatus'. Another, more specific meaning of archeological treasure developed with findings of golden pieces identified with the Thracians. The topic of 'Thracian gold' or golden treasures deserves special attention, which is beyond the scope of this article.

contemporary social imaginaries. This approach might be particularly fruitful when dealing with figures of treasure and facts or treasure-hunting in history writing, in media discourse, and in myth². In Bulgaria, the topic is still not given the research interest it deserves. Despite some interest in folk stories about treasure-hunters [*imanjarski folklor*], the theme is not explored from the viewpoint of ethnology. Treasures have their own cultural history that is also worthy research³. Perhaps Bulgarian examples are most interesting to study with regard of what may be termed a *treasure discourse* in history and archeology⁴. The category of treasure discourse is a good analytical tool for studying the multifaceted relation between national[ist] celebration of the past, materializations of history, archeology, and the media. It allows extending research to hot issues like competition between archeologists and treasure hunters, or looters⁵. Closer to the goal of this paper, analyzing data in terms of 'treasure discourse' helps understanding how perfectly conscious and purposeful historical constructs lead to unconscious historicization.

The last point takes us to another level of Stewart's argument: the very process of nation-building can induce one or another form of *unconscious* or *subconscious* historicization (2003: 487-90). The primary goal of nation building is, precisely, to produce *the Nation's* historical consciousness, its awareness about its rooting in time and space. The

² Professional writings of historian and archaeologists (with the possible exception of numismatics) dealing with treasures often fail to clearly separate the technical aspect of a 'treasure' from popular representations and social phantasm about gold, and thus charter myths into the media.

³ A book supposed to deal with this history, **Petrov** 2001 (inspired by the *imanjarski folklor*), does in fact amalgamate pseudo-historical research, folklore studies, semiotics and myth-making.

⁴ Here, 'treasure discourse' is a category I introduced elsewhere (Valchinova 1998:75-7) to account for a range of cultural and social phenomena related to the heightened public interest high-value artifacts from the past. In recent years there, there was an increase of interest of Western social scientists in Thracian treasures and social phenomena related to them, as 'gold treasure' exhibitions, the antiquaries' mafia, and the like.

⁵ One recent example is the media thriller enacted on 4-5 October 2004, at the discovery of a Thracian treasure in the village of Shipka (Kazanlăk Region), as well as the depiction of the leading archeologist in the Thracian realm, Dr. G. Kitov, as "the Bulgarian Indiana Jones"; see for instance www.novinite.com under 5.10.2004 ["Archeologists, Police Hit Headlines over Gold Treasure"]. For Western media coverage see **Williams** 2006. Most of the public statements about archaeological 'treasures' are a mix of would-be scientific report and catchy media coverage.

notion of historical consciousness is especially suitable to account for the intense work of Balkan elites on collective memory and knowledge of the past, a work intrinsic to every nation-building process. Viewed from this angle, unconscious historicization can take multiple shapes, from projections of scholarly knowledge into everyday life to dreams. Basing myself on different 'sources', I will apply Stewart's concept to other forms of symbolic thought and cultural imagination. The paper focuses on how historical events are reflected in the prophecies of Bulgarian visionaries from the Interwar period; the following pages are the first step of a larger study in process.

The Setting

The present study deals with women visionaries and clairvoyants, i.e. with female figures of an alternative religious expertise. By the latter term I mean that such specialists, albeit not recognized by the Church, cannot be limited to 'folk' or 'popular' religion either. No matter whether we label them witches or *magi* (the Weberian category of religious expert), religious dissidents or simple *bricoleurs*, they are among the principal actors of religious innovation (Albert 2005). It should be emphasized that these female visionaries and clairvoyants (whose usual label of *vračka* suggests an ambiguous characterization of both 'medicine women' and 'witches') consider themselves – and are viewed by social actors in most Balkan societies – as endowed with religious competences (knowledge and skills), usually referred to as a "gift from God". This point of view helps bringing into focus the *emic* cognitive system and representations, and taking into account the actors' voices. It might be particularly fruitful when applied to Balkan Orthodox cultures, where Eastern Christianity was for centuries blended with Islam, and to societies where witch-hunting was virtually unknown⁶.

⁶ This peculiarity, common to Eastern Christianities, is generally underestimated and almost unstudied, except for Russia: for an overview of research on witch-hunt in Russia, and an innovative approach, cf. **Kivelson** 2003, with a wealth of literature. The research problem for the Balkan context is delineated in **Valtchinova** 2006.

The following pages will feature a few religious specialists, in the above broad definition, that have been active during the Interwar period. This is a crucial time for Bulgarian nationalism, a period sealed by a 'national catastrophe', and characterized by disillusionment with national ideals and a decisive move towards national homogenization. During the quarter of century separating the two 'national catastrophes' from the Second World War and the radical socio-political change (sometimes put as the 'Third' catastrophe), the feelings of loss and despair generated a variety of political reactions and led to opposite public attitudes. They materialized also in culture, mentalities, and in what we use to call spiritual life, giving impetus to a millenarian *ethos* that is always dormant in Orthodox cultures. For a historian, it remains extremely difficult to access these cultural and socio-psychological processes through the usual sources: mental attitudes do rarely sediment in documents. They are perhaps well manifested in prophecies and visions, specific cultural products that have always some social and political contents⁷. Therefore, working on visionaries and clairvoyants amounts to understanding them as social actors; it requires also seeing their prophecies as symbolic responses to broader concerns of the society they live. In a way similar to the history of dreams and **through** dreams, delineated in Peter Burke's innovative study (1973), research on visionaries and their religious and cultural imaginaries can contribute to better understanding specific historical periods, as well as the symbolic 'refractions' of History more generally speaking.

To illustrate my point, I will scrutinize of the dream/visions⁸ of the famous visionary of the Interwar period Bona Velinova, who was referred to as 'living saint' and 'a manufacture for visions.' Since the 1920s, Bona Velinova became the entitled prophet of an Orthodox association, *Dobryi*

⁷ As numerous examples from Western Christian cultures show, even 'private' visions and messages from Heavens are saturated with public messages: cf. the analyses of **Christian** 1996; **Zimdars-Swartz** 1991.

⁸ Dream/vision [съновидение] is the erudite (and also the ecclesiastic) term for "having a vision"; it is used by most Orthodox religious visionaries that are self-conscious of being religious actors.

Samaryanin (The Good Samaritan), which provided her support. The organization's ideas and ideals gradually influenced Bona's 'dreams' and visions. Adding her sensitivity to large social and political issues, Bona's art of receiving and interpreting signs from Heavens set her aside among popular prophets and visionaries in Interwar Bulgaria. In what follows, I will look at the social production and the cultural interpretation of dreams and visions *of* and *by* Bona Velinova, and of some minor visionaries of the *Good Samaritan* circle.

Bona's Dreams and Divine Revelations about Bulgaria's Future and Past

Bona Velinova (1885-1960) of Grigorevo was known as by the name of her husband's village, which and more generally associated with the local culture of *šopi*, in Sofia Region⁹. Shortly before the Balkan wars, she became renowned in for discovering holy springs [*ayazmo*] in Grigorevo and other villages. Subsequently this aptitude was extended to finding *holy places*, by divine inspiration and following various saints' instructions. The holy places were usually told to be 'monasteries' "destroyed by the Turks" or "fallen into ruins after Turkish attacks", and therefore founded prior to the late 14th century. Developing her techniques, in the course of the 1920es Bona specialized in the so-called *prayers-demands*, or séances of transmitting public demands to God and transmitting back the divine answer, usually coming from a prophet, an apostle, or a saint. During these séances, she acted as a living channel between God and his acolytes, on the one hand, and individuals or groups of believers, or simply supplicants, on the other one.

In the post-war years Bona Velinova got involved with the Orthodox Society *The Good Samaritan*, a relation that marked durably her career as a visionary. *The Good Samaritan* may be characterized as a Christian fundamentalist and royalist organization that transformed the feeling of 'national catastrophe' and wounded nationalism into a call for 'renewing

⁹ The case of Bona Velinova is extensively studied in Valtchinova 2006 : 92-107 and 251-279.

faith' and preserving religion. The leading figures in it came from the military, namely two officers from the disbanded Bulgarian army (Treaty of Neuilly-sur-Seine, §10.9)¹⁰. The Society developed a royalist and clearly nationalistic discourse focused on the idea of Divine election of Bulgarians and concept of 'the New Israel' (Bulgaria embracing the Orthodox faith). Their coming into existence illustrates a trend characteristic for the post-war decade in the 'losers' countries: trying to explain military defeat and national collapse, the milieus affected by them did in the same time exploit both issues to provide an alternative reading of the events in the spirit of a 'biblical' philosophy of History. In it, defeat and suffering were integrated into a nationalistic mental scheme in which the God-chosen nation should suffer longtime and lose almost everything, before finally getting God's grace and supreme love she deserved.¹¹ According to the vision of the *Good Samaritan*, Bulgarian history was a series of sufferings and ordeals, all of them putting to the test the readiness of 'God's race' to fulfill its mission.

Indeed, Bona Velinova's visions and prophecies were an exponent of the same ethos. It is easy to 'read' them as a symbolic response to in-depth tensions and fears, an interface between the millenarian expectations about the role of Bulgaria on the one hand, and the feeling of loss and humiliation after the wars, on another one. Bona's empathy with the Bulgarians at war has marked the very beginning of her career as a visionary: her first publicly known prophecy was related to a defeat, what turned to be the break of Bulgarian frontline at Dobro Pole and the Allies' offensive in September 1918 leading to Bulgaria's capitulation (29 September 1918). Twenty years later, *Uteha (Consolation)* newspaper relates the story as follows:

Bona had received a dream from the Twelve Apostles and the following revelation from St. Paul: 'You are winning now, but [...] you should know

¹⁰ For the history of *The Good Samaritan* see the detailed study of **Djulgerov** 1937, 1940.

¹¹ For similar reactions in postwar Germany, see **Lehman** 1996: 233-259.

that you'll be defeated and Bulgaria will be divided in three. Pray [...], beg pardon and give offerings [*pravete molebeni*] for your salvation!'

The revelation came over again and Bona was instructed by the holy Apostles to stick white flags into 40 churches and monasteries. In case of failure, threatened God's messengers:

*"what was said would soon come true, Bulgaria will be enslaved and a disease, the Spanish influenza, will spread, and many will die... but if they pray, God will bless Bulgaria and [...] instead of being slaves, the soldiers will just be taken hostages."*¹²

For several weeks, struggling with the local authorities, mayors and village priests, Bona succeeded to stick 40 white flags in more than twenty villages in the larger Sofia region.

This episode is a curious page in the cultural history of the Great War, still unwritten (J. Winter 1995:16), especially in the Balkans. The white flag campaign developed in dramatic circumstances in 1918, when the trench warfare and tensions in the rear had exhausted the army and the whole Bulgarian society. The first signs of discontent emerged in the autumn of 1917, clearly coinciding with the events in Russia: acts of disobedience on the front and anti-war propaganda by soldiers on furlough. Stealing food from storehouses became frequent in the country, culminating in the women's riots that broke out in many towns between March and May 1918¹³. They were not only a protest against poverty to which wartime profiteering had brought many townspeople; they also expressed the tensions and privations endured by women whose fathers, husbands and sons were on the front, or did already lost their lives the war machine¹⁴. Bona Velinova was herself a wartime widow: her husband was killed in one of the first battles of the Balkan War, and this fact did seemingly play a role

¹² Quoted from *Uteha*, Nr. 138 (15 February 1938): 2-3.

¹³ For the women's riots see **Kastelov** 1988: 114-18; while dealing with this period, more recent works do not provide substantial details on this punctual question.

¹⁴ In Bulgaria, these problems are almost not studied in terms of gender or women history. For the relationship of social protest and war widows, see **Audouin-Rouzeau, Becker** 2000: 239-40.

for the military 'encoding' (raising a white flag for surrender) of the divine revelation.

Messages from Heavens are usual form of social reaction to war, civil strike, and to pain, sufferings and the (perceived) moral decay people use associating with them: of the long list of examples from the Middle Ages to our days and time that illustrate the same trend, the case of Joan of Arc is perhaps the best known one. The allegedly divine messages enunciated by the prophetess, as reported by *Uteha* newspaper, were obviously reworked in *The Good Samaritan* circle and adjusted to the current needs, to make them a sort of self-fulfilling prophecies. This revision resulted in noticeable anachronisms, such as the mention of the Spanish flu that raged through Europe since late 1918 and till the winter of 1919/20, causing at least twice more victims than all the war campaigns. On another hand, wordings such as 'slaves' and 'hostages' point to a cultural imaginary and a language influenced by the Old Testament. To sum up, the first revelation publicly communicated by Bona Velinova and the campaign she had initiated are the expression, in a half-military, half-religious language, of the existential insecurity, anxiety, and disorientation that affected most of losing countries by the end of the war and in the first postwar years. The campaign for the white flags anticipated, in a specific way, the *ethos* of the national catastrophe, feelings of loss and despair which were already experienced in the aftermath of the Balkan Wars and re-emerged during the campaign of Dobro Pole¹⁵.

Divine revelations that emphasize repentance and purification of sinners through prayers have been received in similar contexts in other places and times; this occurred also in European countries with predominating Catholicism. For instance, similar reactions were recorded in France during and after the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71 whose outcome, both in military terms (victory of Germany) and social results (the Commune of

¹⁵ For a detailed overview of the developments in the late summer of 1918 see **Markov** 2006: 272-310. To my knowledge, the popular mood of 'national catastrophe' is still not researched; however **Kelbecheva** 1999 gives a broad perspective on its premises.

Paris, March 1871), gave way to interpretations similar to the Bulgarian vision of 'national catastrophe'¹⁶. The apparitions of Our Lady in Pontmain (February 1871), or the solemn vow (1871) and the building of Sacré-Coeur (1875 to 1914) are among the most telling examples of the recourse to religious language for political despair. The apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Fatima, Portugal (April to October 1917) took place, again, in a context of war and civil strife¹⁷. Bona Velinova's vision might be interpreted as an embodiment of social anxiety, and the campaign she had launched – as an attempt to translate into religious language the war violence, suffering and fear. Providing a cultural translation of political and socio-psychological processes, this language was well understood when spoken in a culture divided between 'traditional' and 'modern' reactions to war (Winter 1995: 15-16). By this example, I call for attention to the religious and more generally symbolic expression of the political and socio-psychological mood of Bulgarians in the aftermaths of the Great war and after the collapse of the national ideals in two 'national catastrophes'. Studying dreams and visions that circulated in the public arena and had some public impact can contribute towards the history of mentalities of a crucial period and strengthen the (still lacking) anthropological approach in Bulgarian history-writing.

Bona had recurring dreams of 'buried' or long destroyed churches and monasteries already during the war decade; it seems however that she concentrated on this kind of revelations in the aftermaths of the war. By the mid-twenties, she was credited with discovering dozens of 'small monasteries', many of them on the outskirts of Sofia and in the region. To a large extent, Bona's gift of finding out 'monasteries' was similar to the

¹⁶ **T. Kselman**, 1983: 144-147; cf. Ph. **Boutry** 1982 for Mary as "la grande consolatrice de la France".

¹⁷ Albeit Portugal did not take part in the World War One, the call for peace and against the war remained the background of Mary's messages. Parallel to it, we find messages against God-fighters that have roots in the current situation in Portugal, and apocalyptic images which were subsequently associated with the Bolshevik revolution and 'godless Russia' (cf. **Zimdars-Schwartz** 1991: 68 sq.; 197-218).

techniques used by treasure-hunters (*imanjari*)¹⁸. As a rule, when having a dream in which the location of the abandoned holy place was revealed by divine agency, Bona used to go herself, during the night and while in trance, on the place to put a 'sign' on the spot revealed by the Holy Spirit. Then she came back on the next day, in the presence of local people, for digging on the spot: she is reported to have always found 'walls' or 'altars'. Most of the monasteries were located around Sofia: St. Minas in Obradovci, St. Elija in Darvenica, St. Joachim and St. Ana near Bistrica, St. Archangel near Buhovo, etc.¹⁹ By 1927 the newspaper *Uteha* used to recall in every issue that Bona Velinova had in her favor "over seventy churches and monasteries". Once specified, the number of seventy remained unchanged, despite continuing finding out and digging of monasteries. Bona's mystic sessions with saints led her through the whole Sofia plain, westward up to the Godeč and Slivnica areas, and northward into the Balkan Mountains. In the thirties, she occasionally 'revealed' old monasteries in Northwest Bulgaria (i.e. in the village of Zlatar, Preslav district). Her journeys through the country were marked by the invention²⁰ of Christian holy places, all of which fitted into the same scheme: a 'monastery' had existed many centuries ago and had been destroyed "when the Turks came" here. In spite of rumors about 'agents' of the *Good Samaritan* prospecting village territories for place names suggesting the idea of 'church' (*C'rkvište, klise*), Bona leaved up to God's will the location of such places. Again, divine will was called upon to explain her insistence in pushing local (village) people to assume the task of 'restoring' the holy building. Thus Bona Velinova appears to be the most prominent exponent of a particular strategy, developed through visionary techniques, of communicating God's designs focused on Bulgarian past and using the language of history-writing. Among

¹⁸ For an overview cf. **Mitseva** (ed.) 1994, 24-25, descriptions pp. 145-153.

¹⁹ Stories about finding out "old monasteries" by Bona Velinova, but also by other members of the Good Samaritan, are reported in every issue of *Uteha* newspaper between 1925 and 1941.

²⁰ Here 'invention' is used in its distinctive religious sense, the same as the Invention of the Holy Cross (by St. Helen). There is also a hint at a possible procedure of historical invention, or invented tradition in the sense of **Hobsbawm & Ranger** 1983.

the distinctive practitioners of this technique in the thirties we will find Sultani Shishmanova, the revered leader of the women's Orthodox association *Blagoveštenie* in Stanimaka/Assenovgrad, as well as Yordančo, the Rhodopes' apostle and inventor of Krastova Gora²¹.

The Good Samaritan and Visions of Bulgarian History

Finding out 'old monasteries' was Bona Velinova's hallmark, but by no means limited to her; it was a spectacular way of revealing Bulgarian past – a past that served well the present and *The Good Samaritan's* ultimate goal. Indeed, the national ideals preached by the Society were supported by various types of revelations given to other visionaries into whom "grace was poured out by the Holy Spirit". I turn now to another entitled visionary of the *Good Samaritan*, 'sister E.K.' who, in the course of the twenties, used to have visions during organizational meetings and in the presence of the Society's President, St. Denev²². 'E.K.' copied Bona's style of prophesizing: falling into trance or *primirane*, pompously called 'prophetic gift' ["I saw in my dream"], and after awakening²³, to give an 'interpretation' of the dream/vision. However, E.K. had recourse to an act of divination to reveal God's design in the images she had seen and the voices she had heard. 'Divination' based on the Bible and/or the Gospels is well known: after opening the Holy Book on a random page and putting a finger on the text, the inspired person should take the God-chosen sentence as a clue for interpreting the images she had received in her dream/vision²⁴. Here is a

²¹ The relationship of the *Good Samaritan* with the leader of *Blagoveštenie*, Sultani P. Shishmanova, can be traced back to 1931. Cf. *Uteha*, Year VI, No. 63/ 10. Dec. 1931, p. 3: 'sister' Sultani found a 'monastery in the Rhodopes'.

²² See, for example, *Uteha*, Year I, No. 6, p. 4-5 (revelation about the Holy Kingdom); year III, No. 30/ 25 March 1929, p. 2-3 (at a meeting in V. Tirnovo, 'she saw Saint Petka.').

²³ For possible English translations of *primirane*, with an analysis of this visionary technique, see **Ivanov & Izmirlieva** 2003. I insist on the fact that *primirane* was spontaneously translated as 'having a dream' by the speakers themselves, including on the pages of *Uteha* newspaper.

²⁴ Here is a good example of the technique of [in Bulgarian *predskazvane*] used by 'sister E.K.' (*Uteha*, Year II, No. 6/15 March 1927, p. 5 [italics mine, G.V.]: "Today, 6 June 1926, I was in St. Nikola Church and while sitting there, I had the following vision:

vision involving heroes of the anti-Ottoman struggle that E.K. received in 1927:

'Today, 24 February 1927, at dawn, as I woke up, my eyes closed and I saw a hill, not very high one, a lot of people had gathered there and many others walked up the streets. I asked why they were going thither. I was told that guests were coming. So, I went to the hill to see. It was lighter there, not a strong sun light but a soft light coming from the sky. People were standing in a semicircle and in the middle, there were three persons: one of them was a human being and looked like the mayor of the town, the other two were skeletons. The three of them were standing close together and were talking quietly, with a serious look.

*When I saw them, I wondered who the skeletons were. Then I heard a voice from above, '**Hadži Dimitar and Stefan Karadža!**' It was repeated twice... The skeleton of Hadži Dimitar was thinner and darker, while the skeleton of St. Karadža was bigger and more robust. After a while I lost sight of the picture. I was greatly surprised at this phenomenon and was wondering why it happened. I had no textbook at hand to see if it wasn't any special date or anniversary. And I stopped thinking of it.*

*However, the next night (25 February), again at dawn, as I woke, my eyes closed and I heard a voice from Heaven, ordering: '**Erect monuments to Hadži Dimitar and Stefan Karadža!**' That very day, we received Otechestvo, No. 314, and I came across an article: 'Bulgaria and the 50th anniversary, and so on.' I was eager to read further and... saw the names of Hadži Dimitar and St. Karadža... but it only said when and where they were killed and nothing more, the remaining article was about [a project of] making a memorial park for the Russians, not a word about building a memorial to our martyrs."²⁵*

The above text (as well as the passage quoted *infra*, note 24) is literally a handbook for interpreting religious visions through national history. It makes palpable the representations, common sense assumptions and the

an image of a bishop, with a white face and his hair white [...] I was struck and could not understand it, so when I got home, after the Mass ended, I asked God Jesus Christ in a prayer whose this image was, and what this vision was, and when I opened the Gospel, that's what I came upon: [...] (Rev. 1:19)." In *Uteha* (II, No. 6: 3), it is pompously called "communicating with God through his Verb". For divination through the Bible see **Ivanov** 1992: 280 sq. This technique is largely used still today by adepts of the Old-Calendar Church (informant M. St., Blagoevgrad).

²⁵ Published in *Uteha*, year II, issue 7/ 15 April 1927, p. 6-7: "National Martyrs, Victims to our Liberation. Some Words about Hadži Dimitar and Stefan Karadža" (bold words in the original text).

implicit logic that rule the interpretative act. First of all, it is meaningful when put in proper context: the dream occurred during the preparations of wide-scale celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the Bulgarian Liberation; marking the beginning of the Russian-Turkish war could not be missed. Perhaps the revelation is focused on a local-level commemoration of supposedly 'forgotten' heroes of Bulgarian national liberation. The figure that "looked like a mayor" represents State power; his 'talk' with the two skeletons might be understood as a metaphor for concern of the Bulgarian state for its heroes. The two skeletons turn to be the mortal remains of the two most colourful personalities in the revolutionary *četnik* movement of 1860s. They have the physical appearance of the respective *četnik* leaders in flesh and blood, as they appear on the rare pictures of their time. More interesting perhaps, they are seen as skeletons, therefore in a condition of mortality as normal humans, while nationalist discourse used to associate heroes of the national revolution with 'immortality'. There is obviously a problem of status related to this public commemoration, and 'sister E.K.' tried to formulate it in moving from description of her vision (which allowed the reader to identify this exchange as a religious vision produced *lege artis*) to its explanation. It is striking to note that the first thing she did in order to understand the divine message was looking for a textbook; the context makes it clear that it is on history (a "textbook to see if it was a special date or an anniversary of an event [*godišnina*]"). The history textbook is found in precisely the same structural position that the Scriptures – mainly the Bible or the Gospel – usually take in the 'divinatory' or interpretative act. It is a fascinating case of a spontaneous 'cultural translation,' illustrating in a brilliant way what students of nationalism have more recently formulated: history textbooks are 'Gospels' of nationalism. In the absence of a textbook, a patriotic magazine would do fine. Thus instead of using the Bible, the heavenly message was read with the help of patriotic press and historical books. The latter formed the background of the hidden knowledge on what such interpretations greatly depend, while the

interpretation itself – a claim to reveal ‘the truth’ – made it obvious, placing it as an alternative (to the officials’) truth.

This case provides an excellent insight into what M. Todorova (2002) called the ‘[transformation of] national heroes into secular saints.’ In the case of Vasil Levski studied by Todorova, the figure of the most complete ‘secular saint’ of the national Revival found itself in the focus of a national debate about national memory and [religious] sanctity. Talks about Levski’s sanctification had been circulated in the public space since late socialism. Yet it was in the context of the struggle between the two Synods that the project was brought closest to its materialization: in 1994, Levski’s canonization was attempted by the ‘Blue’ Synod of Pimen. The procedure was not recognized by the other Synod, but the case of Vassil Levski remained a hot topic in public and private discussions about the saintly status of national heroes. Our case seems to be quite similar. At a first glance, the issue is memory and public commemoration. Though, given the general orientation of the *Good Samaritan* and its prophets, it was religious sanctity that was at stake. The command to ‘erect monuments’ came from ‘God’s voice’: for someone relying on popular theologies more than on Orthodox dogmas²⁶, it would be easy to make the relationship between such an explicit command and the urge for canonization. My suggestion is that here, we face a similar logic of making saints out of national heroes. Perhaps in our case, one more step is required: from ‘skeletons’ to heroes. The ‘forgotten’ leaders of the national revolution should be first recognized as national heroes, i.e. given the tangible marks of this status. This is precisely what is meant by ‘erect them monuments’: in the language of the institutionalized national memory, monuments to national heroes and memorials to the fallen in wars for the Homeland are the *sine qua non* for the transformation of a ‘hero’ into a ‘saint’.

This authoritative message from Heaven is nevertheless carefully constructed as a vision given to a religious virtuoso. The moralistic charge

²⁶ What is an essential characteristic of both religious dissidents and religious innovators: see **Albert** 2005.

of the message is clearly stated in its introductory part: 'Our disgrace [revealed through the vision of 'sister' E.K.] is so great today, we have sunk so deeply into the quagmire of selfishness and greed, that even God cannot stand us any more!' The final sentence attributed to the visionary shows the political mood underneath the message: it happens because of the State official's attention to the celebration of the 'Russians', which is explicitly opposed to the *commemoratio* of the 'Bulgarian martyrs'. Should we read this statement as one more expression of the traditional division between Russophiles and Russophobes? Bearing in mind the strong anti-Bolshevik attitude of *The Good Samaritan*, it is more plausible that this older divide was reinforced by a new dichotomy, one having a future: between pro-'Communists' and anti-Communists.

History and Territory: on the Refugees' Tracks

Since the mid-twenties, Bona Velinova backed by the leaders of the *Good Samaritan* developed a specific visionary techniques and on-demand mediation between earthly actors and Heavens: the prayer-request [*molitva-zapitvane*]. It was performed during a sort of 'touring preach,' or 'preaching round' [*propovedničeska obikolka*] a form of missionary encounter intended at local communities. Both corresponded to the Society's project of making Bulgarians "come back to God" in order to fulfill their mission of New Israel. In the thirties, the prayer-request became the main form of the public séances she performed. As a rule, a prayer-request developed into four stages; a) public meetings, during which dozens (even hundreds) of requests and demands for God's help were handed to the seer, read or shouted in her face; b) the seer's withdrawal from public's eye for performing one or two-hour long prayer to the Lord and various saints, during which she transmitted, and mentally processed, people's inquiries for divine assistance; c) Bona Velinova falling in 'prophetic sleep,' in which she heard, or was visited by, the most suitable heavenly protector; d) at her 'awakening', the visionary related the vision she was gratified with by

the Holy Spirit, and interpreted it herself, in the manner of the Biblical prophets²⁷. It is difficult to imagine the burden of this work of imagination, memory, hidden knowledge, and ideology that resulted in a unique religious bricolage. Mixing together Old-Testament prophecies and historical myths, Bona Velinova tried to redraw the map, and the History, of Orthodox Bulgaria. The prophetess made exhausting rounds (taking up to seven days) to distant parts of the Kingdom, during which she processed hundreds of requests to the Heavens and transmitted the Lord's will to local people. Starting from early 30s, she regularly visited the regions of Burgas and Yambol in Southeastern Bulgaria, a fact explained by *The Good Samaritan's* interest in ritual fire-walking and the *nestenari* in Stranzha. A group of fire-walkers formed within the organization, and their presence marked the revival of fire-walking in the Burgas area (cf. Georgieva 2005). With her visions and predictions, Bona Velinova had undoubtedly taken part in this process: her revelations had much to do with the outburst of fire-walking in the village of Novo Panicharevo, Burgas region. The visionary was also the primary cause for the short-lived fire-walking in Malko Belovo, Pazardzhik region²⁸.

The mechanism of the seer's way of mirroring contemporary social concerns and political trends through her visions is well illustrated by the following revelation, reported as always by *Uteha* newspaper. In June 1939, on her way back from a preaching round in Stranzha, Bona stopped in the village of Ustrem, Elhovo district (south of Topolovgrad), where she was met by 'brothers' and 'sisters' from the *Good Samaritan*. As usual, she did a prayer-request, in answer to which "St. Theodosius of Tirnovo sent her the following revelation":

...There were thermal baths here and they were named 'Indžeza' after a princess, and her statue was put up near the baths. There were two marble plates [...] which

²⁷ Cf. the description of Prophet Daniel having a dream and providing its interpretation, a topic that is common to Byzantine and Bulgarian apocrypha: cf. **Tapkova-Zaimova, Miltenova**, 1996: 46.

²⁸ For the interest of *The Good Samaritan* in the *nestenari* and evolution of fire-walking in Strandzha during the Interwar period see **Georgieva** 2005 and **Valtchinova** 2004. An account for Malko Belovo in **Gerginova** 2001.

told the story of the town and the healing properties of the baths in Roman language [sic!]. One of the plates was broken into pieces, and the smaller one was taken to Greece at the time when Greeks ruled over that land. / This plate also said that treasures were buried, and where, and how long they would stay underground and when they would be discovered. [...] Stagecoaches carrying the treasury [hazna] used to pass by this place and once, haidouks came and robbed them. At last, the government sent troops, all men of the town were captured and tortured to death, and their women were given to men from other places, and the town was looted. / Later on, at the time of Bogomils and Adamites, I used to come here to preach, talking to them as I am talking to you, and to do penance, but they mocked me and I run away. I hid myself away for 15 days, and then I could [face them again] and speak to them about their fate. (Uteha, Year XIII, No. 145/ Oct. 1939, p. 3)

This revelation is a compendium of popular historical knowledge: every sentence contains images and representations of the past, including a lot of clichés about Bulgarian history. What immediately strikes is the figure of the heavenly messenger: the name of Theodosius Tirnovski, without the label of 'saint', is known to every Bulgarian from history textbooks. This 14th-century patriarch of Tirnovo, a disciple of Gregory Sinaites, is known as the highest-ranking representative of Hesychasm in Bulgaria²⁹. The story told in the first person ('I used to come here to preach') may be interpreted in two ways, both of which show a range of anachronisms. If we focus on preaching, we find the distinguished Hesychast acting in a way that contradicts the very spirit of the doctrine and practice of Hesychasm, in which retreat from the world was the rule, and not the social involvement typical for preaching, and for missionary attitudes more generally speaking. St. Theodosius of Tirnovo from Bona's vision is represented as bringing the Gospel to local people (vaguely associated with major heretic movements) and arguing with them much in the way which the leaders of the Good Samaritan should have acted in. The temporal construction "in the time of..." shows the seer's sensitivity to history and a sense that a credible

²⁹ In different works one can find both 'Saint' and 'Reverend' Theodosius of Tirnovo; a Patriarch and an anchorite are known by that name: see, for example, **Petkanova** (comp.) 1992: 459-60; **Heppel**, M. 1975: 920.

image of the past requires some chronological marks. The mention of 'Adamites' is clearly intended to thicken the 14th-century – or “just-before-the-Turks” – setting.

If, on the other hand, the interpretation focuses on local history, it could help us making sense of anachronisms and the whole sophisticated mental construct. The revelation is built on at least three chronological levels: Roman (pagan) times; an intensely Christian period which coincides with the crucial 14th century prior to the Ottoman invasion, presented through its most popular historical marks (Hesychasm, the Adamites); and Ottoman times. Additionally, implicit references to more recent events are introduced, in a subtle way. In popular historical knowledge, Hesychasm is closely related to Mount Paroria, a highly symbolic place located, as its name suggests, 'on the border' between Bulgaria and Byzantium generally speaking. Its location lacks precision; during a century-long search for Paroria, the 'cradle of Hesychasm' was variously located in a vast area from Burgas/Sozopol through the Strandja Mountains to the Sakar Mountains.³⁰ The region of Elhovo-Topolovgrad, where the village of Ustrem is located, is on the southeastern edge of possible locations for Paroria. The mention of 'robbers' is another interesting indication: in this point the story told by St. Theodosius of Tirnovo and allegedly reflecting his own experience bears close resemblance to another mid-14th century Bulgarian saint and Hesychast. The *Life* of St. Romil of Vidin provides an exact parallel to the episode of the 'robbers' attacking the saint when leaving Paroria³¹. The mention of 'robbers' is immediately translated in the more familiar

³⁰ During the period under review, attempts at localizing 'Paroria' were made by Professor (and the leader of academic history-writing) V. Zlatarski, and by local historian and Strandzha patriot Goro Gorov. Both were made public, albeit on different levels, and both could have been inculcated in historical consciousness that underlies the 'unconscious' visionary work. For the various locations and the number of Hesychast monasteries in 'Paroria,' see an accessible summary in **Petkanova** (comp.) 1992: 320. It is worth noting the comeback of Strandzha location in the 1970s and '80s, in the framework of interdisciplinary Program 'Strandzha-Sakar'. Today some Bulgarian tourist websites make use of 'Paroria', defining it as "the area between the villages of Zabernovo and Kalovo" in the hearth of the 'Thracian' Strandzha.

³¹ For these elements cf. the details analysis of his *Life* in **Bartusis, Ben Nasser & Laiou**, 1982.

categories from Ottoman times: *hajduks*, the negative (and twin) image of the magnified figure of *hajdut*, and *hazna*, the well known term for public treasury. Indeed, road banditry was endemic to this border area already in Byzantine times; it was perhaps a cultural reflex to associate the phenomenon with the Ottomans. Bandits and unsafe roads are well known from the descriptions left by European 'travelers' of all sorts, who should have crossed this region when taking the *Via Militaris* to the Sultan's capital.

Let me attempting now an analysis of this puzzling vision. What is the connection between Paroria and the eminent Hesychast on the one hand, European travelers and *haïdouks* of the Ottoman period on the other one, and the particular circumstances of a revelation received by Bona Velinova received in 1939, in a village near the Bulgarian-Turkish (and Greek) border? The relationship is mainly symbolic, not a causal one. It has to do with cultural imagination and the ways in which the representations of the Nation and its past 'work' to produce vision-dreams. My general answer is that underneath 'dreams' and visions, we find what may be termed a hidden knowledge of history, or the academically produced historical knowledge that is interiorized and transformed into implicit social knowledge. Let me explain the terminology in use. Following anthropologist Michael Taussig's definition, by implicit social knowledge³² I mean the "essentially inarticulable and imageric nondiscursive knowing of social relationality ...[a]cquired through practices rather than through conscious learning, like one's native tongue" (Taussig 1987: 394). Closer to our field, anthropologist M. Van de Port who worked in Vojvodina on the eve of Yugoslavia's outbreak, used the same concept to show (1998: 133-75) how apparent 'traditionalism' of this "murky and obscure knowing, muted and marginalized" (Ibid.:97), that "rarely surfaces in public discourses", revealed itself as chartering the social and political dynamics that is not

³² For a theorizing of 'implicit knowledge' see A. **Giddens** (1994); this category is in many points similar to the categories of 'common sense' and of *habitus* in Bourdieu's sociology.

“contained in a society’s canons”. Implicit social knowledge has an “enormous power as a motivational force in the lives of individuals and groups” (Ibid.:100). Making a step further, I would extend this definition to the popular knowledge of the past and ‘history’. Here, I use the phrasing ‘popular historical knowledge’ to denote the crystallizations of history-writing which enters in public circulation through history textbooks, local histories, family and every sort of genealogical writings. It is also chartered through literary fiction and film, as well as by other mass media during the last decades³³. Popular historical knowledge is ‘invisible’ in academic writing or official discourses, but it permeates the representations, ideas and mental images relative to the past and the national *grandeur* – the basic features of the modern’s social identity. With all this, it deeply influences the way people think of events and long-term developments; what may explain the long life of Bulgarians’ romantic nationalism.

Let me come back to the question asked at the beginning: did the ‘implicit knowledge’ of the past and Bulgarian history influence (supposedly) unconscious visions and revelations of an Orthodox peasant prophetess – and if so, how was it done? I will proceed by reading into small parcels of Bona’s vision. Take for instance ‘European travelers’: if, for academic historian, this is a specific category of ‘sources’, by the 1930s it came to be conceived as an authoritative ‘European’ voice that schoolbooks and popular writings utilized in the overall construct of Ottoman backwardness vs. Bulgarian’s European-ness. It is even more pronounced in the image of *hajduts*/*hajduks*, the ambiguous bandit magnified as a ‘fighter for freedom’ by all Balkan national ideologies. Interestingly, the imaginary world from Bona’s revelation thrives on the shadowy part of this national icon: still now, the popular use of *hajduk* for ‘thief’ is part of the implicit knowledge of elderly Bulgarians. Perhaps this semantic shift might also be due to local realities: more than just insecurity maintained by *hajduks*, the area in question suffered from the Kirdzhali riots at the end of

³³ See **Todorova** 2004 for an example of how ‘high’ historical knowledge was put into use through films and media.

the 18th and the first decades of the 19th century. They deeply marked the collective memory: popular songs and legends about famous *hajduk/hajdut* Indže Vojvoda attest at the ambiguity of this memory³⁴. Often dismissed as folklore, such oral productions might well be part of the unique blend of local memories, oral data, and popular historical knowledge that forms the ideological frame against which Bona Velinova interpreted her vision/dream. It is against such a background of 'knowing history' that divine revelations should be understood.

The figure of God's messenger is of key importance here. St. Theodosius of Tirnovo from Bona's vision shows an outstanding sense of historian and politician. His *revelatio* is in line with a basic concern of nation building: connecting places of history to the nodal points of the modern State's physical and political geography, and making holy the landmarks of national territory. Thus 'History' is literally built-in into the national territory, conferring to it political and symbolic meaning. We find the same logic in the saint's (and the seer's) endeavor to making past and present coincide: past experiences and events are interpreted according to the imperatives of the present. Thus the mention of Bogomilism should be read against the debate on the role of this heresy in Bulgarian history³⁵. The same is true for Hesychasm: the very choice of an obscure saint – but the most distinguished Hesychast – to mediate the contact with the divine realm, at the very spot of one of Paroria's possible locations, suggests that the prophetess should have interiorized what had become a common knowledge of Bulgarian history. Just as, once publicized, academic knowledge on *nestenari* had become common and public – thereby subject to a variety of interpretations and uses outside the scholars' control, popular historical knowledge of the Bogomils, Hesychasm, of Ottoman

³⁴ The memory of the 'kirdžalijsko vreme' and the impact of the 'kirdžali generation' on early Bulgarian history-writing are discussed in **Lory** 1997, with a reply by **Mutafčieva**, 1997.

³⁵ The issue of the Bogomils' movement in Bulgarian national 'fate' is overexploited by Bulgarian historians and the intelligentsia; for a good approach see **R. Daskalov** 1998: 87, 96.

conquest and 'Turkish' times was deeply ingrained in the Bona Velinova's dreams, visions, and interpretations.

The analysis of this particular revelation can be applied to dozens of Bona's prophecies published in *Uteha*, as well as in other newspapers of the Interwar period. The messengers from Heavens play an impressive role: they both mediate and interpret God's revelations. This is exactly what happened with St. Theodosius of Tirnovo: attentive to historical facts, figures and monuments, he did not miss the explanations that revealed historical concepts and language contemporary with the visionary. The words put in the mouth of this historical figure, whose dimension as a saint was almost never mentioned, are mixture of popular historical knowledge about particular periods³⁶ and political discourses of the Interwar period that play with history. It is precisely what we hear in the talk about the marble plaque purportedly bearing historical inscriptions, which had disappeared when the Greeks who "ruled over that land" left (for Greece). It is a good specimen of the discourse of 'historical theft': since the end of World War I till our days, accusations about destruction, removal, or 'theft' of valuable artifacts have been periodically raised from Greece to Bulgaria, and *vice versa*.³⁷ Historical monuments and artifacts are viewed as treasures in the proper sense of the word: in the marble plate, "it was said that treasures were buried, [...] and when they would be discovered." Perhaps they are also national treasures, embodiments of capital highly

³⁶ It should be kept in mind that popular representations about the 'Roman age' generally (and vaguely) speaking rest on clichés like public baths and the 'bathhouse' as an architectural monument; the Roman emperor seeking cure in thermal baths; marble plaques bearing inscriptions and/or pictures.

³⁷ The last affair in this sense was the theft of an emblematic treasure, the 1762 copy of monk Paissij's *Slav-Bulgarian History* (expressing Bulgarian consciousness) from the Zograf Monastery in Mount Athos. The quasi- thriller played around it between 1996-1998 provoked large public debate on 'owning' and 'theft' of history. In January 1998, tens of thousands visited the National Historical Museum where the manuscript was exhibited, before its return to the Zograf Monastery; for a description of this event as a national 'pilgrimage' cf. <http://www.aba.government.bg/bg/Bd/Archive/archive/980115/1.html> . Greek claims at the exclusive use of the name of 'Macedonia' (vis-à-vis the FYRoM) also proceed from the vision of "history theft" broadly speaking.

symbolic precisely in the perspective of the nation's past and present.³⁸ The revelation does perfectly illustrate the transfer from a material treasure to a symbolic one, and *vice versa*.³⁹ The disappearing of the marble plate (i.e. carried away in Greece) deprived Bulgaria of the buried treasure, but more importantly, of the very symbol of its rich ancient history buried in the ground, like the hidden archeological treasures. In this way, the message hints at a topic that was a burning issue in the Interwar period: leaving Bulgaria, the Greeks carried away 'treasures' of its history and deprived the country of its historical memory (stored in marble inscriptions among others) in the same way Greece took away 'old Bulgarian' lands after the First World war⁴⁰. Bona Velinova's vision repeated, in its specific symbolic language, both the nationalistic discourse embraced by the *Good Samaritan* and local people's frustrations.

It is not pure coincidence that this particular message from Heavens came in the village of Ustrem. It is located in the southernmost part of the Kariots' area, at the border of the group of villages whose Greek-speaking population left for Greece in the late twenties⁴¹. Compared to the emigration of the Greek communities from other parts of Bulgaria, the Kariots' one had provoked feelings of sadness and much regrets: the most industrious part of the population left a border region that already suffered depopulation. The mixed feeling of loss and frustration has to be noticed: it renders well people's mood towards the exchange of populations and the social construction of the refugees' life in their new homes. Like the arrival of refugees of Bulgarian origin (mainly from Greek Macedonia), the migration of Greek-speaking (or identifying themselves as Greek)

³⁸ The use of symbolic capital here follows the development of **Bourdieu** 1980: 191-207.

³⁹ It must be noticed that the use of *hazna* in the previous passage – again a familiar (Ottoman) term for public treasury, helps strengthening the association with treasure in the strict sense of the word.

⁴⁰ After the war and especially in the 1930s, erasure of material traces and artifacts that might recall Bulgarian-ness, or Slav language was part of the Greek policy for homogenizing the newly reunited Macedonia and Thrace; for a detailed list of the measures cf. **G. Daskalov**, 1996: 191-224.

⁴¹ For the competing Greek and Bulgarian claims over the Kariots' group, see **Daskalova-Zheljazkova** 1989: 5-39 (map p. 7); for the migrations see **G. Daskalov** 1996: 176-179.

population from Bulgaria to Greece were events that resounded for years, even for decades, giving food to the media of the interwar period. Issues such as 'propaganda' of foreign emissaries who urged people to migrate, the property of land and houses, the difficult adaptation of refugees, were periodically raised in the press. Questions more delicate to deal with, like division of families choosing to leave or to stay, the sense of homeland, or nostalgia for (somewhat idealized) harmonious life together in the old days, were chartered through rumor and oral accounts⁴². No doubt, all these channels were captured into visionary experience giving credence to the local readings of many of Bona Velinova's revelations.

The last observation is supported by the fact that other members of the *Good Samaritan* produced visions on the broader theme of refugees and Balkan exchanges of populations. Such one is the following experience described in *Uteha* [No. 133/ 1936, p. 2] under the title "vision of the reunification of the Balkan nations":

The wife of brother (of our Society) Dimitar G. Mangurov, from Katuntzi, Sv. Vrach District, had the following dream. She saw that a twig of boxwood appeared from the Greek border, it was shining like gold and began to grow, getting bigger and bigger on the Bulgarian side, and when it came to our territory, it turned into three large bunches. At that time, many people came along from Greece, running to Bulgaria and saying that they had to flee because of the Bulgarians.

Again, we have a symbolic mediation of social problems, a 'dream' translating into religious language social and political tensions; the particular case might correspond to an anticipated or (less probably) real return of small groups of refugees. To legitimate it as God's revelation, *The Good Samaritan* asked Bona Velinova to reveal the true meaning of the dream. In a prayer-inquiry, God sent her the following answer enounced by Prophet Jeremiah:

"The twig means the refugees in Greece who had gone there by crowds and now, seeing how bad their situation was there, all of them get ready for a journey to

⁴² For more information about these aspects see St. **Ladas** 1932: 101-263. For a good presentation of these issues that takes into consideration the Greek point of view, see **Dragostinova** [2001].

their home land. If Bulgaria keeps up to God and observes strictly what the Scriptures, the Orthodox Church and Commandments say, then as Serbia got closer, as will Greece and Romania try to get closer, and then all other countries will be willing to unite because humans all over got frightened by the wars and will search peace and comfort. Then non-Christians will convert to Christianity and God's words will come true: and other sheep I have, them also I must bring, to eat My flesh and drink My blood. And I still say to you, if Bulgaria does not humble itself and does not believe the Scriptures and God's words but hatred goes increasing, then worse will follow and Bulgaria will not expand but what it has will be lost and destroyed. That's what God says."

As many other revelations given to the seer of Grigorevo, this one is for Bulgarian politics and society much more than for 'purely' religious matters. Providing an adequate reading to it is worth historian's job.

To conclude, I hope having shown that the visions and revelations produced by Bona Velinova and other illuminated women and men were a mixture of mental imagery typical of Christian visionary culture *lato sensu*, and spontaneous historicization based on popular historical knowledge. The popular texts studied *supra* reveal that the production of popular historical knowledge, in which sophisticated historiography fuses and intermingles with folk versions and popular representations, is a process that can be triggered by religious techniques. It can also be manipulated by different ideologies and policies. More important, the impact and use of such dreams and revelations suggest that knowledge of the past and particular national vision of History remain underneath cultural imaginations like dreams and visions, determining what seers 'see', 'hear' and how they talk about it. Hence Bona Velinova makes 'unconscious historicization'. Like the "Bulgarian Pythia" Vanga, or Jordancho, 'the apostle of the Rhodopes Mountains' and inventor of Krâstova Gora, and many others. Only few cross the line by acknowledging a conscious use of history.

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