

Martina Baleva. *Bulgarien im Bild: Die Erfindung von Nationen auf dem Balkan in der Kunst des 19. Jahrhunderts*. Köln: Böhlau Verlag Köln, 2012. 294 S. ISBN 978-3-412-20687-1.

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## M. Baleva: Bulgarien im Bild

Monographs concerned with aspects of the artistic heritage of the Balkan Peninsula are an absolute rarity, and even more so when they are published in western languages. Martina Baleva's book on the image in a nineteenth-century Bulgarian context is a most welcome addition to a body of critical literature that is only beginning to emerge. The informative introduction reveals that the author's interest in pursuing an inquiry along these lines was awakened during her studies at the Free University Berlin, where she came to be exposed to theories of nationhood that sounded, as she writes, "quasi-heretical" to someone hailing from the Balkans. The ethnically-defined nation, so it was now claimed, was not a matter of fact, but a bourgeois construct that dated back no further than two centuries. To become palatable to various social strata, it had to be promoted through visual and other media. Eventually, state institutions that work to reproduce existing society, such as schools and universities, helped to strengthen people's convictions of belonging to such imagined communities.

Confident that images are a vital means of consolidating national communities, Baleva began to look into the case of her native Bulgaria. Striking similarities with the states of affairs in neighbouring Balkan nations convinced her that this case may in fact be seen as exemplary for the whole region. And indeed, the reader is provided with vital insight into the foundations of modern image-making – not only in Bulgaria, but in an entire European region. This is only partly reflected in the witty title of this dissertation-turned-book, "Bulgarien im Bild."

Particular attention is paid to the various extra-regional factors that played a part in the emergence of this tradition. One of Baleva's principal points concerns the vital role of western visual prototypes in the development of a Balkan tradition in representational art. In terms of subject matter, western audiences' demand to read of unspeakable cruelty and see it visualized led many draughtsmen to specialize in that genre. Few actually witnessed the battles or uprisings on which they were paid to report. Fortunately for them, they could already draw upon a rich repertoire of ethnic types and assorted cruelties, typically reproducing the antithesis of male/Muslim/perpetrator and female/Christian/victim. The Christian iconographic tradition also offered many prototypes for rape and murder scenes, as did the mass-produced anti-Ottoman propaganda of the sixteenth century. The determination to trace the history of certain images throughout the centuries is one of the author's strengths.

A foundational role for Balkan-themed painting of the "realist" kind is given by Baleva to Delacroix's famous "Massacre of Chios" of 1824, which recycled western iconographic traditions as a commentary on contemporary events. Less known is that this was a calculated move by an artist hoping to further his career by attracting attention. After a couple of quiet decades, it was only in the 1860s that painters from (East) Central Europe, such as Čermák, Mrkvička, and Makovsky began following Delacroix. They perfected a genre that was eventually enthusiastically appropriated by local painters, who were occasionally taught by the aforementioned artists.

The subject matter of their work often translated the scenes of violence and exodus that had already been visually present thanks to the western illustrated press into an artistically more reputable medium – a “fine” art. This press, however, acted according to the logic of the market: rather than sensible reportage, the buyer’s behaviour encouraged sensationalism bolstered by the claim of accuracy. Differently stated, artists’ careers depended on the exaggeration of events they had not witnessed.

This had repercussions far beyond the study of art produced in the past. The constant exposure to images of victimization impacted the collective memory of an entire region. History paintings such as Uroš Predić’s “Kosovo maiden” have helped, and do still help, rally the masses for a cause. In that sense, and although one might wish at times that Baleva had articulated these significant claims more pointedly, the author quite impressively demonstrates that Art History (and its disciplinary relatives dealing with the study of the visual and material world) “can matter”: it/they can contribute knowl-

edge supportive of disarming claims and ideas that have led, and do lead, to physical and structural violence. Baleva has had a first experience of this when her involvement in a critical project (discussed in the book’s chapter VI) led to death threats against her in her native country. This only illustrates the profundity and magnitude of a problem that Baleva’s book can be hoped to alleviate.

It is not hard to identify minor shortcomings in the book. The chapters could have been structured in a way that better reflects the course of the argument; direct citations and details in the chapters concerned with the illustrated press could have been omitted or abridged rather considerably; the separation of text and illustrations may have been detrimental to the book’s idea, etc. However, it must be admitted that none of these really concern the author’s scholarly method, which is impeccable. More importantly, Baleva’s book truly offers something new on several fronts. Her disinclination to hide behind disciplinary boundaries is most refreshing. This has also helped her produce an account that should interest an audience beyond that of Balkan historical studies.

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