

BOOK REVIEW

Between Empire and Nation: Muslim Reform in the Balkans by Milena Methodieva, Stanford University Press, 2021, 344 pp, \$75 (hardcover), ISBN 9781503613379.

Milena Methodieva's book *Between Empire and Nation* significantly contributes to filling a crucial void in the literature concerning Muslim minorities in Europe. While there exists a wealth of literature in other languages, particularly regarding the Turkish minority, there has been a notable absence of an English book to disseminate this knowledge to an international audience. By concentrating on the initial three decades following Bulgaria's establishment as a state (1878–1908), Methodieva's work delves into the intricate responses of Muslim communities to Bulgarian state policies, internal divisions within the community, and the complexities of conflicting loyalties and identities.

Chapter 1 presents an overview of Ottoman rule in the Balkans from its inception until the conclusion of the Ottoman-Russian War of 1877–78. In Chapter 2, attention shifts to the administrative structures of Bulgaria and Eastern Rumelia, established during the nine-month Russian provisional administration and the early years of the Bulgarian constitution. The chapter contends that, compared to its counterparts, the new Bulgarian constitution and minority administration displayed significant liberalism. The author argues that “the idea of a government guided by civic principles that afforded equal treatment of all diverse communities underpinned the official policies and rhetoric of the Bulgarian state” (pp. 48–49). However, these principles as symbols of integration into the Western civilization turned out to be discriminatory when “there was an implicit understanding that the Bulgarians were the dominant group within the larger *narod*” (p. 50). Despite addressing population movements and Muslim emigration, the chapter's examination of legal and administrative frameworks does not approach these foundational aspects of the Bulgarian state critically. For instance, the author mentions that Muslim minorities fell under the administration of the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign and Religious Affairs (MFRA), attributing this to the Bulgarian intention to eliminate Ottoman intervention in religious matters of the minority (p. 61). However, there is no interrogation as to why Muslim citizens of Bulgaria, possessing equal rights, were treated as “foreigners” under this administrative arrangement (Turan 1998, 188). Additionally, the text overlooks the categorical issues arising from grouping Turks, Pomaks, Tatars, and Roma under the Bulgarian state's definition of the Muslim minority. This portrayal contrasts sharply with minority communities' self-perception, where Islam is one aspect of their diverse religious, ethnic, and historical identities (Katsikas 2009, 183).

Chapter 3 transitions from the state to the municipal level, examining the impact of urban transformations on Muslim communities. Drawing on examples from various Bulgarian cities, the book adeptly illustrates how ambitious urban redevelopment projects, mirroring those in Western European cities, inadvertently served as mechanisms for eradicating Ottoman heritage. This eradication mirrored the perception among Bulgarian elites that the Ottomans represented backwardness, and their removal from the Bulgarian landscape represented a crucial step toward integration into Western civilization. The chapter elucidates the detrimental consequences of this process on Muslim endowment (*vakıf*) properties and land tenure.

Beginning with Chapter 4, the book's primary contribution becomes evident: a thorough investigation of Muslim communities utilizing Ottoman Turkish and Bulgarian newspapers, along with archives from both states. This chapter is particularly significant for challenging the prevailing

notion that Muslim elites departed once the Bulgarian state was established, leaving behind only illiterate peasants and the urban poor. This perception was seen as a hindrance to the formation of organized political activity within the minority. Methodieva demonstrates that certain Muslim elites, particularly local notables, remained and played crucial roles in community administration. Moreover, she illuminates the existence of a vibrant press that actively shaped Muslim public opinion as early as the 1890s. Reform-minded Young Turk member, Ali Fehmi's *Muvazene* and urban notable pro-Abdulhamid Rıza Pasha's *Gayret* newspapers engaged in debates about loyalties to the Ottoman state and reform within the Muslim minority. This chapter also introduces other social actors such as prominent Muslim landowners, merchants, and Turkish and Pomak intellectuals, illustrating the diverse array of individuals who forged relations with both the Bulgarian and Ottoman states and sought to shape the loyalties and identities of the minority.

Chapter 5 delves into the reform programs discussed within community newspapers. These programs primarily focused on educational reform, heavily critiquing the perceived ignorance among Muslims, and advocating for the adoption of the new method (*usul-u jadid*). While Muslim schools persisted as private institutions, their funding and relationship with the Bulgarian government became contentious issues. There were also broader societal education initiatives. *Kır-aathanes*, public spaces for reading secular materials, and theaters emerged as alternatives to religious readings and discussions in mosques. The concept of the new method also surfaces in other chapters of the book, particularly in the context of İsmail Gasprinsky's jadidist movement. Chapter 5 could greatly benefit from a thorough discussion of jadidism as a transnational movement and its influence on Muslim communities in Bulgaria.

Chapter 6 explores how Muslims navigated electoral politics during the period under study. Muslim men meeting certain criteria were granted the right to vote and to serve as representatives in the Bulgarian Parliament. This chapter effectively illustrates how remnants of Ottoman notables adapted to the new political system and were elected as parliamentary representatives in the early years. They leveraged their patronage networks to secure votes from the community and generally aligned themselves with the ruling parties (primarily Stambolovists and Radoslavists). The emergence of the reform-minded Young Turk opposition sparked heated debates with these old notables, who staunchly supported Sultan Abdulhamid II and his absolutist policies. Internal divisions within the Muslim community created obstacles to presenting a unified front in the Parliament and Bulgarian politics.

Chapter 7 delves into the concepts of nation, homeland, and community, with a particular focus on Turkish groups. While there are some references to Tatar and Pomak understandings of nation, the majority of examples are drawn from Turkish newspapers where Young Ottomans and pro-Abdulhamid groups debated various definitions of loyalty to the Ottoman state, Bulgaria, and their own community. The conclusion of this chapter addresses the reception of the Young Turk Revolution of 1908. This section could be expanded in the book to further explore the impact of the advent of the constitutional regime that led to the decline of the old politics of notables and the rise of a more reformist group within the minority.

The Conclusion examines the fates of prominent Muslim figures, many of whom emigrated to the Ottoman Empire. Additionally, it offers a brief summary of the minority's status in the early 20th century, asserting that "the rupture came with the advent of the communist regime in 1944" (p. 237). The author contends that the new regime curtailed liberties and dismantled Muslim institutions such as schools and periodicals. However, this glorification of the pre-1944 "liberal" regime in Bulgaria is surprising as it overlooks significant literature highlighting the increasing Bulgarian state repression of Muslim minorities. Many of these Muslim institutions had already been shuttered by 1934 (Köksal and Barlas 2023; Köksal 2010).

Despite these considerations, the book is a significant contribution to the literature and deserves serious attention from scholars and students of history and political science focusing on minorities and Islam in Europe. It should be an essential reading for anyone interested in Muslim minorities in Bulgaria.

Yonca Köksal 

Department of History, Koç University

ykoks@ku.edu.tr

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