
DIANA MISHKOVA, *Rival Byzantiums. Empire and Identity in Southeastern Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2023. x+357 pp. – ISBN 978-1-108-49990-3

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This historiographical overview of Byzantine studies in Southeastern Europe is the work of a non-Byzantinist: DIANA MISHKOVA, an acknowledged expert on the modern intellectual and social history of the Balkans (with contributions to historical theory), surveys the national historiographies of five countries – Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia/Yugoslavia, Romania, and Turkey – from the eighteenth through the twenty-first centuries. Her book focuses on contrasting perceptions and rival appropriations of the idea of Byzantine heritage. Several alternatives emerge: submission or opposition to the impact of Byzantine civilization; building the grand narrative of nationhood either against or along historical continuity with Byzantium; claiming or refuting ethnic, historical, institutional, cultural affinity with the East Roman/Byzantine empire, and hence, constructing national historical, political, and institutional claims either within or outside the discursive and institutional frameworks of Byzantine civilization.

In order to account for “transnational communication” (p. 2),¹ the study frequently refers to influential Western and Russian Byzantinists, or identifies as representative of a local historiographical tradition scholars working in the USA, France, etc. Much of it deals not with Byzantinists *per se* but with public figures who were influential in the building of national narratives, polemicists, or historians from adjacent areas. In the author’s words, the “intention [...] is to explore the various projections and appropriations of Byzantium [...] in the [...] master historical narratives of these societies” (p. 4). MISHKOVA is interested in the “*politics* of Byzantine studies” (p. 4) and not in the methodological validity of various approaches and theories. Her own central thesis is that “Byzantine culture and legacy subverted rather than asserted the idea of a shared past” (p. 2).

The book’s content is split into two parts, with 1945 as a dividing line in elaborating the grand narratives and building the institutionalized historiographical schools. In the first part, the material is arranged chronologically:

1. Throughout my review, double inverted commas are used when quoting MISHKOVA and single inverted commas are used for quotes from authors whom she discusses.

individual chapters focus on distinct stages in the development of historiographical traditions, while subchapters discuss the different nations one by one. Turkish historiography appears on its own in Chapter 5. In the second part, separate chapters follow the trends and debates in Greece, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Romania, and Turkey since 1945.

Chapter 1 discusses the complicated beginnings of Byzantine studies during the Enlightenment, in major European states and among Ottoman-ruled Balkan nations. Greek authors were divided between two opposite perspectives, an ecumenist and a nationalist one – the former focusing on the institutional continuity of Byzantine church and state, the later viewing the East Roman/Byzantine empire as a break in the ethnic continuity of Greeks. Ideologists of Greek independence shifted towards ‘orientalising’ the Byzantines (p. 21); the precursor of Bulgarian national revival PAISIY HILENDARSKI² (Paisius of Hilandar [1722–1773]) treated Byzantium as the arch-enemy of the medieval Bulgarian state; the Serbian historiographer JOVAN RAJIĆ (1726–1801) constructed the first comprehensive national narrative based on Byzantine sources; authors from Transylvania claimed that Romanians were the true heirs of the Roman Empire, while Byzantines usurped the name (pp. 31–32).

Chapter 2 treats the Romanticist period in early nineteenth-century national historiographies of the Balkans against the background of political struggles. In 1844, Greek Prime Minister Ioannis Kolettis (1773–1847) proclaimed the *Megali Idea*, aimed at absorbing ‘any land associated with Greek history or Greek race’ (p. 43). His statement materialized in the work of SPYRIDON ZAMBEIOS (1815–1881) who construed a teleological, tripartite schema of ancient-medieval-modern Greek history, and of KONSTANTINOS PAPARRIGOPOULOS (1815–1891) who arranged the first comprehensive synthesis of Greek history along chronologically contiguous *Hellenisms* (pp. 49–54). Contemporary Bulgarian publicists looked down on a hostile, Greek Byzantium, and criticised the medieval Bulgarian state for accepting its cultural domination (pp. 55–64). Serbian politicians and historians developed a grand narrative using Byzantium as reference. The Serbian takeover of Byzantine space and legacy in the later Middle Ages legitimated nineteenth-century expansionism (pp. 64–69). Romanian scholars of the period were more interested in their nation’s links with the West, yet GEORGE BARIȚ (1812–1892) saw Wallachia and Moldova as the safe

2. I follow MISHKOVA’s style of transliterating Bulgarian names.

havens of Byzantine civilization after the Ottoman conquest (p. 73), while others built a narrative of confrontation with Byzantium (p. 74).

In Chapter 3, we see academic institutions in the Balkans endorsing the scholarly methods of German and Russian Byzantinists. The dynamic exchange of global academic research, however, brought little to the local readings of Byzantine legacy. PAPARRIGOPOULOS remained the reference of Greek studies, where history was related to the ongoing ‘language question’. DIMITRIOS VIKELAS (1835–1908) and SPYRIDON LAMBROS (1851–1919) added the vision of a centuries-long struggle in defence of Christianity (p. 88). Together with KONSTANTINOS SATHAS (1842–1914), they opened Byzantine studies to the general public. Bulgarian medievalist VASIL N. ZLATARSKI (1866–1935), too, worked along established lines: Bulgarian history was a cyclical drama fuelled by a constant contest with Constantinople; the greatest monarchs betrayed the ‘national spirit’ (p. 95) and adopted disruptive Byzantine models. Serbian scholar STANOJE STANOJEVIĆ (1874–1937) developed a national narrative upon both political resistance and cultural appropriation (pp. 100–101). MISHKOVA dedicates more space to STOJAN NOVAKOVIĆ’s (1842–1915) approach of treating medieval politics, society and culture in terms proper to the period, away from modern nationalist perspectives, and along an ‘evolution towards Byzantium’ (pp. 103–109). In late nineteenth-century Romania, ALEXANDRU D. XENOPOL (1847–1920) in his multi-volume Romanian history “dubbed the whole period between 900 and 1650 [...] the ‘Era of Slavonism’” (pp. 110–112). Powerful voices contested his premises: DEMOSTENE RUSSO (1869–1938) rehabilitated Byzantium’s global historical impact and the significance of Hellenic culture for Romanian developments; NICOLAE IORGA (1871–1940) minimized Byzantine, and Slavic, influence on Romanian history, yet worked towards a “shared history” (p. 118) with consistent efforts at uncovering the impact Romance speakers exerted on the empire (p. 120).

Chapter 4 brings us to the interwar period and a diversification of perspectives. In Greece, Byzantine legacy became a focus in research and preservation of cultural heritage, in a strategy of survival after the ‘Catastrophe’ of 1922, and in support for the ascendant *demoticist* side in the language dispute. The failure of Bulgaria in the wars of 1912–1918 prompted, in the works of PETĀR MUTAFCHIEV (1883–1943), a new reading of Byzantium as a creative and economically productive civilization, yet MUTAFCHIEV contested its Greek character (p. 135) and viewed the spread of the Bogomil heresy as a reaction against Byzantinisation. With the emer-

gence of Yugoslavia, earlier trends in Serbian historiography shifted, notably with VLADIMIR ĆOROVIĆ (1885–1941), towards establishing continuity in the historical development of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (p. 144) and downplaying Byzantine influences until at least the reign of Stefan Dušan. ĆOROVIĆ and NIKOLA RADOJČIĆ (1882–1964) thought in terms of a Serbo-Byzantine synthesis, while VLADIMIR DVORNIKOVIĆ (1888–1956) considered medieval Serbia a “blueprint for Yugoslav convergence” (p. 151). Byzantine civilization remained a point of high interest in Belgrade because of the globally prominent Byzantinist GEORGIY OSTROGORSKI (1902–1976) who attracted a circle of Russian *émigré* scholars studying Byzantine legal, institutional, and economic history and its impact on the Slavs. At the same time, IORGA developed his view of Byzantine civilization continuing after the fall of Constantinople in the Romanian lands through a synthesis of Byzantine imperial institutions and Roman democratic organization (p. 157). This did not resonate with all Romanian scholars. While NICOLAE BĂNESCU (1878–1971) and GEORGE MURNU (1868–1957) identified earlier forms of Romanian statehood as far back as the tenth century, CONSTANTIN GIURESCU (1901–1977) and PETRE PANAITESCU (1900–1967) saw Byzantium’s role in Romania as just mediated through the Slavs. Chapter 4 concludes with an overview of the early international congresses of Byzantine studies, which took place in Bucharest, Belgrade, Athens, and Sofia, and the competition by “successor states” (p. 166) to claim the Byzantine heritage.

Chapter 5 addresses the study of Byzantine history in the Ottoman Empire and the interwar Turkish Republic. One early trend was to perceive Byzantium as a dark mirror image of ‘enlightened and liberating Ottomans’ (p. 173), in the words of AHMET MIDHAT (c.1844–1912), or even to blame Byzantine legacy, as CELAL NURI (1881–1938) did, for the later Ottoman decline (p. 175). Conversely, AHMET REFIK (1881–1937) saw Byzantium as ‘the brightest pages’ of Ottoman history (p. 177). Interest in Byzantine antiquities was slow to emerge, even after the Ottoman government began to promote archaeological preservation. Byzantine studies in Kemalist Turkey suffered a serious blow with the institutionalized Turco-centric ‘History thesis’ and the ‘Sun Language Theory’ positing that Turkish was the world’s oldest language (p. 182): since Turks were conceived as autochthonous to Anatolia, the country’s Byzantine past appeared extraneous and hostile. This evolved into a ‘discontinuity thesis’, excluding even the Ottomans from the nationalist narrative because of Byzantine influences. In the 1930s, MEHMET FUAT KÖPRÜLÜ (1890–1966) reversed the per-

spective by proposing a ‘genetic’ approach to Ottoman institutions (p. 187) and claiming that Ottoman legal practices stepped on pre-Islamic Turkish and pre-Ottoman Muslim precedents. The Ottoman period was re-inserted in the Turkish master narrative – but at the expense of Byzantium as an area of interest. Social historian ÖMER LÜTFİ BARKAN (1902–1979) expanded this view into a “theory of liberation from Byzantine feudal oppression (p. 194).”

Chapter 6 treats Byzantine studies in Greece after 1945. Left-wing authors focused their interest on the ‘people’ instead of the imperial legacy, yet their perception of a ‘Graeco-Roman *ethnie* [*graikike laoteta*]’ (*sic*) revived conservative views of national continuity (p. 200). This predated the massive debate on Greek identity between Greek, Greek-born, and non-Greek scholars after 1962. On one side stood the British academics ROMILLY JAMES H. JENKINS (1907–1969) who questioned the very concept of Byzantine as part of Greek ethnic history until at least 1204, CYRIL MANGO (1928–2021) who questioned the continuity of political ideology between classical Greece, Byzantium and modern Greece, and DONALD NICOL (1923–2003) who argued that Byzantines had not been Greek but modern Greeks had been Byzantine (pp. 200–204). Their opponents included GEORGIOS GEORGIADIS ARNAKIS (1912–1976) and APOSTOLOS VAKALOPOULOS (1909–2002) who resubstantiated, based on evidence from medieval Greek-language literature, folklore and popular culture, PAPARRIGOPOULOS’ perspective of continuous Hellenism, just as PETER CHARANIS (1908–1985) and SPEROS VRYONIS JR. (1928–2019) later reiterated that Byzantines were Greeks or even ‘oblivious Greeks’ (p. 207). The most pronounced case of equating Byzantine to Greek was DIONYSIOS ZAKYTHINOS (1905–1993) for whom 1453 was the entry into ‘the most critical period of [Greek] history’ (p. 209), Greeks being a ‘historical’, that is history-conscious, nation. Marxist historian and exile NIKOLAOS SVORONOS (1911–1989) corroborated this continuity thesis by studying ‘folk creativity’ (p. 210). The chapter concludes with an overview of the work of Greek-American historian ANTHONY KALDELLIS who reignites the debate by attacking the very concept of “Byzantine” in favour of “Romaic” and of a state that was *not* a multi-ethnic empire; thus, he supports continuous Hellenism but rejects Greek historical continuity.

Chapter 7 moves back to Bulgaria after 1945. Byzantine studies there focused on two main themes: Byzantino-Slavic cultural synthesis and the historical balance between Byzantium and the medieval Bulgarian state. On the second issue, Marxist approaches allowed DIMITĀR ANGELOV

(1917–1996) to argue that Bulgaria ‘had developed earlier and faster in the direction of feudalization’ (p. 222), while his studies of Bogomilism uncovered ‘democratic socio-political conceptions’ (p. 223). Eventually, ANGELOV conceived of Bulgaria and Byzantium engaging in “two-way interaction between societies of the same level of development” (p. 225). Extending Soviet medievalist DMITRII S. LIHACHOV’S (1906–1999) concept of ‘transplantation’ of Byzantine cultural phenomena (p. 228), Bulgarian historian IVAN DUYCHEV (1907–1986) studied various aspects of the cultural exchange between Byzantium and *Slavia Orthodoxa*, including the reverse impact of Slavic traditions, social norms, and literary creations on Byzantine culture (pp. 232–234). DUYCHEV simultaneously emphasised the full-scale impact of Byzantium on the formation of the national cultures of Slavic peoples. ‘The true blacksmiths of the literary Slavic language were the translators from the Greek language’, he wrote (p. 231). DUYCHEV’S views of Bulgarian-Byzantine reciprocity re-emerge in the work of VASIL GYUZELEV (b. 1936) who opts for “dialogue” (p. 237). The theme of balance also marks the work of IVAN BOZHILOV (1940–2016): he saw the adoption of traits of Byzantine imperial ideology and state institutions by early tenth-century tsar Simeon not as an effect of *Byzantinisation* but as a counterforce aimed at a new universal order – *pax Symeonica* – and a distinct ‘Preslav civilization’ (pp. 239–241).

Chapter 8 treats post-war Yugoslavia, beginning with a discussion of OSTROGORSKI’S views on Byzantine-Slavic relations. OSTROGORSKI asserted a “crucial contribution to the social regeneration of the empire” in the seventh century because Slavic immigration changed the legal status of the peasant (pp. 244–245). Stefan Dušan’s imperial ambitions were no pinnacle of a Byzantino-Serbian synthesis but the response to the Serbian feudal nobility’s demand for land and power. After OSTROGORSKI, the focus moved onto re-examining national narratives, with SIMA ĆIRKOVIĆ (1929–2009) leading the way in re-writing a history of the Serbs. ĆIRKOVIĆ subverted traditional nationalist narrative when cautioning that the ‘ethnic whole is changing and shifting’ (p. 250). He saw Dušan’s reign as an ‘unfinished society’ and doubted that Serbian kings wanted to displace Byzantine emperors (p. 252). LJUBOMIR MAKSIMOVIĆ (b. 1938) saw medieval Serbian state ideology as a predominantly original invention, based on scriptural readings and not on appropriated Byzantine models (pp. 254–256). Distinguishing between people and élite, art historian BRATISLAV PANTELIĆ claimed that the cultural impact of Byzantium upon Serbia was limited only to the ecclesiastical circles and the notables; PANTELIĆ situ-

ated the “cradle” of Serbian national culture in the early modern Habsburg Empire and blamed claims for continuity with Byzantium on a politically-motivated clerical conservatism (p. 258). When discussing Byzantine influence on medieval Serbia, VLADA STANKOVIĆ defines a thirteenth-century paradigm shift from a state-centred to a family-centred model of rulership (p. 260).

Chapter 9 refocuses on Romania, where historians debated “how and why did Romanian countries enter the Byzantine Commonwealth?” (p. 266). In a consistent demythologizing effort, ALEXANDRU ELIAN (1910–1998) acknowledged the missing points of direct contact between Constantinople and the Romanian lands and opted for a “Balkan symbiosis” (p. 269) observable in the collaboration with medieval Bulgaria. MIHAI BERZA (1907–1978) pursued the idea of Slavic mediation of Byzantine culture. While ELIAN’s caution stemmed from the limited amount of textual sources, in the postwar period Romanian historians came to rely steadily on archaeological evidence. DAN GHEORGHE THEODOR concluded that the fifth-through eleventh-century archaeological findings in the Romanian lands were consistent with Byzantine material, bespeaking long-term symbiosis. In 1972, the International Congress of Byzantine Studies convened in Bucharest and reports of local scholars reiterated the problem all of them faced, viz. a dilemma between autochthony and foreign influence. Art historian RĂZVAN THEODORESCU (1939–2023) applied the concept of ‘active reception’ “testifying to the maturity of the receiving culture” (p. 273). DIMITRU NĂSTASE (1924–2013) discussed the political aspects of such ‘active reception’ and demonstrated the real (but disguised) imperial ambitions of fifteenth-century Romanian rulers. VLAD GEORGESCU (1937–1988) applied the same approach to Romanian institutions, concluding that the medieval Romanian principalities produced ‘innovative local syntheses’ (pp. 275–276). ANDREI PIPPIDI (b. 1948) similarly observed a conscious effort by Romanian princes to imitate – for the sake of independence and centralization – but not to succeed Byzantine emperors (p. 278). Still, other voices revived perspectives of Byzantium’s hostility regarding Romanians; even when acknowledging the significance of Orthodox/Byzantine ideological assets for Romanian history, NICOLAE-ȘERBAN TANAȘOKA reproduced a consistent national historical narrative. Chapter 10 traces the thorny path of Byzantine studies in post-war Turkey. Over several decades, apart from art, Byzantium remained in the shades of the tensions between Turkish nationalism and Islamic identity. OSMAN TURAN (1914–1978) opened the way towards the Turkish-Islamic synthe-

sis of the 1980s, re-inserting Ottoman history into a triumphalist narrative of major victories over Byzantines and Greeks: Manzikert, Constantinople, the Independence War. The Turkish-Islamic synthesis remained essential to the state doctrines after the military coup of 1980 and substantiated two basic claims: everything Ottoman was Turkish and there was a progressive ‘Anatolian-Turkish Islam’ (p. 289). It was in Chicago that influential economic and social historian HALİL İNALCIK (1916–2016) attacked this synthesis: Ottoman ascendance had been one of a ‘frontier Empire’ with *gazi* warriors emulating their Byzantine enemies and the agrarian structure of the Ottoman Empire reproduced the Byzantine one (p. 290). In Turkey, TANER TIMUR (b. 1935) professed a ‘Turkish-Byzantine synthesis’ on the premises that at the time of their confrontation Seljuks and Byzantines shared similar patriarchal and communal social foundations while undergoing the same crisis of feudalization (pp. 292–293). ÇAĞLAR KEYDAR (b. 1947) even claimed that the Ottomans had revived Byzantine social structures based on the Land Code (*sic* – presumably the *Nomos georgikos*). In 1988, Turkish prime minister Turgut Özal published a manifesto of Turkish presence in European history based on a claim that the Ottomans inherited practically everything Byzantine “by virtue of their ‘synthesizing, ecumenical approach’” (p. 295); this was in stark contrast with TURAN’s view that Byzantium could not have influenced the Seljuks since it had entered a process of decline in the sixth century and the Seljuks had been more developed and inclusive (p. 296). In the words of archaeologist ÇİĞDEM ATAKUMAN, even the task of preserving cultural heritage in present-day Turkey is problematic, since ‘any presentation of historical continuity [...] based on the heritage found within [...] the Turkish state is in conflict with the [...] Turkish-Islamic Synthesis’ (p. 301).

The book concludes with insightful comments on ongoing debates regarding the continuing marginalization of Byzantine studies and the lack of work on Byzantine history that would raise theoretical issues relevant to other fields.

This is a lucid and balanced outsider’s reading of the historiography of Byzantium. The author does not take sides – she just reads and synthesizes what Byzantinists proper claim. Her book may be a practical tool for scholars in Byzantine studies in that it provides insights on the cultural background, intellectual formation, political and ideological stands of individual historians. A further contribution is that it distinguishes between competing perspectives and narratives within the national historiographical schools, and engages in reconstructing dialogues and contestations, some-

times unexpectedly connecting the dots between authors of different nationality, generation, or area of interest. MISHKOVA has rightly included intellectuals who, while not specializing in the field, saw long-term developments and constructed functional perspectives underlying the later work of Byzantinists. The flip side of her approach is that, in essence, it is dismissive of Byzantinist research, or at least of research within the historical-geographical area of Byzantine civilization: if perspectives and approaches betray, or comply with, national projects and traumas, or with dominating ideologies and paradigms, the very idea of balanced, objective, and source-based scholarly work seems unattainable.

Keywords

historiography; nation-building