

Research

BORDERS AND BORDER ZONES: DIFFERENCES AND EQUALITIES

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THE WARS AS CHRONOLOGICAL LIMITS IN THE MODERN HISTORY OF BULGARIA

Petko St. Petkov

St. St. Cyril and Methodius University of Veliko Turnovo

Abstract. The paper discusses wide accepted periodization of the modern Bulgarian history in which the wars are being used as border landmarks for beginning and end of different periods. Out of the six accepted boundary landmarks in the present periodization of our modern history from the beginning of the 18th until the middle of the 20th century, five are related to wars: the Russian-Turkish war of 1828–1829, the Crimean War of 1853–1856, the War of Liberation of 1877–1878, the wars of national unification of 1912–1918/19. The author brings forward arguments in confirmation but also reasons against some of the already accepted periodization border landmarks connected to the enumerated wars. If the chronological border landmarks are defined according to different essential criteria as for example economic de-

velopment, political changes, culture change then the periodization should vary accordingly.

Keywords: history, periodization, boundary landmarks, wars

During the last three decades of the 20th century, a periodization of the modern Bulgarian history was imposed which generally follows this scheme: (1) The outset of the transition towards modern history – the beginning of the 18th century or the first years after the Peace Treaty of Karlowitz and the end of the war between the Holy League and the Ottoman Empire (Паскалева, 1978; Генчев, 1988, p. 7). (although even today some scholars, and not only literary historians, continue to follow Marin Drinov’s scheme when dividing history into periods and start from the appearance of “Slav-Bulgarian History” by Païsiy of Hilendar, i.e. from the middle of the 18th century) (Грънчаров, 2001, p. 533-540); (2) Transitional landmarks which demarcate the first, the second and the third stage of the transition (which almost everyone romantically designates as Bulgarian National Revival¹⁾) – the Russo-Turkish War of 1828–1829 and the Crimean War of 1853–1856; (3) The beginning of the modern history after the Liberation of 1878 for the Bulgarian lands, which gained independence according to the treaties of 1878 that ended the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878; (4) Important intermediate but not final chronological limit of the period of modern history – the end of the wars for national unification (1912–1919) (История, 1999); (5) The last period of the modern Bulgarian history – 1919–1944 (Стателова & Грънчаров, 1999).

Naturally, not all the historians, and some not without reservations and diversions, stick to this periodization. But the basic and the special research works, the popular and the textbook historical literature, up to and after the “Great change” on 10th of November 1989, are submitted to this periodization. The few exceptions not only corroborate the rule but also specify as a differ-

ent upper limit of the modern period and the beginning of the contemporary Bulgarian history the year in which World War II broke out, although the year 1939 did not have so important periodization significance for Bulgaria and the Bulgarian society (Даскалов, 2005).²⁾ Being aware of the fact that each periodization is relative and that principally this is a controversial question, I nevertheless think that it is important to discuss it and that this by no means is a “trifle” (Даскалов, 2002, p. 155, 163).³⁾

It is a fact that the greater part of the chronological landmarks in the thus established periodization of the Bulgarian history within the range of the last almost 300 years, are connected with wars and not with changes resulting from transformations, slow and evolutionary in their character (and lasting in their results). All the six transitional landmarks in the present periodization of our modern history from the beginning of the 18th to the middle of the 20th century, are connected with wars: the war between the Holy League and the Ottoman Empire (1683–1699), the Russo-Turkish War of 1828–1829, the Crimean War (1853–1856), the Russo-Turkish War of Liberation (1877–1878), the wars for the national unification of the Bulgarians (1912–1919), World War II (1941–1944). This peculiarity of the general periodization of the modern Bulgarian history has been noted in some publications and even an attempt has been made to explain it in a critical way (Бонева, 2003), but in spite of all that, still in the beginning of the 21st century, the mentioned periodization scheme is used in scholarly, textbook and popular literature (Петков, 2009a).

Three periodization outsets in the modern and contemporary history of Bulgaria, according to the now functioning periodization scheme, are connected with foreign military occupations: the beginning of the new Bulgarian state history is connected with the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878 and the Russian occupation of the Bulgarian lands that followed it, inaccurately and vaguely named as “provisional Russian government”,⁴⁾ the beginning of one

of the inner stages of the modern Bulgarian history is connected with the end of the Bulgarian participation in World War I which actually came with the Thessalonian armistice of September 1918, providing for a foreign military occupation of part of the country; the beginning of the contemporary history of Bulgaria – the autumn of 1944 – is also connected with a foreign military occupation, no matter how it is presented and how it is received by the society. In this sense, it seems quite normal, though ill-grounded (both in concrete historical and comparative aspect), that in the last volume eight of the academic History of Bulgaria in many volumes, the text ends with the information about the Thessalonian armistice of September 1918 and even a word is not mentioned about the final document which regulated the end of the war – the Treaty of Neuilly-sur-Seine from 27.11.1919 (История, 1999, pp. 325-328). If an analogous criterion should be applied, then the end of the Bulgarian National Revival should be assigned to the appearance of “The Fundamentals of Peace” and the truce signed in Edirne on 19/31.01.1878 but not to the San Stefano (preliminary) or the Berlin (final) peace treaty. However, exactly in accordance with “The Fundamentals of Peace” of Edirne, for the first time the Ottoman Empire consented to the forthcoming establishment of the Principality of Bulgaria within boundaries not smaller than those that had been drawn at the Constantinople Conference of the Great Powers of 1876 (Петков, 2009b, pp. 133-140).

Actually, in several cases wars could be considered well-grounded and distinct limits in the Bulgarian historical development. After the Crimean War (1853–1856), and after the wars for national unification (1912–1919), the changes were categorical and most of all, they concerned the entire historical process. With greater conditionality, but again in this group, I would place the Russo-Turkish War of 1828–1829, not because all the supervening changes ensued from it, but actually because since the beginning of the 30s of the 19th century, new processes began, essentially different from those in the previous

decades (i.e. it was this war exactly that marked/coincided with the end of one and the beginning of another stage in our historical development).

The wars could not be categorical and entirely valid limits in the historical development of the Bulgarians in several other cases: the war of the Holy League against the Ottoman Empire (1683–1699), the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878, and the participation of Bulgaria in World War II, because after these wars, changes occurred, most of all political, geo-political and economic, related to the former ones, but they did not act as demarcating signs dividing two essentially different periods as did the wars from the first group. Thus for example the main tendencies in the development of Bulgarian culture which manifested themselves in the 19th century, until the war of 1877–1878, were still followed, at least until the end of the century, and the trends of the cultural development did not change radically only because of the establishment of the Bulgarian Principality in 1878–1879.

It is quite another question that when dividing our home history into periods, in some cases the Bulgarian activities have been taken into consideration, and in others – important decisions of the so called Great Powers that proved to have a serious impact on the Bulgarian historical development.

More than ten years ago, I proved my assertion that since the beginning of the Bulgarian transition towards the modern period (the so called National Revival) was marked by prevailing Bulgarian efforts in the direction of comprehensive social changes, the next period in our home history should also begin in conformity rather with Bulgarian activities than with foreign ones toward the Bulgarians. The critical review of the contemporary historical literature on the problem of the upper limit of the Bulgarian National Revival shows that most of the authors point out as such the year 1878 because, according to them, it was then that the Bulgarian state was restored. Some consider as a demarcating event the treaty of San Stefano, others – the treaty of Berlin. But here an important and principal question arises: how and when a

state is restored/ founded? When outside forces decree the establishing and recognize the new state or when it constitutes itself and starts to govern itself (the problem of the founding of the Bulgarian state in the 7th century is analogous)? The question is whether there was a Bulgarian state in 1878. And this problem is as theoretical and methodological as concretely historical. According to me, the provisional Russian occupation government (PROG) from 1877 till 1879 was not a form of the new or restored Bulgarian state – it emerged with the Constitutional Assembly (February – April 1879) which adopted the fundamental law of the state, and with the election and the assumption of office of the first Prince of Bulgaria – Alexander I, after he took an oath before the First Grand National Assembly on 26.06.1879 (Петков, 2000, pp. 56-77). It was no chance that at the session of the Constitutional Assembly on 26.03.1879 Dr Konstantin Stoilov declared: “This treaty (the Berlin treaty – A/N) says that the Bulgarian Principality will enter into exercising its autonomy after the election of a Prince. This comes to mean that until we elect a Prince we are still considered a Turkish province occupied by a victorious army. If we want to establish our autonomy we have to hurry up with the election of a Prince, all the more that according to the same treaty our liberators have to leave our fatherland on 3rd of May” (Дневници, 1879, p. 91).

In the same sense the year 1879 was a stage marking a historical limit for Eastern Rumelia, too: the Organic Statute was adopted, the first Governor-General was appointed, the District Assembly was elected, the Bulgarian character of the autonomous province was proved and its government was taken over mainly by Bulgarians (Стателова, 1983).

The year 1879 was crucial also for North Dobruja, which was turned over to Romania by Russia according to the San Stefano Treaty and not because of the Romanian participation in the war at that, but as a return for the former Romanian territory of South Bessarabia which had been taken away in Russia's favour (Попов et al., 1992, pp. 20-21). Until 1879, the Bulgarian

ecclesiastical government was preserved in the region but on 12.10.1879, the Dorostol-Cherven exarchic metropolitan Grigoriy was forced to address his last pastoral epistle to “the priests and the population of Tulcea and all Dobruja”, after which Romanian ecclesiastical authority was established in North Dobruja (Петков, 2000b, p. 343-356). For the Bulgarian regions of Niš and Pirot, that had been recognized an integral part of the Bulgarian Exarchate by the Sultan’s firman of 27.02.1870, the year 1879 was also crucial, and in Macedonia, in the spring of 1879, the attempt at liberation and annexation to the already liberated Bulgarian lands – the Kresna-Razlog Uprising – ended in failure (Дойнов, 1979).

The first stage of the modern history of Bulgaria (the so called National Revival) ended prematurely and conclusively after 1878–1879 in the lands inhabited by Bulgarians, which got within the boundaries of Romania and Serbia. There, in the years to follow, the Bulgarian national spirit (if the National Revival is considered a process of national confirmation) was brutally suppressed, it withered away until it was almost entirely obliterated under the purposeful pressure of many years realized by the new authorities, and right before the disappointed but passive eyes of the ruling circles of the Principality of Bulgaria. In this sense inadequately grounded is the allegation of some authors that the National Revival processes continued to develop even after 1878 in North Dobruja, Niš and Pirot regions. Logically the following question arises: if the National Revival processes continued in North Dobruja until 1918, though the region was under Romanian government, why did they not continue after 1918 too? Was it exactly in this year (and having in mind that during World War I Dobruja was liberated by the Bulgarian army), immediately after the second invasion of the Romanian army and administration, when the National Revival processes suddenly died away, disappeared?

My objection against setting the upper limit of the National Revival in 1878 (no matter whether the San Stefano or the Berlin Treaty is envisaged) is

grounded on the scholarly uselessness of the applied criterion. Instead of basing the periodization of our home history on the changes in the Bulgarian society and the activities of the Bulgarians, in this case exactly it is obvious that decisions of foreign countries and forces, though important for the Bulgarians, have been taken into consideration. If the criterion chosen by me would be taken into consideration – the Bulgarian activities, not the foreign ones towards the Bulgarians – after the failure of the Constantinople Conference of 1876 (to a great extent provoked by the Bulgarian uprising in the spring of 1876) and until the Constituent Assembly (1879) not only the Bulgarian activities were not leading and determining for the historical development but they were largely subjected to a number of outside factors. The great independent intervention of the Bulgarians took place once in 1876 (and not only through the uprising but through the political activity after it as well,⁵⁾) and for the second time in 1879 – the constituent year for the Bulgarian state.

Otherwise, i.e. if we continue to maintain that the end of the National Revival is marked by the treaty, signed by the Great Powers in Berlin in July 1878, or by the preliminary Russo-Turkish peace of 19.02/3.03.1878, we shall have to accept that the end of a long period of Bulgarian history that had been started in the early 18th century by the Bulgarians themselves as a universal renovation, was marked by the omnipresent Great Powers by a decision, political in its character. If we keep on placing the Provisional Russian occupation government (1877–1879) at the beginning of the next period of the Bulgarian history, then it will mean that we accept as true the assertion that outside forces (no matter with what motives and goals) have restored the Bulgarian state after an interruption of almost five centuries. Both statements (firstly, that the end of the Bulgarian National Revival was marked by one of the two international treaties of 1878, in which the Bulgarian party was not represented, and secondly, that the next important period in the Bulgarian history begins with the Provisional Russian occupation government) that have been accepted by

the Bulgarian historiography, lead to the awkward but well-grounded conclusion that the end of the Bulgarian National Revival, as well as the beginning of the next period were not set by the Bulgarians but by the Great Powers; the Principality of Bulgaria established by the latter, i.e. the restored Bulgarian state was a function and a result of the international relations concerning the Eastern Question rather than of the state-creative will of the Bulgarians. Objectively this is the conclusion that now ensues from the adopted periodization, but such a suggestion will not be possible if the criterion for the determining of the upper limit of the National Revival epoch is connected with the Bulgarian state-constituting activity. And at that, the Great Powers themselves, having taken the political decision for the establishment of an independent Bulgarian state, had still granted considerable rights to the Bulgarian nation for the establishing of the Bulgarian state, firmly guaranteeing the Bulgarians the opportunity to work out independently the fundamental law of the Principality (clause 4 of the Berlin Treaty) and to elect a prince, i.e. head of state (clause 3) as it happened in the course of the Constitutional and the First Grand National Assembly of 1879.

In the first years of the new century, at a conference held at Sofia University in 2004, I tried to advance arguments in favour of the thesis that the modern period of the history of Bulgaria did not continue until 1944, when the contemporary one started, but that it ended with the wars for national unification and their results, i.e., the contemporary Bulgarian history started from 1919 (Петков, 2006, pp. 195-208). The upper limit of the modern Bulgarian history should be connected with the end of the wars for national unification (1918–1919). As main arguments in confirmation of this thesis the following could be stated: the failure of the efforts for achieving national unification and realization of the National Revival ideal of the society after the end of the three wars that broke out in pursuing this goal (1912–1919) (Петков, 2003b, pp. 127-138); the prolonged economic and political post-war crisis which con-

siderably changed the political system as well as some firm concepts and public feelings of the Bulgarian society; the appearance of new political forces with extremely radical left and right ideologies after 1919; the change of the head of state with an entirely different person (and for the first time not in accordance to the functioning of the constitution of 1879 at that); the new ideas and experiments in the economic sphere – for example in the management of the national economy (greater and greater active intervention by the state), as well as in the development of the political ideas (the appearance of authoritarian and totalitarian ideas and organizations), etc.

There are arguments that necessitate a dispute over the scholarly validity of the current concept of the upper limit of the modern Bulgarian history (also enforced, however) – the year 1944. If a criterion based not on party and politically interests, but on scholarly arguments is applied, and most of all, if we free ourselves from ideological and other prejudices, we will find out that no such historical facts took place and no such political processes began in 1944, to produce solid grounds for the proclaiming of this year exactly as the beginning of a new epoch in the Bulgarian history. Many of the “new” historical phenomena after 1944 became evident even in the period between the two world wars – the state intervention in economy, the co-operation of agriculture, the large-scale ideologization and the establishment of new government organizations, and many others (Цветков & Поппетров, 1990). It is an indisputable fact that the year 1944 marks an inside periodization limit in Bulgarian history but the beginning of the contemporary history of Bulgaria should be related to a quite earlier date than the one of the new consecutive occupation of Bulgaria by foreign troops and the inner political change that followed it. If the applied periodization criteria are more valid ones and if they for example allude to the change in the political system, then it will be easily seen that exactly after 1918–1919 and especially after 1934 the political system tended to turn qualitatively different from the pre-war one and even from that, which

had functioned during the wars of 1912–1919. The same conclusion is necessitated with the application of a seemingly formal criterion – the replacement of the generations of politicians and statesmen (the new generation came immediately after the end of World War I), the change of the royal personality and the changes in the most of the political parties and the new political formations.

There is something else that has always made me think that after 1919, Bulgaria and the Bulgarian society were never the same that an essential and profound change ensued. This is the enormous spiritual collapse that followed after the downfall of the national ideals and the waste of the colossal efforts of the people and the army for the achieving of those ideals with great sacrifice of lamented lives. If we view the matter from this concrete side – what ideas of possible perspectives for a future development the Bulgarian society enunciated itself (not those that the others formulated for it), we will realize that in 1919, the despair and the unbelief in a coming improvement were much greater and all-embracing than in 1944. While the change in 1944 was accepted by a part (not a prevailing one) of the Bulgarian society with the hope that the economic life and the political system were changing for good, the consequences of the defeats in the wars of 1918–1919 and the collapse in the years to follow were perceived by the greater part of the Bulgarian society as the beginning of a new, essentially different and expectedly hard period.

Therefore, with the entire diversity of the historical process the establishment of a universally accepted and scholarly sustained periodization of the development of a particular nation or state will be achieved with difficulty in the future as well. That is why it would be better to structure periodization following separate, essential criteria: economic development, social transformations, political changes, cultural evolution, etc. (such suggestions have already been made regarding the periodization of the Ottoman history.⁶⁾ Under such an approach there will be applied several, probably different periodiza-

tions, while the general one will exist only as a necessary and indisputably conventional landmark, needed for the entire apprehension and relating of the historical narrative.

NOTES

1. On the applicability of the term “Bulgarian National Revival” and other terminological and principal specifications see: Петков, 2001a, p. 55-67; Петков, 1996b, p. 7-9; Петков, 1999, p. 85-104; Петков, 1996a, p. 82-98; Петков, 2001, p. 51-54; see also: Петков, 2005, p. 7-17; 41-47; 116-130; 181-200; 259-275.

2. The author has not considered it necessary to explain the choice neither of the lower (although there is already a discussion about it in the scholarly literature) nor of the upper chronological limit of his history. It is probably because, according to him, the “modern Bulgarian state... came into being as a construction of the European Great Powers which enforced their interests at the Berlin Congress”. Remaining true to the same unnamed criterion – the foreign non-Bulgarian state-establishing will – he starts his text as follows: “Provisional Russian government (May 1877 – April 1879)” – p. 25.

3. Instead of commenting on the principal question about the upper chronological limit of the National Revival which has been determined in my paper published in History Magazine (see here, note 3), R. Daskalov declares it “a trifle” and openly demonstrates his unwillingness to read and go deep in the whole text – he ardently criticizes me for having defended the idea that the upper limit is connected with “Battenberg’s coming to the throne”. Thus he demonstrates the fact that he does not know and does not understand my concept of the beginning of the modern Bulgarian state history, and besides, he ignores a lot of essential details (for example the fact that there is no Bulgarian prince Battenberg – the first prince of Bulgaria is Alexander I). It is even more strange that in the second edition of the same “historiographical research” which has the claim to fill in the omissions of the first, the author repeats literally the same note concerning my publication regardless of the fact that since 2002 I have several times pointed out arguments in favour of the thesis about the upper chronological limit of the Bulgarian National Revival. (Даскалов, 2013, p. 121).

4. For a different opinion on this question see in: Петков (2012, pp. 14-15).
5. Coincidentally the emigrants newspapers of 1876–1877 advanced the idea of “the beginning of the National Revival” because of the turning of the Bulgarian Question into a central one for the Great Powers and the forthcoming outbreak of the Russo-Turkish War, *Български глас*, No. 46, 30.04.1877; year II, No. 9, 13.08.1877. (Петков, 2003-1, pp. 75-89).

6. <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=h-turk&month=0402&week=a&msg=nOpwdwBEgJD1IgYrtaG4Mw&user=&pw=> .

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✉ Professor Petko Petkov
St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Turnovo
2, T. Tarnovski Str.
5003 Veliko Turnovo, Bulgaria
E-Mail: dr_pstpetkov@abv.bg

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