

BOOK REVIEW

Kaneff DEEMA,
WHO OWNS THE PAST?
THE POLITICS OF TIME IN
A “MODEL” BULGARIAN
VILLAGE,
Berghahn Books 2004.

The author of this book, Deema Kaneff, is an expert on Bulgarian political and economic reorganization and policy development¹. ‘Who owns the past? The Politics of Time in a ‘Model’ Bulgarian Village’ is an ethnography focused on the political changes undergoing in the village Talpa before and during the early transition period in Bulgaria. Talpa gives the impression of an ordinary village in north central Bulgaria, but in reality, it is a ‘model village’, i.e. a title given to all Bulgarian villages which could fulfill certain parameters requested by the socialist rule at the time. Through the analysis of local-state relations, Kaneff tries to describe the role of the past in Talpa’s socialist world. It is important to mention that the author lived for four years in Bulgaria in the pre and post socialist period, hence she speaks fluent Bulgarian, among other Slavic languages.

The book begins with a brief flash back of Jenny Zhivkova’s² visit in Talpa in 2001, which represents already a great example of how the past might influence the contemporary world. Afterwards, the author returns in the past to involve us in the ‘model village’ celebration in Talpa. As mentioned in chapter two, this event involved almost all Talpians and village institutions such as the *Chitalishte* (the ‘village cultural house’), the Party head, the TKZC (agricultural co-operative) head, the village council, the Fatherland Front head, school representatives and young schoolchildren. The reason why Talpa was

¹ For further information see also
<http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/staff/profiles/government-society/kaneff-deema.aspx>.

² Jenny Zhivkova is the granddaughter of the last Bulgarian socialist leader, Todor Zhivkov.

awarded with this title, as stressed out several times by the author, is the relationship between the history and the village. Kaneff explains how the villagers were devoted to the socialist system, they had one of the oldest *Chitalishte* in the area and they were proud of having the house-museum of Zhivkov's wife. Therefore, history was very important for Talpa and the Talpians. In fact, history is represented as a benchmark in every public occasion: history of the Bulgarian state, history of the village socialist institutions, history of important people and their position in history.

History, tradition and folklore embody the trilogy used by Kaneff to explain the influence of the past in the 'model' Bulgarian village. Tradition is also history, but it could be both individual and collective and expressed equally in public and private space. Chapter five and six are dedicated to traditions and they seem to be the most malicious in the book, since the author is trying to make obvious how traditions in socialist Bulgaria were still connected to Orthodox religion, taking as examples the celebration of funerals and Zarezan, a cyclic festivity in honour of Saint Triffun. Although there were some evident religious associations during these traditional practises (for instance, the recognition of afterlife or the practice of lighting candles), the majority of the villagers did not discuss traditions in public, sometimes because of fear, sometimes because of ignorance. In these chapters of the book Kaneff seeks to answer the question if traditions had in fact religious associations. Through a comparison between a typical Bulgarian and Turkish funeral, she emphasizes the distinction between religion, ethnicity and gender in the traditional practices. Nevertheless, Kaneff does not focus on the minorities in this volume as she did in the work 'When 'land' becomes 'territory'³. In fact, the weakness of this work is perhaps the lack of more examples about different traditions among the minorities in the village: Turks, Macedonians, Pomaks⁴ and Gypsies, which in my opinion would demonstrate how religion indeed survived and was practised even during socialism.

Chapter seven and eight are devoted to folklore, the public state sponsored celebration which could best create the notion of national

³ Kaneff, Deema 1998, 'When 'land' becomes 'territory': Land privatization and ethnicity in rural Bulgaria', in: S.Bridger and F.Pine (eds), *Surviving postsocialism: Local strategies and regional responses in eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union*, London – New York: Routledge, pp16-32.

⁴ Islamized Slavic speaking people.

identity. Folklore in Talpa is also a synonym of nationalism. In effect it contributed to unify Talpians under the mark of 'Bulgarians'. While 'history is a way of knowing the future and present in terms of the past and tradition is a combination of past, present and future, folklore had a more decorative function, based on visual and aesthetic aspect' (page 155). Moreover folklore broke the particular religious, ethnic and gender meaning carried by traditional practises. According to the author the broad meaning of folklore could include dances, songs, music, specific food, objects and costumes. Nevertheless, the author argues that the village of Talpa became a 'model' one mainly with the help of its history relations, whilst folkloristic activities were in fact deficient especially because of the considerable majority of older population in the village.

Kaneff's book concludes with the fall of communism in 1989. Talpa became a 'model village' in the spring of 1987, and after only two years this epithet lost completely its significance. With the collapse of communism, everything important in the previous 45 years became insignificant, useless, and a new system with new values started rising. Unfortunately this is not just Talpa's fate but it may concern all the villages under socialism, according to the author. In my opinion this volume is really useful for those who approach this topic for the first time, but also interesting for those who already have some background knowledge in history of South Eastern Europe. It is particularly unique and unusual, how the author combines some Bulgarian words throughout the book. The use of '*relia*' or '*chicho*' (ant and uncle) before the name of the person gives the idea of closeness. Furthermore, this idea is emphasised with the photographs given in chapter two, all representing the 'model village' event. All these peculiarities give more relevance to the work and they make it more credible in the eyes of the reader.

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