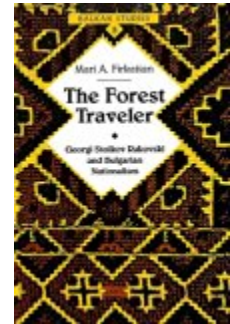


Mari A. Firkatian. *The Forest Traveler: Georgi Stoikov Rakovski and Bulgarian Nationalism (Balkan Studies)*. New York: P. Lang, 1996. xiii + 194 pp. \$51.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8204-2826-0.

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Georgi Rakovski: The Heroic Image

Georgi Stoikov Rakovski (1821-1867) is a name in Bulgarian history conventionally listed along with Vasil Levski, Khristo Botev, and Liuben Karavelov as a hero of the cause of Bulgarian national liberation, and Rakovski is often cited by Bulgarian historians as the organizer of the first truly “national” movement devoted to winning Bulgarian independence from Ottoman rule as well as a writer who inspired later generations with nationalist ideals. Yet Rakovski remains in many ways an obscure and puzzling figure. He was a military leader whose martial adventures invariably ended in failure, a journalist and polemicist behind a series of short-lived periodicals, a patriot too often pursued not so much by the Turks as by his creditors and angry investors, a Bulgarian nationalist whose political allegiances shifted in a bewildering series of pro- and anti-Russian, Serbian, Greek, and even Turkish attachments.

Mari Firkatian has undertaken to introduce Georgi Rakovski the man to a Western audience and to clarify his role in the development of Bulgarian national thought. To this end she has worked her way through the multi-volume collection of Rakovski’s papers produced by the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences between 1952 and 1969 as well as numerous memoirs and biographies penned by Rakovski’s contemporaries and a formidable array of secondary sources as well. Given the breadth of Firkatian’s research, one might wish that she had more fully sketched in the political and social environment in which Rakovski lived and worked. Firkatian presents a strong portrait of Rakovski, not just as a political or literary fig-

ure but as a man embodying a host of conflicting motives and ideologies: a man whose outlook was very much the product of the Romantic age and a deeply Romantic sense of personal heroism, a man who expected to serve the cause of his nation for the whole of his life and who yet expected the cause of national liberation to provide him with fame, personal prestige, and wealth—a man who devoted himself no less to constructing his own image as a hero than to organizing *cheta* partisan bands or searching out the historical and mythic roots of the Bulgarian language.

Firkatian promises in her first chapter to examine the theoretical basis of Rakovski’s thought, but although she is well-grounded in the work of Ernst Gellner, Benedict Anderson, and Liah Greenfeld, she does not analyze Rakovski’s development in depth, nor does she explicitly integrate Rakovski’s work into present-day models of nationalism. She is, however, firm in her depiction of Rakovski as a member of a generation which tried to introduce the Western version of the state into a region lacking the necessary social and political basis to sustain it. For Rakovski and his generation, cultural identity would have to be created, and cultural identities would be fought over as fiercely as any political boundary.

Firkatian argues that Rakovski’s vision of nationalism and national identity must be seen against a Balkan social and political environment which saw national legitimacy as a function not of individual or even group rights, but rather as a function of historical “greatness,”

an environment which demanded that any “modern” national movement justify itself by appeals to past glories. In such an atmosphere, Firkatian writes, “without a history or past historic greatness...a nation could not demand the right to exist in the modern world” (p.4). For Rakovski and his fellows, national liberation had to begin with the exaltation and purification of a national language as the key to national identity and national history. Thus Rakovski devoted himself to supporting a Bulgarian church cleansed of any Greek influence and to arguing in endless journal articles that Greekness was the enemy of all things Bulgarian. He argued that the ancient Bulgarians had possessed a Christian heritage long before the Greeks, that a written Bulgarian language antedated the efforts of Byzantine missionaries, and that the modern Greeks could claim no real links of blood or culture to the glories of the Hellenic past. Given the pervasiveness of Greek cultural and ecclesiastical influence in Bulgaria and the Danubian Principalities, far more of Rakovski’s polemics were directed against the Greek Patriarchate and the Phanariot Greeks than against the Ottoman Turks. For Rakovski, an autonomous Bulgaria might be possible within an Ottoman framework, but the Greek dominance of Bulgarian religious and cultural life as well as the much-trumpeted *megale Idea* of Greek nationalists would strip away all hope of creating a sense of the Bulgarian past and thus destroy any hope of creating a sense of the Bulgarian future.

Rakovski himself shifted political allegiances throughout his career, adopting a host of new personal names as his politics changed and evolved. At various points he presented himself as both pro- and anti-Russian, pro- and anti-Serbian and Wallachian, and even as willing to cooperate with Turks and Greeks. His bewildering changes in allies (and his equally bewildering changes in name) were, as Firkatian ably argues, all part of his ultimate attachment to a very personal vision of Bulgarian liberation. He was willing to court Russian support against the Turks and the Greek Patriarchate and even willing to apply for a Russian passport, but no less willing to produce violent polemics against Russian attempts to recruit Bulgarian colonists to settle in the Crimea—a move which he saw as a Russian effort to use expendable Bulgarian lives to settle the wastelands of the Crimea. For Rakovski, any ally was acceptable so long as the cause of Bulgarian special identity and nationhood was ultimately served.

Firkatian does describe Rakovski’s efforts to make himself into a military figure as part of his effort to embody the Romantic ideal of the true heroic leader. To be a *true* national figure, he could not just edit journals,

he must be seen to fight the enemies of the nation, and Rakovski’s military activities began at the dawn of his twenties and lasted until he was crippled by tuberculosis in his forties. He began by leading *cheta* partisan bands against the Turks, and his military career reached a climax with his command of the First Bulgarian Legion in Belgrade under Serbian sponsorship. Firkatian’s description of Rakovski’s military career highlights the basic weaknesses of his character and his failures as a commander: rashness coupled with vacillation, lack of any sense of basic grass-roots organizing, and an overweening sense of personal importance. These flaws made it nearly impossible for Rakovski to work with others. The Bulgarian Legion, Firkatian reminds us, had money for silk battle flags and for Rakovski’s dazzling parade uniforms, but remained woefully short of ammunition and supplies.

Rakovski’s lasting influence was not as a *cheta* leader but as a journalist and poet, as the editor of the *Dunavskii Lebed* and the author of the poetry collection *The Forest Traveler*. While never, as Firkatian admits, a great literary figure or “enlightener” like Vuk Karadzic (p. 155), Rakovski—like his Western contemporary Giuseppe Mazzini—found success in failure by providing other, later Bulgarian activists an image, however contrived and self-promoting, of tireless devotion to the national cause. The problematic nature of his actual achievements has allowed Rakovski to be used as an icon of Bulgarian heroism by a succession of governments and biographers, and Firkatian argues that in the post-1989 era he will no doubt undergo another mutation into the kind of national figure required by the post-communist government.

Firkatian’s work centers on Rakovski the man, and she has allowed his life to speak for itself without a great deal of theoretical discussion. Her work could profit from more historical context—from a more extensive description of Bulgaria in Rakovski’s day as well as more background information on regional political events. One might argue that her description of the fate of the First Bulgarian Legion might be more revealing if the political situation in Serbia in the early 1860s had been sketched in. Yet Firkatian’s intent is to look at Rakovski the man more than at his world, to look at him as the Romantic figure he so labored to become, and within those limits Firkatian’s lucidly written work succeeds in rescuing a figure too little known in the West and in offering him as an exemplar of a variety of nationalism which continues to haunt the Balkans, substituting personal heroism and past glories for the work of social and political construction.

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