Book Reviews

Denis Vovchenko, *Containing Balkan Nationalism: Imperial Russia and Ottoman Christians, 1856-1914*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2016, xii + 343 p.

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Established in 1872, the schismatic Orthodox Church known as the Bulgarian Exarchate paved the way for a modern Bulgarian nation-state and announced the failure of Ottoman religious politics in the face of increasing Balkan nationalism. Viewed from the perspective of the early twenty-first century, the rise of nation-states in the Balkans seems to have been an almost inevitable consequence of the break-down of the Ottoman Empire. Like it or not, nationalism has been *the* political ideology of Balkan modernity. Nonetheless, over the past fifteen years a number of scholars of East-Central Europe have pointed to “national indifference”, emphasizing places where local or religious identities remained more important than national identities for long periods of time.¹ The precarious status of nationalism in the nineteenth century has not been lost on historians of the late Ottoman Empire either, but those studies reminding us that some people preferred not to think and act in national terms are typically told “from below” and focus on marginal groups who rejected nationalism because of the violence it engendered.² Denis Vovchenko’s remarkable book is different in a number of ways. First, despite a number of suggestive photographs illustrating multiethnic communities in Bulgarian villages, this is primarily an elite history populated by diplomats, journalists, patriarchs, sultans, and tsars. As such, it is told almost entirely through diplomatic sources, from archives found in modern day Russia, Turkey, Bulgaria, Greece, and Serbia. Second, it revolves around the creation of the Bulgarian nation-state, usually seen as one of the

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¹ Jeremy King, *Budweisers into Czechs and Germans: A Local History of Bohemian Politics, 1848-1948*, Princeton, Princeton University Press 2002; James E. Bjork, *Neither German nor Pole: Catholicism and National Indifference in a Central European Heartland*, Ann Arbor, Social History 2008; Tara Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls: National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands, 1900-1948*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press 2008.

² Keith Brown, *The Past in Question: Modern Macedonia and the Uncertainties of Nation*, Princeton, Princeton University Press 2003; Nicholas Doumanis, *Before the Nation: Muslim-Christian Coexistence and its Destruction in Late Ottoman Anatolia*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2013.

prime examples of the ascendancy of religious nationalism. Third, whereas most studies of national indifference look at national *identities*, Vovchenko examines national *institutions*. Finally, Vovchenko refuses to contrast nationalism with “communalism” or some other form of collective identity. Instead he shows us how nationalism was one tool among many that diplomats, church leaders, and secular rulers used to get what they wanted.

Vovchenko notes that the Patriarchate of Constantinople rejected the spread of nationalism in the wake of the Enlightenment; a position that allied it with the Sublime Porte, which also had to negotiate threats of Balkan and Turkish civic nationalisms to its authority. In doing so, however, the Sultan empowered laypeople inside non-Muslim communities during the Tanzimat reforms of the late 1850s, laying the basis for the Bulgarian national movement later in the century. Russian emperors were also skeptical of the power of nationalism, and Vovchenko emphasizes that Pan-Slavism and Official Nationality were not coherent or straight-forward ideologies dictating Russian policy in the region because the Russians themselves were not united around what they thought was the best approach. Rather, he states, “dressed in modern garb, the ideal of Orthodox unity and Russian messianism consistently trumped ethnocentrism in the minds of the supporters of Pan-Slavism, Pan-Orthodoxy, and the Greco-Slavic world” (11). But Orthodox unity was a difficult card to play consistently when rival Orthodox churches challenged each other for supremacy. The Bulgarians argued that they needed a church of their own lest they be converted to Greek Catholicism, and the Russians took this argument very seriously. Questions of practical church life frequently complicated these struggles, and issues such as the architecture of churches, mentioning the Patriarch’s name during the liturgy, moving Gregory V’s relics from Odessa to Athens, or the scandal of three Bulgarian bishops celebrating the Divine Liturgy in Constantinople could make or break carefully negotiated agreements. The problem with the Bulgarian Exarchate was not just that it was taking believers away from the Patriarch of Constantinople, but that (1) it claimed to exercise authority on Bulgarian Christians living outside of Bulgarian territories, and (2) it was based on secular legislation such as the *firman* of 1870 and the Treaty of Berlin (1878) rather than on canon law. Separating national, ecclesiastical, secular, and theological factors in the creation of Bulgaria is simply not possible, and emphasizing nationalism at the expense of other factors fails to adequately explain what happened.

Vovchenko relies heavily on Russian diplomatic sources, which he uses as a unique lens through which he reconstructs the political struggles surrounding the Bulgarian Exarchate and the Bulgarian nation-state be-

tween 1856 and 1914. This is nonetheless a strikingly polyphonic book, and one hears the arguments of Greek journalists, irredentist Bulgarian priests, Macedonian teachers-turned-terrorists, and Russian statesmen with equal force. Vovchenko shows us Russian diplomats arguing with Slavophiles over Russian policy in the Balkans. While some Russians celebrated “the Slavic struggle for survival” (199) in Pan-Slav or Pan-Orthodox terms, others worried that anti-imperial uprisings in the Ottoman Empire might encourage the Poles in their struggle against Russian rule. Nor were the Bulgarians united in their politics, with wealthier elites seeking a better deal inside the Ottoman Empire while younger professionals agitated for their own state. Inside the church there were those intent on complete autonomy for the Exarchate and those who emphasized the need for financial support from the Patriarch of Constantinople. The consequence of presenting so many competing views on a story with multiple turning points is a very complex narrative that threatens to lose even the most attentive reader at times. Vovchenko solves this problem by providing short summaries at the end of each chapter, but this remains a text for specialists, not first year undergraduate classrooms.

The book’s overriding argument is that “despite the appeal of nationalism as part of Western modernity in the late nineteenth century the Christian Orthodox centers in the Ottoman Empire, the Russian Empire, Greece, Bulgaria, and Serbia formulated and promoted supranational ideologies and public policies directed at containing nationalism within existing structures in Eastern Europe up to the First World War” (13). National identities and nation-states were thus not the inevitable end result of modernity in the Balkans. Rather, diplomats and rulers promoted solutions grounded in modern religious institutions. What is not central to Vovchenko’s argument but is nonetheless present on almost every page of the book is that these ideas were negotiated amidst brutal power struggles that promised money, status, and power for the individuals involved. The story of the creation of modern Bulgaria and of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire was one mired in intrigue, violence, and politics as much as it was about ideas, dreams, and belief.