

Civilizational mnemonics and the *longue durée*: The Bulgarian case

Memory Studies

1–27

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DOI: 10.1177/17506980211066580

journals.sagepub.com/home/mss**Dafina Nedelcheva, and Daniel Levy** 

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Abstract

Constructivist assumptions have dominated the field of memory studies, producing an avalanche of case studies focusing on the instrumental and expedient factors shaping memory politics. However, this constructivist bias has also yielded new blind spots. For one, it tends to privilege “events” and “contingencies” over the *longue durée* of a particular memory configuration. Two, it remains caught in a binary juxtaposition with some states adopting globally circulating mnemonic scripts, signaling universal aspirations, while other states pursue nation-centric approaches. To overcome these blind spots (and binaries), we propose two interrelated conceptual moves: first, we are taking the importance of enduring memory figurations into consideration. Second, we expand the nation-state focus by introducing the notion of “civilizational mnemonics,” which does not replace national memories, but frequently underwrites them. Bulgarian memory politics, our test case, is part of a complex nexus of imperial legacies and post-colonial discourses. Bulgaria has been a middle ground, accommodating competing imperial projects—Ottoman, Russian, and Western. These intersections allow us to draw general inferences about mnemonic tropes and their enduring salience.

Keywords

Bulgaria, *civilizational mnemonics*, globalization, *longue durée*, methodological nationalism

On est toujours le barbare de quelqu'un

(Claude Lévi-Strauss)

Introduction

Conceptualizations of Memory Studies have greatly benefited from the ongoing extension of mnemonic realms and the geographic expansion of memory politics (and their study). Yielding conceptually and theoretically fruitful discussions about the balance of universal and particular manifestations of memory, the field has produced a wide array of case studies. Differences notwithstanding, memory scholars tacitly (and usually explicitly) agree with the constructivist

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assumptions that dominate the field. And indeed, constructivism and the concomitant proliferation of post-Kuhnian turns are an important corrective to both positivism and essentialism. Consequently, literally thousands of case studies have been focusing on the instrumental and expedient factors shaping memory politics. However, this constructivist bias has also produced new conceptual and theoretical blind spots. For one, it tends to privilege “contingencies” and “events,” over processual mnemonic facets that speak to the *longue durée* of a particular memory configuration. Two, it remains caught in a binary juxtaposition with some states adopting globally circulating mnemonic scripts, signaling universal aspirations, while other states pursue nation-centric approaches. To supersede this event and nation-centric orientation, we propose two conceptual moves: the first is taking the importance of enduring memories into consideration; the second is complementing the nation-state focus by introducing the notion of “civilizational mnemonics.”

Most memory studies have situated the mnemonic landscape of Europe between the Holocaust, the Stalinist Gulag, and Communist repression. Our study expands the conceptual and empirical focus beyond the common juxtaposition of Holocaust versus Gulag (and by extension Nazism and Stalinism) paradigms with a third trope: a civilizational narrative. We demonstrate how contemporary memories are shaped not only by the political expediency of the Cold War, but also with reference to sedimented memories that pre-date World War II and relate to nineteenth-century foundational myth of nation-states. Many of these myths are articulated by national theorists such as Herder, Fichte, Renan, and others (Zerubavel, 1995). They are rooted in origin stories of ethnogenesis that were actively in play in the early modern period (Smith, 1987). Moreover, we suggest that the dividing line of East and West itself needs to be interrogated and historicized. Our processual approach also functions as a critique of methodological nationalism. This does in no way entail a negation of the nation-state and its continuous significance. Rather it provides a historical perspective that situates discussions about nation-states in their past, post-imperial and current global contexts.

Bulgarian memory politics will serve us as an illustrative case study for these developments and arguments. They are part of a complex net of imperial legacies and post-colonial discourses, where Bulgaria has been a middle ground accommodating competing imperial projects—Ottoman, Russian, and Western (White, 2010). These legacies have produced lasting impacts on local historiography and collective memory practices. In tracing this history, we demonstrate how initial institutionalizations of a mnemonic master narrative prove hard to dismantle when civilizational tropes endure. The Bulgarian case is a microhistory providing a useful prism to address actual and potential mnemonic repertoires in post-Communist realms and their implications for European memories.

The *longue durée* and civilizational mnemonics

In a seminal essay entitled “Travelling Memory,” Astrid Erll (2011) distinguishes three periods in the study of (cultural) memory. Her starting point are the claims and impulses that the works of Maurice Halbwachs (1980, 1992) and Aby Warburg (Gombrich, 1986; Warburg, 2018) have generated since the 1930s. This initial phase is marked by a focus on how memory works in society and culture and is followed by the memory boom of the 1980s.

The focus thus shifted from the dynamics of memory in culture to the specific memories of (allegedly stable and clearly demarcated) cultures—the most popular social unit being the nation-state, which was then swiftly seen as isomorphic with national culture and a national cultural memory. Memory studies thus entered the stage of “national memory studies,” which characterized much of the work done in the 1990s. (Erll, 2011: 6)

As globalization processes came into sharper relief, the pervasive and persistent explanatory power of “methodological nationalism” in the social sciences in general, and memory studies, appeared if not anachronistic then certainly limited. This resulted in a third phase, where memory scholars tried escaping the national container. Erll (2011) labels this latest shift “transcultural memory studies” suggesting that

for memory studies, the old-fashioned container-culture approach is not only somewhat ideologically suspect. It is also epistemologically flawed, because there are too many mnemonic phenomena that do not come into our field of vision with the “default” combination of territorial, ethnic and national collectivity as the main framework of cultural memory—but which may be seen with the transcultural lens. (p. 8)

Since the early 2000s, critiques of nation-centric assumptions have proliferated and numerous scholars have made important contributions to studying memory beyond the exclusive purview of the nation-state. Empirically the nation-state remains the focus of attention, with the recognition that its own memory tropes are relational—that is, they are influenced by global memory trends and neo-nationalist resistances to cosmopolitan aspirations.

However, there remains a naturalized and largely reified understanding of the nation that most defenders of methodological nationalism subscribe to (Smith, 1987). Incidentally, the binary fallacy juxtaposing national and global tropes epitomizes the a-historical bias among scholars failing to distinguish between earlier processes of nationalization and later manifestations of nationalism. Nationalists, of course, have good (political-cultural) reasons to blur these differences. Scholars should be more attentive to the difference and not presuppose that collective (national) memories automatically are limited to or derive their meaningfulness from the national container. To break up this container, we will next elaborate on the notion of “civilizational mnemonics.”

Memory studies: constructing permanence and civilizational analysis

Looking at the foundational memory work of Maurice Halbwachs, we see that he was greatly influenced by “Durkheim’s teachings about the formative power of the deep social structures shaping all conscious human endeavor” (Hutton, 1988: 313). Commemoration

sustains or revives the deep traditions of a community that might otherwise be modified over time . . . Through commemoration, collective memory receives an anchor from which it cannot easily drift. It serves the need of a community to resist change in its self-conceptions. (Hutton, 1988: 315)

Memory here serves as a bridge explaining the persistence of deep cultural structures, something that is easily overlooked when one focuses on the expediency of official/public memory.

However, despite or precisely because of the “constructivist turn,” constructed memories (be it through negotiated, contested or officially top-down modalities) do retain their meaningfulness because they tend to resonate with strong foundational moments. Barry Schwartz (2008) has engaged with mnemonic transformations, showing how change comes about more through superimposition than through displacement.¹ Fundamentally, older images persist because of “the endurance of the social relations they symbolize” through large-scale change. This continuity sets limits to changes in collective memories. However, not all founding moments carry the same significance. Lyn Spillman (1998) has pointed out that the ability of founding moments to constrain or enable the production of memories, that is, the extent to which memories remain compelling, depends, among others, on the degree to which they offer multivalent symbols.

These founding moments (such as myths of origins dating back to some imaginary past and continuity) can (and do) pre-date modern nation-states. Or rather nation-states can (and do) take recourse to “eternal,” “primordial,” and other timeless characteristics. One important broad category that encompasses different modalities of governance and time, are civilizational dispositions, which have resurfaced in public and academic discourse post 1989. Rather than take the short and often presentist view, we are attentive to the fact that

all the cycles and inter-cycles and structural crises tend to mask the regularities, the permanence of particular systems that some have gone so far as to call civilizations—that is to say, all the old habits of thinking and acting, the set patterns which do not break down easily and which, however illogical, are a long time dying. (Braudel, 1982: 32)

On this view, the notion of “civilizational mnemonics,” is particularly suited to the global context and the attendant critique of methodological nationalism in the humanities and social sciences.

Historically, the concept of civilization is a European invention of the eighteenth century and quickly became an important part of the Enlightenment (Katzenstein, 2009). Simultaneously it functioned as a measure for humanistic-rationalistic ideals and their brutal subversion.

It was conceived as a “standard of civilization,” a condition not a process to be enshrined in the law of civilized nations. That is, it mattered for intra-European affairs in the 19th century but was absent in the relationship between “civilized Europeans” and “uncivilized” non-Europeans. (Katzenstein, 2009: 1)

During the second half of the twentieth century, the horrors of “modernity,” long a proxy for the “civilized” (Imperialism, Genocide, Holocaust, Colonialism) and cognate developments in Anthropology and other social sciences, the notion of “civilization” assumed contested and even toxic connotations. This trajectory was reinforced by the nation-centric social sciences, which relegated civilizational analysis (and identifications) to the dustbin of history. Along with other aspects that were condemned to conceptual irrelevance in the nascent social sciences (such as religion or primordialism), civilizational identities have resurfaced both as a meaningful identitarian category and as a serious scholarly pursuit.

It was Samuel Huntington’s (1993) polemic about the “Clash of Civilizations” in the early 1990s that revived and reflected growing interest in civilizational identities. His thesis essentially harks back to nineteenth-century understandings of civilization as a fundamental identity less mutable than political-ideological or economic factors. For Huntington, the conflict is cultural and no longer between states but between states and groups of different civilizations. These civilizational identities constitute the major conflict lines. Global interconnectedness leads to an increasing exposure to other civilizations, which, according to Huntington, tends to put fundamental differences into sharp relief. Moreover, local identities are weakened because of globalization further undermining the nation-state contributing to the shift toward civilizational identities.

The main problem with Huntington’s analysis is that he views civilizations as “coherent, consensual, and able to act” (Katzenstein, 2009: 6). While much of his analysis has been scrutinized, critiqued, and largely dismissed by scholars, there is no question that his thesis was highly influential among politicians and other agents thinking about a new World Order. “Indeed, the enthusiastic reception of Huntington’s writings indicated how widely primordial categories of thought were accepted” (Katzenstein, 2009: 8). Huntington’s thesis retains seminal influence on contemporary understandings of global fault lines.

Peter Katzenstein (2009) offers us a broad and more scholarly view of civilizational analysis. He describes civilizations as

configurations, constellations, or complexes. They are not fixed in space or time. They are both internally highly differentiated and culturally loosely integrated. Because they are differentiated civilizations transplant selectively, not wholesale. Because they are culturally loosely integrated, they generate debate and contestations. And as social constructions of primordiality, civilizations can become political reifications especially when encountering other civilizations. (Katzenstein, 2009: 5–6)

In short, civilizations evolve gradually in response to both their internal pluralism and their external encounters. Instead of reducing this process to a Manichean Clash of Civilizations, scholarly focus is on inter-civilizational encounters and trans-civilizational engagements. And contrary to its earlier normative conceptualizations, we understand that a

world of plural civilizations is embedded in a larger context no longer defined by a single standard expressing a firm moral hierarchy. Instead, that larger context characterizes a civilization of modernity stressing individualism, diversity, ecumenicism, and a loose sense of shared moral values. (Katzenstein, 2009: 2)

Shmuel Eisenstadt (2000), another prominent proponent of civilizational analysis, speaks about “multiple modernities” and the “civilization of modernity” assuming an indexical significance. Ironically, it is the latter and its (academic) surrogates under the influence of modernization theories, which have long prevented us from recognizing and redirecting our attention to civilizational analysis. This raises two important conceptual issues: one, civilizational modes of thought are not static but do assimilate new historical experiences and cultural tropes; two, civilizational perspectives require more attention to how deep-seated and prefigured cultural belief systems remain significant. Especially considering global interdependencies and concomitant inter-civilizational forms of engagement. Jeffrey Olick (2007) helps us address the balance of particular experiences and the universal dimensions of world cultural demands in terms of genre memories and path-dependencies, pointing to the formative impact of the earlier commemorations for the mitigation of subsequent memories. At the same time, path-dependency does not mean path-determination (Olick, 2007).

Huntington’s popular (and populist) thesis of civilizational clashes contributed to what Rogers Brubaker (2017) has referred to as a shift from nationalism to “civilizationalism” in Europe:

driven by a striking convergence in the last fifteen years around the notion of a civilizational threat from Islam. The preoccupation with Islam has given rise to an identitarian “Christianism,” a secularist posture, a philosemitic stance, and an ostensibly liberal defense of gender equality, gay rights, and freedom of speech. It is this novel and distinctive configuration and the paradoxes associated with it—notably the illiberal invocations of liberalism, the increasing salience of a “Christian” identity in the most secularized region of the world, and the adoption of liberal rhetoric by parties often characterized as “extreme right.” (p. 1193)

Unpacking the civilizational rhetoric of European populists, Brubaker (2017) notes that theirs is a secularized Christianity and a source of belonging (us vs them) rather than believing.

It is precisely the ongoing erosion of Christianity as doctrine, organization, and ritual that makes it easy to invoke Christianity as a cultural and civilizational identity, characterized by putatively shared values that have little or nothing to do with religious belief or practice. (p. 1199)

The civilizational configuration in East and Central Europe somewhat differs, insofar as religion remains a salient force regardless of political expediency. The central interpretive point here is that

the power of sedimented memories lies precisely in the fact that they can easily be mobilized during such expediences.²

A second important consideration relates to the nexus of civilizational analysis and the aforementioned *longue durée*, as elaborated by members of the Annales School. Patrick Hutton (1981) provides an overview of how the study of memory and insights from the Annalists can yield profitable results. For our immediate purposes, we are focusing on Fernand Braudel's reconceptualization of historical time, in which he substitutes an episodic, political event-centered "great men" approach, with one focused on slow changes in social (and environmental) levels. A second conceptual pillar for the *longue durée* approach can be found in the work of Philippe Ariès and the conceptualization of collective mentalities. Both Ariès and the Annalists speak of habit memory (i.e. customs and habits of mind).³

Among the questions arising from closer examination of civilizations in history, the maintenance of civilizational continuity over long periods of time deserves particular attention. This *longue durée* is an essential and defining aspect of the civilizational dimension, but it cannot be taken for granted. (Amason, 2010: 10)

Recent trends, foremost among them the persistence and revival of civilizational antagonisms, and the political and cultural salience of Islamophobia, have reactivated the question of mnemonic continuity and its socio-cultural foundations.⁴ Conversely, supra-national quasi civilizational amabilities and ties are also proliferating.

Before we delve into the details of the Bulgarian case and the continuous mobilization of anti-Ottoman sentiments it is important to note that these anti-Islamic tropes are not limited to Bulgaria. The imagery of a dominant other in the nascent European state system of the sixteenth century was the "Turk," or more precisely its mighty predecessors, the "Saracen" and later, the "Ottoman" (Neumann, 1999). This is not the place to go into the various historical permutations of this othering. Suffice to say, that contemporary tropes of European Islamophobia have deep roots dating back to the Middle Ages (Goldberg, 2006). There the conflict was religious and starting with the Crusades Islam became a unifying enemy for a united Christendom. Facing the mighty rule of the Ottomans from the fourteenth to the nineteenth century, Islam was no longer merely construed as a foreign religion but as a barbarian other. "And just as the 'Saracen' was present at the creation of Carolingian Europe, the 'Ottoman Turk' was present at the creation of the Europe of the modern state system" (Neumann, 1999: 44). Even, or precisely, when Christendom was increasingly fragmented and had to deal with various schisms (from the Byzantine Empire to the Protestant Reformation, to name but two of the most potent ones), sedimented memories of the "Turk" relied on medieval representations of the "Saracen."

As represented by Europeans, the Ottoman Empire was profoundly unsuited to the new Westphalian system. The postmedieval European idea of the state—a territorially defined entity apart from dynasty and organized in accordance with man-made rules—was alien to Muslim political theory. (Neumann, 1999: 51)

This discourse of civilizational incompatibility remains the centerpiece of Europe's relationship with Turkey to this day and continues to inform East–West imageries.

Bulgaria's "other"

What makes the Bulgarian case conceptually and theoretically so profitable is the presence of enduring memory configurations shaped by competing imperial projects and their respective

civilizational discourses. The resulting cultural memory carries multivalent symbols, permitting the exploration of civilizational encounters and the legacies of their respective mnemonic arsenals. Associations with Ottoman, Russian and Soviet empires have long been problematizing Bulgaria's position in the European memory space. Even today, as a member of the European Union, Bulgaria continues to occupy a rather striking position due to its uninterrupted and controversially cozy relationship with Russia. What makes these connections so robust, withstanding cultural and political shifts? While this may appear as a question better suited to discussions of regional and religious identities, the following case study will demonstrate how those fold into civilizational configurations. We will be connecting broader cross-regional and cross-temporal European trends, exploring how deep history cultural tropes (part of a wider European mnemonic paradigm) have been integrated and adapted to local religious and in response to political expediencies. These civilizational references are continuously employed to justify political positions and relations, creating strong emotional attachments still relevant today.

In the following we study the development and institutionalization of key memory repertoires, arguing that Bulgaria's mnemonic possibilities are circumscribed by "civilizational" discourses that predate the formation of the nation-state. Our goal is to complement regional or nation-state foci by introducing the notion of "civilizational mnemonics." Focusing on nineteenth-century East–West imageries rooted in European modernity, we will trace how local and regional discourses interact within a wider European mnemonic paradigm, constructing enduring mythologems (images of the "other"). Examining the link between civilizational discourses and historiography, on one hand, and civilizational mnemonics and geo-politics, on the other hand, reveals a superimposition of mnemonic facets that have paved the *longue durée* of Bulgaria's memory configurations. We briefly sketch the two central tropes in Bulgarian historiography and the general civilizational background against which Bulgarian memory discourses unfold. We then examine how the *longue durée* is embedded in changing geo-political contexts, reflected in literary and artistic production, as well as related commemorative practices.

Bulgarian history(ography)

Bulgarian national memory and identity rest upon a master narrative, inaugurated during nationalist struggles for independence from the Ottoman Empire in the second half of the nineteenth century. The period saw the growing competition between Russia and Western states (Great Britain, Austro-Hungary, and France) for political and economic domination over Ottoman territories in Southeastern Europe and the Near East. European powers deliberately encouraged nationalist movements to undermine Ottoman rule, stigmatizing it as "Uncivilized" and "Barbaric." The insertion of Western civilizational discourses and political ideologies into the multiethnic and multiconfessional Ottoman society radically altered the ethno-confessional delineations and relations. The result was a clash between various discourses on how to adapt the newly politicized concept of ethnicity to existing religious and dynastic structures. Pan-Orthodoxy and Pan-Slavism emerged as new supranational alternatives to Western-inspired secular nationalism, and as a direct response to the rise of the modern concept of the "West" (Bavaj, 2011; Gerd, 2014; Mazower, 2000; Vovchenko, 2016). While those alternatives never materialized, their legacies survived into memory configurations and historiographical traditions still alive today. Their prominent relevance, however, is only possible in relation to binaries behind the modern concept of the "West," that in the nineteenth century was temporalized and politicized as a polarized opposition to "Russia," "the East," and "the Orient," where the self-image of "civilized" Europe was constructed against an imagined "primitive" Orient (Bavaj, 2011; Said, 1979; Wolff, 1994). This opposing stance was often deployed by forging identities, predisposing historical reasonings with

lasting impacts on historiographical traditions, circumscribing (self)identifications and (self)stigmatizations (Todorova, 2009).

Bulgaria's national memory emerged out of these highly contentious power struggles and their cultural constructs, where the modern state came into existence after the victory of the Czarist armies over the Sultan in 1878. The era gave rise to two key (interrelated) tropes—the Turkish “yoke” and the Russian “liberator.” The meaning and significance of those powerful political and cultural constructs was further complicated by Marxist historiography of the Bulgarian Communist regime in the second half of the twentieth century, when liberation from the Turks by the Russian Empire in 1878 was equated to the “liberation” of Bulgaria from Monarcho-fascism by Soviet troops in 1944, forging the myth of the “double liberator.” Myths and symbols produced and superimposed during these two periods (matching the dominant binary models of their times) have proved to be prolific and resilient political tools (producing enduring memory configurations) still employed in historiographical and political discourses in the region (and beyond). For Russia (and later the Soviet Union) to be perceived as a liberating and modernizing power, however, it is necessary first to construct and imagine a population that needs to be liberated and modernized, thus (self)stigmatized as oppressed and backward. Therefore, the roots of the problematized position of Bulgaria (and of the entire region) in the European memory space, along the controversial relationship with Russia must be traced back to historiographical constructions of the national struggles for independence and historical interpretation of the nature of the Ottoman rule. Exploring this historiography reveals the extent to which civilizational discourses have informed national and regional mnemonic configurations and their historiographical traditions.

Historiography has long been a central concern for both memory scholars and memory entrepreneurs (Hutton, 1993; Nora, 1989). Historians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century take central stage as important protagonists in nation-state formation processes. Focusing on nineteenth-century societies, we are evaluating how historicizing the Ottoman period and the Bulgarian National Revival relates to the present in terms of the accumulating imageries of artistic and literary representations of local memories and identities, based on specific interpretations of past events conveyed to future generations in the form of a sacred national narrative. The aim is to identify the causal pathways between dominant civilizational discourses and mnemonic symbolism created in the nineteenth century and their appropriation and institutionalization by the Communist and post-Communist regimes since the second half of the twentieth century.

Daskalov's (2004) historiographical review of the period of the Bulgarian National Revival (1778–1878) demonstrates the misuses of history by Bulgarian historians since 1878. The Revival is perceived as an epoch of national formation and liberation struggles that function as a founding myth in the building of Bulgarian national identity with far-reaching implications for historical scholarship. The identity engendered here presents the highest and most idealized portrait of the nation: pure idealism, self-abnegation, heroism and self-sacrifice. The narrative, however, is deeply partial toward “us” (Bulgarians), producing over-Romanticized images and sharp lines of black and white narratives. Daskalov rejects the periodization of Bulgarian history that tends to draw parallels with the Western-European Renaissance and Enlightenment, emphasizing instead the question of Bulgaria's “self-colonizing inferiority complex” that has driven historians to overcompensate. Historical plots about the Revival were instrumental for fostering of national and state loyalties, as well as for legitimating political regimes. Daskalov pays special attention to politically motivated shifts within the interpretations of one of the leading events of the revival—the April Uprising of 1876, where alterations in the Bulgarian–Russian relations appear as a major trigger in the revision of perspective. At the core of this problematic historiographical tradition is the most robust trope of all—“the Turkish yoke” (Daskalov, 2004).

In the following we dissect the origins of the founding trope of Bulgarian modern historiographical tradition—the “Turkish yoke.” We will see how its initial purpose and function (largely in service of Russian imperialism and nascent local nationalism) was later repurposed by the Soviet-backed Communist regime in Bulgaria, producing problematic legacies still affecting memory configurations in the regions. The term “yoke” was coined in 1875 by Czech historian Konstantin Jireček.⁵ He authored the first academic work on the history of Bulgaria, and later served as Bulgarian Minister of Public Education (1881–1882). Jireček’s (1876) *History of the Bulgarians* was written in the positivist tradition of nineteenth-century European historiography, an admixture of Romanticism and Realpolitik: “a historical scholarship with a problematic legacy of which is not easy to divest” (Fikret and Faroqhi, 2002: 42–47). The picture of the Ottoman period as “the saddest and darkest period” shaped in the century of the national idea and under the strong influence of Russia and the dominant trends of romanticism and positivism, Todorova concludes, has become the predominant mode of historical writing in the Balkans (Todorova, 2009: 183). Despite academic shifts in the last decades, the overriding trait of conventional Balkan historiography of the Ottoman period persists: “the centuries of Ottoman domination are conceived as period of intense resistance to the foreign ‘occupier’, thus totally denying the historical reality of a common experience shared by the various peoples in a multi-ethnic empire” (Fikret, 2000: 252).

Where histories of post-Ottoman countries address the pre-independence period, they tend to discuss specifically the nation and its territories under Ottoman rule, which projects a twentieth-century fact into an earlier time. At base, is the idea that “national passions are something born of the long experience of Ottoman oppression” (Anscombe, 2014: 8). Anscombe (2006) critiques this standard narrative arguing instead for the decisive role of external, mostly Russian, intervention in transforming any local rebellion into a “nationalist war of independence” (p. 21). Nationalism has been an artificial, post-Ottoman construction, built on ethnic divisions developed in the late nineteenth century. Prior to that, populations under Ottoman control identified themselves primarily (but not exclusively) by religious criteria, thereby shaping national consciousness legitimizing the nation-state. Anscombe (2012) argues that the newly emerged Christian states in the Balkans, lacking the ideological validity to establish a foundational relationship between the state and the population, adopted the Western model of nationalism as their form of legitimizing politics.

Similarly, Fikret and Faroqhi (2002:41) argue that the national question in Bulgaria was not resolved by a political compromise articulating the internal dynamics of local civil society, but by an external factor: the victory of the Czarist armies. The nation-state was created before the corresponding national societies had developed. Consequently, the new ruling elite had to impose nation building “from above,” and historical scholarship was to play a predominantly ideological role (Kitromilides, 1989). Interpretations of the Ottoman period served not only to legitimize new regimes internally but sought the equally important external justification of Europe. Thus, the nineteenth-century European image of “the Turk” has had a direct relevance for the emerging Balkan historiographies, who embraced the Eurocentric theoretical constructs that reflected the political and moral prejudice against an “external principle” such as “Islam” or “Asia” as the stance of a morally and intellectually superior European civilization.

Orientalism and local “civilizational” discourses

We begin with the interrogation of the complex net of imperial legacies and post-colonial discourses that have shaped memory configurations informing Bulgaria’s historiographical traditions. This entails an examination of the general East/West divide as a founding principle in the discussion of Ottoman and Russian imperial periods against the rise of the modern theoretical concept of the “West.” The concept came to prominence with economic, technological and territorial advances

of Western European powers, where the old powerhouses of the Russian and Ottoman empires appeared on the losing side of history. The nineteenth century saw the gradual substitution of an east–west for the north–south divide that had dominated European mental maps for centuries. Tracing the shifting meanings of “the West” in nineteenth-century European imagination, we need to look east, where Russian and Ottoman lands emerged as the antonym that gave birth to “the West” (Bavaj, 2011; Bonnett, 2004; Jackson, 2006; Lewis and Wigen, 1997).

Imaging Modern Europe in opposition to an Oriental “other,” earlier scholarship identified the opposing stance of a “civilized” Europe against the “savage” or “primitive” Orient. This divide, organized around central oppositions (Modern/Backward and Christian/Muslim), reflected fundamental dualities rooted in European modernity: good/bad, culture/nature, male/female, rational/irrational, civilized/uncivilized (Todorova, 2009; Wolff, 1994). This tradition has informed historical reasonings with lasting impacts reflected in (self)identifications through regional and local appropriations and adaptations. Proximity to Asia and associations with Christian Orthodoxy, Islam and the “Asiatic” Russian and Ottoman empires has placed Eastern Europe and the Balkans in an exemplary position within perceived stages of development. European perceptions of the Balkans have been widely internalized, resulting in mnemonic configurations of self-stigmatization (Todorova, 2009: 62). Within this binary system, Ottoman rule in southeastern Europe emerged as Eastern/Islamic and thus backward and oppressive; a *foreign* barbaric imposition, enslaving and hence corrupting local otherwise European (Christian) populations. Consequently, the idea of Balkan “backwardness” appeared as a byproduct of the region’s links with the Ottoman empire, which was branded “foreign” and “Asiatic” and thus essentially different from European modes of development. This epistemological paradigm has fashioned understandings with enduring presence in local historiographies and mnemonic practices, shaping exclusionary identities built on the enduring memories of the “other.” A closer examination of this regional context will reveal the modality of the civilizational thought and the growing relevance of the consequent endurance of prefigured cultural belief systems.

Regional appropriations of the binaries behind the omnipresent East/West divide had profound effects on local memories, identities and historiographical paradigms are evident in the production of contentious concepts such as *Orientalism* (Said, 1979), and its derivative *Balkanism* (Todorova, 2009) and “Nesting Orientalisms” (Bakić-Hayden and Hayden, 1992). At the dawn of European Modernity, the West constructed a self-image modeled against an imagined East. An organized system of knowledge akin to what Edward Said called “Orientalism” illuminates the presence of a pattern of representation of cultures and societies that privilege a self-confidently “progressive,” “modern,” and “rational” Europe over the putatively “stagnant,” “backward,” “traditional,” and “mystical” societies of the Orient. Like Orientalism, Balkanism has been organized around these binaries (rational/irrational, civilized/barbarism) arranged hierarchically so that the first (“Whiteness” or “Europe”) is always primary and definitional of the second (“Blackness” or “Balkans”). Thus, the image of the Balkans has been constructed through a discourse that associates modernity and progress with the West and the North, where “the Balkans have functioned as the fulcrum for Enlightenment Europe’s self-image” (Bjelic, 2005: 3). Todorova names this process of representations “Balkanism,” a concept explaining the internalization of outside perceptions (self-stigmatization) with long-lasting consequences for local and regional identities and historiographical traditions.

Todorova uses the term Balkanism as “both a mirror and foil of Orientalism.” Inspired by Said’s Orientalism and the subsequent literature on postcolonialism, she traces the emergence of the Balkans as the “other” in European imagination. In a system of stereotypes within the larger discourse of the East–West divide, the East (i.e. Eastern Europe)—in “the reflected light of the Orient”—emerged as the less privileged. Without denying the Orientalist character of Balkanism,

Todorova shows that “Balkanism” evolved independently from “Orientalism,” constructing its own rhetorical arsenal via its specific geo-political, religious, and cultural position as a sub-region of Eastern Europe (Fleming, 2000). She argues that Balkan self-identities constructed during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were invariably opposed to “oriental” others: the Ottoman Empire (and later Turkey), as well as the “Orientalized” part of their own history (Todorova, 2018: 117).

Todorova draws on Larry Wolff’s (1994) reasoning that the European Enlightenment played a decisive role in forming the modern image of Eastern Europe. Wolff detects the intellectual origins of Eastern Europe among the eighteenth-century *philosophes*. Under the paramount influence of Voltaire, the era reoriented the dichotomy between barbarian and civilized on an east–west axis following the shift of Europe’s financial and cultural centers. Within this conceptual reorientation of Europe, Eastern Europe emerges as “a work of cultural creation, of intellectual artifice, of ideological self-interest and self-promotion” (Wolff, 1994: 4). Western Europe invented Eastern Europe as its complementary other half, borrowing and adapting the belief in evolution and progress. Lagging Europe in economic performance, the East came to be identified with industrial backwardness, lack of advanced social relations and institutions, irrational and superstitious cultures unmarked by Western Enlightenment. Eastern Europe thus was demi-Orientalized, discovered “on the geographic frontier between Europe and Asia, on the philosophical frontier between civilization and barbarism” (Wolff, 1994: 331).

This developmental aspect (from simple to complex, backward to developed, primitive to cultivated) remains an important characteristic of contemporary perceptions of East and West. The intermediate (or “liminal” as articulated by Fleming, 2000) status of the Balkans, as a sub-region of Eastern Europe, evokes the image of a bridge. The region has been perceived not only as a physical and political bridge between the East and the West, but also as a time bridge between stages of development, producing labels, such as semi-developed, semi-colonial, semi-civilized, and semi-oriental. These labels emerged in the post-Ottoman period, in relation to the Balkans peripheral status in terms of integration into the economic and cultural life of Europe. And while the Cold War imposed additional 45 years of isolation and undeniably left a mark on local and regional mnemonics, the legacy was not as profound as associations with the Ottoman and Russian empires.

The regional appropriations of these “civilizational” discourses are also visible in a phenomenon that Milica Bakić-Hayden and Hayden (1992) conceptualizes as “Nesting Orientalisms”—divisions within the sub-regions of Eastern Europe and the Balkans, between Europe “proper” and those parts that were closer or under Ottoman (hence Oriental) rule. Like Balkanism, “Nesting Orientalisms” are based on the gradation of “Orients” in terms of otherness and primitiveness. It defines a pattern of reproduction of the original dichotomy upon which Orientalism is premised, where each region views the cultures and religions to its South and East as more conservative and primitive. Within this system of cultural representations, a group that creates the Orientalized other can also be the subject of orientalizing by another group (Bakić-Hayden and Hayden, 1992). This is the case of “the unfathomable identity of Russia,” perceived as either Western or Eastern, civilized or backward, depended on the standpoint of the observer (Bjelić, 2009; Burbank and Cooper, 2008: 335; Todorova, 2009). Of particular interest is Russia’s orientalizing of her southern neighbors (especially the Bulgarians) in crafting the complex self-image of “savior” and “civilizer” (Tolz, 2011; Weeks, 2002). This self-definition occurred within the binaries of the East/West divide, revealing the modality of civilizational thought and its lasting legacies in local and regional memory formations.

Russia’s orient and the “West”

In the following we briefly trace how the interaction between Western and Russian civilizational discourses resulted in powerful ideological constructs, producing lasting mnemonic tropes still

employed in European political and historiographical debates. While Russia had long been considered a northern power, the nineteenth century saw she gradual transformation into an eastern one. This geographical re-imagining, however, rarely entered Russian self-conceptions, which typically externalized the east as the Orient (Bassin, 1999; Bavaj, 2011: 8–16; Khalid, 2000; Lim, 2008). While nineteenth-century West Europeans framed Russia increasingly as the epitome of the East (backward and autocratic), Russia mostly saw herself as European and modern, often modeling this self-definition against her own oriental others: “alien” population of the Caucasus or her southern neighbors under Ottoman rule (Brower, 1997; Dickinson, 2002).

Growing influence of Western ideas and perceptions in Russia gave rise to Slavophilism, a nineteenth-century intellectual movement that advocated Slavic and specifically Russian culture over Western European, insisting upon the superiority of values and institutions derived from Russia’s early history. In the 1860s this Romantic Russian nationalism began to move from academic circles to mass politics. “Pan-Slavism” is typically interpreted and used as a politicized version of Slavophilism, where the tradition of Russian Anti-Westernism was reinvented by the construction of a clear-cut dichotomy between a Romano-Germanic Europe and a Slavic “historico-cultural type” (Bassin, 1991: 9–11; Bavaj, 2011: 11). This polarized conceptualization left little room for any Hegelian mediation between a civilization-in-the-singular and a civilization-in-the-plural. Pan-Slavists’ anti-Western attacks, Bavaj (2011) argues, “severed any intellectual ties that might have related different civilizations” (pp. 11–12). Western European Russophobia, a major constituting factor in the crystallization of “the West” from the 1820s onward, was reinforced by Russian anti-Westernism, ultimately leading to the constructed opposition between an “Oriental” Russia and Western Europe’s “Christian,” “liberal,” and “modern civilization” (Bavaj, 2011: 11–12). Mirrored by Western Europe’s self-definition as “Christian.”

The role of Christianity, chiefly the split between Western and Eastern Christianity, has always been at the center of these civilizational juxtapositions. Western definition of “Christian” included or excluded Orthodoxy depending on other political and cultural expediencies. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the West described Eastern Christianity using Orientalist tropes, where the Christian East existed in a state of “petrification” and “barbarism” and thus needed the restorative intervention of the West (Johnson, 2014: 811–840). For Russia, however, the Christian East (Orthodoxy) has always been an identity cornerstone, part of a medieval messianic ideology (Russia being the heir to Byzantium) that nineteenth-century Pan-Slavs reinvented as an influential political weapon. In the 1870s, they rationalized Orthodoxy as an important part of Slavic cultural traditions, asserting that Russia was the only Orthodox great power and as such it should rule over the entire Orthodox world (Gerd, 2014: viii). Russian neo-Byzantinism came into conflict with the objectives of other European Powers, the Greek *Megali Idea* (also rooted in the *byzantine tradition*) and Balkan nationalism, where the ideological basis for independent state formation was the establishment of national churches, independent from Constantinople. These clashes further politicized Russia’s Messianism, giving rise to modern Pan-Slav and Pan-Orthodox visions of a political and cultural union of Orthodox Slavs and Greeks. These visions (in direct dialogue with dominant civilizational discourses) aligned with Russia’s imperial colonial ambitions and played an important role in Russian policy in the Balkans, directly involving the *longue durée* of Bulgarian–Russian relations (Gerd, 2014; Vovchenko, 2016).

The longue durée of Russian–Bulgarian relations

It is common to depict Bulgaria as the ever-friendly and dependent little brother of Imperial (and later Soviet) Russia. “Whatever validity there may be to this view,” Michael Petrovich (1967) explains, “it should not rest on the supposition that pre-Liberation Bulgaria was traditionally and

solidly pro-Russian” (p. 87). He demonstrates that during the century between 1760 and 1878, most Bulgarians held conflicting opinions about Russia.⁶ Still, a pro-Russian orientation began to penetrate Bulgarian intellectual elite in the 1820s in response to a complex competition between Greek nationalism, the rise of Slavophilism and their corresponding pro-Western and pro-Russian sentiments and ideologies. What began as a movement for cultural and educational self-determination among a small Bulgarian elite (closely intertwined with the Greek high culture dominating the Christian *millet* under Ottoman rule), quickly became a bitter struggle for religious and cultural autonomy from Greek-dominated institutions. Language emerged as the key organizational principle in the definition of the nation (Angelov, 2016). Bulgarian nationalists (under strong influences from Slavophilism) turned to Russia as an alternative source for educational and cultural resources (Trencsényi et al., 2016). By the 1840s Bulgarian literary tradition became increasingly hostile to Greek influences and reoriented toward Russia (Daskalov, 2013). “The transition from Greek to Russian learning seems natural today; yet it was not an easy one” (Petrovich, 1967: 87).

The process marked a decisive move of Bulgarian elites away from Greek high culture, and toward a new sense of community found in direct contact with the West, or in the regional alternatives of Slavophilism, Pan-Slavism and Russian Occidentalism. Early in the nineteenth century, Bulgarian intellectuals turned from Enlightenment principles to Slavic exceptionalism. This “anti-Enlightenment” was part of the transition from Hellenophiles to Hellenophobes and a negative “occidentalizer” critique of Western Orientalism. Occidentalism in the Balkans acquired an increasingly distinct geopolitical ring related to Russian policies in the Balkans (Danova, 2014). These developments unfolded next to a wide range of sentiments, such as Turkophilia and Slavophobia and their mirror-images of Turkophobia (Islamophobia) and Slavophilism; along with Philhellenism–Slavophilism clashes—all as direct functions of great power politics and their civilizational discourses. Russophilia and its patronizing affections (directly involving the clash of dominant civilizational discourses), however, left the more enduring mark on Bulgaria’s memory and historiographical traditions, where internalized civilizational mnemonic scripts have dominated scholarship and public memory for over a century (Aretov, 2010; Todorova, 2009).

Particularly interesting is Russia’s orientalizing of Bulgarians in crafting the complex self-image of “savior” and “civilizer,” while at the same time constructing their own dialectic in opposing Western attitudes and influences. The parallel between Western’s and Russian’s Orientalism is evident in the accounts of Russian travelers to the Balkans in the nineteenth century. They often self-identified as Europeans, and romanticized “Bulgarian Asia,” depicting it as charming and exotic Orient, idealizing its untainted purity, a reminiscence of European *philhellenism* of the 1820s: “just as Europeans were discovering *their* Greeks as the source of their [Western] civilization, Russians were discovering *their* Bulgarians as the roots of Slavic [and Orthodox] culture” (Todorova, 2009: 83–84). Thus, nineteenth-century Slavophil sentiment toward the Bulgarian population reflected “the dominant melody of commiseration” expressed by Western observers toward the Greeks under Ottoman rule. The observations of the prominent Russian (Ukrainian) Slavophil ethnographer and historian Yuri Venelin that “Among the Slavs, Bulgarians have suffered the worst” has dominated perceptions ever since (Bezsonov, 1857: 12–19, cited in Todorova, 2009: 83). Consequently, Russian (and later Soviet) imperial aspirations in the Balkans were self-ascribed as “liberating” and “civilizing” missions, rescuing their dignified but oppressed and backward Orthodox brothers from the primitive rule of the Islamic (or monarchic) other.

Bulgaria’s medieval history took an important stand in the rise of Slavophilism and the development of the vision of Russia’s messianic Orthodox Empire (Angelov, 2016). Slavophiles extolled Bulgaria’s role in Russia accepting Christianity from Constantinople and the Cyrillic alphabet, as well as Bulgaria’s contribution to Church Slavonic, a major component in modern Russian. This narrative penetrated deep into debates about the codification of modern Bulgarian language, when

cultural nationalism was centered on the conviction that the Old Church Slavonic was synonymous with Old Bulgarian. The claim that the Bulgarian language was the closest to Old Slavonic was used in support of an argument that medieval Bulgarian culture was at the root of the whole Slavic culture. Consequently, up to the middle of the nineteenth century, Bulgarian literature was replete with Church Slavonic features, heavily influenced by Russian Church Slavonic (Gyllin, 1989).

By the second half of the nineteenth century, modern political and cultural trends often reached Bulgaria via Russia (the army, missionaries or diplomats, literature, Bulgarian students traveling to Russia, etc.), and thus reflected Russia's imperial stance. Meanwhile, Russia adapted Western European trends to local needs and regional strategies, such as adopting the Balkans as its own Orient, and launching a "liberating" and "civilizing" mission. Pursuing its Slavic roots, the doctrine of the Slavophiles, along with the "serviceable Christian genealogies" became powerful weapons in imperial competition in the Balkans. Claiming racial and religious links, Russia commenced a diplomatic and military campaign, assuming the role of protector of the Christian groups within the Ottoman provinces. Russia began to gain prestige during the military victories of Alexander I (1801–1825), under the banner of the "eternal religion of God our Savior," in tune with European association with Christianity (Burbank and Cooper, 2008: 380).

This period gave rise to the myth of the Bulgarian–Russian fraternity, which became increasingly powerful, especially after Bulgaria gained independence, because of the Russian victory over the Ottomans in 1878. A testimony to this is the number of monuments dedicated to the Russian Liberator. Numerous boulevards still carry the name Tsar Liberator (*Цар Освободител*), commemorating the Russian Emperor Alexander II, who went down in history as the liberator of the Bulgarian people. These reverences, however, did not go unchallenged. The political battles between the Russophiles and the Russophobes in the young state were bitter. By the 1880's Russian–Bulgarian fallout, when diplomatic relations were broken, however, the founding mythologems were already firmly established.

Art and literature

Russian influences in Bulgarian art and literature during the Revival Period were substantial. They were instrumental in establishing the *longue durée* of Russian–Bulgarian relations and their mnemonic scripts. These cultural representations serve as reflection of sentiments directly involving great power politics and the sedimentation of their respective civilizational discourses. Art both triggers and reflects cultural memory by the "act of transferring" where groups construct identities by recalling shared (or imagined) pasts (Assmann, 1995; Connerton, 1989). Visual and literary representations and symbols provide an opportunity to study the origins of myths (Lévi-Strauss, 1969).

"Plots and figures associated with Russia," Nikolay Aretov (2010) argues, "played a major role in Bulgarian national mythology" (p. 69). These associations, often perceived as ancient and universal, were employed in "forging and imposing different ideological and propaganda structures" (Aretov, 2010: 69). Despite many variations of these plots, they can be reduced to two key figures: Dyado Ivan (Grandpa Ivan) and Rayna, a Bulgarian Princess. The image of Grandpa Ivan, the Russian czar that people believed would liberate Bulgaria, has been well researched and documented as part of the South Slav "Muscovite myth" (Penchev, 1993; Trifonov, 1908). The story of Rayna, the daughter of the Bulgarian King Peter (927–969), however, is less well known.

In the story of Rayna, Bulgaria was epitomized as a beautiful yet helpless young woman, who desperately needed and ultimately found male protection in the arms of a Slavic prince. The story (based on a mythical tale of the medieval Bulgarian kingdom) was first recorded in 1829 by the Russian (Ukrainian) scholar Yuri Venelin, who for the first-time interpreted Russian–Bulgarian

relations in ideological terms (Manolakev, 1996: 41, cited in Aretov, 2010). These historical studies, however, had a narrow audience. The wider reach came after the publication of the novel *Rayna, Bulgarian Princess* (1843) by the Russian writer Alexander Veltman, who proposed an interesting ideological construction, inaugurating an important historical mythologem, linking Bulgarian and Russian identities. At the center of the plot is a conflict between Russia, Bulgaria, and Byzantium, where Rayna, a noblewoman lacking parental protection due to stormy political events, attracts the attention of the noble Svyatoslav and the power-loving Samuel. Samuel is depicted as “Black-haired and black-eyed.” Svyatoslav, the quintessential Romantic hero who ultimately won Rayna’s heart, had a “golden mustache.” The juxtaposition between the Slav (Nordic, North European) and the Mediterranean (Southern European/ Byzantium/Ottoman) is easily recognizable. The book became popular in Bulgaria in 1852, institutionalizing the symptomatic Bulgarian–Russian relationship (Aretov, 2010).

The image of Rayna became a reference in a network of inter-textual analogies (Aretov, 2010). A prominent example from the Revival literature is the image of “the abducted young woman,” a representation of what it meant “to be under the Turks”—stories of women tempted, kidnapped, or raped by the Ottoman “oppressor” (Peleva and Spassova-Dikova, 2010). “As a rule,” Aretov argues, “conflicts in early Bulgarian narratives were based on the opposition: Christians–Muslims” (Peleva and Spassova-Dikova, 2010: 77). Russian–Bulgarian relations and identities were shaped by these literary traditions. Russians, as well as Bulgarians, viewed Bulgaria through this archetypal figure—the beautiful but defenseless young woman who had to be saved from abductors (“infidels” or “evil” foreigners) by another foreigner, who was good, handsome and brave (Svyatoslav, Dyado Ivan, or a Western prince). Bulgaria readily accepted and interiorized these images as an act of “self-colonization” with lasting impact on its national memory and identity (Kiossev, 1999).

An interesting case study is presented by Nikolay Pavlovich (1835–1894), one of the most prominent Bulgarian Revival artists, famous for depicting scenes from Bulgaria’s medieval history and patriotic images of Bulgarian struggle for independence. In search for the authentic Bulgarian medieval identity (the roots of Bulgarian modern nationality in tune with Western European Romantic trends), Pavlovich conducted ethnographic research in early 1860s Odessa, the center of the Slavic culture during this period (Ivanova, 2016: 596). Pavlovich used Venelin’s history of Bulgaria as a source of inspiration and created a series of images after Veltman’s (1852) novel *Rayna, Bulgarian Princess*. A prominent example is the lithograph *The meeting of Princess Raina and her brothers* (1874) (see Figure 1). A more noteworthy semiotics of representation is observed in one of his most famous works—*The Awakening of Bulgaria* (1881) (see Figure 2). Pavlovich depicts Bulgaria as a young female watching the two-headed eagle (symbolizing the Russian Empire), rising with the sun high in the sky. The flag of the Ottoman Empire is crushed in the distance. Bulgaria is free from the shackles of slavery. This unbalanced image of the higher standing symbol of the Russian and the barefoot Bulgarian still in her traditional outfit (a reminder of her backward stance) will become an inspiration for other artists.

Soviet civilizationism

The same gendered political dynamics (imperial/center—peripheral/subordinate tension) in Russian—Bulgarian relations was preserved after the restructuring of the world of empires following World War I and the Russian Revolution (1917–1923). Despite the general anti-imperial moods of the Soviets, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics rose as a new imperial project, managing to recover most of imperial Russia’s territories and strategies. In the aftermath of World War II, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics established its power over Eastern Europe as “protectors,

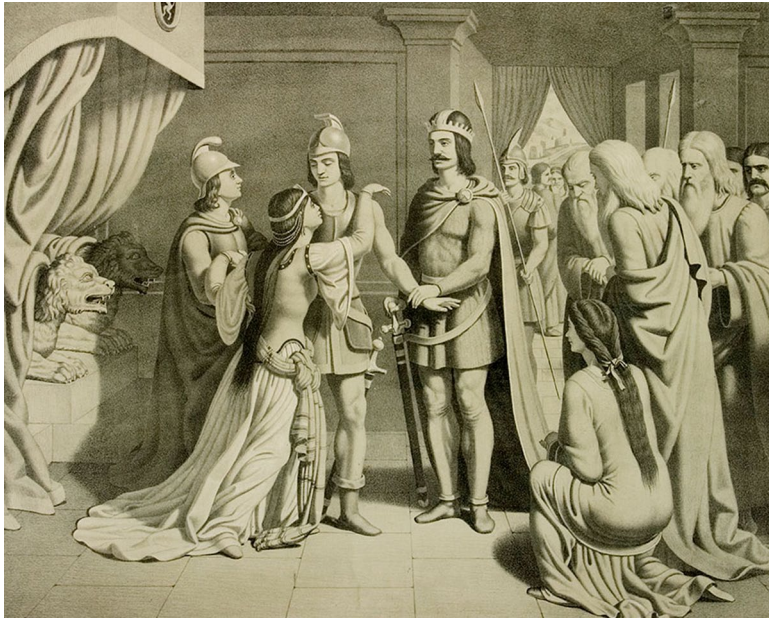


Figure 1. The Meeting of Princess Raina and Her Brothers with the Russian Prince Svyatoslav.
Source: Pavlovich (c. 1874). With the permission of the National Gallery, Sofia.



Figure 2. The Awakening of Bulgaria.
Source: Pavlovich N (c. 1881). With the permission of the National Gallery, Sofia.

patrons, and policemen in theoretically sovereign states” (Burbank and Cooper, 2008: 380). The Soviet kind of empire, Burbank and Cooper explain, worked by requiring each Communist leadership to establish what Tony Judt (borrowing Kenneth Jowett’s term) labels “geographically contiguous replica states.” The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was imperial in its reach and dictate, postulating “the myth of fraternal socialist states allied in the march toward world communism” (Judt, 2005: 167). Thus, it could be argued that the final conquest over Bulgarian allegiances came with the Soviet occupation in 1944 and the consequent Sovietization of Bulgarian historiography. It was the Communist regime that definitively transformed Bulgarian attitudes toward Russia, erasing any contestations of the fraternity and liberation mythologem (Daskalov, 2004).

The myth of “eternal brotherhood” was refurbished to serve the needs of a new regime, backed by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. In building the myth of the fraternal socialist states in Bulgaria the old image of Imperial Russia as the “big brother liberator” was deployed, linking the image of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics with the already established image of Imperial Russia. The Communists equated Bulgarian liberation from the Turks by the Russian Empire in 1878 to the “liberation” of Bulgaria from Monarcho-fascism by Soviet troops in 1944, as if the first “revolution” prefigures the second. The period saw the sedimentation of memories and identities suggested by the idea that history proceeds as a singular linear narrative. The Soviets claimed lineage and thus legitimacy by this cultural appropriation, merging the two images (of Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union) into a coherent whole, a new trope—the “double liberator.” The newly constructed multilayered images of loyalty to Moscow were so closely interlocked with nineteenth-century mythologies and dualities that pulling nationalist and Communist narratives apart has proven difficult in post-1989 reconstructions of memory. Both Anscombe (2014) and Daskalov (2004) blame the nationalist-materialist paradigm of the Cold War period for the misleading historical interpretation of Bulgarian Ottoman past and the National Revival Period (Anscombe, 2012).

During the 40 years of Soviet-style Communist tenet in Bulgaria, the historical and cultural ties between the two nations were widely celebrated, strengthened by the activities of Bulgarian–Soviet Friendship Committees (Roucek, 1959). Bulgaria became (in)famous for its unquestionable loyalty to its “big brother.” Bulgarian–Russian relations became the embodiment of the eternal brotherly love. The relationship, however, as before, was never based on equality, but rather on dependency that deserves to be analyzed within a wider imperial/post-colonial context. The civilizing mission and the gunboat diplomacy of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries turned into exceptional political and economic dependencies in the second half of the twentieth century. Russia, and later the Soviet Union have always been perceived as a “Big brother”—more modern, more sophisticated, more civilized, more industrialized, and more revolutionary. These perceptions based on the center-periphery power dynamics became visible in the material culture accumulated during the second half of the twentieth century.

Monumentality: the sedimentation of memory

Studying some of the socialist-era monuments and commemorative practices dedicated to Russia and the Soviet army in Bulgaria allows us to assess the depth of the sedimentation of history and the *longue durée* of memory in establishing the myth of the double liberator. We see the continuation of already established mythologems and modes of representation, whose foundations go back to nineteenth-century civilization discourses. The refurbished myth of the Dyado Ivan (the Russian savior) and Rayna (the defenseless female) are easily recognizable. One prominent example is the abandoned Park-monument of Bulgarian–Soviet Friendship in Varna, Bulgaria (see Figure 3), built by the Bulgarian Communist Party in the 1970s. Here history is literally sedimented within the landscape, while the iconography of Bulgarian public memory is cast in concrete on the façade.



Figure 3. Park-monument of Bulgarian-Soviet Friendship in Varna.
Source: Kafedjiiski et al. (1978). With the permission of State Archives, Varna.

The monolithic composition was raised on the historical hill of Tournatepe,⁷ used as a post of Nicholas I, during the siege of Varna in the Russo-Turkish War (1828–1829). The symbolism was kept after World War II, when the site became an ossuary for the Communist partisans fallen in the fight against fascism (Savov, 2010). The monument was inaugurated in 1978, commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Bulgarian liberation from Ottoman rule, making the hill a sediment of multilayered historical realities.

The artistic composition on the façade conveys the central tropes of Bulgarian national memory. It is a narrative that is chiseled in the politically charged gendered images. Bulgaria is personified by a group of young women in traditional outfits, cast on the lower left wing of the two-folded edifice. They are welcoming the arrival of the double liberator, represented by four male Soviet soldiers in modern military uniforms and weapons, positioned on the right, higher wing. Large bronze letters above them once read “Friendship from centuries to centuries.” It is a rich juxtaposition between modernity (higher /male/ military) and traditional, pre-modern vernacular symbols (lower/female/civilian), in tune with civilizational discourses and binaries discussed above.

This gender-colored apposition is also visible in another monument, erected in Varna the same year the Park-Monument was built—the monument “Welcoming Brothers Liberators” (see Figure 4). It depicts the greeting of the 14th Bryan Regiment of the Russian army, headed by Gen. Stolypin, who entered (and liberated) the city on 27 July 1887. Here Bulgaria/Varna is represented not only as a female in traditional dress, but as a very young girl, looking up to the Russian liberator (Gen. Stolypin), a much older, dignified male titan. The romanticized higher image of the Empire against the lower stance of infantilized Bulgaria in these two monuments recalls both, the story of Rayna and the barefooted Bulgaria in Pavlovic’s *The Awakening of Bulgaria*. It has been a carefully crafted narrative, based on local and transnational perceptions and self-identifications, resulting in a multilayered relationship of dependence, still visible and relevant today. This has made Bulgaria an outsider not only within the EU, but also among the countries from the former Soviet bloc.

Similar monuments, celebrating the triumphant Soviet army were erected throughout the eastern bloc in the 1950s, following Soviet occupation in the aftermath of World War II. Validating its



Figure 4. Welcoming Brothers Liberators in Varna (photo by Nedelcheva, 2021).
Source: Pesev H (1978).

political hegemony, the Soviets insisted on a narrative of “liberation” and “friendship.” The storyline was often challenged, and its success varied across countries until it was publicly dismantled after the fall of Communist regimes past 1989, when monuments were swiftly removed or repurposed. In this regional context, Bulgaria arguably, was the only country, where the “liberation” and “fraternity” narrative found a fertile ground (Vukov, 2006: 270); the only country that portrayed its relationship to Moscow in so overtly unbalanced gender tones; and the only one that kept its storyline and monumentality almost intact after the political restructuring of the 1990s (Vukov, 2006). The image of the Soviet Union as an occupier has dominated public debates across Eastern Europe long before the fall of Soviet censorship in 1989. In Bulgaria, however, these views have been much less prominent, even after the fall of the regime. When Communist rule collapsed in Bulgaria after 1989, the image of Russia as a protector and liberator survived. While in the post-Soviet era statues of Communist leaders and Soviet-era insignia, such as the five-pointed star, were hastily removed, monuments dedicated to the Soviet army or Soviet–Bulgarian friendship remained, even as a forgotten or simply abandoned part of the landscape.

The Park-monument to Bulgarian–Soviet friendship (as many other Socialist-era monuments across Bulgaria) has been deserted since 1989, but not demolished. High political contestations and strong pressure from Moscow have hindered the process of finding a solution for its re-adoption. Public opinion has been divided. For some, it is a symbol of Soviet occupation and/or the Bulgarian totalitarian socialist regime; others appreciate it as a memorial and a site for commemoration of

Victory Day against Nazism. The broader historical context explains why it draws such intense affective investment from the public. Still, the public debates are mainly focused on the removal (demolition and radical erasure) and preservation, preoccupied with artistic/aesthetic values and much less with the message on the façade. As such, they rarely incite a debate on reexamination of historiographical traditions, or national identity and memory. The monument is no longer a site of memory or forgetting, but a site of emptiness (Dimitrova, 2016). “The ‘emptying’ of monuments as sites of memory, the disintegration of the unified discourse, and the overcoming of the conservative vision have opened up vast possibilities for appropriation and use of space” (Dimitrova, 2016: 52).

Similarly to its more famous counterpart in Sofia, where the bronze Soviet soldiers were painted as American pop-culture heroes in 2011 and in the colors of the Ukrainian flag in 2014 (BBC, 2014; Dimitrov, 2018), the monument in Varna has been a canvas for artists and political activists, dressing it up in Pussy-Riot style in support for the anti-Putin band in 2012 (Novinite.bg, 2012; The Huffington Post, 2012) and painted in the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender/transsexual (LGBT) pride flag in 2018 (Hervey, 2018; Varna 24, 2018). Bulgarian media frequently cover the changing look of these monuments, with the Russian embassy and pro-Russian political actors condemning these “desecrating” “vandal incidents,” organizing quick cleanings (Novinite.com, 2011). These actions have been successful (to a certain degree) in reconfiguring the monuments’ political meaning, offering a visual critique on contemporary post-socialist reality, and a mobilizing of a counterculture toward national emancipation from Soviet political and cultural hegemony.⁸ Identifying hegemony’s provisional character, however, is insufficient for an actual change of its symbolic configuration (Ivanova, 2014). The compositions of socialist monuments endorse the nationalist politics, where commentaries often blindly reproduce this nationalist political turn. Political forces that desire radical breaks with the past, fail to account for unexamined continuities and silent undercurrents that they themselves retain (Valiavicharska, 2014). The close interrelation between Communist/socialist memory tropes and nationalistic narratives hinders any productive public rearticulation of meaning. Meanwhile, Russia has been trying to reclaim the space in Varna, laying flowers to commemorate Victory Day and making plans to turn the complex into a museum of Bulgarian–Russian friendship (Russia with the World, 2017).

In contrast to this contested emptiness, the *Monument Welcoming Brothers Liberators* in Varna (similarly to other monuments that do not directly involve the Soviet army or brutalist architecture) has been well-kept as a center of annual commemorations of the Liberation Day, officially known as the “Day of Liberation of Bulgaria from the Ottoman Dominion in Bulgaria.” It commemorates the Liberation of Bulgaria following the Russo-Turkish War (1877–1878). Thus, while political associations with the Communist (or Soviet) regime are controversial, the imagery of Russian liberators still stand strong, where the gendered unequal footing and feminization (if not infantilization) of the nation is not only unproblematic but celebrated. What makes this connection so robust to political and cultural shifts has been a key question for the current study.

There are several contingencies that are often cited, when discussing the *longue durée* of the Bulgarian–Russian/Soviet fraternity. Bulgaria never experienced the direct Russian imperial occupation and assimilation policies as other Eastern European states (like Poland, Ukraine or the Baltic states), thus Bulgaria lacks the strong opposing view of Russia (and consequently, the Soviet Union) as an imperialist and hostile state. Neither did Bulgaria go through the Cold War–imposed separation (such as Greece) or dogmatic dissent (Yugoslavia). Those, however relevant and important developments, are only part of a more complex set of predispositions. They are processual mnemonic facets that have facilitated the longevity of the memory configuration dominating the Bulgarian narrative, drawing on a civilizational framework. Underwriting the persistence of certain binary presuppositions, this has allowed an enduring memory culture, namely, the close association of Russia with the next powerful trope in Bulgarian historiography—the Turkish “yoke”—a

political and cultural construct in service to European and especially to Russian imperialism. This has fostered an array of interlinked historical narratives and myths, nurturing special emotional links still relevant today.⁹ Thus, as long as this context remains intact, the image of the Russian liberator will endure.

The founding principles of that imagined relationship that took shape in the late nineteenth century, and was further fortified during Communist rule, survived almost uninterrupted until the present, except for a brief period in the early 1990s. The 1990s brought about a push for a new kind of “synthesis” of history, moderating the pro-Russian propaganda in Bulgarian historiography. Still, the Communist-era historians, obsessed with economic and social issues, class categories, and Marxist analyses of the Revival period continued to provide the “archeological evidence” for the molding of historical memory. “Apart from the provision to use research methods outside Marxism,” Radushev (2008) explains, “working with any sources that questioned or refuted the official version of the ‘Turkish yoke’ was not looked favorably” (p. 3). As argued by Mary Neuburger (2005), “Bulgarian emotional attachment to the heroes and events of the period has been detrimental to the uncovering of ‘truths’ about the era in question” (pp. 1628–1629). For Daskalov (2004), the key problem is the sanctification of the entire revival period. This sanctification, however, can only be possible within the civilizational discourses and the binary system that have predisposed attitudes toward the Ottoman past. Current resurrections of secularist discourses supporting anti-Muslim political agendas across Europe and the world further complicate academic arguments and political discourses. Russia also works hard to keep these images and narratives in place, securing its leverage in Bulgaria and the region. “It is not a coincidence,” Grashkin (2020) argues, “that Bulgaria’s deep historical, cultural, and social-political ties to Russia keep it vulnerable to the Kremlin’s pressures.” It is a debate that continues to fuel academic and political controversies (Rekun, 2018).

Discussion

The *longue durée* of Bulgarian civilizational memories and the myth of “brotherly love” survived into the post-Communist era. This is interlinked with the other key tropes of Bulgarian identity—the Turkish “yoke” and Bulgaria’s historic links to Russia and later the Soviet Union. The Ottoman Empire emerged as Eastern/Islamic and thus backward and oppressive (not modern and democratic) and a foreign imposition on local (otherwise Christian and European) populations. The master narrative inaugurated by Bulgarian nationalists (and pan-Slavists) in the nineteenth century reflected contemporaneous European trends. Among them, the positivist interpretations of history, employed in the service of romantic nationalism, closely aligned with dominant binary models, namely the divide between West and East (Modern/Backward; Christian/Muslim). All of these are organized around fundamental dualisms deeply rooted in Western cultural traditions.

The Bulgarian story also provides a general lesson for Europe as such. It too “draws on the historical trope of ‘antemurale Christianitatis’—the idea, central to nationalist historiography and myth throughout the region, of East and Central European nations as ‘bulwarks of Christianity’ against Islam” (Brubaker, 2017: 1209). To be sure, this civilizational rhetoric can be (and is) also directed against the West, a phenomenon that we can see across Eastern and Central Europe. Here the target is “liberalism,”

construing it as a non-national and even anti-national project that subordinates the interests of the nation to foreign capital, on the one hand, and to foreign models of multiculturalism, Roma rights, LGBT rights, and refugee protection, on the other hand. The longstanding nationalist trope of resistance to “centuries of foreign rule”—in the context of the distinctive geopolitical vulnerability of the small states of East Central

Europe—allows liberalism to be seen as the latest in a long series of projects of foreign domination undertaken by powerful neighboring states and empires, by international communism, and today by dictates from Brussels and grants from the Open Society Foundation. (Brubaker, 2017: 1208)

These perceived excesses of Western rationalism, materialism, atheism and all the other evils modernity (and secularization) have brought upon us, contribute to the diffusion of “civilizationalism” as a global phenomenon.

Civilizational memories resonate with various parts (and parties) of Europe, drawing on a tapestry of historical divisions and lasting fractures (Hadler, 2017). In the words of Andrei Plesu: “There is a Latin Europe and an Anglo-Saxon Europe, a Catholic Europe, a Jewish Europe, a Protestant Europe, an Orthodox Europe, and lately, a Muslim Europe.” This is an antidote to the simplistic thesis of re-nationalization, which certainly captures the resurgence of nativism. However, in parallel and no less important is the fact that we are witnessing a re-civilization and its attendant civilizational memories, where sedimented structures, predating national formations, are demanding to be heard. In sum: the post–Cold War, with its subsequent migratory flows and especially the post-9/11 emergence of a clearly identifiable foe have conjoined the Islamophobia of the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries. These “friend-foe” dynamics, even if articulated in national contexts essentially thrive on supra-national civilizational beliefs. To be sure, the salience of civilizational memories is not the same everywhere, but they are increasingly becoming a weapon in political-cultural discourse.

The study of (contested) national memory politics occupies a large swath of publications in memory studies. Our argument and the notion of “civilizational mnemonics” is another contribution against the pervasive methodological nationalism that continues to guide most scholarly pursuits. Studying national memories, we argue, requires attention to mnemonic configurations that are based on sedimented memories pre-dating the nation-state. An additional advantage of this conceptual Gestalt switch is that it moves us away from the Western-centric focus of most memory studies. We propose to resituate the study of national memory politics in two co-extensive coordinates: one is diachronic and looks at the extent to which path-dependency and sedimented memories continue to inform national memory politics. The other is synchronic and looks at the existence and political-cultural relevance of broader (and smaller) units of reference, which includes imperial, regional and resulting civilizational tropes. The Global Post–Cold War World and the attendant Huntingtonian vision of a Clash of Civilizations provide a geo-political cultural template for policymakers and various publics. Political memory entrepreneurs continue to take recourse to civilizational tropes. In other words, globalization adds an important and wide-ranging context that should give us pause and make us reflect upon our own conceptual tools. Hence, the main interpretive point here is to situate nation-states in the interplay of larger (e.g. civilizational) and smaller (e.g. regional, local) social frameworks of remembrance in the Global Age.

In this article we have introduced the notion of “civilizational mnemonics” as a heuristic tool for the analysis of memory politics in the context of global interdependencies. To be sure, the profitability of this concept necessitates further refinement in theoretical and empirical terms. Demonstrating the existence, relevance, and salience of the *longue durée* in Bulgaria, does not reveal all the mechanisms “civilizational mnemonics” consist of. We have directed attention to one case, and focused on the role of historiography, arts, and literature. Going forward, we hope that scholars with different empirical interests (e.g. comparing liberal-democracies with authoritarian memory politics) and disciplinary background (e.g. exploring the nexus of norm-generating laws and civilizational references) will elaborate on it. Looking at the contemporary landscape of liberal democracies, that is societies willing to take a critical look at their pasts, they seem to have one thing in common or rather seem to lament the same phenomenon: namely, the decline of national

unity and the concomitant and increasingly rigid divisions in their respective polities. However, these are not pathologies but are persistent expressions of how people negotiate their supra- and international alliances contesting previous modes of national identity. On this view, recourse to and the cultivation of civilizational tropes, can also be understood as a form of nostalgia. In the sense that it functions as a kind of re-imagined community providing people with a sense/source of unity that the (contested) nation no longer does.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the following people for their insightful comments. Amy Cook, Astrid Erll, Patrick Hutton, Alan Kim, Herman Lebovics, Gary Marker, Jeffrey Olick, Joachim Savelsberg, and two anonymous reviewers.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Notes

1. This notion of superimposition resonates with the work of Aby Warburg (2018). Especially his notions of *Phatosformel* (Phatos Formula) and *Nachleben* (Afterlife) about the circulation, endurance, and trajectories of art works offer fertile grounds to further theorize the *longue durée* of memories.
2. The concept of sedimentation has been theorized by other scholars. Aside from the obvious influence of Freud, whose entire edifice is constructed on memories and their unwelcome sedimentation, Jan Assmann (1997) has made a significant contribution with his concept of “mnemo-history.”
3. Maurice Halbwachs was in close intellectual contact with Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, the founders of the *Annales* School. For additional overviews of the *Annalistes* and their affinity to collective memories, so to speak, see Alon Confino (1997) and Jeffrey Olick et al. (2011).
4. For a psycho-analytical approach to the *longue durée* potential, see the work of Vamik Volkan. For Volkan, identity (based on similarity and continuity) is closely tied to what he refers to as “chosen trauma.” This “refers to the shared mental representation of a massive trauma that the group’s ancestors suffered at the hand of an enemy. When a large group regresses, it’s chosen trauma is reactivated in order to support the group’s threatened identity” (Volkan, 2001: 79).
5. Arguably a direct appropriation of the Russian historiographical trope—the “Tatar yoke” (Татарское иго).
6. Some particularly divisive events include the forced depopulations of the region following Russian–Turkish wars (1806–1812); the refusal of Russia to recognize or support Bulgarian Exarchate in 1870 and the unification with Rumelia in 1885, along with the gunboat diplomacy exercised by the Russian Empire in the decades following Bulgarian independence (Crampton, 2007: 126–135; Daskalov, 2011: 7–26; Jelavich, 1958).
7. For this reason, on maps from 1908, the knoll is marked as “Nikolai’s Tumulus” (*Николаева Могила*), and the nearby hills were known by local people as “Russian trenches” (*Руски окопи*). The symbolic transition from knoll (тепе) to tumulus (могила) is significant, marking the sanctification of the location in the public memory (Savov, 2010).
8. Some of these practices can be subsumed under the concept of counter-memory (Foucault, 1975). The term refers to the presence of memory work that is, for the most part, done outside and frequently against official memories. This is not the place to arbiter under which conditions counter-memories can thrive. However, what we can say is that a functioning “civil society” is fertile ground for the emergence of counter-memories, as demonstrated by Peter Stamatov (2000).

9. In 2009, Bulgaria voted for its most beloved novel and film, choosing *Time of Violence* (1988) and *Under the Yoke* by Ivan Vazov (1850–1921), known as the Patriarch of Bulgarian literature, and one of the most prominent members of the Bulgarian Russophile circles (see Novinite.com, 2009; Todorova, 2003).

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