

Local homelands and national projects: territorial representations in the Bulgarian press from the 1840s to the Russo-Turkish War (1877–1878)

Dessislava Lilova

doi: [10.12681/historein.314](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.314)

Copyright © 2015, Dessislava Lilova



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

To cite this article:

Lilova, D. (2016). Local homelands and national projects: territorial representations in the Bulgarian press from the 1840s to the Russo-Turkish War (1877–1878). *Historein*, 15(2), 41–55. <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.314>

The Russo–Turkish War of 1877–1878 undoubtedly played a key role in the construction of Bulgarian territorial identity. More specifically, it led not just to the emergence of the Bulgarian state but also to the establishment of two radically different notions of a Bulgarian homeland. On the one hand, the national imagination began to associate the homeland with the map of what came to be known as San Stefano Bulgaria, on the basis of which the Ottoman empire and Russia signed a peace treaty on 3 March 1878. According to this map, the Bulgarian-populated lands comprised most of the Balkan peninsula. On the other hand, the homeland was also objectively identified with the independent Bulgarian state formed following the resolutions of the Congress of Berlin (13 June–13 July 1878), which revised the territorial provisions of the San Stefano peace treaty. This state encompassed only the territory between the Danube River and the Balkan mountain range, as well as the former Ottoman *sancak* of Sofia. Hence, the two notions of the homeland – as a utopia and as a reality – acquired legitimacy simultaneously. This resulted in the formation of a territorial identity with a seismic nucleus which periodically caused shock waves in modern Bulgarian history and has therefore become a constant object of scientific investigation.

Much less attention has been paid to the fact that the Russo–Turkish War of 1877–1878 gave rise to yet another notion of the homeland, whose alternative is completely absent from the normative territorial myth – namely, the local sense of place. Unlike the utopia and the reality of the national homeland, it is not part of the memory of Bulgaria’s liberation from Ottoman rule. But during the war itself and the subsequent Russian occupation – that is, in the period between

Local homelands and national projects: territorial representations in the Bulgarian press from the 1840s to the Russo–Turkish War (1877–1878)

Dessislava Lilova

Sofia University

1877 and 1879 – the mobilisation of local identity was a publicly visible process. It left traces both in the diplomatic negotiations between the Great Powers and in the periodical press – in the debates in Bulgarian newspapers and in the reports of Russian correspondents.

The local mobilisations which accompanied the birth of the Bulgarian nation-state are worth analysing not just because of their high intensity. What is more important is the change in the very way the press treated the issue of belonging to “small homelands”. Until then, early Bulgarian nationalism had purposefully encouraged representations of local worlds in the press because it interpreted them as metonyms for the national homeland. During the war, however, the local forms of activity were observed with mixed feelings and were often interpreted as anomalies. I will try to rationalise the logic of this change as I believe it contains an answer to the question of why early Bulgarian nationalism actively exploited the resource of the local but ultimately did not include it in the newly formed territorial myth. To this end, I will analyse both the ideologies and the mechanisms of using “small homelands” to the benefit of the national project, from the emergence of the Bulgarian press in the 1840s to the end of the period of Ottoman rule.

The homeland in the news: mediatizing the local

The main channel that ensured constant representation of the “small homelands” in the public sphere was the news flow from the Bulgarian-populated lands. One may say that this was a standard mechanism of mediatizing the local, for it is connected with the very definition of news as information about an event that has happened in a particular place. The genealogy of news agencies is also symptomatic in this respect. As Terhi Rantanen notes, news agencies were not founded as mediators between states or national territories but as private companies which “transmitted news from and to other *cities*”.¹ Viewed from this perspective, the peculiarities of the Bulgarian case stemmed solely from the way in which domestic news was produced.

In the Ottoman era the Bulgarian newspapers were printed in Constantinople, Bucharest, Brăila and Bolgrad – that is, far from the Bulgarian-populated lands. The problem was that their editors did not have the money to employ regular correspondents to report news from territories of strategic importance to the national project. Although some foreign news agencies, such as Havas and Reuters, were operating within the Ottoman empire at the time, neither had a special interest in the Bulgarian-populated lands or had regular correspondents there either. Hence, it is hardly surprising that until the end of the 1850s there was a lack of Bulgarian news in the Bulgarian press. A typical example is the Constantinople-based *Tsarigradski vestnik* (1848–1862) newspaper, which functioned more as an almanac with translated articles from the European press and from French- or Greek-language newspapers published in the Ottoman empire.² As Plamen Mitev’s analysis shows, it was not until after the Crimean War (1853–1856) that the share of original news content in *Tsarigradski vestnik* began to grow.³ The long period in which readers cultivate the habit not just of reading but also of writing in the periodical press is a necessary stage in the development of every press. But something even more was expected from the Bulgarian public: it was seen as the main source of current information about the territories it inhabited. Thus,

the press became directly dependent on the activity of its own audience. This begs the question of what followed from this.

There are no indications that the key role of the public as the producer of domestic news allowed it to determine the latter's content. There is nothing to suggest that the topics discussed in village squares and town bazaars were automatically transferred to the pages of the Bulgarian press. It is telling that priority events in the local kinship worlds, such as baptisms or weddings, were reported only in particular circumstances – for example, if a Bulgarian woman married a Muslim man, a Bulgarian man married a Greek woman, or if the priest performed a church ceremony in Greek instead of Bulgarian. This means that the creation of a family and children was not represented as a private event worth sharing with the imagined community. It was rationalised as a fundamental but routine mechanism of reproduction of the national collective and, therefore, became an extraordinary event – that is, a newsworthy story – only if it deviated from the norm regarding ethnic “purity”. In other words, to become news producers, the local readers of newspapers learned to perceive their small worlds from a new perspective – as part of the imagined Bulgarian homeland.

Still, this is not to say that the news flow from the Bulgarian-populated lands became a monotonous variation of one and the same message. On the contrary: the regime of local representation in fact proved to be more resistant to the ideological schemes than one would have expected. For example, one may learn all sorts of juicy gossip about the private lives of village families if the main subject of the news story was the exorbitant divorce fee charged by the local bishop.⁴ Who was getting divorced, and why, was just as important to the authors of news stories as their desire to join the propaganda campaign against the Greek bishops. The issue of the arbitrariness of the Ottoman authorities was interpreted at the local level with the same logic. The villages where Ottoman soldiers or tax agents chose to stay overnight sent the newspapers an almost identical list of the exact number of hens, cheese-and-egg pastries (*banitsa*), eggs, loaves of bread, casks of cheese and sacks of barley eaten by the agas and their horses. Almost all such news stories noted the higher cost of providing food for Muslim guests, as the Bulgarian hosts had to cook with butter instead of the traditional lard.⁵ Thus, the standard for a newsworthy, nationally significant event was practically “calibrated” to the local measurement system.

This hybrid logic influenced all aspects of the news flow, including its geographical parameters.⁶ There was a significant difference between the coordinates of the homeland in the news and the national territorial project, although both visions were popularised by one and the same institution – namely, the periodical press. According to the editorials and political commentaries, the Bulgarian-populated lands comprised three geographical regions: Bulgaria (or ancient Moesia), Thrace and Macedonia. The boundaries of those three regions were provisional since the second and third did not correspond to real administrative units, but it was generally assumed that they stretched from the Danube to the Aegean. The problem was that in the world of domestic news, the Danube was not a boundary. To the north of the Danube lay three of the most active information centres: Bucharest, Bolgrad and Brăila. They certainly did not belong to the ethnic homeland but they regularly appeared in domestic news. What is more, their presence was statistically comparable to reports from Ohrid, Bitola and Salonica, which were of strategic importance to the political territorial project. Two factors determined the prestigious position of those three Romanian cities in

Bulgarian news: the existence of printing houses as well as of large emigrant colonies with a high percentage of educated elites. As one can see, demographic statistics – that is, the main argument in the territorial project of Bulgarian nationalism – were not directly related to the news production activity of a given town or village. This activity did not depend on whether the Bulgarians were a majority or a minority, but on the existence of elites which had developed a need for sharing news about local events with the imagined community of readers.

Hence the drastic mismatch between the maps of the “ethnic” homeland and “the homeland in the news”. As the news flow was not guided by the editor’s ideological views, it did not cover equally all territories claimed by Bulgarian nationalism. The news came only from the places where there were active readers in the moment in question. That is why almost half of all towns and villages that were represented in the news were situated in a dense network on both sides of the Balkan range. The area was home to most of the leading information centers, starting with Ruse, Plovdiv and Tŭrnovo, the top three cities which together produced 17 percent of the news flow. Taken separately, they were surpassed only by Constantinople, which generated 11 percent of all news stories. The resulting configuration definitely did not serve the project of an “ethnic” homeland; but on the other hand, it would be an exaggeration to say that it impeded it. The newspapers did not classify domestic news according to their geographical origin. They did not have separate sections for news from Bulgaria, Thrace and Macedonia. Hence, the fact that most news stories came from both sides of the Balkan range practically did not leave any traces that would have influenced the reader’s imagination.

Conversely, however, the structural differences between the two parallelly constructed “homelands” grew. The reason for this lies in the coordinate system used by the local authors and its potential to generate not a territorial but a spatial vision. Neither provinces nor *vilayets* are mentioned in the news stories. The reader was not offered any information regarding the actual location of the place featured in the news story. The only exception were reports from villages, where the closest town and how long it took to get there were specified. Readers, however, were not told where the town in question was actually located. This ultimately created a fragmented space structured as a network – a mediatised constellation of hundreds of local worlds which told unknown, anonymous and distant people about their minor and major events. Each story was an invitation for a virtual visit to the otherwise invisible “small homeland”; in this sense, the news space was mobile, consisting of itineraries and existing for the purpose of being immediately navigated.

Hence, in addition, the most significant mismatch between the mediatised network of local worlds and the project of an ethnic homeland – that is, the vision of the Bulgarian-populated lands which constituted a compact territory and required a collective political effort in order to be controlled in the form of an independent church or state. For its part, the news space also presupposed the existence of an imagined community but largely preserved the autonomy of the local. This was a “homeland” which could not emerge without voluntary activity on the part of concrete towns and villages and their desire to share stories about local events. People sent reports and bought newspapers not because they had to but simply because they *wanted* to tell others about their small worlds and to learn what was happening elsewhere. They needed the imagined community formed by means of the periodical press but entered that community on their own initiative. This is what

was specific to domestic news in the Bulgarian press in the Ottoman era. Domestic news was produced and used by local amateurs, although the media outlets themselves were directed by their publishers and performed ideological functions.

Geographical descriptions: ‘quantifying’ the local

Geographical descriptions were another form of representing the local, which was also popularised by means of the press. They resembled the domestic news stories in many respects because their authors were usually the same: anonymous members of the local elites, teachers and travelling merchants. It is no coincidence that the two genres often entered into hybrid combinations, especially in news stories from small settlements which often began with brief geographical descriptions. But whereas the news flow was the product of the press alone, the descriptions of settlements emerged as the result of the specific curriculum of Bulgarian schools and the place of geography in it.

The priority position of geography and, above all, its early emancipation from history was one of the most important distinctive features of the Bulgarian educational system in the Ottoman period. In this respect it differed from the European tradition at that time, which treated geography as an auxiliary discipline whose main function was to illustrate the “scenery” of history.⁷ In the Bulgarian context, however, geography did not just acquire autonomy early in time; it also successfully competed with history. It is telling that the first geography textbook in Bulgarian was published in 1835, almost a decade before the first textbook on Bulgarian history (1844). By 1878, the number of geography textbooks for schools had grown to 38, or almost four times as many as those on Bulgarian history, of which there were ten in all.

The prestigious status of geography was due above all to the project for using it as a political instrument in the service of Bulgarian interests. The attention of the elite was attracted primarily by the statistical data on the population of European Turkey, according to which the Bulgarians were a majority. One may say that by way of geography, Bulgarian nationalism discovered the nation not as a historical but as a statistical quantity and began to build its political strategies on that basis. The effect of that choice is to be seen clearly in the arguments justifying the idea of separating the Bulgarian church from the patriarchate of Constantinople – a political project which came into sharp conflict with the interests of Greek nationalism. Bulgarian propaganda insisted that territory belonged not to its ancient past but to its present population, and formulated its leitmotiv in a simple but categorical manner – “We are but of yesterday, yet we are many.”

We are but of yesterday, we too can tell the Greek writers and journalists, as Tertullian told the pagans 1,600 years ago; we are but of yesterday in comparison with your praiseworthy national antiquity, and yet we have filled the cities, villages and even huts both on this and on the other side of the Balkan range. We are but of yesterday, and yet Bulgarian sweat is flowing and the Bulgarian plough is being used not only in the old lower Moesia (Bulgaria) but also in the fatherland of the sweet-voiced Orpheus (Thrace), as well as in the fatherland of the great phi-

osopher Aristotle and of the great conqueror Alexander (Macedonia). We are but of yesterday, and so is our language in comparison to yours, whose beauty we do not want to question; and yet our language is being spoken both on the Balkan range and along the Danube as well as along the Vardar and the Maritsa.⁸

As Robert Shannan Peckham's analysis shows, the ethnic majority principle gradually became a dominant territorial argument; by the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the Balkan national elites had become so obsessed with producing statistical data that western observers started speaking of an epidemic of "morbus ethnographicus" in the region.⁹ In the Bulgarian context, though, the symptoms of this specific "malaise" of modernity appeared much earlier and left an imprint on the form and content of early Bulgarian nationalism.

The active production of geographical descriptions is one of the relevant pieces of evidence for the development of this process. The publications in question date from 1846 to 1876, forming a corpus of nearly 130 texts. Their structure is standard, having been copied from geography textbooks which normativised the following criteria to describe territorial units: location, boundaries, quality of the land, rivers, climate, flora; size, ethnicity, educational attainment and religion of the population; industry, trade, local government, and finance. Putting their own towns and villages under the magnifying glass of these new analytical tools made the Bulgarian authors feel like discoverers of unknown worlds. The thrill of this "discovery" filled their descriptions with a true taxonomic passion. With meticulous thoroughness, the authors counted everything they could fit into the normative classification scheme: ethnic groups, neighbourhoods, houses, families, males in each household, married men per capita, churches, priests, schools, teachers, male pupils, female pupils, *chitalishta* (reading rooms), newspaper and magazine subscriptions, professions and taxes due. The problem was that there are always parts of reality which cannot be quantified statistically. Still, "blanks" of this sort rarely appear in the descriptions of villages, even though their closed worlds were objectively most difficult to understand. The authors, however, were interested only in quantifiable indicators of ethnic identity and social status and, in this respect, villages seemed comparatively easy to describe – at least against the background of the difficult intellectual exercises required in analysing towns and cities.

For example, Gospodin Slavov declared that the Gypsies in Stara Zagora could not be counted as some of them were nomads and were not registered.¹⁰ Besides, as some clans were Muslim while others were Christian, they paid different taxes and could not be entered together as a compact group into the tax table.¹¹ Stefan Zahariev had similar trouble in his description of Tatar Pazardzhik. He was afraid that he could not define with certainty the ethnicity of each neighbourhood because Armenians and Jews had settled among Turks, and Tsintsars (Aromanians) among Bulgarians.¹² The same problem came up when he moved from the neighbourhood to the individual house level in his description, as he found that many Turkish homes had Bulgarian tenants. Finally, the number of weddings also remained in question because it was not clear exactly under which heading mixed marriages should be classified. With regards to the Bulgarian Tsintsar families, Slavov decided to count them as Bulgarian because, in his view, there were very few Tsintsars in the city, they rarely married, and when they did, they always married Bulgarians.

Yet undoubtedly the most serious challenge posed by local reality to the rational reason of its “discoverers” was the existence of a statistically significant group of Bulgarians who voluntarily identified themselves as Greeks.¹³ It is noteworthy that in this particular case the authors of descriptions did not react as one may have expected from fans of modern statistics, which is known for its “intolerance of multiple, politically ‘transvestite’, blurred, or changing identifications”.¹⁴ They did not classify the assimilated urban residents either as “Greeks” or as “Bulgarians”; they classified them as a separate group (“lost Bulgarians”) and went on to analyse them according to the usual scheme – number of males, females, houses, neighbourhoods, schools, occupations, and so on.¹⁵ In other words, the authors made a decision that not only ran counter to modern rationality, but implied the application of a very unconventional statistical procedure.

In the first place, in order to differentiate the assimilated group it was not enough to apply the standard indicators of language and religion – that is, the normative criterion for determining ethnic identity. Factors of a different order, which were usually not taken into consideration, acquired key importance: for example, family origins, date of settlement in the town, the names of grandfathers and fathers, as well as the number of generations born in mixed marriages. At the same time, the language practices of the persons under study were examined in detail to see which language was spoken in the street and at home, at the children’s school and at the church attended by the particular family. Of course, every member of the respective local community knew this; but as a rule, gossip about neighbours was to be shared in the news, and not in geographical descriptions which were considered to be a scientific genre. The news flow from cities like Plovdiv and Adrianople (present-day Edirne) was full of information about the dress code of assimilated fellow townfolk, as it proved important to know whether the older generation in the family was still wearing Bulgarian *tsarvuli* (traditional cattle hide or pigskin boat-shaped shoes) and exactly when their children had switched to European-style footwear.¹⁶ Some correspondents even candidly related how they had eavesdropped near the fences of houses in order to find out the language spoken in the garden of assimilated families.¹⁷ The authors of geographical descriptions were not as forthcoming about their methods of collecting information, but it is obvious they had used the same resource. They mobilised the complex system of local intuitions about identity and legitimated it as a relevant instrument of statistical analysis.

The ingenuity with which early Bulgarian nationalism managed to include even hybrid answers to the question “Who am I?” in its statistical project is among the clearest symptoms of the development of “morbus ethnographicus”. Against this background, the lack of interest in local history as an alternative resource for political (mis)use is all the more remarkable. To the authors of geographical descriptions, history was an optional genre element. Insofar as they included information of that sort at all, they reduced it to stories about migrations of separate families or of the whole village. They occasionally mentioned the existence of ruins in the area, about whose origins nobody knew anything. Petko Slaveikov was one of the few authors who situated the geographical description within the framework of medieval history.¹⁸ He even reprimanded his fellow authors for ignoring history altogether, but his criticism had no effect.¹⁹

What the genre of geographical descriptions would have looked like had the authors heeded the advice of the otherwise influential Bulgarian ideologue is suggested by the description of Tatar

Pazardzhik (and the adjacent *kazas*) by Stefan Zahariev. Zahariev followed the conventional structure with all its sections as standardised by geography textbooks, but added three elements which are not to be found in any other author: an introduction devoted to the history of the Bulgarian people; geographical maps; and a huge corpus of notes containing historical excursions. The priest Metodi Draginov's chronicle on the forced conversion to Islam of the Pomaks in the Rhodopian village of Chepino was published precisely among the notes to the main text.²⁰ Until the end of the 1980s Bulgarian historiography accepted this chronicle to be authentic and in 1964 the writer Anton Donchev used it as the basis of his bestselling novel *Vreme razdelno* (*Time of Parting*), whose 1988 screen version became a big box-office hit. Doubts as to the authenticity of the chronicle were expressed in 1984 by the linguist Ilia Todorov, but the character of the document as a literary mystification has become the subject of public debate only since the 1990s.²¹

Thanks to its reception in the twentieth century, Zahariev's geographical description is now the best-known work in this genre. In the context of its origin, however, it was an exception to, not an exemplar of, the genre norm. There is evidence that Metodi Draginov's chronicle attracted the interest of another author of a literary mystification, Stefan Verković, who wrote to French experts in Balkan studies about the "discovery".²² In the press of that era, though, there are no traces of this private correspondence or other comments on Zahariev's work.²³ It is telling that when the April Uprising of 1876 broke out in the Tatar Pazardzhik *kazas*, all Bulgarian newspapers published a geographical description of the region but none of them used the occasion to at least mention Zahariev's version about the Rhodopian Pomaks. In fact, the geographical descriptions published in connection with the uprising in *Napredük*, *Den*, *Iztochno vreme* and *XIX vek* are versions of one and the same text sent to the newspapers by an anonymous resident of Panagjurishte.²⁴ For its part, the text in question was based on a geographical description of Panagjurishte and the surrounding villages published ten years earlier by Vasil Cholakov.²⁵ This was a work that followed the traditional genre structure, placed the emphasis on geographical elements and offered historical information only about the local "Golden Age" when the Ottoman authorities had granted Panagjurishte the privileges of a *voyruk* settlement.

This is what the genre norm of settlement descriptions looked like until 1878. It was indeed created to exploit the local worlds to the benefit of the national project – though not as a source of legends to be included in the normative historical narrative, but as a statistical resource. Like the motto of early Bulgarian nationalism, "We are but of yesterday, yet we are many," geographical descriptions were characterised by a minimum of romanticism and an overdose of rationalism. Their taxonomic passion was a product of modernity's belief that the world is cognisable and hence governable, for all its elements can be arranged in the only correct scheme. By this logic, the nation was reduced to a solid statistical quantity computed by a mechanical procedure. The ideological projection of this number was a homogeneous community with a normative identity, such as in fact did not yet exist. The collective imagination was yet to be standardised, and the contradictory mobilisations of the local in the period of the Russo–Turkish War (1877–1878) and the subsequent Russian occupation (1878–1879) are compelling evidence that the process was still ongoing.

The Russo–Turkish War (1877–1878): the impermissible self-initiatives of the local

The initiatives on the part of the local communities in the period of the Russo–Turkish War (1877–1878) that were most often commented on were memoranda, petitions and collective letters sent by some Bulgarian towns and villages to the Congress of Berlin. They contained strong objections to the revision of Bulgaria's borders as established by the San Stefano treaty, and therefore the entire corpus of documents is viewed by contemporary scholars in the light of the nationwide mobilisation of the Bulgarians in defence of the collective interest.²⁶ The national cause was undoubtedly of primary importance in those initiatives. However, there are also letters which reveal a much more complexly nuanced set of motives behind the attempt of some towns and villages to interfere in big politics.

Thus, for example, the residents of the town of Gorna Dzhumaya (present-day Blagoevgrad) petitioned the Great Powers to transfer them from the Ottoman empire to the Principality of Bulgaria on the grounds that their town had always served to mark the border of the *sancak* of Sofia, which ended up within the territory of the principality.²⁷ This letter triggered a furious response from the newspaper *Maritsa* accusing Gorna Dzhumaya of defending its own selfish interests and not caring about the fate of the rest of the Bulgarians in Macedonia.²⁸ Just a few days later, however, the judgmental tone against the Macedonian town put the newspaper's editors in an awkward position as a similar petition was filed by another three towns that could not be accused of lacking of patriotism.²⁹ These were Koprivshtitsa, Panagjurishte and Klisura, the leading centres of the April Uprising of 1876. They claimed in their petition that their labour market was directly connected to Sofia, therefore seasonal migration rates were high and the new border was bound to ruin them. This argument was used to justify an appeal for their transfer from Eastern Rumelia to the Principality of Bulgaria, a gesture which no doubt placed the local benefit before national solidarity. In this petition, in particular, the priority of economic interest over ideological motivation is categorical, and that is precisely why it is symptomatic that the letter was signed on behalf of the three revolutionary towns. It shows that in itself – even if it was interiorised – the imagined community of the nation did not block local identity. The war had transformed geographical structures before the eyes of the local population and this brutal change of the familiar world sharpened all intuitions about territorial identity, including the local one.

In general, early Bulgarian nationalism established a comparatively liberal regime of relations with the local. As the informative function of the press largely depended on volunteer amateurs, the presence of local identities in the public sphere was high. Another powerful impetus in this respect came from the political use of statistics, which constructed the nation as an aggregate of members of duly described local collectives. Those mechanisms of integrating the local into the national project worked well for a long time and their effectiveness created the impression of a “natural partnership”. The war destroyed the idyll of this “Golden Age”, as in the ensuing chaos, the local interest was activated and undertook self-initiatives that were not subject to ideological control.

This change startled the ideologues of the nation who spoke on behalf of the latter in the press, because to them the mobilisation of local interests was neither an acceptable nor even a logical out-

come of the historical moment. They had expected the nation to experience the birth of its state as a sublime event which would make the everyday answers to the question “Who am I?” irrelevant. From this point of view, the authors of ideological comments were baffled not only by some of the petitions, but also by the overall attitude of the Bulgarians towards the Russian troops. They were particularly impressed by the fact that the Russians were welcomed everywhere with flowers and joyful tears, but otherwise people preferred to stay clear of the war. A typical example was the village of Gorna Lipnitsa, where several young men enlisted as volunteers in the army, but their relatives immediately showed up at the headquarters and filed a protest, claiming that their children were being drafted against their will.³⁰ Even more widespread, and hence more disappointing, were the instances of pragmatic profiteering. Russian soldiers fell prey to daylight robbery everywhere because of the arbitrary exchange rates. The only exception was the town of Lovech, where the local authorities surprised them nicely by introducing an official exchange rate of 33 Russian kopecks to 1 franc in their honour.³¹ The Plovdiv *charshia* (bazaar), on the contrary, shocked the Russian troops. The prices there were exorbitant and the Bulgarian merchants offered no discounts, thus turning out to be more relentless in their market policies than the Greek, Armenian and Jewish merchants.³²

Bulgarian journalists found this sort of behaviour disgraceful and harshly criticised their compatriots. They depicted the war as a reunion of two brotherly nations and expected those who took part in it to behave befittingly. The local population, however, failed to live up to those expectations – even if it did arrange festivities to celebrate the victory, it still distanced itself from the military operations and tried to make a profit at the expense of its liberators. Moreover, the attitude of the Russians was sometimes far from brotherly. The Russian military correspondent Evgeny Utin, for instance, quoted an officer who bragged about administering 200 strokes of the whip a day because “Bulgarians don’t get it right unless you give them a good beating”.³³ The response of the Bulgarian press to such incidents is symptomatic. The reports of the liberal Utin were rejected as an ill-meaning lie and their author was proclaimed “an inside enemy” of the Slavic cause.³⁴ Local market policies and the relations of the peasants with the troops accordingly came under excruciating criticism. Unlike the cult of Russia, which was later to be normativised, these problematic contacts were not recorded in the history textbooks. They were rather treated as anomalies already at the time they took place, and it is no coincidence that no traces of them remain in Bulgarian collective memory.

Against this backdrop, the way in which the Bulgarian press interpreted the relations of the local population with the Serbian troops stands out prominently. The main reason for that is that Serbia entered the war against the Ottoman empire as Russia’s ally, but raised territorial claims over the lands liberated by its army. Undoubtedly the thorniest issue was the case with the petitions from a number of borderland towns and villages requesting they be transferred to Serbia.³⁵ The Bulgarian press categorically refused to accept those letters as evidence of the ethnic identity of the local population. It published a series of letters and reports from the region which claimed that some of the petitions had been gathered by force or by intimidation.³⁶ In this context, the expulsion of the Bulgarian bishop from Pirot received extensive coverage. On the other hand, although much more rarely, opinions that the motives behind those petitions were purely pragmatic are also to be found in the Bulgarian press at the time. According to some reports, many local peasants declared

Serbian identity because the occupation authorities had promised them lower taxes and exemption from military service.³⁷ It was also implied that the population was afraid that the Turks might come back and that the future Bulgarian principality did not have an army to protect it. Conversely, the very presence of Serbian troops evoked a feeling of state protection. The sympathy with which those dreams and fears were described in the press is a telling exception to the normative representation of local identity. As a rule, its pragmatic logic was denounced as an instance of retrograde selfishness that impeded the birth of the national homeland. Ironically, the small rural world and its interests were granted legitimacy in this particular case only in their capacity as a camouflage concealing the “true” identity – namely, the national identity.

The rational workings of early Bulgarian nationalism were not sensitive to the autonomy of the local and its capacity to accept or reject the vision of the national depending on its particular interest. The war constantly forced people into situations where they had to make such a choice, but perhaps the most dramatic among them had to do with the huge influx of Bulgarian refugees who fled to the Russian-occupied territories after the army of Süleyman Pasha burned down a number of towns and villages to the south of the Balkan range. The press responded with a volley of publications, but their ideological messages were mixed. On the one hand, the descriptions of Thrace became quickly dominated by a standardised set of emotional clichés. Most of the authors defined Thrace as “the core and the heart of our fatherland”.³⁸ On the other hand, the press discovered with both concern and surprise that the refugees themselves were not perceived by the rest of the Bulgarians as children of the said fatherland. On the contrary, to the north of the Balkan range they were looked upon as foreigners – as uninvited guests in the small worlds of the local villages and towns. Rejected by their compatriots as beggars, vagabonds and thieves, out of necessity the refugees gravitated in the orbit of the Russian troops. In fact, they made their living by fetching water for the soldiers, watering their horses, washing their clothes, and serving as prostitutes, receiving in return protection, accommodation and food.

A first-hand witness of this daily drama was Totiu Stefanov, who served in the legendary Bulgarian volunteer corps that defended the Shipka Pass. On 10 September 1877 he submitted an article to the *Bŭlgarin* newspaper in which he succinctly reported that he had only just “served” the enemy a hundred grenades “for breakfast”.³⁹ This is all he had to say about the most important battle in the course of the Russo–Turkish War before proceeding to discuss the issue he was truly concerned with. That was the sight of a group of starved and lice-infested people who were warming themselves at the campfire of the Russian army because they had not been allowed to enter the town of Gabrovo, or even to gather firewood from the nearby forests:

Yes, because we welcomed them so warmly, because we helped them so much – that is why today they are below the thorns of the Balkan range, lamenting their days. That is why from dawn to dusk, they carry water – some in jugs, others in copper bowls, and still others by cart – to the troops in return for an apronful of rusks. A mother carrying her children, naked and barefoot like her, from tent to tent, holds out her trembling hand for alms ... You see the man on the other side leading the horses of the Cossacks to water so that he would be allowed to sit at their table in the evening and sate his hunger.⁴⁰

At that moment Stefanov was not yet aware of the fact that he was a hero in an event that would be sacralised. All he cared about was finding the right words to convince his readers that the valley of the river Tundzha and the forests of Gabrovo were both homeland. There was no way he could foresee that just six years later it would be impossible to recount his memories from this particular angle. As it is well known, in 1883 the Shipka Pass battles were extolled by Ivan Vazov, “the patriarch” of Bulgarian literature, in a textbook poem that every Bulgarian child would learn by heart from then on: “The Volunteers at Shipka.” The naturalistic eyewitness accounts of those scenes from the defence of Shipka never made their way into the epic vision of the poet, who compares this historic event to the battle of Thermopylae. That is why the Thracian refugees are absent from the national imagination of the “Bulgarian Thermopylae”, and why instead of small local homelands there is one single motherland, Bulgaria, whose gaze is fixed on the battle at the top:

The whole of Bulgaria watches, supports us,
The peak is a high one: if we run away,
She'll see us – so better to die here today!⁴¹

The discrepancy between the two accounts of the battles at Shipka is due not just to the differences between the viewpoints of the eyewitness and the poet or between the instruments of the media and literature. One may rather say that in this particular place and on this particular day two opposite events happened simultaneously: a victory for and defeat of the national imagined community. The Bulgarian nation has since remembered the victory but forgotten the powerlessness of one of its celebrated heroes to convince the local people that the unknown Bulgarians were not foreigners. Furthermore, the result of the victory came quickly in the form of the Bulgarian state established in 1878, while the defeat remained invisible and its consequences are not spoken about. That is why it is difficult to say exactly when, how and to what extent the Bulgarians “internalised the nation-state by transforming it into a local experience”.⁴² The rational utopia that the nation is a given entity that only needs to be counted has dominated the Bulgarian collective imagination to this day. This, in turn, explains the absence of serious interest in the local worlds, although it is precisely in them that the “domestication of elsewhere” takes place.⁴³ That is why, I believe, that the memory of the Russo–Turkish War of 1877–1878 needs to be revised. This war did not just give birth to the modern Bulgarian state; it also caused a social upheaval that provides an insight into the microlaboratories of the local and offers us the rare opportunity of observing how the discovery of the homeland occurred in practice.

NOTES

- 1 Terhi Rantanen, *When news was new* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 93.
- 2 For a detailed analysis of the foreign publications cited in *Tsarigradski vestnik*, see Pierre Voillery, *Mezhdú dva svyata. Bŭlgarite v Rumelia XVIII-XIX vek* [Between two worlds: the Bulgarians in Rumelia in the 18th–19th centuries] (Sofia: Kama, 2005), 254–55.
- 3 Plamen Mitev, “‘Tsarigradski vestnik’, Krimskata voina i bŭlgarite” [*Tsarigradski vestnik*, the Crimean war and the Bulgarians], in *Bŭlgarskata zhurnalistika – 160 godini. Minalo, nastoiashite, bŭdeshte* [Bul-

garian journalism, 160 years on: Past, present, future], eds Zdravka Konstantinova, Milko Petrov and Maria Deenichina (Sofia: Universitetsko izdatelstvo "Sveti Kliment Ohridski, 2006), 180–88.

- 4 See, for example, "Provadiški sela, 10 iuli 1859" [Provadia villages, 10 Jul 1859], *Bŭlgaria*, 25 Jul 1859.
- 5 See, for example, "Boboshevo (Dupnishko selo), 1 avgust 1872" [Boboshevo (a village in Dupnitsa district), 1 Aug 1872], *Pravo*, 2 Oct 1872; "Orahovo, 10 noemvri" [Orahovo, 10 Nov], *Iztochno vreme*, 29 Nov 1875.
- 6 For a detailed analysis of the Bulgarian press until 1878, see Dessislava Lilova, "Novinarskata rodina: geografija na informatsionnia potok v bŭlgarskata presa (1842-1878)" [The homeland in the news: newsflow geography of the Bulgarian press (1842–1878)], *Kritika i Humanism* 2 (2012): 93–113.
- 7 Daniel Nordman, "La géographie, œil de l'histoire," *Espaces Temps* 66–67/1 (1998): 44–55; Christina Koulouri, *Dimensions idéologiques de l'historicité en Grèce (1834-1914) : Les manuels scolaires d'histoire et de géographie* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1992), 397–400.
- 8 [Editorial], *Pravo*, 9 Oct 1872.
- 9 Robert Shannan Peckham, *National histories, natural states: nationalism and the politics of place in Greece* (London: IB Tauris, 2001), 140.
- 10 Gospodin Slavov, *Statisticheskoto opisanie na kazata Eski-Zagra* [A statistical description of the kaza of Eski-Zagra] (Constantinople: Printing house of the *Tsarigradski vestnik* newspaper, 1858), 11.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 15.
- 12 Stefan Zahariev, *Geografiko-istoriko-statisticheskoto opisanie na tatarpazardzhiskata kaza* [A geographico-historical-statistical description of the kaza of Tatar Pazardzhik] (Vienna: L. Sommer, 1870), 19.
- 13 For an in-depth analysis of hybrid identities, inherited from the premodern age, in the urban culture of Plovdiv, see Raymond Detrez, "Relations between Greeks and Bulgarians in the pre-nationalist era: the Gudilas in Plovdiv," in *Greece and the Balkans: identities, perceptions and cultural encounters since the enlightenment*, ed. Dimitris Tziouvas (Burlington: Ashgate, 2003), 30–46.
- 14 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities* (London: Verso, 1991), 166.
- 15 Typical examples of this type of descriptions are "Narodonaselenieto na Plovdivskia sandzhak" [The population of the *sancak* of Plovdiv], *Letostruŭ* 2 (1870): 70–78; "Odrin" [Adrianople], *Turtsia*, 31 Oct 1870; Petko Slaveikov, "Svedenia za Trakia i osobeno za Odrinskata eparhia i Odrin" [Information about Thrace and particularly about the Adrianople eparchy and Adrianople], *Napredŭk*, 7 Dec 1874.
- 16 See, for example, "Edrene, 3 septemvri" [Edirne, 3 Sept], *Turtsia*, 19 Sept 1864.
- 17 "Memoar, otpraven do Velikite sili ot elinite v Plovdiv" [Memorandum sent to the Great Powers by the Greeks in Plovdiv], *Bŭlgarin*, 6 May 1878.
- 18 Slaveikov, "Svedenia," 1874.
- 19 See Petko Slaveikov's comments on Mosko Dobrinov's article "Yavno zhelanie" [A manifest wish], *Makedonia*, 4 Dec 1869.
- 20 Zahariev, *Geografiko*, 67–68.
- 21 See Ilia Todorov, "Letopisniat razkaz na pop Metodi Draginov" [The priest Metodi Draginov's chronicle], *Starobŭlgarska literatura* 16 (1984): 56–79; Elena Grozdanova and Asparuh Velkov, "Falshifikat li e letopisniat razkaz na pop Metodii Draginov?" [Is the priest Metodi Draginov's chronicle a forgery?], *Istoričeski pregled* 2 (1993): 146–57.

- 22 Bernard Lory, "Letopisūt na pop Metodii Draginov kato literaturno proizvedenie ot XIX vek" [The priest Metodi Draginov's chronicle as a literary work of the 19th century], in *Pomatsite – versii za proizhod i sūvremenna identichnost* [The Pomaks: versions regarding origin and contemporary identity], ed. Evguenia Ivanova (Sofia: Nov bŭlgarski universitet, 2013), 117–34.
- 23 It is known that the author had offered parts of his work to the newspaper *Bŭlgaria*, but for unknown reasons, the editor, Dragan Tsankov, had refused to publish them. For details, see Lori, "Letopisūt," 130.
- 24 See "Panagiurishte," *XIX vek*, 1 May 1876; "Panagiurishte," *Den*, 1 May 1876; "Panagiurishte ili Kamenograd" [Panagiurishte or Kamengrad], *Iztochno vreme*, 8 May 1876; and the footnote to "Nastoiashiti raboti" [Current affairs], *Napredŭk*, 3 May 1876.
- 25 Vasil Cholakov, *Opisanie na selo Panagiurishte* [Description of the village of Panagiurishte] (Constantinople, 1866).
- 26 See, for example, *Istoria na Bŭlgaria* [History of Bulgaria], vol. 6 (Sofia: Bŭlgarska akademina na naukite, 1987), 474.
- 27 "Pétition adressée aux représentants des grandes puissances à Constantinople par les habitants du district de Djoumaïa," *Maritsa*, 20 Oct 1878.
- 28 See the editorial comment in a footnote to the text of "Pétition," 1878.
- 29 "Proshenie, predadeno na Evropeiskata Kommissia ot edna deputatsia ot naselenieto na Koprivshita, Panagiurishte, Klisura i okolnite v Sredna Gora sela" [Petition submitted to the European Commission by a delegation (of representatives) of the population of Koprivshitsa, Panagiurishte, Klisura and the surrounding villages in (Mount) Sredna Gora], *Maritsa*, 24 Oct 1878.
- 30 "Nezhelaniето na bŭlgarite da stanat voinitsi" [The Bulgarians' unwillingness to become soldiers], *Bŭlgarin*, 22 Oct 1877.
- 31 "Bukuresht, 11 noemvri 1877" [Bucharest, 11 Nov 1877], *Bŭlgarin*, 12 Nov 1877.
- 32 "Dopiska na *Moskovskie vedomosti*" [Report by *Moskovskie vedomosti*], *Maritsa*, 23 Jan 1879.
- 33 Evgeny Utin, *Pis'ma iz Bolgarii v 1877 g.* [Letters from Bulgaria in 1877] (Saint Petersburg: Tipografia Stasiulevicha, 1879), 123.
- 34 Pandeli Kisimov, "Vŭtreshnite nashi nepriатели" [Our inside enemies], *Bŭlgarin*, 5 April 1878.
- 35 Petitions for incorporation into Serbia were submitted by the population of Pirost, Trŭn, Vrania and some villages from the districts of Trŭn, Breznik and Sofia. For documentary evidence on this issue, see Mihailo Vojvodić, Dragoljub Živojinović, Andrej Mitrović and Radovan Samardžić, eds, *Srbija 1878. Dokumenti* [Serbia 1878: Documents] (Belgrade: Srpska književna zadruga 1978), 189–91, 207–11, 260–65, 335–37, 345–47.
- 36 See "Pismo ot Sofia" [Letter from Sofia], *Bŭlgarin*, 18 Mar 1878; "Razni novini" [Miscellaneous news], *Maritsa*, 18 Aug 1878; Simeon Pavlov, "Edin pogled na pitanieto za srŭbsko-bŭlgarskite predeli" [A view on the question of Serb-Bulgarian borders], *Bŭlgarin*, 24 May 1878.
- 37 See, for example, "Novini" [News], *Vitosha*, 13 Jun 1879.
- 38 Alexandar Kozarov, "Dve dumi kŭm bŭlgarskiŭ narod" [A couple of words to the Bulgarian people], *Bŭlgarin*, 27 Jul 1878.
- 39 Totiu Stefanov, "Shipka-Balkan, 10 septemvri 1877" [Shipka-Balkan Range, 10 Sept 1877], *Bŭlgarin*, 26 Oct 1877.

- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Ivan Vazov, "The volunteers at Shipka," in *Anthology of Bulgarian poetry*, trans. Peter Tempest (Sofia: Sofia Press, 1980), 101.
- 42 Alon Confino, *The nation as a local metaphor: Württemberg, Imperial Germany, and national memory, 1871–1918* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 50.
- 43 David Morley, "What's 'home' got to do with it? Contradictory dynamics in the domestication of technology and the dislocation of domesticity," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 6/4 (2003): 436.