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The History of Historiography, Historical Master Narratives, and This Book

The subject of the present book is the historiography of the Middle Ages in Bulgaria. The book is historiographical in the old-fashioned sense—of writing on the writing of history, where “history” has a double meaning of “what happened in the past” and of “writing about (what happened in) the past.” This ambiguity is now avoided by taking “historiography” to mean (literally) “the writing of history,” while writing on the writing of history is called “the history of historiography.”

1 The History of Historiography and the Narrativist Turn

The history of historiography has expanded beyond its traditional scope of studying exemplary historical writings and historians. As described by Jan Eckel and Thomas Etzemüller, it has developed new tendencies and interests, such as attention to the close relation and symbiosis between history and politics (especially under Nazism and under communism); the social conditioning of scientific historical activity as regards institutionalization, professionalization, scientification, and scholarly careers; narratological perspectives on the literary and textual basis of historical works; the contribution of historical literature to fostering national identities and the various textual strategies and models for constructing one’s image in contrast to the Other(s); comparison between historiographical schools, and processes of transfer and reception between different national historiographies. To that, they add the writing of history as part (but only one part) of the historical memory of any society and its function in fostering collective social memories; an interest in the debates and polemics not only within the framework of the discipline, but also in the relations established by historical scholarship with the society at large and the appearance of historians in the media; and finally, gender perspectives on historical scholarship, with a focus on the role of men and women in its evolution.¹

1 On the “history of historiography”, see Jan Eckel and Thomas Etzemüller, “Vom Schreiben der Geschichte der Geschichtsschreibung. Einleitende Bemerkungen,” in *Neue Zugänge zur Geschichte der Geschichtswissenschaft*, eds. Jan Eckel and Thomas Etzemüller (Göttingen:

In general, the history of historiography in its present day form represents the self-reflection of the historical discipline. While it has been traditionally interested in the valid normative standards of historical scholarship, and has been considered to have a supporting role as a companion to scholarly-historical practice, it is currently understood more broadly and in a meta-disciplinary way. More precisely, its role is to thematize historical scholarship in order to highlight how it contributes to the formation of identities of nations and social groups, and to study the public uses of history, the relations between history and memory, the international processes of exchange, and transfer between historians. Thus, it forms an autonomous study of the position of historical scholarship itself within society and the construction of reality through history.²

The history of historiography in its most radical form, which derives from narrativism and the linguistic extremes of post-structuralism, comes into conflict with (and displaces in significance and relevance) the older normativist “theory and methodology of historical knowledge” known as *Historik* (after the title of Johann Droysen’s book), with its claims of attaining historical truth and a “constructivism of historical science based on method.”³ The present work understands the history of historiography precisely as a reflection upon, but also a critique of, history writing, specifically through its way of narrating the past and master narratives in particular.

Within the history of historiography, the narrativist turn, which became apparent in the 1960s, is related to the earlier linguistic turn. Both concerned a number of disciplines in the humanities, such as literary theory (also called poetics), philosophy, psychology and psychoanalysis, anthropology, memory studies, and film theory, as well as the field of history. As regards historical scholarship, the narrativist turn began under the influence of several trends.⁴

Wallstein Verlag, 2007), 7–26. Some aspects of the new “history of historiography” are presented in Christoph Conrad and Sebastian Conrad, “Wie vergleicht man Historiographien?” in *Die Nation schreiben. Geschichtswissenschaft im internationalen Vergleich*, eds. Christoph Conrad and Sebastian Conrad (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002), 23–34.

2 Eckel and Etzemüller, “Vom Schreiben der Geschichte der Geschichtsschreibung,” 19–22.

3 Alexandre Escudier, “Die historische Darstellung als theoretisches Problem in Frankreich und Deutschland im 19. Jahrhundert,” in *Die Nation schreiben*, 212–213, 234–235. This article is written from the standpoint of the older *Historik* against postmodernism in historiography. For a view favoring “dialogue” between the theory of history-writing and the history of historiography in the name of self-reflexivity, see, for example, Paul Nolte, “Darstellungsweisen deutscher Geschichte. Erzählstrukturen und ‘master Narratives’ bei Nipperdey und Wehler,” in *Die Nation schreiben*, 268.

4 The presentation of these trends draws on Jan Eckel, “Der Sinn der Erzählung. Die narratologische Diskussion in der Geschichtswissenschaft und das Beispiel der Weimargeschichtsschreibung,” in *Neue Zugänge zur Geschichte*, 201–215. On narrativity, see also the detailed

The first was French structuralism, and one of Roland Barthes's works in particular. Barthes pointed out that in writing history (especially "historical realism"), the historian typically presents historical events as if they are independent of the agency or the figure of the narrator. The historian does this by avoiding intervening in the form of the first-person singular—"I." In other words, the historian suppresses the reference to himself or herself and thus creates a "referential illusion" of objectivity. Another aspect of the nature of the historical discourse is its perception as transparent toward the referent, that is, the object spoken about, even though the latter cannot be grasped outside of the discourse.

Another inspiration for the narrativist turn has been the Anglo-American analytical philosophy of history, which opposed the previously dominant logical positivism or logical empiricism. Logical positivism considered historical science to be similar to the natural sciences and stated that its key aspect was the explanation in which a certain event is derived from certain initial conditions by recourse to general laws, the "covering laws" of Karl Hempel. Analytical philosophy challenged precisely that view. According to the analytical philosopher Arthur Danto, the narrative itself is a form of explanation typical of historical science, and historical explanation in general does not consist of causal derivation of events but of a description of the changes between two moments in time. He wrote of a narrative structure, which organizes the contents—that is, the events—and goes beyond a purely chronological ordering. This anticipates the concept of emplotment introduced by Hayden White. Danto also differentiated between the "simple narrative," in which events are ordered as in a chronicle (and uncommented upon), and the "significant narrative" of history proper. Other analytical philosophers who went in a similar direction are Walter Gallie and Louis Mink. For Gallie, historical understanding comes from following the story, as history is a type of story. Mink considers historical understanding to be a "configurational way of understanding" in the form of a narrative, in which the actions and events in the chronological stream can be grasped, as if at a glance (synoptically), as connected in meaning. A single historical event can be understood through its correct location in the narrative sequence.

exposition of Richard Vann, "Turning Linguistic: History and Theory and History and Theory, 1960–1975," in *A New Philosophy of History*, eds. Frank Ankersmit and Hans Kellner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 40–69. See also Stephan Jaeger, "Erzähltheorie und Geschichtswissenschaft," in *Erzähltheorie: transgenetisch, intermedial, interdisziplinär* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 2002), 237–263. See also Martin Kreiswirth, "Tell Me a Story: The Narrativist Turn in the Human Sciences," in *Constructive Criticism: The Human Sciences in the Age of Theory* (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 61–87.

Third, and perhaps strongest, was the influence of Hayden White, whose *Metahistory* appeared in 1973.⁵ White's term "plot" or "emplotment" (comparable to Mink's "configurational act" and Paul Ricoeur's "*mise en intrigue*") became especially popular in the studies of narrativity. Plot means a narrative model that turns a series of events into a meaningful story or history; the emplotment goes beyond the chronological ordering of the events and constitutes the meaning of the historical presentation. It is most fundamental and identifies the type of story or history. According to White, there are four "archetypal" types of emplotment or archetypal forms of story: romance, satire, comedy, and tragedy. In *Metahistory* White subsumes history to fiction; hence he speaks of the "poetics of history" in the sense of a theory of literature.

In addition to emplotment, the meaning of a certain story or of history is attained, in White's view, through argument and ideological implication. The historical explanation through argument (and a respective theory of truth) can assume four forms: the formistic argument (identification of features of the historical objects and their classification), the organistic argument (the historical objects as components of processes), the mechanistic argument (causality), and the contextualist argument (the events are explained by their relations to other events in the surrounding space). According to White, history is not science but a proto-science at best, and every historical description of reality contains non-scientific elements, especially an ineradicable ideological component (reflecting ethical views). The reason is that every claim of discovering coherence in the historical evidence implies theories of the nature of the historical world and of historical knowledge, which have ideological implications for the attempts to understand, and to change or preserve, the present. White identifies four basic ideological positions: anarchism, conservatism, radicalism, and liberalism. Finally, he bases the deepest cognitive act of making sense of experience (which comes before analysis and explanation) upon the basic linguistic tropes or figures, such as metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony, and links them to the forms of explanation.⁶ In another work, he stressed metaphor.⁷

5 Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

6 Ibid., 1–42. See also Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987). According to White, "the narrative, far from being merely a form of discourse that can be filled with different contents, real or imaginary as the case may be, already possesses a content prior to any given actualization of it in speech or writing" (p. xi).

7 Hayden White, "The Burden of History," *History and Theory* 5 (1966), no. 2, 111–134.

White is especially radical in obliterating the differences between historiography and fiction (though there are other interpretations of his views).⁸ However, there are more moderate narrativists, such as Anne Rigney, who recognizes what distinguishes historiography from fiction.⁹ According to her “rhetoric of historical representation” (or “historiographical poetics”), events do not possess a natural, organic coherence of their own, inherent in the historical reality, which could then be rendered by the narrative discourse. Instead, the identity and meaning of the events and their intelligible (meaningful) coherence is a product of their various representations by the participants and, later, by historians. Still, the historical discourse is defined by the fact that it deals with real, not imaginary, events—those that exist outside and prior to the discourse in which they are represented. However, they cannot be narrated without translating them into another medium, that is, language. Moreover, their discursive rendering is not complete, but a reduction: it is linear, limited, and selective in the sense that it prefers some events over others. However, it is precisely that linearity and finiteness of the discursive medium in the presentation of complex historical events that makes order and intelligibility possible through the selection and linking of particular actors, acts, and circumstances. The referent of the historical writing—the historical reality—belongs to the past and cannot be observed directly. It exists only in traces, documentary records in the present, and symbolic representations “after the fact.” Rigney emphasizes that the historian uses not only documentary sources but also the texts of other historians and intermediary texts (inter-textuality), and that he or she always writes about the past for a contemporary public. That is a retrospective representation of past events from a certain distance, and the revealing of their meaning for a later public. In order to claim authority over the historical reality and ensure that one’s text is recognized as non-fiction, the historian-narrator has to respect the conventions of the historiographical discourse, to point to sources, make bibliographical references, and also to take into consideration elements that are recognized as belonging to the topic. As a consequence, the “rhetoric” of historical representation (in the sense of

8 According to Monika Fludernik, White does not deny the difference between historical and fictional narrative but offers a corrective to the ultra-positivist view of historiography by pointing out that the very process of narrating imposes a narrative structure on the events, which gives them a meaning that they do not have “in themselves.” It is in this sense that the historical narrative is “fiction,” that is, a construct. Monika Fludernik, “Fiction vs. Non-Fiction: Narratological Differentiations,” in *Erzählen und Erzähltheorie im 20. Jahrhundert: Festschrift für Wilhelm Fäger*, ed. Jörg Helbig (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2001), 89.

9 Ann Rigney, *The Rhetoric of Historical Representation: Three Narrative Histories of the French Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

standing for reality) has to be understood as an array of discursive and narrative strategies for presenting and, along with that, attaching of meanings to past events, and, in a narrower sense, convincing the public of the veracity of the representation and asserting the historian's authority as a speaker for the collective past.¹⁰ In her book, Rigney compared three histories of the French Revolution: those of Louis Blanc, Lamartin, and Jules Michelet.¹¹

Another advocate of narrativism is Philippe Carrard, who proposed a narratological analysis of the "poetics" of the French *Annales* school. I will go only briefly into the categories of his analysis, especially voice and perspective. The voice is expressed in the use of the personal pronouns "I" and "we"—the more self-assured the author and better embedded in the institutions, the more he or she asserts his or her own voice through the use of "I." Contrary to the preconception that women are more "subjective," women authors rarely use "I," even if they are well established. The voice is also expressed in the representation of the consciousness of other people, the inner world of the actors, their motives—often in free indirect speech. That is undoubtedly a hallmark of fictional (literary) texts, and is rare in historical works, which Monika Fludernik has described as having a low degree of narrativity.¹² As for perspective, which Carrard called "focalization," historical texts are characterized by "zero-focalization." This means that the events and situations are presented from an indefinite perspective—"from behind the heroes." The multivocality of the sources is synthesized and integrated by the historian into his or her own conclusions in a closed picture of history. In the end, Carrard shows that the Annalists' claim of objectivity is not borne out by their practice, which expresses feelings and opinions.¹³

In principle, narrativist analyses can be performed on various materials: the works of a single author, a whole historiographical trend such as the study of the *Annales* by Carrard (mentioned above), or a comparison between works of

¹⁰ Ibid., 11–18.

¹¹ Ibid., 171–176. In comparing the three narratives of the revolution, Rigney stressed that every historian configures the common past in a different way and invests it with a different meaning for his or her readers.

¹² Fludernik, "Fiction vs. Non-Fiction," 93. On the other hand, Stephan Jaeger shows, using several authors and works as an example, that unconventional historiographical texts can potentially achieve a higher degree of narrativity without turning into fiction, namely through multiple perspectives; the creation of alternative "possible" worlds; the widening of the concept of "sources" with pictures, photos, and fictional texts; and so on. See Jaeger, "Erzähltheorie und Geschichtswissenschaft," 252–258.

¹³ Philippe Carrard, *Poetics of the New History: French Historical Discourse from Braudel to Chartier* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 83–121. See also Jaeger, "Erzähltheorie und Geschichtswissenschaft," 246–248.

various authors on a given era (e.g., Thomas Nipperdey and Hans-Ulrich Wehler on modern German history,¹⁴ the aforementioned work by Anne Rigney on several histories of the French Revolution, or a comparison between several histories of the Weimar Republic).¹⁵ The instrumentarium of the analysis itself can be different, because there is no obligatory set of categories, and these can vary from more formalistic narratological categories to more substantive ones.

Jan Eckel's attempt at elaborating a model for textual analysis includes three categories or dimensions, some of which are borrowed from literary theory. The first is the presence of a narrator (in works of history, the narrator is identical to the author), namely, a weak or strong presence, and types of authorial interventions (such as foreshadowing). Also in this category is the distance of the narrator-historian from the narrated events and the perspective from which the events are presented (also known as focalization). In this respect, it should be noted that while historians (unlike writers of fiction) rarely present the consciousness and inner world of their protagonists, they may use empathy in representing their motives and intentions, and it is also possible to assume the point of view of the historical personalities by letting them speak from the sources. The second category of textual analysis is the configuration of time: there is either a representation of the events in a chronological sequence or a systematic ordering according to topics or problems. Also in this category is the relation between time in the narrative (measured in pages) and narrated time (i.e., the "real" time of the unfolding of events) and thus the possibility to create an impression of acceleration or deceleration. The third category is plot structure (following White, or *mise en intrigue*, following Ricoeur), in the sense of narrative models created through the configuration of the events in the text. According to Eckel, White's four-term typology, borrowed from the literary genres, is restrictive—also possible are simpler models (from mythology, religion, and other sources), such as narrations of decay, of success, of a lost utopia or of a wrong way, or of a cyclical evolution or development in stages.¹⁶

14 Nolte, "Darstellungsweisen deutscher Geschichte," 247–265. As different strategies of emplotment, Nolte contrasts Wehler's dramatizing manner of exposition (with personalities acting as if on scene and dramatic events) with Nipperdey's more structural exposition (also compared with Koselleck's paradoxes).

15 Jan Eckel, "Narrativizations of the Past: The Theoretical Debate and the Example of the Weimar Republic," in *Nationalizing the Past: Historians as Nation Builders in Modern Europe*, eds. Stefan Berger and Chris Lorenz (Basingstoke, Hampshire, and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 26–48.

16 Ibid., 34–36. These categories are then applied to three works on the Weimar Republic. In the three works a three-part model is used as a plot: crisis / stabilization / new crisis. Weimar serves ideologically and politically as a demonstration of the internal weaknesses

It is interesting to note that the narrativist paradigm in historical scholarship was developed against the prevailing historiographical trends, such as “social history” (or “historical social science”) in Germany, inspired by sociology and political science, which claims theoreticity as opposed to pure description (or narrativity), as well as against the French *Annales* school, which advocates “problem-oriented” history (*histoire-problème*) instead of the history of events (*histoire événementielle*). The narrativist turn means, generally speaking, taking textuality and narrativity seriously, not just as a manner of exposition or representation (*Darstellung*), neutral to the represented facts and arguments, or as a “form” (undervalued with regard to the contents), or as mere “description,” as opposed to “explanation” (causal or with “laws”), which is deemed to be scientific. Instead, the narrative is conceived of as a carrier of meaning, as itself generating meaning and as a method of comprehension (understanding) and explanation, even the main such avenue in history-writing.¹⁷

In explaining the relations between the traditional categories of the “theory and method of history” and narrativism, which is also an attempt at mediation, Allan Megill draws attention to historical scholarship’s traditional underestimation of “description” (or representation, *Darstellung*) and the privileging of “explanation” (an answer to the question “why,” most often with the idea of causality in the sense of “what caused it?”).¹⁸ More generally, Megill points out the privileging of “analytical” qualities vis-à-vis “descriptiveness,” in spite of the appearance of theoretical literature stressing interpretation and the “thick description” of culture (with reference to Clifford Geertz). Megill attributes this preference for “explanation” to the influence of the idea of scientificity—understood, in fact, anachronistically in the spirit of Newtonian physics—and the influence of “logical positivism” in the philosophy of science (with its “deductive-nomological” model of explanation or model of “covering laws”), which purports to explain the particular by means of general and abstract theory. Especially regarding the humanities, Megill notes the preference for “vertical metaphors” and for explanations in terms of determining factors standing “behind” the reality (and constituting the “real” reality), as with Marx and Freud. Finally, he also notes the idea that the explanation is something universal or universalizable, while “description” is connected with the particular and the singular. This underlies Wilhelm Windelband’s division of the sciences into

of democracy and potential threats to it. It also serves as a counter-image of the new democracy of the Federal Republic, serving as a cautionary tale.

17 See Eckel, “Der Sinn der Erzählung,” 205–206, 212–213.

18 Allan Megill, “Recounting the Past: ‘Description,’ Explanation and Narrative in Historiography,” *American Historical Review* 94 (June 1989), 627–653.

“nomothetical” and “ideographical” at the end of the nineteenth century. The underestimation of “description” is reinforced by the hermeneutical naiveté that it is a “glance from nowhere,” instead of understanding that it comes from a certain interpretative perspective, that every account of reality is perspectival, and that the researcher’s point of view is inscribed into the research.¹⁹

The narrativist paradigm reverses this state of affairs. The “description,” or, in the term coined by Megill, “recounting” (connected with the French “*raconter*,” to tell a story), is not a neutral preliminary stage of data collection before the real work of the explanation begins. The historical narrative in general is not “mere description” but also an explanation. Yet not causal, as the narrative is not an incorrect application of the rule “post hoc, ergo propter hoc,” i.e., if one thing follows another, it is caused by it. Moreover, narrative description and explanation can change places, in the sense that what in one rhetorical context is considered to be an explanation, in a consequent context may be considered a narrative description, insofar as the explanation has already been accepted by the audience and has entered its image (or representation) of the past. Megill considers the plot in the sense of sequence of acts in the narration as only one aspect of narrativity. He adds four other basic elements (borrowed from literary theory) that together produce the narrative: action, happening (in the sense of something that befalls the protagonist), agent or character, and setting.²⁰

According to him, every historical work strives toward four different, though inter-related, goals or tasks to a different degree that can cause the work to lean in one direction or another. In addition to the aforementioned “descriptive” plus explanatory task, there is the argumentative (or justificatory) task and the interpretative task. The argumentative task consists of the justification of a certain representation of the past compared with others, and it is here that references are made not only to the “sources” but also to their commentary and analysis. Finally, the historian’s interpretation of the past will inevitably be shaped by some present perspective, because the work of history is always interested in what historical events mean for us today (even if the historian denies this). If the present meaning of the past dominates entirely, the historian turns into a social or intellectual critic of the present.²¹

Under the impact of narrativism, even quite moderate authors began to recognize and acknowledge the significance of the narrative in historical scholarship. However, they accord it an additional or secondary “modeling”

19 Ibid., 628–637.

20 Ibid., 637–641, 644–645.

21 Ibid., 627, 647–653.

function: “literary modeling of the historical exposition” and “aesthetic qualities.” Accordingly, science and art are not counterposed as polar opposites, but are thought to stand in fluent transition and overlap, and historical science is called upon to recognize its aesthetic qualities and demands.²²

At the same time, others point out that some extreme narrativist theses (in fact, created by extreme post-structuralists) cannot be accepted, especially the denial of external reality outside the text, the conflation of history with fiction, and the rejection of the search for truth (in a certain, though complex sense).²³ Against such theses, one points to the role of the sources to invalidate some statements and the requirement to draw upon relevant sources to validate a certain assertion, as well as the requirement to observe the rules of elementary logic and to draw non-contradictory conclusions, that is, rules that are all connected with the “scientification” of history. Finally, the *habitus* of the historian as a searcher for truth is asserted.²⁴

One may also cite the position of the eminent historian of historiography Georg Iggers vis-à-vis the “postmodern challenge.” According to him, some ideas of the narrativists have to be accepted. For example, that history does not possess immanent unity or coherence and that every history is a construct; it is constituted through the language and contains elements of fiction. But even if the historical descriptions are based on literary models, they portray and reconstruct a real past and are not fiction, and the extreme tenet that reality does not exist outside language is unacceptable. It is also unacceptable to say that history is no different from literature because the historian operates with archives and sources, treated in a critical way, and operates with a notion of truth, complex though it is. Although there is no “objectivity” in the historical narrative, there is still “plausibility,” which is established within a community of critical researchers with shared research practices and according to professional standards, so history is still a scientific undertaking.²⁵ As one can

22 For example, Nolte, “Darstellungsweisen deutscher Geschichte,” 243, 245–246, 268.

23 Kevin Passmore, “Poststructuralism and History,” in *Writing History: Theory and Practice*, eds. Stefan Berger, Heiko Feldner, and Kevin Passmore (London: Hodder Arnold, 2003), 118–140. Passmore has little sympathy for the postmodern positions (and for poststructuralism as one variety of postmodernism).

24 Mathias Middell, Monika Gibas, and Frank Hadler, “Sinnstiftung durch historisches Erzählen. Überlegungen zu Funktionsmechanismen von Representationen des Vergangenen,” in *Comparativ, Zugänge zu historischen Meistererzählungen*, eds. Mathias Middell, Monika Gibas, and Frank Hadler (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2000), 8–9, 12–13.

25 Georg Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), 12–13, 17–19, 132–133, 139–140, 144–145.

see, this approach concedes less to the “postmodern challenge” than it rejects, while it preserves the notion of a science of history and a certain notion of truth.

The present work uses several formalistic narrativistic approaches and categories, such as beginning, middle, and end; plot or “intrigue,” that is, the arrangement and sequencing of the events into a meaningful narrative; perspective and “voice” (of the author); flow of time in the narrative in comparison with real chronological time (with more pages devoted to glorious eras than to those of decline). For example, the structuring of the Bulgarian narrative demonstrates great sensitivity to the space (in pages), allotted to the constitutive elements of Bulgarian medieval nationality: the Turkic Bulgars and the Slavs, as well as the order of introducing them (the sequence). The space devoted to the first centuries of the Ottoman domination is very small (a sort of “little narrative”) and falls out of the master national narrative, which resumes with the formation of Bulgarian institutions during the so-called Bulgarian national revival. Authorial presence (“voice”) is also differently manifested according to era and the particular historian, and so is “empathy” with the protagonists. Perspectivism finds expression in the “inversion” of the narrative from the Byzantine sources to a Bulgarian perspective and in the shifting of perspectives when taking a broader context into account (Byzantine, West European). There is also the fact that the keeping to narrative rules or “logic” itself generates a certain plausibility (at least for lay readers) despite the lack of convincing evidence, as in the Marxist counter-narrative of the Bulgarian Middle Ages. But I am mostly interested in the more “substantial” aspects of the master national narratives.

2 Grand and Master Narratives and the “Nationalization” of History

Scholars and journalists began talking about grand narratives (or master narratives or metanarratives) after Jean-François Lyotard’s well-known work *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*.²⁶ Lyotard spoke about grand narratives (*grands récits*) in connection with the legitimation (or justification) of scientific knowledge. More specifically, he considered the emancipatory narrative of the French Revolution about liberating mankind from the shackles of priests and tyrants. He also considered the speculative narrative of German idealism (Fichte and Hegel) about the dialectics of the Spirit (or the realization

²⁶ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984; French edition, 1979).

of the Idea) as a meta-principle, as well as the narrative on relations between science, nation, and state (made more explicit by Humboldt). According to Lyotard, these narratives have lost their persuasiveness and credibility in the postmodern conditions.²⁷ After Lyotard, the idea of grand narratives became popularized and entered various fields, one of which is historical scholarship.

Allan Megill differentiates several types of narratives in historical scholarship: narrative proper; master narrative, which claims to offer an authoritative account of a given segment of history; grand narrative, which claims authoritatively to explain history in general, for example, the development of history towards a “civic union” of the human race (as with Kant), or as a progressive realization of freedom (as with Hegel); and metanarrative, which serves as a justification of the grand narratives, most often belief in God or in an immanent rationality of the world.²⁸

Yet the use of the terms is not codified, and the various authors use them interchangeably or fuse two categories. To quote one definition, the representations of the past attain the status of a metanarrative “when their validity is not contested or at least they are socially dominant and form a magnetic field that is capable of integrating and orienting in a unified way the various particles of the historical representations” (trans. mine, R.D.).²⁹ Or a shorter one: “metanarrative, that is, a narrative that arranges a number of other histories.”³⁰

Konrad Jarausch and Martin Sabrow describe the various components and functions of the master narratives. These include a substantive aspect consisting of events, personalities, and structural interrelations (implying “subjective” selectivity and way of relating). There is also a theoretical-methodological dimension, in other words, claims of veridical argumentation and positing of criteria of rationality. There is a semantic component consisting of the use of a language instrumentarium and the following of narratological rules. There is a discursive deep structure, that is, a meaningful arrangement of the past, creation of coherence, and organization of the historical discourse. And there is the relation to social practices of generating a tradition (and identity) and a

27 Ibid., xxiv–xxv, 31–34, 37–38, 51, 60, 65.

28 Allan Megill, “‘Grand Narrative’ and the Discipline of History,” in *A New Philosophy of History*, 152–153.

29 Middell, Gibas, and Hadler, “Sinnstiftung durch historisches Erzählen,” 24. Another definition appears in Konrad Jarausch and Martin Sabrow, “Meistererzählungen: Zur Karriere eines Begriffs,” in *Die historische Meistererzählung. Deutungslinien der deutschen Nationalgeschichte nach 1945*, eds. Konrad Jarausch and Martin Sabrow (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002), 16.

30 Lynn Hunt, “Geschichte jenseits der Gesellschaftstheorie,” in *Geschichte schreiben in der Postmoderne*, eds. Christoph Conrad and Martina Kessel (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 1994), 98–122, quote on 113.

politics of history. The master narratives attain social hegemony through institutionalization, dissemination through the media, and political scenarios. The same authors point to the critical potential of the very notion of master narratives, which respects the effort to achieve directedness and synthesis but at the same time points to the constructed character of every writing of history, and indicates that the past is not “in itself” but “for us” and depends on present interests. The concept thus contains a critique of any attempt to dictate the viewing of the past and of the arrogance of asserting “how it really was.” In other words, it is directed against historical monism in favor of the historical pluralism characteristic of the twenty-first century (and of postmodernism).³¹

The master narratives, as they react to changes in society with a change in the dominant interpretations, satisfy society’s identificatory and other important needs, and help in achieving social integration. They also offer orientation in the future. With the rise of the nation-states and nationalism in the nineteenth century, the master narratives became a product and a factor of this new type of social integration. The history of one’s own nation became the major interpretative framework for ordering and fusion of historical knowledge in a meaningful master narrative—the nation is legitimized by constructing a continuity from its mythical origins up to the present. The master narratives feature a deep structure that relates to foundations of cultural community, and, along with that, the ordering of time according to periodizations. The latter reflect respective judgments of the course of history, such as myths of origins, stories of rises and peaks, and phases of decay or stagnation—all marked by events. They are organized around important actors and events, refer to a certain space, and introduce differentiations, namely, the divide between “us” and the “others” (“them”). The master narratives were problematized in many European states after 1945 through alternative attempts, e.g., the transnational study of the common foundations of the “West,” and the universal-historical dimension of Marxism. But these alternative interpretations often remain attached to the national-historical model.³²

The master narratives I am concerned with in this book are exactly of the national type, national master narratives, because they are deployed in the national framework and have the nation (or people) and its state as their major (collective) agent. The Marxist counter-narrative, which attempted to replace the nation with classes but remained (in the Bulgarian and other cases) within the national framework, will also be analyzed.

31 Jaraus and Sabrow, “Meistererzählungen’—Zur Karriere,” 11–12, 17–18.

32 Middell, Gibas, and Hadler, “Sinnstiftung durch historisches Erzählen,” 25–28, 30.

The close relation between historiography and justification of the nation, as well as the “nationalization” of history in the sense of presenting the nations as the major historical actors and privileging the national point of view, are universal or at least European phenomena. They appeared with the assertion of the national principle and the creation of modern nations and nation-states in the second half of the eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth century. Moreover, they coincided with the scientification and professionalization of the historical discipline.³³ The national principle of organization of the historical narrative made its appearance with Romanticism in the early nineteenth century, with its ideas of the unique character of the nation, its legitimation by stressing continuity in history, its affirmation of the superiority of one’s nation over other nations, and the strongly gendered approaches to describing nationhood. Then the national principle of organization became the hallmark of positivist historiography of the second half of the nineteenth century, with its orientation, if not toward “laws” in human affairs, then at least toward empiricism and a critique of the sources. The same principle passes through some varieties of Marxism and it even has some medieval antecedents, especially among the humanists.³⁴

“Scientific” history has been accorded a major role in the formation of nations and the building of national identities and national “historical consciousness,” hence of a national loyalty and attachment, and thus the legitimation of the nation-states. Accordingly, the historians assumed the role of nation-builders and “spokespeople” for the nation, upholders of the national honor and glory, and national pedagogues in general. In more extreme cases, they became apologists of the nation and developed a cult of the state.³⁵ One

33 On the professionalization and institutionalization of historical scholarship, which first took place in Germany, see Peter Lambert, “The Professionalization and Institutionalization of History,” in *Writing History*, 42–60.

34 Stefan Berger, “Introduction: Towards a Global History of National Historiographies,” in *Writing the Nation: A Global Perspective*, ed. Stefan Berger (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 4, 9–13.

35 Stefan Berger, Mark Donovan, and Kevin Passmore, “Apologias for the Nation-State in Western Europe since 1800,” in *Writing National Histories: Western Europe since 1800*, eds. Stefan Berger, Mark Donovan, and Kevin Passmore (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 3–14. On the German national tradition of historiography, see Stefan Berger, *The Search for Normality: National Identity and Historical Consciousness in Germany since 1800* (Providence and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1997). Berger extends his observations to other European national historiographies and (in a work resulting from collective research) to the way of writing national history in the whole world and alternative traditions of making sense of the past—dynastic or family narratives. See Berger, “Introduction: Towards a Global History,” 1–29; Stefan Berger, “The Power of National Pasts: Writing National History in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Europe,” in *Writing the Nation*, 30–62. See

comparison between the traditions of the German, French, British, and Italian historiographies points out their central themes and narrative threads, which in all cases emphasize the uniqueness of the given nation-state and its superiority over its rivals. The “Great Revolution” and the republican idea stand at the center of French historiography. The liberal parliamentary tradition forms the core of British historiography in the spirit of the Whig history of progress toward freedom, but “Empire” also exists as a national myth. Italian historiography is dominated by the mythologized “Risorgimento” and the hagiography of the Savoy dynasty (which achieved national unification) but also by the republican understanding of history with reference to the medieval Italian city-states. In Germany, a mighty state appears in historiography as the protector of the inner fulfillment of the individual; later appears social history and a racialized notion of the “people.”³⁶ In Western Europe, the national paradigm was dominant until the mid-twentieth century (in Germany until the 1960s, when the rise of the new “social history” began), but in many countries it is still dominant and there has been a certain “re-nationalization” in Germany after unification.

The national narratives typically operate with models of rises and falls, notions of golden ages, lost lands and ideal borders, national renaissances, heroes, national missions, and the continuous existence of states, the longer the better. In the absence of state continuity, ethnic continuity and the heroic struggle of the people against a foreign domination take center stage.³⁷ In a general sense, the national narratives can be optimistic, such as the American and French “histories of success.” In the American case this involves concealing historical crimes such as the extermination of the Native Americans, the enslaving of other races, and imperialist exploitation. Other national master narratives have a pessimistic overtone: the Polish and the Serbian histories are histories of suffering with martyrological self-pity and victimization that risk inflaming a desire for revenge. In some cases, as in the Balkans, the national narrative presents a secularized history of salvation—after a demonstration of a glorious past, the spread of the national-liberation movements brings salvation from Ottoman rule and the establishment of independent nation-states.³⁸

also *Historians as Nation-Builders: Central and South-East Europe*, ed. Dennis Deletant and Harry Hanak (Houndmills, Basingstoke and London: Macmillan Press, 1988). This is a more traditional treatment of some national Central European and Balkan historians.

36 Stefan Berger, “Geschichten von der Nation. Einigen vergleichende Thesen zur deutschen, englischen, französischen und italienischen Nationalgeschichtsschreibung seit 1800,” in *Die Nation schreiben*, 49–77.

37 Berger, “Introduction: Towards a Global History,” 5, 9, 23–24.

38 Jarausch and Sabrow, “Meistererzählungen’—Zur Karriere,” 29–30.

The protagonist of a “nationalized” history is, of course, the nation and its state, but there are histories that employ the notion of “people”—the history of this or that people. As Thomas Welskopp pointed out, this notion can be used in different senses and in different historiographical and ideological traditions. In general, it is notable that the notion of “people” derives from the representational world of Romanticism and refers to the “pre-political,” “organic,” and “primordial,” that is, to pre-industrial societies in contrast to the notion of “society,” with its reference to the modern age. Moreover, it indicates historical continuities. It also represents an early category of the “social” and of “social history.” At the same time, “people” is a notion that avoids the ideas of class and social conflict, even if applied to industrial societies, and it refers mostly to everyday life. It is not an analytical category but fuses description with an ideal (or norm) and a political vision. One example of such a vision is the idealized past imagined as part of a culturally pessimistic and elitist neoconservative view of modern mass society. Under Nazism, the notion of a “people’s community” (*Volksgemeinschaft*) was politically charged and sat at the foundation of an enhanced “new type” of statehood, and the notion of “people” was interpreted as a “racial community.”³⁹ The notion of “people” had a different, peasantist, and generally democratic (or demotic) sense in Russian Populism (*narodnichestvo*), and a still different class meaning in Marxism, where the people or “popular masses” are synonymous with the oppressed classes, that is, the people without the ruling classes and the governing elites. Sometimes, in the notion of people and a history of the people, one can detect an opposition to the dominant institutional (state and church) history. I make clear how the issue state—people is dealt with in Bulgarian history writing.

Although the transnational categories of religion, class, and race (with the rise of Social Darwinism in the late nineteenth century) had the potential to challenge the dominance of the national master narrative, they rarely did so in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In fact, they themselves became “nationalized”, especially the histories of religion and class, and were deployed within the national framework. Hence one can speak (with Stefan Berger) of national counter-narratives and not of overcoming the national orientation in historiography.⁴⁰ The counter-narratives also include the communist parties’ attempts to create their own class narratives on the basis of Marxism-Leninism

39 Thomas Welskopp, “Grenzüberschreitungen. Deutsche Sozialgeschichte zwischen den dreissiger und der siebziger Jahren des 20. Jahrhundert,” in *Die Nation schreiben*, 301–307. Also Georg Iggers, “Nationalism and Historiography, 1789–1996,” in *Writing National Histories*, 21–22.

40 Berger, “Introduction: Towards a Global History,” 16–20; Berger, “The Power of National Pasts,” 39–46.

(and mostly of Stalinism) in the states where they came to power. With their emancipatory claims, particularly those of the socialist alternative, they opposed the bourgeois national historiographies and elaborated their own themes and causal interpretations. But, in fact, they became upholders and legitimators of the communist dictatorship, and in the very struggle against the bourgeois authors, they remained bound to the national narratives instead of creating their own.⁴¹

Some national and nationalist historians insist that historical scholarship should be scientific, “objective,” and “value-free” (in the Weberian sense), i.e., without biases and value judgments. Others advocate taking sides and favoring a (national) “party” stand (*Parteilichkeit*), not very different from the communist tenet on the issue of classes. It is exactly in criticizing the national paradigm in historical scholarship since the early nineteenth century, which reached the extreme of national apologetics, that the notions of “objectivity” and “freedom of values,” as well as the strict separation between scientificity and politics (and ideology), have been challenged. They have been accused of being a “new metaphysics” actually concealing national biases or, at best, a rhetorical weapon in institutional power competitions between historians for careers and promotions, and a way to exclude “amateurs.”⁴²

Let us return to the national master narratives with some examples. In Germany the national narrative was initially elaborated by the historians of the “Prussian school,” namely, Johann Gustav von Droysen, Henrich Siebel, Henrich von Treitschke, and others. It pared down the variety and heterogeneity of individual confessional and territorial (regional) histories and oriented the narrative mainly toward the rise of Brandenburg-Prussia as the nucleus of the future unified state. After the national goals were realized, the national history turned into legitimation and a veritable cult of the statehood and power of the German Empire.⁴³ After 1945 (but not immediately after), with the rise of social history starting at the end of the 1960s, a new “grand narrative” of the Federal Republic developed. This was the thesis that there was a particular

41 On the historiography of the former German Democratic Republic, see Konrad Jarausch, “Die DDR-Geschichtswissenschaft als ‘Meta-Erzählung,’” in *Verwaltete Vergangenheit. Geschichtskultur und Herrschaftslegitimation in der DDR*, ed. Martin Sabrow (Leipzig: Akademische Verlagsanstalt, 1997), 19–34; Martin Sabrow, “Auf die Suche nach dem materialistischen Meisterton. Bauformen einer Gegenerzählung in der DDR,” in *Die historische Meistererzählung*, 33–77.

42 Berger, Donovan, and Passmore, “Apologias for the Nation-State,” 4–5.

43 Jarausch and Sabrow, “‘Meistererzählungen’—Zur Karriere,” 25–26. In more detail, see Stefan Berger, *The Search for Normality*, 21–55.

negative German path of development (*Sonderweg*) within the metanarrative of modernization that led to Nazism.⁴⁴

Joep Leersen underlines the significance of the beginning, middle, and end of the stories. Yet in his opinion, the beginning and the end of historical narratives are somewhat anomalous; although the histories start and end somewhere, these are not proper narrative beginnings and ends. The beginning is in many cases a review of the setting—either the geographical setting or the circumstances in which the historical events will take place—while the end is often something like a moral balance of the significance of the events described. Leersen considers the beginning of some national histories, in which the coincidence between ethnicity and territory, that is, an early settlement of a certain people on a certain land, represents the ideal case. Such a fortuitous continuity between ethnicity and place of settlement is present in the case of Germany. When such continuity is lacking, as in the case of Belgium, the unity of social life (commerce and traffic) is stressed instead. Ireland has to be satisfied with a legendary beginning, followed by an invasion by the Celtic Galli as a real historical beginning (and an ideal of future independence).⁴⁵

Mikhail Bojkov analyzes the popular national meta-narrative of Russian history during the Soviet era (started by Nikolai Karamzin in the early nineteenth century) on the model of a fairy tale, in terms of composition and narrative strategies.⁴⁶ He likens this narrative to the fairy tale of the innocently persecuted maiden (similar to the fairy tale of Cinderella) who, with the help of supernatural powers, succeeds in overcoming hostile circumstances, endures all ordeals, and is rewarded with marriage to a king's son. In Russian history, the nation takes the role of the maiden; the evil stepmother is represented by neighboring tribes, peoples, and states; and the supernatural powers are mythical factors such as national destiny, the spirit of the people, the historical mission of the nation and its virtues, or historical trends. Marriage to the prince is analogous to triumph over one's enemies and the achievement of a glorious state in the present and in the future.⁴⁷

Bojkov identifies two triadic or three-stage schemes (or triptychs) in Russian and Soviet history: in the Middle Ages and in modern times. The medieval one begins with the prospering of Kievan Rus, followed by the "Dark Ages" of the "feudal fragmentation," and the catastrophe of the Tartar invasion. Then follows

44 Thomas Welskopp, "Identität ex negativo," in *Die historische Meistererzählung*, 109–139.

45 Joep Leersen, "Setting the Scene for National History," in *Nationalizing the Past*, 71–85.

46 Michail Bojkov, "Zaubermarken, Mythos und symbolische Figuren im sowjetischen und postsowjetischen historischen Metanarrativ," in *Meistererzählungen vom Mittelalter*, ed. Frank Rexroth (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2007), 87–105.

47 *Ibid.*, 90.

the rise of the Moscow tsardom (after the Battle of Kulikov in 1380), stressing continuity with Kievan Rus (now strongly challenged by Ukraine, Poland, and Lithuania), and the rise of the Russian Empire among the European Great Powers. However, there is no savior figure in this triad similar to Joan of Arc in the French case, cited as a parallel. The second triptych comprises the events from the twentieth century with some “prefigurations” in the past, just as the New Testament looks for points of reference in the Old Testament. In the beginning, Russia was doing well, but the national tragedy of the Russian Civil War and foreign intervention followed. Then came World War II, which was even more damaging, until finally came the victory over fascism and the Soviet Union’s rise to a superpower. This triptych, unlike the previous one, has a savior figure: Stalin (similar to de Gaulle in France).⁴⁸

In the two triads or triptychs, the attitude of Russia toward the East (the Tartars) and the West (France, Britain, Germany) is of special importance. The East is the negative pole backward as a result of the Tartar yoke and of “Asianness,” but it does not pose a great problem. The West is generally the positive pole as both Russia and the Soviet Union considered themselves part of European civilization, but it is ambivalent and becomes a recurring problem. As the author points out, in the new circumstances of the post-Soviet era, the above-mentioned narrative largely lost credibility, perhaps because there is no prospect of a happy marriage with a prince, and there even occurred some de-Europeanization of the narrative and a certain rehabilitation of the East (yet Tatarstan, with its separatist movement, became a crisis zone).⁴⁹

3 Master Narratives of the Middle Ages

The Middle Ages has also generated master narratives that became “nationalized” in a variety of ways, even when stating that nations did not exist at the time. As Patrick Geary has pointed out, medieval history is always in a subordinate position and serves as a negative otherness and the opposite image of the grand narratives of the modern age. If the modern age is known for “progress,” “reason” or “rationality,” “science,” “the liberation of the individual,” and “liberal democracy” initiated during the Renaissance and achieved during the Enlightenment, the Middle Ages stand for the opposite notions and values: the traditional irrational world, lack of a developed personality and interest for the material world. With such a negative image of the Middle Ages, the

⁴⁸ Ibid., 91–100.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 101–105.

medievalist according to Geary has several options for constructing a meta-narrative about them. The first, is to reject the autonomy of the Middle Ages by denying them their own era in periodizations by prolonging antiquity until very late and starting immediately with “Old Europe.” The second, is to assert the otherness of the era between 500 and 1500 with a positive or negative attitude toward medieval religion, culture, and society, and sometimes even with fascination for morbid things (death, blood, violence, pain, pus). The third, is to attempt to show that the Middle Ages, like modern times, are part of the narrative of rationalization and emancipation: the beginnings of a modern economy and capitalism, navigation, various cultural renaissances, and so on. The fourth, is to problematize the modern age itself as a history of progress and to show the medieval roots of modern intolerance, repression, and violence.⁵⁰

Geary recognizes the usefulness of the narrative paradigm but rejects the radical epistemological theses of postmodernism, such as closure within language and lack of referentiality to reality, or that the narratives are just formulae of power and desire. He opts for multiple Middle Ages by decentering vis-à-vis Europe and its “provincialization” (as Dipesh Chakrabarty has it) on the example of the postcolonial (subaltern) studies and of Eurasian and global history, as well as the history of women and of minorities with their alternative narratives of the modern age (not just criticism and deconstructionism).⁵¹

Some authors view the master narratives of the Middle Ages in a positive light, pointing to their important orienting and directing functions. These include the determination of the basic structure of the historical narrative, the ordering of historical knowledge in coherent frameworks and the ascription of meaning, and the reduction of complex historical interrelations to simple schemes and dichotomies (e.g., unity versus freedom, community based on equality [*Genossenschaft*] versus community based on domination [*Herrschaft*]), and thus the rendering of coherence and meaningfulness and the possibility to narrate the historical process in general.⁵² One should also mention the important insight that the Enlightenment, the modern age, and

50 Patrick J. Geary, “‘Multiple Middle Ages’—konkurrierende Meistererzählungen und der Wettstreit um die Deutung der Vergangenheit,” in *Meistererzählungen vom Mittelalter*, 107–120, esp. 107–113.

51 Ibid., 114–120.

52 Frank Rexroth, “Meistererzählungen und die Praxis der Geschichtsschreibung,” in *Meistererzählungen vom Mittelalter*, 4–6, 8. Also Walter Pohl, “Ursprungserzählungen und Gegenbilder. Das archaische Frühmittelalter,” in *Meistererzählungen vom Mittelalter*, 29–35. See also Peter Raedts, “The Once and Future Reich: German Medieval History between Retrospection and Resentment,” in *Gebrauch und Missbrauch des Mittelalters, 19.–21. Jahrhundert*, eds. János M. Bak, Jörg Jarnut, Pierre Monnet, and Bernd Schneidmüller (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2009), 193–204.

postmodernism as well as the Renaissance and the Reformation, all have their “own” Middle Ages. Conversely, the Middle Ages are a precondition for thinking about the modern age.⁵³ This resonates with the uses of the Middle Ages in the Bulgarian national narrative.

The narratives of the early Middle Ages receive special attention, because the origins of the modern nations are sought there, and it is from there that the comprehensive national master narratives begin. Walter Pohl gives examples of master narratives about the ancient beginnings of the West. These include the monasteries as islands of written culture and gradual spread of literacy; the process of social disciplining and of taming and civilizing of behavior and mores as a precondition of the industrial society (Norbert Elias); and the evolution of statehood. Yet, according to Pohl, all master narratives about the early Middle Ages transcend them, treating them as a time of decay, transition, or origins, while the real interest is directed to another era. Therefore, he argues that the early Middle Ages should be understood in and of themselves in their multiplicity and contradictions. As for the master narratives, he thinks that they are not necessarily mistaken and can offer a productive challenge.⁵⁴

Pohl considers in another work the modern uses of early medieval ethnic descent on the examples of Germany, France, England, Spain, Greece, Italy, and (more briefly) Central and Southeastern Europe. As Pohl points out, early medieval history is always entangled with issues of national identity, and national histories everywhere have contributed to the creation of national myths of origins. Although the national ideologies reached their peak in the first half of the twentieth century, and the most aggressive until 1945 was German nationalism (with the racist belief in biological Aryan German superiority), in some countries today the controversies over medieval descent still carry nationalist overtones.⁵⁵ Below, I only touch upon his treatment of the German, French, and British examples.

According to the national myth of origins, present-day Germans are considered heirs to the Germanic rulers’ conquests of much of Europe by Germanic

53 Otto Gerhard Oexle, “‘Das Mittelalter’: Bilder gedeuteter Geschichte,” in *Gebrauch und Missbrauch des Mittelalters*, 27–28.

54 Walter Pohl, “Ursprungserzählungen und Gegenbilder. Das archaische Frühmittelalter,” in *Meistererzählungen vom Mittelalter*, 23–41.

55 Walter Pohl, “Modern Uses of Early Medieval Ethnic Origins,” in *Gebrauch und Missbrauch des Mittelalters*, 55–70, esp. 55–56. As Pohl points out, most conflicts during the early Middle Ages were not national, but this is the period when ethnic states (kingdoms named after peoples) started to expand in Europe (70). On the mythologizing and politicizing of the origins, see also Patrick Geary, *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002), 15–40.

tribes during the Great Migration of Peoples (*Völkerwanderung*). The early Middle Ages are more problematic because some German kingdoms lasted only a short time, and Clovis and Charlemagne (or Charles the Great) ruled the successful Frankish Kingdom, which has in fact a more direct link with the present-day French state (and the Franks gave their name to the French). For that reason, German nationalist historians turned mostly to the Otons, under whom the Holy Roman Empire turned into a kingdom of the Eastern Franks (together with other Germanic tribes, such as Saxons, Bavarians, and Alamani), who would eventually evolve into Germans. In fact, the German state developed in a protracted and punctuated process from the Frankish Kingdom still called the Holy Roman Empire, where most of the inhabitants were more attached to regional identities. Only during the course of the nineteenth century did the idea of a common German identity succeed in a protracted competition with other specific identities connected with the names and areas of other Germanic tribes.⁵⁶

The history of the French is also connected with the early medieval Franks; the paradox is that a Germanic-speaking people gave its name to a Romanic-speaking nation. Traditionally, the French aristocracy claimed descent from the Franks. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the theory of the two races was elaborated by the aristocrat Boulainvilliers, namely, the Franks, who were freedom-loving and capable of governing, and the subjugated Galli. However, this was countered with the argument that the French monarchy was a legitimate heir to the Roman Empire, which legally transferred the government of Gaul to the Franks, whom the Roman emperor called upon for the defense of the borders. Hence, they came by invitation as workers and soldiers and not as conquerors, and they were later assimilated into the Gallo-Roman population without leaving significant traces. The French Revolution accepted the (ethnic and social) division into Franks and Galli but reversed the assessments. It declared that the real French (the third estate, or *tiers état*) were heirs of the Galli, who suffered under foreign domination and who formed the nation. The debate about the origins of the French became strongly aggravated after Prussia defeated France in 1871, but it later subsided. The influence of the Roman tradition was underscored (by Foustel de Coulanges) rather than ethnic descent. Since 1945, French history has been defined territorially (the “hexagon”) and institutionally, while Charlemagne has been symbolically appropriated as the “father” of united Europe. The “double

⁵⁶ Pohl, “Modern Uses”, 56–58.

origin” of the French resonates with the Bulgarian case of conquering Bulgars and conquered Slavs, and I reveal the interpretative tactics employed.⁵⁷

No less complicated is the issue of British origins and identity. The Germanic tribes the Angles and Saxons, the future Englishmen, came to Britain in the fifth and sixth centuries. There, they encountered and attacked or repulsed not only the Brits (i.e., Romanized Celts) but also other Celtic tribes who were among the forerunners of the present-day Welsh, Scots, and Irish. In the eleventh century, the Normans (French) invaded the British Isles and centralized the political system. They were subsequently Anglicized also in a linguistic sense.⁵⁸

Some medieval myths, once they are deeply imprinted in the consciousness, can be instrumentalized and manipulated for political purposes. One such case can be seen in Serbia with the myth of the Battle of Kosovo against the Turks (1389), which served to foster a dangerous and bloody nationalism.⁵⁹

The question can be asked: what is the attitude toward the master narratives today, and toward national ones in particular? The author of the notion, Lyotard, believes that the grand narratives, which exercise a totalizing, and in some cases even totalitarian influence and control, have lost credibility. As an alternative, he offers what he calls “little narratives” (*petit récits*) or micro-narratives—local, contingent, and popular, expressing a variety of circumstances and unresolved conflict, and for that reason not subject to totalization. According to him, such narratives derive from customary knowledge, and they have a pragmatic and performative function and local authority and heterodox socio-political power—they produce social and political resistance and subvert the institutionalized narratives with their power props.⁶⁰

The master national narratives seem to have lost credibility in the great national historiographies, or at least they are meeting resistance, and alternatives are sought. Such alternatives include (in an early timeframe) the history of the working classes, and later on women’s history, though both are often

57 Ibid., 59–61. On the French case, for more detail, see Bonnie Effros, “The Germanic Invasions and the Academic Politics of National Identity in Late Nineteenth-Century France,” in *Gebrauch und Missbrauch des Mittelalters*, 81–94; André Burguière, “L’historiographie des origines de la France. Genèse d’un imaginaire national,” *Annales, Imaginaires nationaux: Origines, usages, figures* 58 (2003), no. 1, 41–62.

58 Pohl, “Modern Uses,” 62–64.

59 See, for example, Marko Šuica, “The Image of the Battle of Kosovo (1389) Today: A Historic Event, a Moral Pattern, or the Tool of Political Manipulation,” in *The Uses of the Middle Ages in Modern European States*, eds. Robert J. Evans and Guy P. Marchal (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 152–174; Dejan Djokić, “Whose Myth? Which Nation? The Serbian Kosovo Myth Revisited,” in *Gebrauch und Missbrauch des Mittelalters*, 215–233.

60 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 60, 66; Kreiswirth, “Tell Me a Story,” 71–72.

narrated in national frameworks, and might, for that reason, be called (as Stefan Berger calls them) national counter-narratives.⁶¹ Berger notes a certain loosening of the homogeneous national paradigms in general. This happens especially through the categories of “remembrance” and “memory,” through the “history of everyday life” and “microhistory,” as well as in postmodern strategies of narrating history, which insist upon the multiplicity of subjective “memories” and upon taking various perspectives and experiences into account. These also reflect why and by whom particular pasts are constructed, and, along with that, certain representations of the future, while others are barred from the public discourse. Berger takes a stand against homogeneous identity national discourses in the writing of history in favor of a historiography that would validate different identities in their conflictual relations, and would insist upon the simultaneous existence of multiple constructs of identity. Even more radically, he states that the representation of the past should not recreate mythical roots of the national identity but, on the contrary, should dissolve the ideas of imagined identities and identify the myths underneath them. (He cites Foucault’s dictum that it is not the goal of history to offer “substitute identities” to people who do not know who they are).⁶²

Konrad Jarausch also makes it clear that nation, class, and modernity are losing their meta-status and that the master narratives have been eroded, including the narrative of the German *Sonderweg* to modernization, not to speak of the Marxist alternative in the former East Germany. Especially in Germany, this erosion took place under the impact of the political upheavals in 1945, 1968, and 1989, as well as under the impact of the postmodern critique (which leads to methodological relativization) and the competition of individual remembrances and medial images. He lists the alternative metanarratives and grand interpretations on offer, such as an updated theory of totalitarianism to explain the two German dictatorships (the Nazi regime and the GDR’s communist regime), the Holocaust, the counter-narratives of minorities, territorial alternatives (subnational, regional, or the geographical perspective of the whole of Europe, as well as a globalized “history of the world”). Other alternative grand narratives, with less relevance for Germany, are the postcolonial discourses in the United States, Britain, and France, and the “subaltern stories” of black or colonial peoples, counterposed to master narratives taken literally.

Jarausch, however, remains skeptical that these or other new grand or master narratives can take root, given the competition of historical images transmitted through the media and their inability to inspire the intellectuals. He

61 Berger, “Introduction: Towards a Global History,” 19.

62 Berger, “Geschichten von der Nation,” 77; Stefan Berger, *The Search for Normality*, 6–7.

even notes the rehabilitation of a democratized national history as the ironic consequence of offering all the aforementioned alternatives. He argues for a pluralization of the historical narratives within a tolerant democracy (i.e., many histories of the Germans and the German past—local, confessional, social, and ethnic) and a multi-vocality or “polyphony” of cross-cutting historical narratives—without, however, fusing them into a new, if decentered, metanarrative. In this way the complexity of the past will be seen and a multi-perspectival understanding of it will be achieved, in which historical research will also enter into a dialogue with popular remembrances and memories about it.⁶³

On the other hand, influential historians like Jörn Rüsen think that a cultural identity simply cannot exist without grand or master narratives, and that even if the critique of such narratives is justified, we need new such grand narratives in order to define our identity in a new way. Even a thinker of the rank of Michel Foucault, who departed from a critique of one grand narrative, of liberalism and progress, ended up creating another grand narrative, of increasing social control and disciplining in the modern “carceral society.”⁶⁴ The irony, as some have pointed out, is that historians are faced with a public demand for comprehensive narratives, whose status they themselves consider more and more problematic, yet to which they owe their social significance.⁶⁵

4 Master Narratives of the Bulgarian Middle Ages

The present book traces the establishment of a master narrative of the Middle Ages in Bulgaria. It uses several general narrativistic approaches and categories of analysis as indicated above. But I am primarily interested in master national narratives, which are typically stories of origins and migrations, founding of a state and its rise (“golden ages,” “renaissances”) and decline or fall and foreign domination, yet with the assertion of continuity (at least of the “people”); historical personalities (good and evil, “great” and “weak”); actions or passivity to other’s actions. Even so, the book does not take a manifestly literary character but remains a history of historiography. In other words, it adheres to the

63 Konrad Jarausch, “Die Krise der nationalen Meistererzählungen,” in *Die historische Meistererzählung*, 140–162.

64 Jörn Rüsen, “Für eine interkulturelle Kommunikation in der Geschichte,” in *Die Vielfalt der Kulturen* (Erinnerung, Geschichte, Identität 4), eds. Jörn Rüsen, M. Gottlob, and A. Mittag (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998), 23.

65 Middell, Gibas, and Hadler, “Sinnstiftung durch historisches Erzählen,” 18–20, 22.

historical layers of facts and interpretations, and traces the evolution of historiography over time.

While master national narratives have some general plots or models, similar to those described above, each one has specific themes and variations, as well as specific “substance” of events and personalities and more general “phenomena”. Important particular themes (and plots) in the course of the Bulgarian narrative, apart from those already mentioned, are the two components of ethnogenesis (Bulgars and Slavs), Christianization by Byzantium, adoption of an alphabet invented by Cyril and Methodius, the Byzantine influence (called “Byzantinism”), the role of Vlachs and Cumans in the Second Bulgarian state, etc. The Marxist counter-narrative added to these its characteristic themes of feudalism and class struggle. One can also note some dichotomies that structure the material, form the plot or intrigue, and serve to make sense of the events, such as the dichotomy “domination” (of the Bulgars) versus “equal union” (between Bulgars and Slavs), ethnic dualism versus unity, paganism versus Christianity, original model versus Byzantine influence, and centralism versus (feudal) decentralization.

The master national narrative of the Middle Ages in Bulgaria has been constructed starting with what is known as “Romantic” historiography (from Monk Paisiy to Vasil Aprilov). But it was elaborated during the course of the development of “scientific” (or critical) historiography, first by Marin Drinov (1838–1906) and especially by the most significant Bulgarian historians from the “bourgeois” era: Vasil Zlatarski (1866–1935), Petăr Mutafchiev (1883–1943), and (to a point) Petăr Nikov (1884–1938). Then it was interrupted by the (crude) Marxist or rather Stalinist counter-narrative in the aftermath of the Second World War through the beginning of the 1960s. Starting in the mid- or late 1960s, there was a gradual return to the nationalism of the master national narrative mixed with obligatory elements of the counter-narrative. This reached a peak with the celebration of the 1,300th anniversary of the founding of the Bulgarian state in 1981. The same line continued after 1989 (stripped of the Marxist vulgata), yet some new tendencies appeared. This book covers those developments and the historians associated with them. Here are the main plots and themes of the narrative in a schematic presentation.

Origins and ethnogenesis are especially important for collective identity, and I demonstrate the stakes and games that surround them. These are interesting because the Bulgarian case involves two basic and quite different ethnic components, and still more interesting because the way relations between the two groups were perceived depended upon the changes in the sociopolitical circumstances and context. It is notable that other ethnic elements are

stubbornly excluded from the Bulgarian ethnogenesis (except for the autochthonous Thracians as a third and minor element), and that the master narrative insists that the process is completed early and the ethnic community or nationality (*narodnost*, a kind of ethnic community) is stabilized precisely to exclude later ethnic additions or to belittle them as “assimilated”. In this way, the master national narrative ensures the continuity of the resulting ethnic group or nation and its identity: we are the same now as they (or even “we”) were then.

The main protagonist of the master national narrative is the state, represented by its rulers; “the people” are in the background. The master national narrative shows particular interest in statehood in the sense of institutions and state traditions, as well as in the church as a “national” institution. The national narrative is particularly insistent in asserting the continuity of state tradition—between the two Bulgarian medieval states; between the eastern part of the First Bulgarian State, which fell under Byzantine domination earlier, and the western part (Macedonia) of King Samuil, which fell later; and (with the intensification of nationalism, increasingly so) between the Bulgaria of Khan Asparuh on the Danube and the preceding Bulgaria of Khan Kubrat to the north of the Caucasus. In fact, most efforts of proving continuity are directed exactly where it is most problematic because of breaks and new beginnings. The continuity of the state and Church tradition is added to ethnic continuity as a main thread in the master national narrative, and as a guarantee of identity.

The master narrative of the Middle Ages in Bulgaria has two peaks or culminations—the periods of greatest military and political might and territorial expansion under Tsar Simeon the Great during the First Bulgarian Kingdom and under Tsar Ioan (in Bulgarian, Ivan) Asen II during the Second Bulgarian Kingdom. In fact, there is a third peak, which is situated outside of the Middle Ages, but it is implicitly a comparative point of reference for them as well. This is the map of Bulgaria of the San Stefano preliminary peace treaty of March 1878 after the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878 (see map 8 and 9), which became the Bulgarian national “Great Idea” but could not be realized during the Third Bulgarian Kingdom (except temporarily). All three “Great Bulgarias” included Moesia, Thrace, and Macedonia, so that Bulgaria bordered “three seas” (as the nationalist slogan goes). The Middle Ages and Bulgarian history in general are conceived through this maximalist territorial expanse, which stands as the “Bulgarian lands” or, more directly, as “original Bulgarian lands,” even though the outer parts were under Bulgarian rule for only a short period of time. Moreover, the actual map of the Bulgarian medieval kingdoms

usually looked very different, and in some periods it had little in common with this national ideal (compare maps 1–7 with map 9). It is against this mental map (or map in the minds) of a Greater Bulgaria that the past and every present were measured. For a long time, the “regaining,” “liberation,” and “unification” of the remaining lands that constituted the “all-encompassing” Bulgaria was the political goal to be pursued. In this way, the Middle Ages were also included in the modern Bulgarian national project as its antecedent and analog, so that the periods of the three kingdoms appear to be new beginnings, expansions, and efforts toward the same political goals and, ultimately, unsuccessful repetitions. The territorial continuity (or, put more strongly, identity) is added to ethnic and state continuity to complete the national identity.

In Bulgarian medieval history, there were two periods of foreign domination resulting in the disappearance of the state—under the Byzantines and under the Ottomans. There was also a period, during the Second Kingdom, in which the state became extremely weak and dependent on the Tartars. Apart from that, there were periods of “feudal disintegration,” mostly during the Second Kingdom. How does one narrate the periods under foreign rule, without Bulgarian statehood? The Bulgarian people remain a collective hero. Yet the master national narrative is not interested in their everyday life but mostly in the dramatic moments of suffering and struggle in which the heroic aspect is emphasized over victimization and its negative consequences like assimilation. In any case, the narrative of the period under Ottoman rule (emotionally called “slavery”) remains “little narrative” (also in terms of the number of pages) because of the absence of “high” official national culture (state, church, and rulers of the same nationality), which stand at the center of interest of the master national narrative. The latter is not particularly interested in everyday life or the “low” popular culture of the population.

Apart from the state with its rulers (and patriarchs of the Church), the master national narrative also has “the people” as its protagonist. “The people” are not an invention of communist historiography, though there they feature as an active participant (waging “class struggles”) rather than only passively suffering from oppression and exploitation. “The people” of communist historiography is a class concept—it consists of the oppressed classes (enslaved and free but dependent people, peasants, and town inhabitants), as opposed to the ruling classes (tsar, boyars, and higher clergy). The national/nationalist “bourgeois” historical discourse, however, also paid attention to “the people,” although it regarded the people more as a passive “object” and not as a “subject” of history, except in special cases of popular movements (such as the Bogomil heresy or the peasant uprising of Ivaylo). In the Bulgarian case, the fact that the

“bourgeois” historians came from commoner or, at best, middle-class milieus, accounts for their sympathy for the common people rather than the elites.

Along with their empirical (mostly passive) existence, “the people” in the master national narrative also have a purely transcendental and normative function: they serve as a distinctive moral measuring rod to judge the rule of the rulers. Good rulers should not exhaust the people in major wars (hence Zlatarski and Mutafovich’s negative judgment of Simeon the Great). Nor should they allow “feudal” arbitrary rule over the people. Furthermore, there is the idea that the state’s strength is maintained by the “unity” between the people and the ruler, who must keep the predatory and egotistic feudal lords in check. Conversely, heavy oppression of the people drives it to indifference and despair, which triggers heresies and weakens the state. This is not so with communist historiography, which celebrates precisely class struggles and the weakening of the always-unjust social order and (in a more muted way) the weakening of the state. But when the Bulgarian communist historiography turned to nationalism, it began extolling statehood, which then created a contradiction with the positive evaluation of class struggles (which a Marxist historiography cannot give up). Thus, some compromise was sought, such as citing other reasons for the weakening of the state, especially separatist feudal interests.

The master narrative of the Middle Ages in Bulgaria is national in several respects. To begin with, the framework of the narrative is national—that is, it narrates almost exclusively what took place within the confines of the Bulgarian state, while what took place outside is narrated only cursorily and insofar as it relates to domestic developments. Secondly, the narrative takes a national perspective or point of view, from which the past is retrospectively configured and colored and, in the process, is “nationalized.” The narrative is conducted from the perspective of the collective “we” (with full identification), as opposed to the others or “them,” who appear most often in the role of enemies or even “hereditary enemies.” In the Bulgarian case, the archenemy is the Rhomios (initially identified in national terms as “Greeks”) of the Byzantine Empire. Enmity with the Rhomios was fed by the attitudes and the struggles against Greek influence during the Bulgarian National Revival, that is, national formation in the late Ottoman Empire.

However, the problem is that most of what is known about the Bulgarians (their rulers, wars, and borders) comes from “others” that they have come into contact with. What is largely lacking is the domestic Bulgarian view on things, with its priorities, its group consciousness, and its own interpretation of the world, only small fragments of which can be recovered, through