

THE PICTURE OF THE FOUNDATION AND FALL OF MEDIEVAL BULGARIA PRESENTED IN BULGARIAN HISTORICAL NOVELS 1874–1989

Summary

The Bulgarian historical paradox consists of periods of power followed by vulnerability, the synthesis of the contrary, extremes, crises, sudden and unexpected rises and risky falls. This paradox became an element shaping Bulgaria's past and influenced the way it is seen and remembered.

The desire to get to know one's roots, to discover the very beginning, is one of the oldest objectives for individuals, as well as for social groups. Studying the genealogical lineage of ruling or aristocratic families, researching the origins of cities and the motherlands of nomadic groups are often used by a country, its institutions and offices to express both a certain continuation in the history of the group and the continuation of national existence. There is a strong need to cultivate the belief in a certain version of the group's origins, faith in a common ancestor or the origins of one's own progenitors. However, due to the insignificance or complete lack of historical materials going so far back documents of actual events intertwine with myths.

This work analyzes Bulgarian historical novels written between 1874 and 1989 and uses stories about the ruler/leader, stranger/other – the enemy and the capital as examples. It aims to outline and analyze literary processes mythicizing historical events, and the creation of the myth of the foundation, renewal and fall of the Bulgarian state.

In Bulgarian history there are a multitude of political, social, cultural moments of change – of gaining and then losing its independence. These influenced the way in which historical topics were used by political activists and the creators of culture as a universal tool, used to an equal extent regardless of political and cultural time, to create the right image of past actions, characters and events. The variation and frequency with which those often extreme interpretations were presented led to a situation that can be described as a paradox of a nation having a past but lacking history: a consequence of an extensive manipulation of history.

The historical novel as a document trying to recreate life in the distant past and marked with the author's subjective attitude towards the events being presented is always more of a document of the times in which it was created than of the episodes from the past presented in its plot. The historical novel was used by the authorities to emphasize either imposed or unsolicited ideologies and programmes, and was also a tool in a socio-political fight used by the opposition, revealing potential problems, and serving as a kind of mood gauge. As a result, historical novels not only reflect contemporary times but also become a research resource. The crucial role of historical novels as an active force of some political myths, whether intentionally created or the effect of specific poetic perception, is to allow some myth-creating ideologies to be unmasked. Those ideologies are present in literature in the form of attitudes, opinions and evaluations that are revealed, verbalized and everlasting in the collective memory. They could also be introduced by the author, of their own volition or if they were commissioned to do so as an attempt to introduce them into 'common use' through the mechanism of literary life.

The myth created by the historical novel of the head of state as a fundamental element of the myth of foundation and subsequent collapse of the country distinguished two types of rulers, both of which have great educational potential. Stories glorifying and legitimizing the myth of the creation/building of the country presented the model of a heroic state-builder, national demiurge, saviour and restorer. In contrast, there was also a leader who failed to prevent the collapse of his country, did not know how or, due to various reasons, could not stop the tragedy. This type of hero was created to warn of the mistakes made by ancestors.

This foundational and contra-present form of the Bulgarian myth of the ruler-founder and subsequent restorers of the country characterised the influence it had on actions inside the society, as well as on the way it perceived itself and the roles it plays in the present. Those functions remain closely related to the mythological-symbolic syndrome described by A.D. Smith, which, by using a mythomoteur, created a myth of ethnic politics. A ruler was the inspirer and leader of collective actions, meaning that the group's historical experiences acquired significance and the group gained its „centre". The dichotomy Us – Others, Compatriots – Outsiders had a constitutive meaning for the literary creations in the stories of the rise and fall of this medieval country. The actions of the rulers (the saviours and restorers portrayed by Bulgarian historical novels) were dictated by the need to oppose the Other/Stranger, whose deeds caused tragic events, linked with the fate of the rulers – witnesses of crisis and the dramatic end of the country. They were to be blamed for the fall of the medieval capitals and they were one of the main factors determining the creation of new centres.

The tragedy of the Byzantine conquest and Turkish invasions were seen by literature as a punishment for mistakes. They were considered to be the result of God's anger or malicious fate. Those traumatic experiences affecting both the nation and the country were interpreted as unfair or merely affecting the wrong people, which determined the practice of blaming the Other or Stranger for such misfortunes. This allowed a process of self-purification through assigning blame to someone from outside the community, in effect an attempt at self-defence. This resulted in situational attribution, which was common in the event of setbacks or failure,

a defensive tendency consisting of absolving oneself of responsibility, and wanting to sustain and protect one's self-esteem. Singling out offenders by stigmatizing them allowed direct aggression towards them, simultaneously portraying members of the community as innocent and suffering victims. This tactic seemed to be a necessary stage in the process of „overcoming failures”, which facilitated the removal of shared responsibility for those tragic events and liberation from guilt.

As a group in opposition to Bulgarians, the authors of historical novels presenting events connected to the foundation, revival or fall of the country (most commonly by reflecting current social moods and the official stance of the authorities) confirmed the suitably marked portrayal of Greeks, Jews and Turks, which was subject to strong mythization.

The pinnacle of the conquest, creation and restoration of the country was the moment of establishing the capital, whether by founding a new city or elevating an existing town to this ennobling, highest rank. Establishing the capital, a central point, the centre of political, military and spiritual power was dictated by the need for self-definition in relation to others. Appointing the centre in this way allowed the community to be located in the landscape, indicated the boundaries and contrasted known and unknown, thus defining the enemies and the territory they occupied. It was also one of the basic stages of creating space as a way of organizing individual and community activities. The act of selecting the capital was often related to the process of foundation, determining the creation of permanent space and planning in accordance with certain cultural and religious norms. This was expressed in a specific urban layout, which determined the location of specific buildings grouped according to their meaning and function.

Founding the capital city confirmed the transformation from Chaos to Cosmos. Manifesting the sacred by building a city according to an earlier model was, among other things, a necessary step for the world to become fully „ours”.

The fact that the capital became both the subject of sacralisation was a crucial factor in allowing turning points in the history of community to be recalled, and an „eye witness” to the foundation, crisis, restoration and tragic end of the country. The symbol of the foundation and fall – the Holy City – became a centre with the function of concentrating creative energy from the present and the past. It is a place of glory and tragic failure in the history of the community, the site of events, the celebration of which defined and indicated the boundaries of ethnical and historical experiences.

Bulgarian historical novels dealing with events associated with the periods of the foundation, fall and renewal of the state (country) had two main functions. Firstly, to create and preserve models and attitudes of a triumphal-heroic character and a martyrological-heroic character. Secondly, they aimed to mitigate failings by specifying, personifying and stigmatizing the enemy (Other/Stranger), and thereby to shed responsibility for failures and consolidate the martyr image of the nation.

On one hand, accentuating the indivisible relation between past and present by proving ideological or political continuity, on the other emphasising the sensation of the emptiness and scarcity generated a desire to recall specific images from the past. These images were

of a lost Golden Age of medieval rulers, which formed the specific mythical-historical basis on which the Bulgarians' self-definition process took place, as well as expressing the attitude towards distant and close neighbours. It is worth noting how timeless and supraideological this dynastic myth-symbolic-political syndrome is; its form and goals validated the actions of the ruler, regardless of whether this was a crowned prince/tsar or national-political leader of PRB. The need for historical authorization of the office by showing a clear continuation, found in the traditions, ideologies or ideological programmes of the historical past, connected every official Bulgarian historical and cultural programme (regardless of time) presented in historical novels.

Translated by Emilia Badosz