

## Historein

Vol 21, No 1 (2023)

Where was 1821? Space and Territory in the Greek Revolution



### Review of Milena B. Methodieva, *Empire and Nation: Muslim Reform in the Balkans*

*Eleonora Naxidou*

doi: [10.12681/historein.27428](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.27428)

Copyright © 2024, Eleonora Naxidou



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:

Naxidou, E. (2023). Review of Milena B. Methodieva, *Empire and Nation: Muslim Reform in the Balkans*. *Historein*, 21(1). <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.27428>



Milena B. Methodieva  
*Empire and Nation:  
Muslim Reform in the Balkans*

Eleonora Naxidou

doi: 10.12681/historein.27428

To cite this article:

Naxidou, Eleonora. 2023. "Milena B. Methodieva, *Empire and Nation: Muslim Reform in the Balkans*". *Historein* 21 (1).  
<https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.27428>.

Milena B. Methodieva

*Empire and Nation: Muslim Reform in the Balkans*

Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021. 331 pp.

Eleonora Naxidou

Democritus University of Thrace

Academic research on Balkan history during the last decades of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century (or the end of the long nineteenth century, as it is usually referred to) most often explores the transition from the Ottoman imperial to the national setting as well as the ideological, cultural, sociopolitical and economic factors which constituted the driving force for the transformation process that led to the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the emergence of nation-states. In this context, special attention has been paid to the significant influence of nationalism, the various strategies adopted by political and intellectual elites in order to cultivate and strengthen the national identity of the majority as well as the inclusive and/or exclusive methods towards the nondominant (minority) ethnocultural groups under their rule; in other words, the policies of “nationalizing” nationalism, as Brubaker terms it.<sup>1</sup> Milena B. Methodieva’s book treats such issues from a different angle, that of minority groups, aiming to shed light on the ways they perceived their new environment and coped with the new complicated realities and dilemmas posed to them.<sup>2</sup> The author focuses on the specific ethnoreligious community of the Muslims in the newly born Bulgarian Principality, examining their political, social and intellectual life, as well as their efforts to introduce reforms that would help them keep pace with modernity without losing their distinct physiognomy. Based on rich archival material, both Bulgarian and Ottoman, as well as the local Muslim press of that time, Methodieva delves deeply into the Muslim community in Bulgaria in the period from 1878 until 1908, that is, from the creation of the Bulgarian vassal state until the declaration of its independence as a result of the Young Turk Revolution and the change of regime in the Ottoman Empire.

The book is divided into seven chapters, followed by a conclusion. Chapter 1 is a short overview of Ottoman rule in the Balkans, the Tanzimat reforms and the conditions which led to the formation of the Bulgarian Principality in 1878 (the Russo-Ottoman War in 1877–1878, the San Stefano and Berlin treaties). Chapter 2 examines the human geography and the geographic distribution of the Muslims in Bulgaria both before and after unification with Eastern Rumelia in 1885, as well as Muslim organisation and its institutions. The third chapter describes Bulgarian efforts to dispose of the remnants of the Ottoman legacy both in the cities and the countryside and, at the same time, to build modern

institutions in order to synchronise with European developments. Chapter 4 looks into the intellectual and socioeconomic stimuli of Muslim attempts to introduce reforms, sketching the profiles of the main actors in this project. The following chapter presents the main initiatives to reform the Muslim community, whose principal aim was to combat ignorance by raising the educational status of all its members, men in particular. In this way, reformist plans involved modernising school textbooks and curricula, employing qualified teachers, founding reading rooms (*kiraathanes*), organising theatrical performances and convening Muslim teachers' congresses. Chapter 6 deals with Muslim endeavours to gain political leverage and parliamentary representation, which were made difficult by various factors including intra-community conflicts for power and control. The last chapter then addresses the issue of Muslim notions of patriotic and national identity. Finally, the conclusion summarises the main thesis of the book.

At this point it should be noted that by *Muslims* the author refers to the Turks living in the Bulgarian Principality, although the ethnic, linguistic and religious differentiations in the Muslim community are acknowledged, and occasionally short mention is made to the Pomaks, Roma, Tatars and the unorthodox Muslims such as Alevi and Bektashi. Methodieva argues that at that time the Bulgarians conflated Muslim with Turk, often using the terms interchangeably. Therefore, it is the experiences and activities of the Muslim Turks that the book illustrates.

Through a thorough analysis built on a large amount of data, Methodieva reaches substantial assumptions that offer a deeper insight into the situation of the Muslim minority in the Bulgarian Principality during the period under research. More specifically, she demonstrates how Muslims sought a balance between their traditional imperial past when they formed a privileged Islamic majority and their future in a Christian nation-state which treated them as an alien minority. Despite the existence of protective laws and provisions, they were confronted with negative and even hostile perceptions, while the obliteration of the Ottoman legacy throughout Bulgaria had a crucial impact on their life. Moreover, the Muslims in Bulgaria, together with the Slavs in Ottoman Macedonia, were regarded as counterparts in the "hostage populations" policies pursued by both the Bulgarian and the Ottoman states. In this way, the Bulgarian vision of turning them into model Bulgarian Muslim citizens fell short of its goal.

At the same time, Bulgarian Muslims never cut ties with the Ottoman Empire, being anxiously concerned with the threatening developments in the empire, which exacerbated their sense of vulnerability. Muslim uncertainties and the difficulty in paving the way to a brighter future instigated the reformist movement, which gave rise to intracommunal conflicts between the traditional elite and the advocates of change, who challenged the former's key role in community affairs. However, reform undertakings were not driven by necessity alone; they were the outcome of the profound influence of the ideas of the Young

Turks, with whom the reformers maintained close links.

As for Bulgarian Muslim identity, Methodieva argues that many Muslims perceived themselves as part of a nation or millet or even a larger entity of Muslim communities worldwide. In addition, the notion of homeland was imagined in different ways, which incited complex and ambiguous loyalties.

All in all, Methodieva's book enhances our knowledge on the Bulgarian and Ottoman realities at the end of the long nineteenth century from the aspect of minority experiences and activities. In this way, it also serves as a case study to better understand the position of the nondominant ethnocultural groups which were included within the borders of the nascent nation-states.

---

<sup>1</sup> Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> It comes as a valuable addition to three other books dealing with Muslims in Bulgaria: Anna M. Mirkova, *Muslim Land, Christian Labor: Transforming Ottoman Imperial Subjects into Bulgarian National Citizens, 1878–1939* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2017); Theodora Dragostinova and Yana Hashamova, eds., *Beyond Mosque, Church and State: Alternative Narratives of the Nation in the Balkans* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2016); Mary Neuburger, *The Orient Within: Muslim Minorities and the Negotiation of Nationhood in Modern Bulgaria* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).