

THE ATTEMPT AT A MARXIST MASTER COUNTER-NARRATIVE AFTER WORLD WAR II*

A few words need be said as a background. There were two Bulgarian medieval states. The first one was created in 680-681 by the Turkic Bulgars by subjugating the Slavs between the Danube and the Balkan range and then expanded at the expense of Byzantium. The ethnic and cultural “dualism” between the name-giving Bulgars and the Slavs was the most important feature of the initial era. The state was Christianized in 864-865 by prince Boris and reached the peak of its might under his son Simeon the Great (893-927), when it included almost the whole Balkans without Constantinople and Thessaloniki. It fell under Byzantine rule in 1018. The Second Bulgarian kingdom was created by the uprising of the brothers Asen and Peter in 1185-1187 and reached its peak under the third brother Kaloyan (1196-1207) and Ivan Assen II (1218-1241). It fell under the Ottomans in 1393 and definitively in 1396.

THE MARXIST “HISTORICAL FRONT” AND THE IDEOLOGICAL OFFENSIVE

With the establishment of the communist regime in Bulgaria on September 9, 1944, and especially after the initial years of political violence and the crushing of the opposition—called the “people’s democratic” transition to socialism—a new period in the development of historiography began. It featured a harsh rejection of “bourgeois” historiography, which it sometimes branded “fascist,” and the launching of an offensive on the “history front” (as it was called in martial terms) by militant communist historians, ostensibly under the banner of Marxism but actually that of dogmatic Stalinism. Then the regime made a serious attempt to replace the master national (and quite nationalist) narrative of the Bulgarian Middle Ages with a Marxist counter-narrative with entirely different priorities and explanatory schemes, followed by a return to nationalism, which will not be considered here. This was accompanied

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by intimidation and repressive measures against the few “bourgeois” historians, whose careers were thus interrupted (at least for a time).

The attack began with individual critiques. The first was directed against the “Hun theory” of the origins of the present-day Bulgarians, i.e. their mostly Turkic origin, and against the accepted interpretation of their relations with the Slavs at the founding of the state.¹ In the new political context, historians stressed that the Slav element took precedence in several ways, not only in numbers but also in state-building abilities and their overall level of development.²

The general offensive on the “historical front” marking the end of the transition period from “people’s democracy” to socialism was signaled at a March–April 1948 meeting of historians to discuss “the state of the science of history.” The main report at this meeting was delivered by the historian Tushe Vlahov. He first leveled general critiques against “bourgeois” historiography. Then he criticized its most prominent representatives for particular views and finally offered his (presumably Marxist) general scheme of Bulgarian history.³ These were, in fact, the basic lines along which the transformation of historical science would go.

Concerning the first line, the typical critiques and invectives against “bourgeois scholarship” were the following. First came the critique about a purely “philological method” that ended in “philological formalism.” This was defined as careful investigation of the written sources without seeing anything “outside the text and the grammatical forms” and severing the text from the social realities, particularly in the interest of the dominant classes.⁴ But soon this seemed insufficient, and other

¹ Nikolay S. Derzhavin, “Proizhod na bălgarite i obrazuvane na părvata bălgarska dărzhava,” *Istoricheski pregled* 1, no. 1 (1945–1946), 5–33, esp. 10. See also Nikolay Derzhavin, *Istoriya na Bălgariya*, vol. 1 (Sofia: Slavyansko kooperativno izdatelstvo, 1946), 203–222. Dimităr Krăndzalov, *Hini li sme nie balgarite?* (Sofia, 1947).

² Sergei A. Nikitin, “Obrazuvane na bălgarskiya narod i văznikvane na bălgarskata dărzhava,” *Istoricheski pregled* 9, no. 1 (1953), 50–77.

³ Tushe Vlahov, “Săstoyanie i zadachi na bălgarskata istoricheska nauka,” in *Sădăt nad istoritsite. Bălgarskata istoricheska nauka. Dokumenti i diskusii 1944–1950*, ed. Vera Mutafchieva and Vesela Chichovska, vol. 1 (Sofia: Akademichno izdatelstvo “Prof. Marin Drinov,” 1995), 204–281.

⁴ Ibid., 208–209. On “philological formalism,” see Nikolay Derzhavin, *Istoriya Bolgarii*, vol. 1, 22–23.

methodological critiques were brought forward, such as (bourgeois) “objectivism,” meaning “pedantic digging into the sources and the ascertaining of mere facts, which, however, are not considered in the light of the overall economic, sociopolitical and cultural development.”⁵ In another definition: “Objectivism is a method of bourgeois historians, who interpret the historical phenomena in favor of the bourgeoisie and capitalism in the form of pure ‘objective,’ above-class and ‘non-party’ historical science.”⁶

Another frequent general critique was that of “idealism” or a “bourgeois-idealist method”. This usually meant emphasizing the role of ideas in historical development instead of the material factors and laws of social development. Idealism was contrasted with the Marxist “philosophy of history” and historical materialism as the only true and correct method. Historical materialism is the explanation of the course of historical development using economic factors (forces of production and relations of production); it includes the teaching of social formations (or social orders), which succeed each other by law-like historical “regularity” through class struggles. Conversely, idealism means the denial (or dismissal) of historical regularities in general and of the determining economic forces in particular, as well as of the driving force of class struggles. In more neutral language, the bourgeois historians were criticized for their preference for political, military, and church history, and eventually the study of culture, while ignoring or downplaying economic and social history – in this case, feudalism and class contradictions and the struggles between peasants and feudal lords.⁷

Another critique of bourgeois historiography was that it exaggerated the role of historical personalities instead of stressing the role of the masses or people. Vasil

⁵ Tushe Vlahov, “Săstoyanie i zadachi,” 208. Similarly in Aleksandăr Fol and Vasil Gyuzelev, “Antichnostta i rannoto srednovekovie do XII vek v bălgarskata burzhoazna istoriografiya,” *Istoricheski pregled* 20, no. 4 (1964), 91–106, esp. 92.

⁶ Dimităr Kosev, “Za săstoyaniето i zadachite na bălgarskata istoricheska nauka,” *Istoricheski pregled* 20, no. 4 (1964), 3–39, quote on 17.

⁷ Such accusations were leveled at the bourgeois historians in general articles on the “current state of historical science,” such as Tushe Vlahov, “Săstoyanie i zadachi,” 208–210. Somewhat later came Dimităr Kosev, “Razvitiето na istoricheskata nauka v Bălgariya sled pobedata na Velikata oktomvriyska sotsialisticheskа revolyutsiya,” *Istoricheski pregled* 13, no. 6 (1957), 3–15.

Gyuzelev and Aleksandăr Fol defined this as a “hero-centered” or “providential” notion of Bulgarian history, meaning a history of kings and military leaders (and some men of letters) that was concerned mostly with the activities of the rulers and the feudal aristocracy, such as alliances, marriages, wars and conquests. This notion of history was criticized from a Marxist point of view, because it saw personalities rather than economic factors and class struggles as the driving forces of historical processes.⁸

These theoretical and methodological objections to “bourgeois” historiography were supplemented by purely ideological accusations—namely, that such historians had given “scientific” support to the interests and the political agenda of the dominant bourgeois class, and of great-Bulgarian chauvinism and fascism. According to this view, Bulgarian historians’ work became especially harmful and reactionary when Bulgarian historical development itself passed from the phase of liberal democracy and capitalism to the phase of fascist dictatorship (dated to the post-World War I era) and monarcho-fascism (dated to the late 1930s and during World War II).⁹

Thus for militant Stalinist historians, the only correct and scientific method was historical materialism, with its postulates and priorities. Yet applying this method was not so easy. It could be turned against anybody—anyone could be accused of some methodological “deviation.” The foremost Bulgarian Stalinist philosopher and president of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Todor Pavlov, made this clear.

If we try to reduce the history of the society to a history of the economy, we will fall into “economism,” which is in contradiction with creative Marxism. If we explain the history of the peoples with the geographical conditions and the dynamics of the population, we will fall into the gross anti-Marxist error of “geographism,” yet we cannot ignore the geographical and demographic data. Attention should also be paid to the cultural, literary, and linguistic development of the Bulgarian people, yet Bulgarian history should not be reduced to the history of Bulgarian literature, art, and culture. Similarly, we should not substitute the role and importance of the people and

⁸ Aleksandăr Fol and Vasil Gyuzelev, “Antichnostta i rannoto srednovekovie,” 92; Vasil Gyuzelev, “Istoriografiya na lichnostite ot srednovekovnata bălgarska istoriya,” in *Problemi na bălgarskata istoriografiya sled Vtorata svetovna vojna* (Sofia: Nauka i izkustvo, 1973), 241–258, esp. 241–243.

⁹ Kosev, “Razvitiето na istoricheskata nauka,” 4–5.

the classes for individuals, great as they might be, yet we should not deny and underestimate the role and significance of the great historical figures who acted in the given circumstances. Such is also the case with necessity and contingency in history. The native Slav population encountered by Asparuh had to create a state by the force of the objective economic and social laws; yet in the confluence of the circumstances, Asparuh's Bulgars played a certain role in founding the Bulgarian state.¹⁰

The risk of being accused of diversions and errors paralyzed historians. They avoided methodological and theoretical questions and theorizing in general. Dimităr Kosev bemoaned this in one of the periodical accounts of Marxist historical scholarship, though without acknowledging the real underlying causes. On the one hand, there was empiricism ("factography"), meaning the mere description of facts, insufficient theoretical analysis, low theoretical level, inadequate application of Marxist-Leninist theory, the absence of conclusions of one's own, the avoidance of "dangerous topics," and work on petty topics. On the other hand, there was dogmatism, schematism, general assertions without enough facts, "citationism," meaning numerous citations (of Marx, Lenin, and Stalin), and sociologization.¹¹

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE MARXIST/STALINIST MASTER COUNTER-NARRATIVE

The result of the Marxist (or more accurately, Stalinist) reorientation of Bulgarian historical "science" was the academic *History of Bulgaria*, a two-volume work published by the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences in 1954. This work presents the "Marxist" master narrative in its crudest form. The whole enterprise was based on the Marxist teaching of the social formations, greatly simplified and applied not to civilizations as a whole (the ancient East, the Roman Empire, etc.) but to separate peoples, as if every people had to pass through all stages of its development. Every social formation succeeded the previous one and was succeeded by the next by necessity or "historical law-like regularity" (*zakonomernost*). Each socioeconomic

¹⁰ Todor Pavlov, "Za marksicheska istoriya na Bălgariya," in Todor Pavlov, *Izbrani proizvedeniya*, vol. 3, *Filosofiya i istoricheski nauki* (Sofia: Izdanie na BAN, 1960), 335–379, quote on 337.

¹¹ Dimităr Kosev, "Za săstoyaniето i zadachite."

formation has an internal structure consisting of a “base” and a “superstructure,” where the base is the economy (forces of production and relations of production), from which the social relations emerge (reduced to classes and class struggles). The superstructure is composed of ideas (particularly laws and religion) that “justify” or “sanction” the social order. The authors’ task in this Marxist *History of Bulgaria* was thus to insert the already written political history of the Bulgarians into those ready-made frameworks and to supply economic and class interpretations of the events and processes, as well as to elaborate on the under-researched economic and social history of feudalism and its classes and class struggles. They supplemented this by highlighting the Slav element and stressing Russian-Bulgarian friendship and brotherhood as well as hostility towards Western Europe and Catholicism.

The communist-era master narrative of Bulgarian history has as its basic plot the process of feudalization and the class struggles between feudal lords (boyars) and peasants. It explains a number of distinctive phenomena, such as wars of conquest, the Bogomil heresy, Ivaylo’s uprising, boyar separatism, and the decline of the king’s authority as the result of feudalism as an overall “order” of the society and with its internal contradictions. Conversely, it rarely if ever employs the previous explanations of ethnic dualism or the harmful Byzantine influence over the Bulgarian development and external influences in general (of Cumans, Tartars, and Magyars).

The Bulgarian-Russian relations during the military campaigns of Prince Svyatoslav of Kiev against the First Bulgarian Kingdom (which led to the fall of Bulgaria under Byzantium) deserves special attention. In the extremes of pro-Sovietism, these relations were treated as a union between Bulgarians and Russians against Byzantium and a manifestation of military collaboration and friendship. This union was presumably facilitated by ethnic and linguistic kinship between Bulgarians and Russians, yet without posing the question of whether such a “union” was coerced (and without mentioning the Russian atrocities).¹²

¹² Boris Cholpanov and Dimităr Hristov, *Rusko-bălgarskata boyna družhba i sâtrudnichestvo prez vekovete* (Sofia: Meditsina i fiskultura, 1959), 5–11; Boris Cholpanov and Dimităr Hristov, *Bălgarskata boyna slava* (Sofia: Narodna Mladezh, 1959), 25–30. Such an interpretation persisted even much later: Boris Cholpanov, *Vekove ot slava*, vol. 1 (Sofia: Voenno izdatelstvo, 1976), 73–75; Dimităr Angelov and Boris Cholpanov, *Bălgarska voenna*

Under Stalinism and the establishment of Soviet domination in Bulgaria, the “Slavicization” of Bulgarian medieval history was taken to extremes. Historians who followed this line sharply rejected the “Hun theory” of origins and belittled, and even denied, the Turkic, i.e. Bulgar component in the Bulgarian ethnogenesis. They presumed that the Slavs had a higher culture and more advanced economy. They asserted that there was a previous Slavic state in the Balkans before the Bulgar-Slavic state. They downplayed the Bulgars’ role in founding the state and asserted that Bulgars and Slavs were on an equal footing (rather than the Bulgars subjugating the Slavs). They asserted that the state was a “union” or “federation.” Moreover, they asserted the rapid Slavicization of the Bulgars and their disappearance and assimilation.¹³

RELATIONS BETWEEN BULGARS AND SLAVS AND THE CHARACTER OF THE STATE

Here is how some major questions of Bulgarian history were debated in a supposedly Marxist manner. There were, to begin with, debates over the relations between Bulgars and Slavs and the character of the state, in which most Bulgarian medievalists expressed an opinion. The debates (until 1980) were well summarized in a work by Petăr Angelov as follows. Traditional “bourgeois” scholarship had two basic stances on this matter. The first stance was that the Bulgars conquered the Slavs and incorporated them in the state created exclusively by Khan Asparuh’s Turkic band. Those taking this position asserted that the Bulgars had “state-building” qualities that the Slavs did not possess. The second stance was that a union (*săyuz*) was formed between Bulgars and Slavs. In the early socialist era the role of the Slavs was emphasized and the pro-Slav theories reached their extremes as already

istoriya. Ot vtorata chetvārt na X vek do vtorata polovina na XV vek (Sofia: BAN, 1989), 18–19, 24–27.

¹³ *Istoriya na Bălgariya*, vol. 1 (Sofia: Nauka i izkustvo, 1954), 60–67 (part by Aleksandăr Burmov); Aleksandăr Burmov, “Săzdavane na bălgarskata dărzhava,” in Aleksandăr Burmov, *Izbrani proizvedeniya*, vol. 1 (first published in 1951), 127–136; Aleksandăr Burmov, “Kăm vāprosa za otnosheniyata mezhdu slavyani i prabălgari prez VII–IX vek,” in Aleksandăr Burmov, *Izbrani proizvedeniya*, vol. 1 (first published in 1954), 137–160.

described. Later (Marxist) historians remained divided on the issue of the relations between Bulgars and Slavs. The majority argued that there had been a union, while a few still argued that there had been a subjugation. With the advance of socialism a compromise was reached that Bulgars and Slavs had collaborated and that the Bulgars initially had a very important role.¹⁴

Another debate concerns the size of the Bulgar population. The estimates of its size vary between 20,000 and 300,000, and one opinion holds that there were several waves of settlement. The compromise during the late socialist era was that whatever their number, they were definitely far outnumbered by the Slavs and became even more outnumbered as the state expanded and incorporated new Slavs—and ultimately, the Bulgars were assimilated.¹⁵

There is also a debate about the character of the newly founded state and the relations between Bulgars and Slavs in it. In the initial socialist era (after the rejection of the view of an earlier Slavic state) the predominant view was that it was a completely new formation, in which Slavs' experience with political unions had to be taken into consideration. A minority view was that it was a continuation of "Old Great Bulgaria" of the Bulgars before they came to the Balkans and based on its accumulated experience and tradition. The other disputed point is whether the state was "federative," in other words, whether the Bulgars ruled their territory according to their own traditions and the Slavic tribes retained their separate territories under the rule of their local tribal leaders (*knez*) but recognized the supremacy of the khan. The opposing view was that the state represented a "union" of even more independent units. In fact, it is the situation of the Slavs that was at stake here and the question is how centralized the state was at the beginning, since it is clear that it became centralized and "unitary" later on.¹⁶

Gradually these disputes became de-ideologized and de-politicized, and a freer expression became possible, which led to a rehabilitation of the idea that the Bulgars had had the leading role.

¹⁴ Petăr Angelov, "Obrazovaneto na bălgarskata dărzhava v săvremennata bălgarska medievistika," *Voenna-istoricheski sbornik* 49, no. 3 (1980), 71–84, esp. 74–78.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 78–79.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 80–82.

THE CONVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY AND THE BYZANTINE INFLUENCE

The other question to be reassessed was the conversion to Christianity and the concomitant Byzantine influence over Bulgaria. The former “bourgeois” view was that Christianity was needed in order to enhance the authority of the prince (as God-given) and to ensure the merger of the Bulgars with the Slavs as well as for reasons of international prestige among Christian states in immediate neighborhood (Byzantium) and the West. What was debated then was the timing (whether premature) and the way of adoption of Christianity (from above, with repression of the Bulgar boyars) as well as the cultural influence of Byzantium that came together with the conversion.

The Marxist militants tackled these issues in another way and from dogmatic tenets. The basic tenet was that since the feudal social formation (or order) represented a higher stage of development than primitive communism based on kinship and common property, then also the adoption of Christianity, which reinforced this higher social formation, should be progressive. This is the more so as Christianity helped disseminate high Byzantine culture, and because it provided the sermon in the vernacular and contributed to the creation of a national culture. Hence the Church should also be evaluated positively, as a religious supporter of the dominant feudal class and of a strong royal authority (against the boyar clans).¹⁷

An example of a dogmatic dispute from the 1950s is that between Aleksandăr Burmov and Emil Georgiev, which concerned the attitude of the various classes towards the Christianization and where the revolt against prince Boris I the Baptist of Bulgaria came from: from the popular masses (“the people”), who fought against their enslavement under feudalism (Burmov), or from the aristocratic feudal class. In the latter case did it come from feudal clans unaware of their interests and bound to tradition or from a group of reactionary boyars while most of the feudal class supported Christianization and so did the people (Georgiev).¹⁸

¹⁷ Vălko Chervenkov, “Deloto na bratyata Kiril i Metodiy,” in Vălko Chervenkov, *Za naukata, izkustvoto i kulturata* (Sofia: Bălgarski pisatel, 1953), 80-92, esp. 81-83.

¹⁸ Aleksandăr Burmov, “Protiv burzhoazno-idealistschkite stanovishta po văprosa za nalaganeto na hristiyanstvoto v Bălgariya prez IX v.,” in Burmov, *Izbrani proizvedeniya*, vol. 1 (first published in 1954), 177–191; Emil Georgiev, “Po văprosa za hristiyaniziraneto na srednovekovna Bălgariya,” *Istoricheski pregled* 10, no. 5 (1954), 82–104.

There is a deeper dogmatic issue of how to combine this view with the critique of Christianity as an “anti-people” phenomenon—an instrument of the exploiter feudal class and ideological prop (“superstructure”) of the feudal order. One way was to argue (with Georgiev) that Christianity was progressive for its time, as it was more humane than paganism and was linked with the “progressive” feudal order and the “young” feudal class. Yet at a later stage Christianity served to dull the consciousness of the people, as it consecrated the right of the feudal class to exploit it, and then the oppressed peasants adopted Bogomilism to fight the official doctrine.¹⁹

There were more thoughtful analyses of the conversion to Christianity even in this era. In 1962, Mihail Voynov revisited this debate and the issue of Christianization in general with realistic historical arguments.²⁰ According to him, both authors exaggerated the role of the popular masses in political life (either in supporting the rulers or in resisting them). The resistance, in fact, came from the boyars (as evidenced by the *Responses of Pope Nicholas I* and *Annales Bertiniani* by Hincmar, archbishop of Reims), and it was directed against Byzantine Christianity, which would destroy the pagan faith of the forefathers. At the same time, it had to prevent the boyars from being placed on the same level as the rest of the population and losing their privileged status as leaders of a dominant Bulgar tribe. According to Voynov, the question about Bulgarian feudalism in the first half of the ninth century was not clarified, and it was not connected to any need for the Bulgarian prince to convert to Christianity. Still less was it perceived as a necessity by the masses and the feudal lords. As Voynov pointed out, both the Christian Church and Islam were militant religions that imposed themselves upon peoples at any stage of their social and economic development (not only during feudalism), and the Christian Church in particular supported the social order in any state; the symbiosis between Church and state was particularly strong in Byzantium. Prince Boris converted to Christianity for a number of reasons: to become part of his contemporary civilization, to utilize the ideological and organizational potential of the Church for the state, and perhaps out of personal conviction. Thus he effectively became a leader of a pro-Byzantine faction

¹⁹ Georgiev, “Po vāprosa za hristiyaniziraneto”, 92, 95, 103-104.

²⁰ Mihail Voynov, “Nyakoi vāprosi vāv vrāzka s obrazuvaneto na bālgarskata dārzhava i pokrāstvaneto na bālgarite,” in *Izvestiya na Instituta za istoriya* 10 (1962), 279–309, esp. 290–309.

and, in fact, “capitulated” before Byzantium, which considered the conversion of the Bulgarians a “triumph.” This also marked the decline of the Bulgar tribe, so it is no accident that it put up the main resistance under the guidance of the boyars, while Prince Boris had to rely increasingly on the Slavs.²¹

Dimităr Angelov also entered the discussion at about the same time. In his contribution he stressed the long and strong tradition of Christianity in the Balkans before the barbarian invasions, the Byzantine Empire’s policy of converting the Slavs as a way of subjugating them and making them into subjects and (more debatably) Hellenizing them. Then he considered the ways in which Christianity permeated the Bulgarian state during its pagan period and the measures some rulers took against it. He pointed to the reasons obligatory to cite for the conversion to Christianity, such as the development of feudal relations in Bulgaria and the usefulness of some Christian ideas for justifying feudal relations, such as subjugation to one’s masters, and the virtue of enduring suffering and violence. On the other hand, other Christian ideas were attractive to the oppressed, such as the promise of happiness in the next world for those suffering in this one. Then he pointed to other uses of Christianity: it served to centralize and to strengthen the authority of the ruler through the notion that he is anointed by God. It served foreign policy goals by putting the state on the same level as other Christianized states. Finally, it facilitated the inclusion of large Christian Slavic populations as the state’s territory expanded. As a whole, Angelov judged the Christianization to be a major state decision and action but not a capitulation (contra Voynov).²²

FEUDALISM AND ITS REVISION

Under the auspices of Marxism, the elaboration of socioeconomic and social-class issues began. Central among them was the feudal formation (or order), with its typical classes. The topic of feudalism as a socioeconomic formation comprised a number of issues, including when it emerged and reached its heyday and decline, its basic social categories (secular and priestly feudal lords, types of dependent

²¹ Ibid., 297–302.

²² Dimităr Angelov, “Po nyakoi vāprosi okolo pokrāstvaneto na bālgarite,” *Istoricheski pregled* 21, no. 6 (1965), 38–57.

population) and institutions (feudal property, rent, feudal immunities, hierarchy, etc.), and the features and distinctive aspects of Bulgarian (and Byzantine) feudalism.

The historiography of the initial Stalinist period typically sets an early date for the establishment of feudalism or “early feudalism” during the pagan period (i.e., before 864–865) and identifies at least some “early feudal” institutions: a feudal (aristocratic) class of boyars, big land domains of the boyars, dependent people working on them, appropriate laws, and so on. However, since evidence is lacking, the authors are not very specific about it.²³

In this early communist period, there was also the very problematic interpretation that free peasants with full land ownership were “dependent on the feudal lord,” under the assumption that if the state was feudal, all subjects—even the free ones—were in feudal dependency, and free peasants could not exist.²⁴

According to the early Marxist authors Bulgarian feudalism developed especially under Byzantine rule with the feudal institution of the *pronoia* (i.e. the granting of land in exchange for administrative or military services) and reached its peak in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in the liberated Bulgarian state. In the latter the feudal domains of the major feudal lords comprised whole regions of the state, with villages and towns. Many monasteries were also big landowners. The feudal lords now had full feudal immunities. Although there is no direct evidence for the existence of serfdom in the Bulgarian lands in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, it is asserted that it existed by analogy with Macedonia, Thrace, and Greece, and in the Law Code of Stefan Dušan. Most of the peasantry was supposedly made dependent in this period. There was also an urban population of varied composition, including craftsmen, traders, boyars, clergy, administration, and soldiers. They were in a better situation than the peasants—they had a lighter tax burden and greater freedom.²⁵

All this demonstrates not only how historians sought to prove the existence of feudalism in Bulgaria from early on but also how they conceived of it as analogous to

²³ *Istoriya na Bălgariya*, vol. 1, 74-80, 93-94.

²⁴ *Istoriya na Bălgariya*, vol. 1, 186-187; Dimităr Angelov and Mihail Andreev, *Istoriya na bălgarskata dărzhava i pravo* (Sofia: Nauka i izkustvo, 1955), 112–113.

²⁵ *Istoriya na Bălgariya*, vol. 1, 158-159, 184-190. Dimităr Angelov and Mihail Andreev, *Istoriya na bălgarskata dărzhava*, 104–106, 109-116.

the most improbable model, Western feudalism. The Byzantine *pronoia*, which involved the state giving a *pronoia*-holder taxes and part of the harvest from a given plot of land, was conflated with the Western feudal domain, which had all types of immunities. Even the free peasants with full property rights were placed in the category of feudally dependent peasants. The Bulgarian medievalists strove to (and were obliged to) discover feudalism of this kind in the sources, which was all the easier the fewer and more ambiguous the sources were.

The alternative would be, for example, to conceive of two models of feudalism of equal status: decentralized Western fief feudalism with suzerainty-vassalage hierarchy and landed estates with full immunities, on the one hand, and centralized Byzantine administrative (or fiscal) feudalism with conditional property or some income in return for a service, on the other hand. Or one could see in the feudalization in Byzantium (and in Bulgaria on the same pattern) a deviation from the initial and fundamentally different centralized system toward decentralized feudalism during certain periods (in Byzantium during the era in which the big provincial landowners [*dynatoi*] dominated the civil bureaucracy in the capital city) yet without full immunities and feudal hierarchy with vassalage. Such a state of affairs would then be seen exactly as a deviation from the centralized imperial norm. Instead, what we see is a dogmatic inability to think about feudalism in an analytical way, by features of the system and how they were inter-related; to construct various models (or “ideal types”) of feudalism, not necessarily only two; and to depict the dynamics of the situation as a gradual transition between such models or types or as a back-and-forth movement closer to, then farther from, a given model, in order to comprehend their complexity and diversity. (This road was later taken by some Soviet Byzantinists, followed by their Bulgarian colleagues.)

Later under socialism there were revisions of the initial (Stalinist) views on Bulgarian feudalism, namely in that it occurred very early and was no different from the “classical” Western European type that was considered normative. First, communist historians shifted the dating of the formative period of feudal relations in Bulgaria from the seventh and eighth centuries through the ninth and tenth centuries to the eleventh and twelfth centuries (under Byzantine rule), which was also when they dated its consolidation. At the same time, they dated the heyday of feudalism—advanced or late feudalism—to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, during the

Second Bulgarian State, especially with the decline of centralization after Ivan Asen II (i.e., after 1241).

Second, the assimilation of Bulgarian (and Byzantine) feudalism to the Western European model, with its hierarchy (vassalage) between autonomous feudal lords with landed estates, various immunities and enserfed peasants was also strongly revised, though the existence of broad immunities was allowed for the late period (on data only about the endowment of monasteries). This line led to, if not the full recognition of two different types or models of feudalism—a decentralized (etc.) Western European model and a centralized (etc.) Byzantine model—at least the acknowledgement of specific features of the Byzantine type. Such specifics were imperial centralization and the mostly conditional (administrative) forms of landowning (the *pronoia*), as well as the development of a Western-like feudalization process with hereditary land ownership and broader immunities, but as a late phenomenon in a restricted scope and as a deviation from the basic model. For Bulgaria in particular, it was admitted that the evidence concerned only monasteries as “feudal lords” but not secular feudal lords. The separatism of mighty boyars with an aspiration toward independence and their autonomization in small statelets (local or regional princedoms) was interpreted as a manifestation of feudalism. Yet such feudal lords’ ownership of the land in their region could not be proven—that is, there was no landowning element, as there was in Western European feudalism—and the historians sometimes admitted this.

Third, the idea that there had been massive enserfment of the peasants (their binding to the land) and of bound peasants altogether was gradually given up; in the end it was given up even for “private” feudally dependent peasants, so-called *pariki*. The preservation of a substantial segment of free peasantry—that is, subordinated only to the state but not to (semi-autonomous) feudal lords—was recognized.²⁶

²⁶ The above revisions in: Strashimir Lishev, *Za genezisa na feodalizma v Bălgariya* (Sofia: BAN, 1963); Genoveva Tsankova-Petkova, *Za agrarnite otnosheniya v srednovekovna Bălgariya (XI-XIII v.)* (Sofia: BAN, 1964); Dimităr Angelov, “Văprosi na feodalizma v bălgarskite zemi prez XIII-XIV vek,” *Istorichski pregled* 16, no. 6 (1960), 61–90; Lyubomir Yonchev, “Za haraktera na manastirskoto zemevladenie v Makedoniya prez XIII-XIV v.,” in *Izvestiya na Instituta za istoriya* 22 (1972), 121–182.

As a whole, a historiography under ideological (that is, crude Marxist) tutelage could not give up the notion of feudalism. It was therefore compelled to look for its forms and manifestations. The aforementioned “feudal separatism” was one solution. Another approach deriving from Marx’s idea of an “Asiatic mode of production” was to characterize state taxation of the free peasants as “centralized feudal rent”. Still, the revision led to a de-emphasis of Bulgarian feudalism and the narrowing of its chronology and scope. Later, there would be attempts at giving up the notion of feudalism altogether.

CLASS STRUGGLES: BOGOMILISM AND IVAYLO’S PEASANT UPRISING

Class contradictions and struggles are a specialty and a trademark of Marxism, so they received a great deal of attention from Bulgarian historians during the communist era, especially in the early years. They supplied the main explanation for many actions, events, and phenomena while processes were explained by “structural” socioeconomic causes mostly stemming from feudalism. Historians sifted through the past searching for class struggles, and they interpreted some historical phenomena exclusively in these terms. In the case of the Bulgarian Middle Ages, these included the Bogomil heresy and Ivaylo’s uprising.

The militant Stalinist period deeply influenced the interpretation of Bogomilism. Rather than being treated as a religious and ethical teaching with social motivation (as by some of the older authors), it was now treated primarily as a form of social protest and directly as class struggle in a religious form.²⁷

The socialist historians consider Ivaylo’s peasant uprising (1277–1280) that resulted in Ivaylo becoming Bulgarian king as the strongest expression of the class struggles during the Bulgarian Middle Ages. It was defined as peak of the peasants’ struggle against feudal oppression. However, in the Marxist view Ivaylo and the peasants fought only to reduce feudal exploitation and hence to improve the feudal order, not abolish it; abolishing it was then impossible and unthinkable. The peasants had an idealized notion of the “good king (tsar)” who would rule to the benefit of all

²⁷ Dimităr Angelov, *Bogomilstvoto v Bălgariya. Proizhod, săshnost i razprostranenie* (Sofia: Bălgarsko istorichesko druzhestvo, 1947). Dimităr Angelov, *Bogomilstvoto v Bălgariya* (Sofia: Nauka i izkustvo, 1980; third edition), 87–88, 441.

his subjects. That is why when they helped Ivaylo to the throne, they considered their dream fulfilled and the uprising completed. The following causes for the defeat of the uprising are noted: the feudal order was still in its heyday; the peasants acted randomly, and the uprising, like all peasant uprisings, aimed at changing the tsar, not the social order. Besides, the insurgents faced several dangerous enemies at once—the boyars, the Tartars, and the Byzantines; the power and the wealth of the boyars were not substantially affected, and Ivaylo even sought agreement with part of them. As the deeper cause for the defeat of the uprising it was pointed out that the peasantry, in principle, cannot cope with its oppressors and change socioeconomic conditions under either feudalism or capitalism.²⁸

OTTOMAN FEUDALISM AND THE END OF THE BULGARIAN MIDDLE AGES

With the advanced stage of feudalism dated to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, we come to the question of when it ended. The “bourgeois” authors did not define the Bulgarian Middle Ages on the basis of feudalism; for them, it ended with the Ottoman conquest. At least, the authors stopped there, probably because they did not think of the ensuing period as, strictly speaking, Bulgarian. The socialist medievalists, for whom the Middle Ages coincided with feudalism as a socioeconomic formation, stated unanimously that both continued under Ottoman rule, though under different feudal arrangements. However, as a rule they left these issues to the Ottomanists (and the historians of the National Revival).

I have written on these issues elsewhere.²⁹ Below I will reproduce some general tenets and conclusions. Here is how Ottoman feudalism and its evolution were described. Marxist authors (following a discussion by Soviet authors of Marx’s

²⁸ Dimităr Angelov, *Ivaylo. Istoricheski ocherk* (Sofia: Narodna Mladezh, 1954), esp. 5, 16–17, 38–39, 55–58. Petăr Petrov, *Văstanieto na Ivaylo* (Sofia: Dărzhavno voenno izdatelstvo, 1956). Subsequent editions with similar ideas were published under the same title: Petăr Petrov, *Văstanieto na Ivaylo* (Sofia: Narodna Prosveta, 1960); Petăr Petrov, *Văstanieto na Ivaylo* (Sofia: Narodna Mladezh, 1968).

²⁹ Roumen Daskalov, *The Making of a Nation in the Balkans: Historiography of the Bulgarian Revival* (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2004), 57–85.

“Asiatic” mode of production) defined the Ottoman Empire of the “classical” fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as Eastern- (or Asian-) type feudalism. What typified this form of feudalism was a strong central power, combining secular and religious authority, and ownership of the fisc of the basic means of production—the land. The basic feudal institution of the Ottoman Empire is considered to be the *timar* – a share of land (more precisely, the taxes from it) granted to a *sipahi*, who lived off this income and formed the cavalry in times of war—hence military-fief feudalism. The ownership of the *timar* (similar to the Byzantine *pronoia*) was conditional (not hereditary)—on the condition of military service and without the administrative and judicial immunities that formed the base of the Western European type of feudalism and led to autonomy and decentralization. The peasants (called *rayah* or *raya*) were not bound to the land, and their dependence was not personal but connected with the working of the land.

Besides the *sipahi*’s *timars*, Ottoman feudalism also comprised the landed estates of the sultan (who also held the supreme ownership of the whole land) and of other high dignitaries with full property rights as well as *vakuf* or *vaqf*—the dedicated property of religious institutions. Soviet Marxist scholarship’s main focus in analyzing feudalism was the land rent and the way it was appropriated and distributed (a focus that took attention away from the developed town life and money economy). The Ottoman Empire witnessed an ongoing struggle between the central authority and the big fief-holders trying to convert conditional land ownership into full and unconditional landed property, which led to decentralization (“feudalization”).

The problem is that after the sixteenth century, the decline began of the Ottoman military-fief system, that is, exactly the feudal institution that was paradigmatic for Marxist historiography. This system declined until it was abolished with the agrarian reform of 1832. Initially it was thought that a transition took place from the economy (in kind) of the *sipahi* fiefs towards *chiflics* (semi-capitalist hereditary landed estates), accompanied by loss of land by the peasants. However, this was soon challenged and abandoned as generally untrue (or of limited scope). Then some authors began to discover important changes in the Ottoman feudal system in the period of its “decay” (i.e., the decay of the military-fief system), such as tax farming (i.e., selling to private persons the right to levy state taxes), the increased influence of commercial and usury capital, the expansion of urban life and of the

money economy, political corruption and weakening of the central administration, and the great significance of the *vakuf* institution as owner of real estate in the towns.

In spite of these new phenomena, however, most Bulgarian historians continued to describe the seventeenth and eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century as a period of decay of the initial military-fief feudalism, accompanied by decentralization and strife. Even the period after the agrarian reform (starting in 1832) was described as feudalism by referring again to the “Eastern type” and its centralization. The abolition of the *sipahi* system with the agrarian reform was then presented not as the elimination of feudalism but as centralization of the whole feudal rent after the former *sipahi* were “retired” and then compensated with pensions or jobs. The term “feudalism,” with its connotations of backwardness and oppression, was obviously emotionally very important for the description and assessment of the Ottoman rule.

THE WORK OF CYRIL AND METHODIUS AND THE BEGINNINGS OF COMMUNIST NATIONALISM

Cultural development, which is part of the Bulgarian national master narrative, was de-emphasized during the militant Stalinist period, when feudalism, classes, and class struggles took center stage. The main cultural event was the work of Cyril (Constantine the Philosopher) and Methodius, inventors of the Slavic alphabet and translators of the first (liturgical) books into Slavic, and the work of their disciples in Bulgaria to propagate Slavic literacy and literature. The pan-Slavic work of Cyril and Methodius, continued by their disciples, is in principle an object of special national pride for the Bulgarians, insofar as (after it was suppressed in Great Moravia) it found fertile soil in Bulgaria, blossomed in Simeon’s “Golden Age,” and was passed on from there to the Russians and the Serbs and to the non-Slavic Romanian people, who used Slavic language and script until relatively recently.

There are, however, certain stakes in the interpretation that guide it: whether and how much to stress the pan-Slavic character of Cyril and Methodius’s work; to what extent to underline the purely Bulgarian contributions to Slavdom; and how to reconcile them with other Slavic national sensibilities, especially with Russian nationalism and imperialism. In the communist era, the pan-Slavic aspect came to the fore, while the Bulgarian contribution, especially to Russia, was downplayed.

With the evolution of socialism Cyril and Methodius work was increasingly linked to Bulgaria and the Bulgarians in several ways as a first sign of the return to nationalism. It was stressed that 1) the brothers originated from Thessaloniki from a territory populated by “Bulgarian Slavs” and were themselves of Slavic (or half-Slavic) ethnic descent; 2) that the language or dialect of their writings was “Bulgarian-Slavic”; 3) that they conducted preaching and literary activities in Macedonia, preceding the Great Moravian mission, meaning that their work was originally oriented toward the “Bulgarian Slavs” (untrue); 4) their Byzantine mission was played down; 5) the success of their work in Bulgaria through their disciples was emphasized; 6) the transfer and propagation of the work of Cyril and Methodius from Bulgaria to Russia, Serbia, and Romania was proudly pointed out.³⁰ Here undisputed truths are combined with untruths and with half-truths. A half-truth for example is the Bulgarian-Slavic dialect of the writings of Cyril and Methodius from Thessaloniki, which is indisputably Slavic but hardly “Bulgarian-Slavic”, which is actually a manifestation of later Bulgarian claims on Macedonia.

A similar new patriotic or nationalist spirit can be sensed in some attempts from the 1960s to interpret the frescoes (murals) in the Boyana Church (near Sofia) dating from the mid-thirteenth century. They are defined as anticipating the Renaissance in Byzantium in the fourteenth century and in Italy in the fifteenth century”; and as a “proto-Renaissance phenomenon.”³¹

The change in the ideological climate of historiography was connected with the political trend of de-Stalinization and the critique of the “cult of personality” in Bulgaria, which took place at the April plenum (of the Politburo) in 1956, after Todor Zhivkov replaced Chervenkov (in 1954) as head of the Bulgarian Communist Party. This tendency was rather weak and dissimulative in Bulgaria.

³⁰ Emil Georgiev, *Kiril i Metodiy. Osnovopolozhnitsi na slavyanskite literaturi* (Sofia: BAN, 1956); Emil Georgiev, “Kiril i Metodiy i razvitiето na bălgarskata kultura,” in *Hilyada i sto godini slavyanska pismenost 683–1963. Sbornik v chest na Kiril i Metodiy* (Sofia: BAN, 1963), 21–49.

³¹ Kiril Krăstev, “Bălgarskiyat prinos v Boyanskite stenopisi,” *Izkustvo* 12, no. 4–5 (1962), 39–47, esp. 44, 47. Similarly Aleksandăr Burmov, “Renaissance-Elemente im Mittelalterlichen Bulgarien,” in Burmov, *Izbrani proizvedeniya*, vol. 1 (first published in 1962), 309–313.

Not until January 1964 was a second national conference of historians in Bulgaria convened (after the first one in 1948), which registered the softening or “thaw” of the ideological climate in the spirit of the “April wind” and a critique of the “cult of personality.” The national conference was preceded by two meetings of historians in early 1963 at the Institute of History of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and at the Philosophical-Historical Faculty of Sofia University, where the issues were discussed more openly and freely. Participants criticized the previous approach to the Bulgarian past, defined as “national nihilism,” and pointed out the need to reassess “bourgeois” historiography. Participants also contrasted the quest for scientific objectivity with the ideologization and politicization of historical knowledge. They insisted on an expert and professional assessment of the past and the ascertaining of the “historical truth” through strictly empirical research. The ensuing official conference was not as open, but the new spirit manifested itself in some statements and in the defense of the “bourgeois” academic authors.³²

Thus in the early 1960s, lagging behind the political changes and with some caution, Bulgarian historiography shifted. Stalinist dogmatism gave way to a softer, less ideologically rigid stance, which would take a nationalist direction in the following years. The simplified Marxist counter-narrative, built upon the plots of feudalism and class struggles, began to lose credibility, and interest in it subsided. Guided by the idea of overcoming “national nihilism” and restoring historical “truth” against dogmatic and ideological constraints, the historians began to return to the traditional master national narrative with its plots and personalities.

³² Ivan Elenkov, “Vtoroto natsionalno sāveshtanie na istoritsite v Bālgariya,” in *Razum i vāzvishenost. Yubileen sbornik v chest na prof. Dimitār Avramov*, ed. Tsocho Boyadzhiev and Bozhidar Kunchev (Sofia: Ab Izdatelsko atelie, 2004), 48–92, esp. 48–53, 58–62.