

Denis Vovchenko. *Containing Balkan Nationalism: Imperial Russia and Ottoman Christians, 1856-1914.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. 360 pp. \$78.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-027667-6.

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Commissioned by Michael B. Munnik (Cardiff University)

Denis Vovchenko has used a careful reading of Russian diplomatic sources to produce a work on Balkan nationalism that nicely eviscerates so many truisms concerning the role of Russian pan-Slavs in fomenting opposition to the Ottoman Empire. The argument that Balkan nationalists were under the control of St. Petersburg no longer holds water. His cover shows a cartoon from the American humor magazine *Puck* from 1903 depicting a Russian bear smiling at an explosion cloud titled "Balkan trouble" while holding an unwilling French diplomat. Lest one judge the book by its cover's implication that Russians were behind the nationalist unrest of turn-of-the-century Balkans, his title shows that rather than fomenting nationalism, Russians sought to contain it. Russian diplomats abhorred Balkan nationalism, at times even more than the Ottoman rulers themselves, because it undermined any sort of unity among Orthodox believers, of whom conservative Russians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries felt themselves to be the rightful protectors. Vovchenko shows Russian approaches to nationalism within the framework of a clash between Russian traditional Christianity and seemingly Western modernity. Nationalism, for Russian elites, was an overwhelmingly Western concept which, together with Roman Catholicism and secularism, would bring only instability to

Orthodox Christian lands. In one of his lighter moments, Vovchenko argues that the nationalism espoused by Tsar Nicholas I (along with ideas of the sanctity of autocracy and Orthodoxy) may have been as ambiguous to contemporaries as it has been to historians ever since. In Vovchenko's assessment, Nicholas I's thinking makes some sense when understood within the context of Russian millenarianism. The idea that Moscow was the "third Rome," after Constantinople fell to the Ottomans in the fifteenth century, became a rallying call to protect Orthodox Christians in Ottoman lands. This pan-Orthodoxy, including efforts to promote Greco-Slavism over national particularities, is something Vovchenko rightly calls "terra incognita" in the scholarly literature (p. 12). His book shows a viable alternative to the teleology of ethnonationalism's rise in the Balkans. For Vovchenko, pan-Orthodoxy held far greater sway among the majority of people who lived through the tumultuous fin-de-siècle in the Balkans.

Among conservative Russians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, nationalism was a foreign, Western concept, as incompatible with Slavdom as were Roman Catholicism and Judaism. Thus, though Russian agents were heavily involved in the Ottoman Balkans during the period of pan-Slavic opposition to Ottoman control,

they did not encourage Slavs to think of themselves as nationally distinct peoples. Rather, they hoped these Slavs would overcome their differences both with Greek and Romanian speakers and among themselves for the purpose of pan-Orthodox rather than pan-Slavic unity. Russian diplomats advocated a Greco-Slavic unity that was based on Orthodox Christianity as far more powerful in their minds than any sort of pan-Slavic unity. After all, plenty of Slavic-language speakers were also Muslims and Roman Catholics.

The epicenter of Vovchenko's narrative surrounds the efforts by Bulgarian nationalists to create a separate Bulgarian exarchate, a religious center outside the control of the patriarchate of Constantinople. The efforts began in the early 1860s by Bulgarian nationalists in collusion with some members of the clergy. While a few Russian pan-Slavs embraced the Bulgarian accounts of twin oppression under Turks and Greeks, Russia's diplomatic core and conservative elites found the Bulgarian exarchate movement to be overwhelmingly petulant and two-faced. It annoyed Russian diplomats to see Bulgarians appealing to the West, to the Ottoman Porte, even threatening conversion to Catholicism should they not receive support from the Russians. When Bulgarian nationalists then turned against fellow Orthodox believers from Serbia and Greece during the 1878 Russo-Turkish War, Russians removed their embassy from then-independent Bulgaria. The Bulgarian movement largely drew Russia, unwillingly, into the complicated nationalist politics of a region that Russians preferred to simplistically imagine as one of Orthodox unity.

Vovchenko also complicates the efforts of nationalists themselves, showing that they were far from unified in their goals and had no common approach to the potential benefits of Russian cooperation. In the regions directly north of Greece, an astonishing array of linguistic and religious diversity baffled the efforts of Serbian, Bulgarian,

Greek, and even early Macedonian ethnnationalists. Vlachs, a term used for Romanian speakers in South Slavic lands, remained totally outside these efforts and were regularly persecuted for their inability to belong. For Russian diplomats, the resulting instability would offer nothing if these people couldn't transcend their differences and find a common religious identity. This was complicated on the ground—at first by Greek bishops who sometimes refused to even learn the Slavic languages of their parishioners. At the same time, Bulgarian-speaking priests alienated Greek speakers. When the Ottomans eventually opted to recognize the Bulgarian exarchate, Russians saw it as a ploy to divide the Christians of the empire into national firms, or approved communities—the same people Russians wanted to imagine as a homogenous, unified whole.

Once the Bulgarian exarchate organized itself and took over much of the territory of the present state of Bulgaria, borderland areas became increasingly violent, with religious services providing a focal point for later terror groups to organize around. Thus in cities such as Skopje, many believers could accept church services held in Serbian; while in Ohrid and the vast countryside in between the two cities along with the mountainous area that today lies in the north of Greece, Bulgarians, Serbs, and Greeks competed to win the hearts and minds of overwhelmingly illiterate believers who weren't even sure what language they spoke.

Russian diplomats were aghast when armed bands of Bulgarian thugs formed the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization in 1903, quickly to be opposed by Serbian and Greek bandits. By 1912, supposedly related Orthodox states went to war against each other over who would gain the spoils of Macedonian land, the same place where the young Turk officer movement had opted for a Turkish national rather than Ottoman imperial solution to bringing Anatolia into

the modern world.

While Balkan, especially Bulgarian, irregulars had provided significant support to Russia in their multiple wars against the Ottoman Empire in the late nineteenth century, ultimately the modern, Western-inspired (as Russians saw it) nationalism of political opportunists proved more powerful than the pan-Orthodoxy that Russians hoped to use to keep people together and to keep them as reliable allies of Russia. When World War I broke out, the Russian, Ottoman, and Austro-Hungarian Empires would all fall, leaving Serb-dominated Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, and Greece to produce new ethnonationalist narratives that completely destroyed the old notion of Greco-Slavic Orthodox unity. For most of this period, Russians hoped, as the diplomat Filipov wrote, “for reconciliation of brother’s in Christ,” while attacking what they rightly saw as the myth of ancient hatreds among fellow Orthodox Christians in the Balkans (p. 99).

In his penultimate chapter Vovchenko explores the power of Orthodox pan-Slavism in Russia by looking at the inability of Russian media to understand the idea of Muslim Slavs. The Bosniaks and Pomak Bulgarians for the most part did not appear in Russian books about Balkan Slavs. When they did, they were a curiosity that could not adequately be explained. Their absence, for Vovchenko, shows the power of pan-Orthodoxy. Pan-Slavs in Russia regularly advocated rapprochement with the Roman Catholic Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Slovenes, and Croatians, but Islam for Slavs was largely beyond the pale of a fundamentally religious understanding of ethnicity.

The book is a wonderful corrective to current historiographical understandings of Russia’s role in the Balkans in the twilight of the Ottoman Empire. Vovchenko uses an astonishing array of Russian Imperial, Ottoman, Bulgarian, Greek, and Serbian archives. While his Romantic vision of pan-Ortho-

doxy is well developed, he makes clear that such a vision of unity could have all the pitfalls of narrow-minded ethnonationalism, especially with regard to the virulent anti-Semitism of pan-Orthodox thinkers. In most cases, Russian diplomats in the Balkans advocated compromise among competing Christians and between Christians and their Ottoman overlords. Vovchenko points out that Russians of the time would have been delighted, however, had they actually had the kind of power to influence events that the Western presses of the time and historians since have attributed to them. He is one of the rare historians of Balkan nationalisms who has extensively used Ottoman and Russian archival sources, not just Balkan sources that impute unsubstantiated and devious influence to Russian agents. Overall, the book is a useful addition to anyone putting together a reading list on nineteenth-century Balkan nationalism, or as Vovchenko himself suggests, those interested in supranational identity building, such as those forging (salvaging) a common European identity. In the case of the Balkans, he has convincingly shown that the power of a pan-Orthodox identity persisted long into what was supposedly the age of nationalism. Hopefully the dangers of the religious exclusivity inherent to such a pan-religious identity (Russia’s ignoring of Muslim Slavs in particular) will also serve as a warning to Europe’s leaders in an era of intense Islamophobia.

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