Milena B. Methodieva, *Between Empire and Nation. Muslim Reform in the Balkans*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2021.

Until a few years ago, the historiography on contemporary Balkan history seemed to be limited to the political dynamics, domestic and international, of the new Christian states of South-Eastern Europe that arose with the progressive disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, failing to devote the necessary attention to the social, cultural and intellectual issues that intertwined within those countries. It almost seemed as if the Ottoman territorial retreat – increasingly evident after 1878 – had produced a sort of new ethnic uniformity in those societies. Actually, this was not the case, and despite the constant movement and migration of Muslim and/or Turkish populations that began after the Congress of Berlin (June-July 1878) and continued without a break in the years up to the First World War, the new Balkan state structures continued to be characterized by an interesting ethnic diversity that helped make those societies extremely multifaceted. This is the backdrop to the volume *Between Empire and Nation. Muslim Reform in the Balkans* by Milena Methodieva, recently published by Stanford University Press, which finds fertile grounds for in-depth analysis. Consisting of seven chapters plus introduction and conclusions, Methodieva's book constitutes innovative research on the social and cultural evolution of the Muslim and/or Turkish-speaking communities in the Principality of Bulgaria after 1878. Before moving on to a more detailed analysis of her work, it is worth noting that it is based on the analysis of a mass of mainly Bulgarian and Turkish archival sources (from both public and private fonds) and a large number of contemporary periodicals, as well as an impressive collection of historiographical publications.

From the very beginning of its new status as an autonomous subject vis-à-vis the Sublime Porte, first under Prince Alexander of Battenberg and then under his successor Ferdinand of Saxony Coburg-Gotha, Bulgaria's inclination was to quickly downgrade its ties with Constantinople, which were seen in Sofia as little more than troublesome and humiliating formal bonds that had to be cut as soon as possible in order to achieve full independence. Moreover, Bulgaria's aggressive policy in Macedonia took little account of the needs of the Ottoman Empire, which still exercised full sovereignty there. One of the main concerns of the new Bulgarian elite was the concrete accomplishment of so-called Greater Bulgaria of Saint Stephen (March 1877), which gave rise to the short-lived illusion of a large, new Bulgarian state extending also to Eastern Rumelia, Macedonia and part of Thrace. According to the data for 1880, the territory of the Principality proper plus Eastern Rumelia had a Turkish and/or Muslim population of 750,000-780,000, compared

with a Bulgarian population of around 1.3 million within the Principality. The challenge facing the Muslims of Bulgaria was to shed their skin in order to continue to live and prosper within a Christian national structure dominated by an increasingly chauvinistic ideology that tended to make that small principality the first nucleus of a strong state seeking to expand into the surrounding regions and revive the splendor of the great Bulgarian empires of the Middle Ages.

This was, perhaps, too much of a challenge for many Muslims who, in fact, continued to leave the Bulgarian provinces, among other things because it was increasingly clear that within the new state the Bulgarian nationality and Orthodox religion would be dominant. The surprising military victory achieved by the young and inexperienced Bulgarian army against Serbia in 1885 and the country's triumphant reunification with Eastern Rumelia, with the acquisition of the important and relatively developed city of Plovdiv/Philippopolis, triggered an ambitious foreign and military policy, as the Principality was determined to modernize quickly in order to back its territorial aspirations in Macedonia and Thrace. For many Bulgarian intellectuals and politicians, however, the Muslim community – which was lumped together with the Turkish community – was not so much a resource as an obstacle to the realization of these plans; it embodied the idea of underdevelopment and backwardness, and its presence (a majority in certain districts) was a sad reminder of the Bulgarian nation's past submission to the Ottomans. The rapid and radical erasure of all traditional Ottoman architecture in many Bulgarian cities that were rebuilt on the basis of more rational western urban planning models was a clear sign of the new ruling classes' project to eradicate all traces – including merely visual and symbolic ones – of a past considered in this new reality as obscure and humiliating.

Moreover, the times were rapidly changing. The totally new Bulgarian legislative and administrative structure was reducing traditional Ottoman law (sharia) to the family sphere alone, while the new Christian state frontally attacked the *vakif*, one of the traditional cornerstones of the Ottoman social scheme, to which the complex system of land ownership (widely redistributed among Slavic/Christian peasants) was strictly connected, with the consequence that the Muslim community was forced, once again, to find some way to adapt to uncomfortable new circumstances.

After an inevitable phase of disorientation, Bulgaria's Muslim community reacted to the new situation. The second part of Methodieva's book offers a careful analysis of this phase. The press – whose freedom was guaranteed by Bulgaria's liberal "Turnovo" Constitution (April 1879) – was undoubtedly one of the privileged vehicles for the Muslim elites to strengthen the social and intellectual position of their community

and to involve as many Muslim citizens as possible in the problems affecting their community. Moreover, the press was also a powerful tool for connecting the elites living in Bulgaria with those operating in the Ottoman Empire, and there were many contacts with the Turkish press, particularly those close to the modernizing ideas of the Young Turks. The author rightly highlights the influence of the latter's modernizing program in promoting among the Muslims of Bulgaria a movement of internal reform to overcome the limits of tradition and better face the continuous challenges posed by coexistence with the Christian community and, above all, within the structures of a State that had made completely transcending the Ottoman experience one of its reasons for being. In the analysis of the measures to strengthen Muslim communities, schools play an important part. The improvement of education was linked to one of the most advanced and determined schooling policies undertaken by any Balkan state in the decades prior to the First World War. As proof of the efforts made during this period, we know that some time later, on the eve of the Second World War, illiteracy had almost completely disappeared in Bulgaria, unique (together with Czechoslovakia) in all of Central and Eastern Europe. It was therefore another major challenge for the Muslim community and its elites, made more difficult by the suspicions and reticence that the Bulgarian state authorities had always harbored about educational initiatives undertaken by alien groups outside the state context. In spite of bureaucratic difficulties, the chronic lack of good teachers, etc., there was a constant ambition to link educational activity to a certain modernizing spirit, but also to the network of Ottoman schools operating in the Balkan provinces still in Ottoman hands, particularly in Macedonia.

The contradictions and conflicts that animated the relationship between the new Bulgarian state and its Muslim communities were certainly not lacking in the political sphere either, all the more exacerbated by the distortions of a parliamentary system dominated by the ambitions and power drives of its main protagonists, and in particular Stefan Stambulov and King Ferdinand I, which forced the Muslim representatives again to strike a difficult balance between loyalty to the state, the defence of their own interests, and the need to coexist with the dominant political forces. For Muslims, the many constraints to which they were subjected in the context of the Bulgarian state represented an extraordinary stimulus not to close themselves off but to try to forge new cultural and human ties with other Ottoman communities in the Balkans in the increasingly strong conviction that they were now "[...] part of a larger interconnected world in which they found new notions of solidarity with Muslim communities elsewhere but also related to the experiences of various people" (p. 210).

In short, Methodieva's book is an important, well-constructed work, based as noted on solid archival research and close comparison with the best historiography, and therefore capable of opening up new scenarios of research in the contemporary history of the Balkans. Finally, the book helps us to discover a post-Ottoman and post-imperial social, political and cultural reality with rich and at the same time contradictory traits that represent the hidden face of the new Christian state realities that strove to erase the vestiges of a cumbersome past considered – perhaps too hastily – to have been the main cause of the tardiness and shortcomings with which they faced modernity.

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