

VISIONARIES AND THE NATIONAL IDEA
IN INTERWAR BULGARIA:
THE CIRCLE OF THE ORTHODOX ASSOCIATION
THE GOOD SAMARITAN

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Abstract: A loser of the First World War, interwar Bulgaria is characterized by developments in its spiritual and religious life that reflect the idea, and the feeling, of a “national catastrophe”. One of the expressions of this general mood is the multiplication of religious organizations run by lay people in which religious activism is infused with ideas of national grandeur. Born in the early 1920s, *The Good Samaritan* was an ultra-Orthodox organization founded by former military officers with the help of an Orthodox priest. Within a few years it entered in conflict with the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, which treated it as a sect. It was, however, successful in rallying citizens and peasants alike under millenarian slogans. The association relied on visionaries and popular prophets to promote its ideas of Bulgaria as a New Israel. The paper focuses on two of the most outspoken prophets acting on behalf of *The Good Samaritan*, both women. By examining their visionary techniques and pronouncements, the aim is to show how national ideology and political climate influence the “work” of visionaries and give them credence.

Keywords: Bulgaria, history, nationalism, Orthodoxy, popular prophets, visionaries

In the late 1930s, the Bulgarian capital Sofia was excited about an affair that was brought to public attention by both religious gazettes and central newspapers: a female visionary was accused of being a *witch* (*vrachka*) and of performing witchcraft, together with magic healing (*vrachuvane*). The visionary, a peasant woman from a village in the district of Sofia, had a decades-long practice that had made her almost part of the religious landscape of the poor suburbs of the capital city and its rural area. The matter was brought before the court by a few Orthodox priests and a group of parishioners, with the support of high clerics and key figures of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. In turn, the peasant woman was supported by other fervent Orthodox believers, and legally defended by a renowned lawyer from a respected Sofiate family. After several sessions of the District Court, the accusations were dismissed, and instead she was praised as a “finder of holy

places”.¹ Commemorating this moment, a picture² shows *baba* (grandma) Bona in front of the main entrance of the High Court, surrounded by her supporters and defendants, all in good bourgeois appearance.

The above vignette singles out an exceptional fact: how an intended witchcraft trial ended up by acknowledging the capacity of “finding out holy places” as a holy gift of the woman initially accused of being a witch. It offers a striking illustration of the thesis that sanctity and witchcraft are cultural constructs that are mixed and intertwined, or, that *miraculum* and *maleficium* may be seen as the two faces of the same coin (KLANICZAY 1990, 1997). It also offers insights into a distinctive feature of the Balkan Orthodox cultures: the lack of witch trials.³ My aim is not merely to point out an under-researched field.⁴ This almost anecdotic story is used here to underline the ways in which visionary experience, the spiritual world and techniques related to it, are shaped by the society one lives in and reflect its hopes and fears. It suggests that the way in which people, individuals or institutions talk about visionaries depends on social cleavages but also on politics. The latter leads us to consider the extent to which national ideas and nationalism penetrate the mental world of religious visionaries, as well as the worlds of those who have recourse to their gifts, who believe in them, and even those who criticize them.

To begin, let me make clear that what the vignette presents is not a struggle between a single visionary woman accused of witchcraft, and the all-controlling Orthodox Church. The opposition is mediated through a collective actor that does not appear in most of the accounts, nor on the photograph: the Orthodox association *The Good Samaritan*. In fact, the visionary is an exponent of this association. By the time of the trial, the association had had public visibility for almost 15 years, mainly due to the religious activism of its leaders. They carried out proselytizing activities with the help of a handful of peasant prophets: hence the support and encouragement it gave to visionaries, the most famous of which was Bona Velinova. The examination of the circle of religious visionaries supported by *The Good Samaritan* has a twofold purpose: delineating the variety of visionary and prophetic techniques encouraged by this organization, and demonstrating the malleability of the visionary’s world, modeled by political impulses and social context. The central question is how a lay Orthodox organization and folk religious specialists could come together and produce a religious discourse about the Nation imbued with mysticism.

¹ Reported in 1938, in several issues of *Carkoven vestnik* [The Church Newspaper], an official organ of the Bulgarian Orthodox church; *Uteha* [Consolation], the gazette of the Orthodox association *The Good Samaritan*, as well as in the daily newspaper *Dnevnik* [Journal]; the last also published the whole preliminary inquiry.

² The image is accessible on <http://www.bonavelinova.hit.bg/gallery.html>

³ The research problem for the Balkan context is outlined in VALTCHINOVA 2006; so far, I have checked the validity of this assessment for Bulgaria, Serbia, and Macedonia. This observation is also made in ANGUSHEVA 2008: 83, 92, without an adequate answer. It should be noted that all concerned cultures have evolved under Ottoman rule for longer periods (around five centuries), i.e. within a *millet*-based system dominated by the Islam that blocked the development of similar processes. For the functioning of the *millets* – the big religious communities, identified by their respective hierarchies, see BRAUDE and LEWIS (eds.) 1982.

⁴ The problematic of witch hunting and “witch craze” in Orthodoxy is dealt with only with regard to imperial Russia: see for instance KIVELSON 1999, 2003; RYAN 1999: chapter 14. Most of the authors identify, among the mechanisms of witch hunting in Russia, less suspicion vis-à-vis neighbours (BRIGGS 1996) than suspicion for wandering persons, fear of plots (KIVELSON 2003), or xenophobia (MELIK-SIMONIAN 2008).

CLAIRVOYANTS AND VISIONARIES IN BULGARIAN RELIGIOUS CULTURE

It should be stated at the outset that here, the (mostly female) visionaries and clairvoyants are not taken as representatives of *folk religion*, but as female figures of what I will call an alternative religious specialist. By the latter term I mean that such specialists are not recognized by the Church, for which religious expertise is gendered, and limited to the male collective body of clergy⁵ – but that their subjective feelings, consciousness, and the cultural techniques they draw on in their activities, are patterned by the mainstream religious culture (here, Eastern Orthodoxy). Religious expertise is therefore taken here as a generic term for a body of techniques for dealing with supernatural entities, not as a competence “owned” by a professionalized collective body, the clergy. As a rule, these Orthodox female specialists have a limited religious culture: being regular churchgoers and considering themselves truly Christian believers, their competence is limited to knowing by heart basic prayers, some texts from the Holy Scriptures, and recognizing saints on the icons. Such knowledge has some correlations with scriptural culture, but it is the product of *aural* culture – the one whose vehicle was the ear and the eye, and which could easily be transmitted and reproduced orally.⁶ What counts is how it is applied in practice, for it is often its practical use that cuts across the thin line separating *magic* from *religion* (TAMBIAH 1990). The practical and ritualized nature of this knowledge led some scholars to prefer calling such people *ritual specialists* (DRAGADZE 1993), or folk specialists. I consider them as bearers of the practical knowledge of religion, or religious *bricoleurs* (ALBERT 2005). By mixing learned systems and popular narratives (KLANICZAY 2008), and by using various techniques in their multiform activities, they build a bridge between “low” or popular and “high” religion, if this cleavage still makes sense.

In the culture of Orthodox Bulgarians, the most common figure of such overwhelmingly female religious expertise is the *vrachka*, a term which subsumes the diviner/fortune-teller, the sorceress, and the medicine woman. In a way similar to the *sorcerer/sorceress* of the Bocage in France (FAVRET-SAADA 1977), it is applied to the (here, mainly female) specialists of enchantment and disenchantment. Derived from Old-Slavonic *vrach*, ‘healer’, the term has evolved to take on mostly negative connotations of a person whose activities cover the broad field between soothsaying, or divination, and magic.⁷ However, the idea of healing remains implicit to it, as well as the uncertain borderline between harm and healing. This ambiguity is palpable in the most common pictorial representation of the *witch* in Orthodox iconography: the “going to a *vrachka*” scene, usually depicted on the church façade in the framework of the Last Judgement fresco paintings.⁸ In the course of the late

⁵ If there are women among the so-called black clergy, the nuns, they have never been trusted religious authority or ministry in the Orthodox Church.

⁶ For a definition and characterization of *aural* culture as “literacy for the trained ear” see GOKALP 1995. Its dependence on the ear is central to my argument: by following the Mass, listening to the priest’s words and preaching, illiterate people could learn by heart and reproduce long passages from the Holy Scriptures. For similar techniques see also TODOROVA-PIRGOVA 2008: 284.

⁷ For the term and its semantic field cf. KONRAD 1987: 559–560; IZMIRLIEVA – IVANOV 1991: 6; IVANOV – IZMIRLIEVA 2003: 34.

⁸ For a description, see ANGUSHEVA 2008: 93. The iconography is relatively late: the near totality of the known examples date back to the 19th century, when the Orthodox Church made an effort to combat “superstitions”.

19th and 20th centuries, the Janus-like characteristic of the *vrachka* only became more palpable: under communism, atheist propaganda insisted on her aspect of magician by drawing putative comparisons between *vrachki* and late medieval/early modern witches. Today, *vrachka* (always in feminine) is the usual term for a diviner who is consulted to identify health and existential problems, feared but nevertheless relied on by people.⁹

Besides the *vrachki*, there are other religious experts, female as well as male, can act as mediators, or intercessors, between their fellows or local communities, and the heavenly powers: They were supposed to communicate with saints and to convey messages from the saints and the Virgin (*Seta Bogorodica*, the Mother of God); only exceptionally were they channels to/from Christ or the Lord himself. Such people used to be referred to as holy people, or ‘saints’.¹⁰ Their ability to speak with saints and to see them was attributed to the Holy Spirit, and more generally considered as a gift from God. In time, they started to be designated by more neutral labels derived from vision or *seeing*: ‘women-who-see’ (*vidoviti zheni*) or ‘people-who-see’ (*vidoviti luge*).¹¹ Among the various techniques of this kind of communication the most frequently mentioned are the ‘seizure’ (*prihvashtane*) or ‘being seized by the saints’; the ‘sleeping/dreaming’ or ‘appearing in a dream’ (*sānuvane, iaviavane na sān*), and ‘dying a little’ or ‘near-dying’ (*primirane*). Unlike the first one, whose effects could be immediately seen and directly watched, the two latter terms, and especially *primirane*,¹² single out a technique by which the seer disconnects him/herself from the external world, and relies on his/her own senses and culturally encoded imaginary to make a journey to the other world. The *primirane* was related to a specific visionary culture, which was in turn fostered by the very practice of near-dying: its main feature was the journey in the other world.¹³ In most Bulgarian cases, the training in, and regular practice of *primirane* resulted in increasingly elaborated accounts of religious visions, with apocalyptic accents.¹⁴

THE GOOD SAMARITAN AND NATIONAL CRISIS IN INTERWAR BULGARIA

The First World War was a crucial time for Bulgarian nationalism. After the defeat in the Second Balkan War (June–July 1913) by her former Balkan allies against the Ottoman Empire, being a loser in the Great War was an even more traumatic experience for Bulgaria. The humiliating Treaty of Neuilly-sur-Seine (27 November 1919) imposed

⁹ The recent changes in the meaning and functions of the *vrachka* are examined in VALTCHINOVA 2006.

¹⁰ The category of living saint is studied on Bulgarian examples by IVANOV [2003], still unpublished; see also IZMIRLIEVA – IVANOV 1991; IVANOV – IZMIRLIEVA 2000, 2003: 32–33.

¹¹ These terms are found mainly in what today is the FYR of Macedonia: see VALTCHINOVA 2006: 110–111.

¹² For possible English translations of *primirane*, with an analysis of this visionary technique, see IVANOV – IZMIRLIEVA 2003. I stress the fact that *primirane* was spontaneously translated as ‘having a dream’ by the speakers themselves, including on the pages of *Uteha* newspaper.

¹³ For the journey to the underworld – or to the divine, or other imaginary world – as a spiritual technique of religious visionaries see PÓCS 1999; STARK-AROLA 1998, and the general perspective in GINZBURG 1983 [1966].

¹⁴ For the deep roots of apocalyptic and eschatological traditions in Eastern Orthodoxy see ARGYROU 1982; TAPKOVA-ZAIMOVA – MILTENOVA 1996.

heavy economic sanctions on the territorially diminished country. Against the background of patriotic feelings that animated Bulgarians going at war, it was not difficult to imagine the impact of two lost wars within seven years. The depth of despair, pain and suffering, but also the questioning of the Bulgarian established elite, gave birth to the notion of ‘national catastrophe’ that politicians used in mutual accusations. The whole postwar period was marked by the mood of the ‘two national catastrophes’: disillusionment with national ideals mixed with decisive steps towards national homogenization. During the quarter of a century that separated the two ‘national catastrophes’ from the Second World War (seen by many as a ‘third national catastrophe’), the feelings of loss and despair generated a variety of political reactions and led to opposite public attitudes: leftist activism and pro-communist orientation on the one side, right-oriented search for one’s own roots and an essential national identity, on the other. They materialized in culture, mentalities, and in what we generally call spiritual life, giving impetus to a millenarian *ethos* that is dormant in Orthodox cultures. For a historian, it remains extremely difficult to access these cultural and socio-psychological processes through the usual sources: mental attitudes are rarely reflected in documents. They become manifest in prophecies and visions, specific cultural products that always have some social and political contents.¹⁵

At its beginnings, *The Good Samaritan* was one of the small lay religious organizations with nationalist inspiration that popped up in the aftermath of the Great War. Its leading figures came from the military, in particular two officers forced into retirement from the Bulgarian army, most of which was disbanded under the terms of the Treaty of Neuilly (§10.9). In the beginning, there was an Orthodox priest among the founders; as a result of internal disputes and public quarrels, the priest left with part of the adherents, to form another similar group. The official birth of *The Good Samaritan* (*Obshtestvo Dobrii Samaritanin*) was in early 1925, when it was registered as a cultural-educational Society or association under the Law of Non-Profit Associations.¹⁶ Its character of a royalist and fundamentalist Orthodox organization quickly became apparent. The Society developed a royalist and clearly nationalistic discourse focused on the idea of divine election of Bulgarians and the concept of Orthodox Bulgaria as ‘New Israel’ that should reveal itself as End Times were coming closer and closer. In this way, wounded nationalism and the despair in the face of “national catastrophe” were transformed into a call for “renewing faith” and preserving religion. The renewal of the faith should come through the mouth of prophets who were expected to become numerous as End Times approached, and to spontaneously make themselves known in the Bulgarian lands. This outcome was prepared by the whole Bulgarian history, which, according to *The Good Samaritan*, was a series of sufferings and ordeals, all of them putting to the test the readiness of ‘God’s race’ to fulfil its mission.

Thus, the existence of the association was punctuated by the rise and the (usually rapid) decline of many female, but also some male, visionaries. However, there was one who remained on top: Bona Velinova was the most revered prophetess throughout the whole period of activity of *The Good Samaritan*. She was in contact with the leaders of the asso-

¹⁵ As numerous examples from Western Christian cultures show, even “private” visions and messages from Heaven are saturated with public messages: cf. the analyses of CHRISTIAN 1996; ZIMDARS-SWARTZ 1991.

¹⁶ For the history of *The Good Samaritan* see the detailed study of DIULGEROV 1937, 1940.

ciation already in the early 1920s, soon to become its entitled prophet and official speaker. The organization provided the seer with support and publicity, while its ideas and ideals gradually influenced Bona's 'dreams' and visions. In exchange, Bona's art of receiving and interpreting signs from Heavens set her apart among the other popular prophets: undoubtedly she was the major figure of all religious visionaries in interwar Bulgaria. Within less than a decade, Bona Velinova had become the leading prophet of *The Good Samaritan*, and her visionary performances were emulated by dozens of candidate-prophets.

BONA VELINOVA: A SEER, A PROPHETESS, A FINDER OF HOLY SHRINES

Bona Velinova (1885–1960), popularly known as 'the prophetess of Grigorevo' from the name of her husband's village in the Sofia region, was a Bulgarian folk seer and prophet with an unusual career and popularity.¹⁷ Her activities could be studied thanks to the numerous reports of her visionary séances published by the gazette *Uteha* (Consolation), the organ of *The Good Samaritan*. By the mid-1930s, *Uteha* had established a quasi-hagiographical account of her life and deeds, various parts of which were reproduced in every issue. According to this lay hagiography, signs of Bona's divine election appeared, in the form of light above her cradle, already at her infancy; they repeatedly appeared to the first sceptics who were Bona's mother and her father's mother. Aged seven, Bona was credited with the vision of a saint that predicted the recovery of her suffering sister, whom everybody had believed was about to die, by prayer and giving a sacrifice in a monastery near Sofia. The revelation of Bona's gift of 'seeing saints' had reportedly occurred when aged sixteen, during the feast on the patron saint's day in a village near Sofia. Various saints and the Mother of God had appeared, warning her not to dance any more, but to dedicate herself fully to the saints, refusing earthly marriage. However, Bona married a local man, whose violent character and early death in the Balkan war (October 1912), were interpreted as a punishment for not following the saints' advice. Already married and a mother of four children, Bona was regularly *seized* (*prihvanat*) or possessed by various saints. The respective states were commonly called either 'falling in a sleep'; only exceptionally were Bona's visionary and prophetic séances referred to as *primirane* by her contemporaries. There is not enough data to judge about the frequency of these visionary crises; it seems, however, they were quite common: already before the Balkan wars Bona had become renowned for finding, guided by various saints, holy springs (*aiazma*) in Grigorevo and other villages in the area. Subsequently this aptitude was extended to 'finding' Christian shrines – village churches and 'monasteries' – that were ruined.

The first public action of Bona Velinova that brought her name to a national audience was an anti-war campaign launched by divine inspiration in the summer of 1918. It came in a crucial moment when Bulgaria, involved in the Great War since mid-1915 on the side of the Triple Alliance, was tormented by speculation, famine, and anxiety about news coming from the front. An increasing number of desertions from the army triggered rumours about

¹⁷ This part excerpts from the extensive study of Bona Velinova in VALTCHINOVA 2006: 92–107, 251–279.

the bad outcome of the war; a series of women's riots broke out in early 1918. It was in this general climate that Bona Velinova claimed to have had a revelation about the forthcoming Bulgarian defeat, and launched a campaign for "putting white flags" on forty churches and monasteries. As *Uteha* retrospectively reports,

Bona had received a dream from the Twelve Apostles and the following revelation from St. Paul: "You are winning now, but ... you should know that you'll be defeated and Bulgaria will be divided in three. Pray ..., beg pardon and give offerings [*pravete molebeni*] for your salvation!"

Urged by the Holy Apostles, the peasant woman had tried, without success, to reach the ear of the Bulgarian Prime minister. The revelation came over again and Bona was instructed by the Holy Apostles to put up the white flags herself. In case of failure, threatened God's messengers,

... what was said would soon come true, Bulgaria will be enslaved and a disease, the Spanish influenza, will spread, and many will die ... but if they pray, God will bless Bulgaria and ... instead of being slaves, the soldiers will just be taken hostages.¹⁸

For several weeks during the months of July and August, struggling with the local authorities, mayors and village priests, Bona succeeded to put up 40 white flags in more than twenty villages in the larger Sofia region. The prophecy materialized shortly afterwards: by mid-September, the Allies' offensive at Dobro Pole (now in the Republic of Macedonia) broke through the Bulgarian front line; the ensuing retreat of the Bulgarian army led to a soldiers' mutiny, crushed in the outskirts of the capital, Sofia, and to Bulgaria's capitulation (29 September 1918).

After the dramatic events of 1918, we hear of Bona Velinova mainly as a finder of Christian holy places. A few years later, she was credited with the "rediscovery" of a dozen holy places, usually designed as monasteries, in the villages around Sofia. Such shrines were rebuilt in most of the villages, forming a dense belt of holy places around the capital city.¹⁹ By 1927, the newspaper *Uteha* used to recall that Bona had in her favour "over seventy churches and monasteries". The "rediscovery", or the reinvention of the holy place, usually consisted of two steps. The first was receiving God's message, or having a revelation about the existence of an "old-time" ruined Christian shrine in such and such locality near a village, or a town. As a rule, such revelations came when the visionary was "in a prophetic state", referred to as a "sleep". The second step consisted in the various ways for communicating God's revelation to people, making them dig in a place where "nothing could be seen". Often, Bona induced herself into a trance-like state on the very spot shown to her "in a dream", and proceeded to uncover parts of walls or of an altar under people's astonished eyes. Thus, she was able to combat the sceptics' refusal to believe, and to make

¹⁸ *Uteha*, No. 138 (15 February 1938): 2–3. The mention of Spanish flu is obviously an anachronism.

¹⁹ The first shrines were discovered in 1914, in her native village and in two distant ones: cf. *Uteha* No. 7 (15 April 1927): 2, with a list of the shrines found by Bona Velinova; cf. also No. 4 (15 January 1927): 2–3.

the collectivity embrace the cause of re-building (in fact, building anew) the holy shrine. The following account shows how visionary techniques mixed with techniques of persuasion in this process:²⁰

One day [in 1928], visionary Bona Velinova had a revelation about the existence of an old monastery ruined by the Turks centuries ago in the locality of Urvich, in a deserted mountainous place some 10 km south of Sofia. Without delay, she went to the nearby village, and prompted local people to come to the place revealed to her by God's wish. At nightfall, Bona and a handful of peasants climbed up the mountain and sat around a bonfire, waiting for a sign from heavens. After praying for a long time, Bona told people that God would show the place through her body and to watch her moves, and fell asleep. In the night, she suddenly rose and without waking up, headed toward a glade deep in the forest, followed by people present there. On the morning, she urged the peasants to dig and to everybody's astonishment, soon a wall and an apse appeared where nothing could be seen before. Following the heavenly instructions, the whole village joined in the digging.

If, as in the case above, the villagers were easily persuaded of the existence of an old-time Orthodox shrine on their territory, it was due to the positive attitude of their leaders, above all of the parish priest. In other cases, however, Bona's revelations were met with scepticism and hotly contested. The contestation could come from either the local priest or mayor, from enlightened people, from the land owners, or those unwilling to join in common work.²¹ The revelation of the St. Mina monastery near Obradovtsi, in 1927, rallied all these figures of contestation: besides the land owner's unwillingness to give up his land to the Lord, the seer had to overcome the suspicion of the mayor and the parish priest. The peasants' unwillingness to comply with God's will triggered a series of dreams through which divine instructions were given historical consistency, thus answering the preoccupations of various contestants:

On this place, there was a *metoh* [dependence] of the Holy Mount [Athos] and it was supported by them [the monks]; it provided assistance to people going to the Holy Mount; here, people were directed to the road to take. Lovely was this monastery and great was its glory. A fair was held here three times a year; and people earned money, nobody counted, they had money to burn, so they put the money in bags and sent them to the Holy Mount. ... Blessed is the man who will build it anew.²²

Once specified, the number of seventy remained unchanged despite continuing revelations and digging out of monasteries. Bona's mystic sessions with saints led her through the

²⁰ The story was reproduced in various issues of *Uteha*, cf. No. 24 (2 October 1928): 2, 5; the year varies between 1926 and 1928. For a similar account about the discovery of two monasteries near the village of Opitsvet, in 1923, cf. *Uteha*, No. 138 (28 February 1938): 4.

²¹ In the cases when the village priest was the principal contester of Bona's revelation, he was usually presented as "unworthy" of his vocation and sooner or later he was "punished by God"; cf. *Uteha* No. 67 (10 April 1932): 2, for the 1928 "finding out" of the monastery of Sts. Joachim and Anna near Bistricea.

²² A dream-revelation from 30 September 1927, announced in *Uteha*, No. 14 (18 November 1927): 2–3.

whole Sofia plain, westward up to the Godech and Slivnitsa areas near the Yugoslav border, and into the Balkan Mountains to the north. In the thirties, she “revealed” old monasteries in Northwest Bulgaria, in the districts of Preslav, Razgrad, Svishtov, with a substantial Turkish population, as well as in the Southeast, in the regions of Burgas and Iambol, where refugee populations were numerous. The seer’s visits throughout the country led to revelations about ancient Christian shrines in virtually every village she had visited. Despite the insistent rumours about “agents” prospecting village territories for place-names that could suggest the idea of church (*Klise, Ts’rkvishte*), most of these revelations materialized, sooner or later, in small chapels erected on the places where the existence of “old monasteries” had been revealed.

COMMUNICATING GOD’S WILL: BONA VELINOVA AS THE EXEMPLAR PROPHET

The re/invention of Christian holy places was Bona Velinova’s hallmark and one of the most spectacular outcomes of her prophetic gift. The latter, however, was by no means limited to this activity. In the course of the late 1920s and the 1930s, she had developed her techniques of mystic trance, inventing various forms and new social arenas for communication with various supernatural agencies. Her own trademark became the so-called *prayers-demands (molitva-zapitvane)* developed on behalf of *The Good Samaritan* and in connection with its leaders. Held in the framework of preaching tours (*propovednicheski obikolki*) organized by the association throughout the country, the prayer-demands were séances of transmitting public and private demands to God and giving back to people the divine answer(s). During these séances, Bona Velinova acted as a living channel between God and his acolytes – the apostles, some prophets, the saints, the Mother of God, Archangel Michael – on the one hand, and individuals or groups of believers, or simply supplicants, on the other. As a rule, a prayer-request went through four stages that could be discerned from accounts in virtually every issue of *Uteha* newspaper:

a) Transmitting to the seer requests and demands for God’s help. Usually this happened during public meetings organized by *The Good Samaritan*, to which people assisted and asked (or shouted) the questions themselves. There were also written demands given to a messenger who read them in a loud voice at the beginning of a séance.

b) The seer’s withdrawal from the public’s eye for “praying to the Lord and the saints”. This prayer, lasting up to two hours, was the central feature in the religious formatting of the visionary performance. As *Uteha* explained in numerous articles, prayer was the only way to transmit people’s requests for divine help and assistance.

c) Falling into a *prophetic sleep [udremenva se]* or in the state of *little death [primirane]*, during which her senses were temporarily “closed down” for earthly matters, but opened to the divine realm.²³ This state was described either as a soul journey, or as a dream, or even as possession by a saint. The seer was “taken to heaven” by a specific saint,

²³ Literally “the Lord closed down her earthly eyes and ears and opened the heavenly ones, in order that she could see and hear what He and his messengers communicated to her”: *Uteha*, 147 (1938): 2–3; 150 (1938): 2.

prophet, or apostle – or a group of them – whose identity varied from place to place (most often, it was the patron saint of the respective village), then she was shown pictures of the earthly life. During this phase of the *séance*, she could also hear angels' trumpets and the Lord's or the saint's voice telling her a message, or a prophecy. All that she had heard and seen was to be communicated to people that gathered around for the *séance*.

d) At her “awakening”, often on the next morning, the seer related in detail the vision she was granted, as “the Lord had given her an unusual memory in order to remember all things seen and heard”. She used to relate the vision, weaving her own interpretation into the account in the manner of Biblical prophets,²⁴ and enouncing the *prophecy*. As a rule, this quite long final sequence contained warnings against unbelievers and those who failed to fast, to observe the religious feasts and divine orders, as well as an indication about one or more holy shrines in the village territory that local people had to uncover and restore.

Another mark of Bona Velinova's gift was her ability to appropriate traditional religious rituals in her prophetic performances, and to build her prophetic pronouncements on that background. This was especially the case of the *nestinarstvo*, the ritual of fire walking or fire dancing that was held on the day of Sts. Constantine and Helen in a small area of Southeast Bulgaria (Strandzha Mountain) inhabited by a Greek- and Bulgarian-speaking population.²⁵ The *nestinarstvo*, Greek *anastenaria*, was extremely embarrassing for the Orthodox Church, and a puzzle for scholars of culture and folklore who kept studying it throughout the interwar period.²⁶ Starting from the early 1930s, Bona Velinova and the leaders of *The Good Samaritan* developed a vivid interest in the ritual fire-walking in Strandzha. Once a year they visited the regions of Burgas and Iambol where the ritual was still practiced. A group of fire-walkers formed within the organization, and their presence marked the revival of fire-walking in the Burgas area, as well as its spread in a newly created village of refugees from the Turkish part of Strandzha. With her visions and prophecies, Bona Velinova took an active part in this process: her revelations had much to do with the outburst of fire-walking in the refugees' village of Novo Panicharevo, Burgas region. The visionary was also the primary cause of the short-lived fire-walking in Malko Belovo, Pazardzhik region.²⁷ The latter showed the limits of such a culture-building effort: without any local tradition and little support coming from outsiders, the fire-walking in this central Bulgarian village did not survive the memorable event of 1939.

²⁴ For instance, the apocryphal literature, very popular among Bulgarians until the 19th century, depicts the Prophet Daniel as having a dream and providing its interpretation: cf. ТАПКОВА-ЗАЙМОВА – МИЛТЕНОВА 1996: 46.

²⁵ After the First World War, the area where the *nestinarstvo* was practiced had been radically transformed by the processes of forced or voluntary exchanges of population. The local Greek communities of *anastenarides* fled and established themselves in today's Northern Greece, where the ritual has been studied by Greek folklorists and Western anthropologists (DANFORTH 1989).

²⁶ The classical study on *nestinari*, ARNAUDOV 1971: 17–161, has been completed in this period, first published in 1924. For an accessible review of the ritual see GEORGIEVA 2001.

²⁷ For the Strandzha villages, see GEORGIEVA 2005; VALTCHINOVA 2004. For Malko Belovo, see GERGINOVA 2001.

THE CIRCLE OF *THE GOOD SAMARITAN* AND VISIONS OF BULGARIAN HISTORY

Finding out old monasteries was Bona Velinova's hallmark, but by no means limited to her. It was a spectacular way of revealing the Bulgarian past, a past that served well the present concerns as well as the ultimate goal of *The Good Samaritan*. Indeed, the national ideals preached by the Society were supported by various types of revelations given to other visionaries into whom "grace was poured by the Holy Spirit". I turn now to another visionary of *The Good Samaritan*, sister E. K. who, in the course of the twenties, used to have visions during organizational meetings and in the presence of the Society's President, St. Denev.²⁸ E. K. copied Bona's style of prophesizing: falling into a trance (otherwise known as *primirane*), which was pompously called a *prophetic gift*; having a prophetic dream ("I saw in my dream"), and after awakening, giving an interpretation of the things seen or heard. Usually, E. K. had recourse to divination based on the Holy Scriptures to reveal God's design in the images she had seen and the voices she had heard. The following shows how ardent Orthodox faith, regular church-going and divination through the Bible are related in the prophet's daily behaviour:

Today, 6 June 1926, I was in St. Nikola Church and while sitting there, I had the following vision: an image of a bishop, with a white face and his hair white ... I was struck and could not understand it, so when I returned home, after the Mass ended, I asked the Lord Jesus Christ in a prayer whose this image was, and what this vision was, and when I opened the Gospel, that's what I came upon: ... (Rev. 1:19).²⁹

Divination through the Bible and/or the Gospels is well known: after opening the Holy Book at a random page, often with eyes shut, and putting his or her finger on the text, the inspired person should take the God-chosen sentence as a clue for interpreting the images she had received in her dream/vision. The next report illustrates how this technique could be applied to other types of literature, or popular readings, in order to find a place among saints for national heroes that appear in a vision E. K. received in 1927:

Today, 24 February 1927, at dawn, as I woke up, my eyes closed and I saw a hill, not a very high one, a lot of people had gathered there and many others walked up the streets. I asked why they were going that way. I was told that guests were coming. So, I went to the hill to see. It was lighter there, not a strong sunlight but a soft light coming from the sky. People were standing in a semicircle and in the middle, there were three persons: one of them was a human being and looked like the mayor of the town, the other two were skeletons. The three of them were standing close together and were talking quietly, with a serious look.

²⁸ For example, *Uteha*, No. 6 (1926): 4–5 (revelation about the Holy Kingdom); No. 30 (25 March 1929): 2–3 (at a meeting in V. Tirnovo, "she saw Saint Petka").

²⁹ *Uteha*, Year II, No. 6 (15 March 1927): 5. In *Uteha* No. 6 (1936): 3, this technique of divination or "prediction" [in Bulgarian, *predskazvane*] was pompously called "communicating with God through his Word".

When I saw them, I wondered who the skeletons were. Then I heard a voice from above, “*Hadzhi Dimitar and Stefan Karadzha!*” It was repeated twice ... The skeleton of Hadzhi Dimitar was thinner and darker, while the skeleton of Stefan Karadzha was bigger and more robust. After a while I lost sight of the picture. I was greatly surprised at this phenomenon and was wondering why it happened. I had no textbook at hand to see if it wasn’t any special date or anniversary. And I stopped thinking of it.

However, the next night (25 February), again at dawn, as I woke, my eyes closed and I heard a voice from Heaven, ordering: “*Erect monuments to Hadzhi Dimitar and Stefan Karadzha!*” That very day, we received *Otechestvo*, No. 314, and I came across an article: “Bulgaria and the 50th anniversary, and so on.” I was eager to read further and ... saw the names of Hadzhi Dimitar and Stefan Karadzha ... but it only said when and where they were killed and nothing more, the remaining article was about [a project of] making a memorial park for the Russians, not a word about building a memorial to our martyrs.³⁰

The above text might be part of a handbook for interpreting religious visions through national history. It makes palpable the representations, common-sense assumptions and the implicit logic that rule the interpretative act. First of all, it is meaningful when put in proper context: the dream occurred during the preparations for wide-scale celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the Bulgarian Liberation; marking the beginning of the Russo-Turkish war of 1877–1878 that led it could not be missed. Perhaps the revelation is focused on a local-level commemoration of supposedly forgotten heroes of Bulgarian national liberation. The figure that “looked like a mayor” represents State power; his “talk” with the two skeletons might be understood as a metaphor for concern of the Bulgarian state for its heroes. The two skeletons turn out to be the mortal remains of the two most colourful personalities in the revolutionary *chetnik* movement of the 1860s. They have the physical appearance of the respective *cheta* leaders in flesh and blood, as they appear on the rare pictures of their time. More interesting perhaps, they are seen as skeletons, therefore in a condition of mortality as normal humans, while nationalist discourse used to associate heroes of the national revolution with “immortality”. There is obviously a problem of status related to this public commemoration, and sister E. K. tried to formulate it in moving from description of her vision (which allowed the reader to identify this exchange as a religious vision produced *lege artis*) to its explanation. It is striking to note that the first thing she did in order to understand the divine message was to look for a textbook; the context makes it clear that it is on history (a “textbook to see if it was a special date or an anniversary of an event [*godishnina*]”). The history textbook is found in precisely the same structural position that the Scriptures – mainly the Bible or the Gospel – usually occupy in the divinatory or interpretative act. It is a fascinating case of a spontaneous cultural translation, illustrating in a brilliant way what students of nationalism have more recently formulated: history textbooks are gospels of nationalism. In the absence of a textbook, a patriotic magazine would serve perfectly well. Thus instead of using the Bible, the heavenly message was read with

³⁰ Published in *Uteha*, No. 7 (15 April 1927): 6–7: “National Martyrs, Victims to our Liberation. Some Words about Hadzhi Dimitar and Stefan Karadzha” (emphasis in the original text).

the help of the patriotic press and historical books. The latter formed the background of the hidden knowledge on which such interpretations greatly depend, while the interpretation itself – a claim to reveal “the truth” – made it obvious, placing it as a kind of alternative truth (i.e., one different from that of the officials).

This case provides an excellent insight into what M. Todorova defined as a transformation of national heroes into secular saints (TODOROVA 2002). At a first glance, the issue is about memory and public commemoration. Though, given the general orientation of *The Good Samaritan* and its circle of popular prophets, it was religious sanctity that was at stake. The command to “erect monuments” came from “God’s voice”: for someone relying on popular theologies more than on Orthodox dogmas,³¹ it would be easy to make the connection between such an explicit command and the urge for canonization. The way to follow is clear: first, the “forgotten” leaders of the national revolution should be recognized as national heroes, i.e. given the tangible marks of this status. This is precisely what is meant by “erect them monuments”: in the language of the institutionalized national memory, monuments to national heroes and memorials to the fallen in wars for the Homeland are the *sine qua non* for the transformation of a *hero* into a *saint*.

HISTORY AS TREASURE

The mechanism of the seer’s way of mirroring contemporary social concerns and political trends through her visions is well illustrated by the following revelation, reported as always by *Uteha* newspaper. In June 1939, on her way back from a preaching round in Strandzha, Bona Velinova and the leader of *The Good Samaritan* stopped in the village of Ustrem, Elhovo district (south of Topolovgrad), where she was met by “brothers” and “sisters” from the Society. As usual, she did a prayer-request, in answer to which “St. Theodosius of Tŭrnovo sent her the following revelation”:

There were thermal baths here and they were named Indzheza after a princess, and her statue was put up near the baths. There were two marble tablets ... which told the story of the town and the healing properties of the baths in the Roman language [*sic!*]. One of the tablets was broken into pieces, and the smaller one was taken to Greece at the time when Greeks ruled over that land.

This tablet also said that treasures were buried, and where, and how long they would stay underground and when they would be discovered. ... Stagecoaches carrying the treasury [*hazna*] used to pass by this place and once, *haiduks* came and robbed them. At last, the government sent troops, all men of the town were captured and tortured to death, and their women were given to men from other places, and the town was looted.

Later on, at the time of Bogomils and Adamites, I used to come here to preach, talking to them as I am talking to you, and to do penance, but they mocked me and I ran away. I hid myself away for 15 days, and then I could [face them again] and speak to them about their fate.³²

³¹ Which is an essential characteristic of both religious dissidents and religious innovators: see ALBERT 2005.

³² *Uteha*, Year XIII, No. 145 (24 October 1939): 3.

This revelation is a compendium of popular historical knowledge: every sentence contains images and representations of the past, including a lot of clichés about Bulgarian history. What immediately strikes is the figure of the heavenly messenger: the name of Theodosius Tŭrnovski, without the label of “saint”, is known to every Bulgarian from history textbooks. This 14th-century patriarch of Tŭrnovo, a disciple of Gregory Sinaites, is known as the highest-ranking representative of Hesychasm in Bulgaria.³³ The story told in the first person (“I used to come here to preach”) may be interpreted in two ways, both of which show a range of anachronisms. If we focus on preaching, we find the distinguished Hesychast acting in a way that contradicts the very spirit of the doctrine and practice of Hesychasm, in which retreat from the world was the rule, and not the social involvement typical of preaching, and of missionary attitudes more generally speaking. St. Theodosius of Tŭrnovo in Bona’s vision is represented as bringing the Gospel to local people (vaguely associated with major heretic movements) and arguing with them much in the way in which the leaders of *The Good Samaritan* should have acted. The temporal construction “in the time of...” shows the seer’s sensitivity to history and a sense that a credible image of the past requires some chronological marks. The mention of Adamites is clearly intended to thicken the 14th-century – or “just-before-the-Turks” – setting.

If, on the other hand, the interpretation focuses on local history, it could help us to make sense of anachronisms and the whole sophisticated mental construct. The revelation is built on at least three chronological levels: Roman (pagan) times; an intensely Christian period which coincides with the crucial 14th century prior to the Ottoman invasion, presented through its most popular historical marks (Hesychasm, the Adamites); and Ottoman times. Additionally, implicit references to more recent events are introduced, in a subtle way. In popular knowledge of Bulgarian history, Hesychasm is closely related to Mount Parrhoria, a highly symbolic place located, as its name suggests, “on the border” between Bulgaria and Byzantium generally speaking. Its location lacks precision; during a century-long search for Parrhoria, the “cradle of Hesychasm” was variously located in a vast area from the coastal towns of Burgas and Sozopol through the Strandzha and Sakar Mountains.³⁴ The region of Elhovo-Topolovgrad, where the village of Ustrem is located, is on the southeastern edge of possible locations for Parrhoria. The mention of *robbers* is another interesting indication: in this point the story told by St. Theodosius of Tŭrnovo and allegedly reflecting his own experience bears close resemblance to another mid-14th-century Bulgarian saint and Hesychast. The *Life* of St. Romil of Vidin provides an exact parallel to the episode of the robbers attacking the saint when leaving Parrhoria.³⁵ The men-

³³ In different works one can find both *Saint* and *Reverend* Theodosius of Tŭrnovo; a Patriarch and an anchorite are known by that name: see, for example, PETKANOVA 1992: 459–460; HEPPEL 1975: 920.

³⁴ During the period under review, attempts at localizing *Paroria* were made by Professor V. Zlatarski (the leader of academic history-writing), and by local historian and Strandzha patriot Goro Gorov. Both were made public, albeit on different levels, and both could have been inculcated in the historical consciousness that underlies the “unconscious” visionary work. For the various locations and the number of Hesychast monasteries in *Parrhoria*, see an accessible summary in PETKANOVA 1992: 320. It is worth noting the comeback of Strandzha location in the 1970s and 1980s, in the framework of the interdisciplinary Program *Strandzha-Sakar*. Today some Bulgarian tourist websites make use of *Parrhoria*, defining it as “the area between the villages of Zaberovo and Kalovo” in the heart of the “Thracian” Strandzha.

³⁵ For these elements cf. the detailed analysis of his *Life* in BARTUSIS – BEN NASSER – LAIOU 1982.

tion of robbers is immediately translated into the more familiar categories from Ottoman times: *haiduks*, the negative (and twin) image of the magnified figure of *haidut*, and *hazna*, the well-known (and still used) term for public treasury. Indeed, highway banditry was endemic to this border area already in Byzantine times; it was perhaps a cultural reflex to associate the phenomenon with the Ottomans. Bandits and unsafe roads are well known from the descriptions left by European “travellers” of all sorts, who had to cross this region when taking the *Via Militaris* to the Sultan’s capital.

What is the connection between Parrhoria and the eminent Hesychast on the one hand, European travellers and *haiduks* of the Ottoman period on the other, and the particular circumstances of a revelation received by Bona Velinova in 1939, in a village near the Bulgarian-Turkish-Greek border? The relationship is mainly symbolic, not a causal one. It has to do with cultural imagination and the ways in which the representations of the Nation and its past “work” to produce vision-dreams. My suggestion is that underneath dreams and visions, we find what may be termed a hidden knowledge of history, or the academically produced historical knowledge that is interiorized and transformed into implicit social knowledge. Following M. Taussig’s definition, by implicit social knowledge³⁶ I mean the “essentially inarticulable and imageric nondiscursive knowing of social relationality ... acquired through practices rather than through conscious learning, like one’s native tongue” (TAUSSIG 1987: 394). Closer to our field, anthropologist M. Van de Port who worked in Vojvodina on the eve of the outbreak of war in Yugoslavia, used the same concept to show (VAN DE PORT 1998: 133–175) how apparent “traditionalism” of this “murky and obscure knowing, muted and marginalized” (Ibid.: 97), that “rarely surfaces in public discourses”, revealed itself as chartering the social and political dynamics that is not “contained in a society’s canons”. Implicit social knowledge has an “enormous power as a motivational force in the lives of individuals and groups” (Ibid.: 100). Taking a step further, I would extend this definition to the popular knowledge of the past and “history”. Here, I use the phrasing “popular historical knowledge” to denote the crystallizations of history-writing which enter into public circulation through history textbooks, local histories, family and every sort of genealogical writings. During the last decades, it is also chartered through literary fiction and film, as well as by the mass media. Popular historical knowledge is “invisible” in academic writing or official discourses, but it permeates the representations, ideas and mental images relative to the past and the national *grandeur* – the basic features of the social identity of modern man. With all this, it deeply influences the way people think of events and long-term developments; which may explain the long life of Bulgarians’ romantic nationalism.

How could the *implicit knowledge* of the past and Bulgarian history influence the visions and revelations of an Orthodox peasant prophetess? I will proceed by reading into small parcels of Bona’s vision. Take for instance *European travellers*: if, for an academic historian, this is a specific category of sources, by the 1930s it came to be conceived as an authoritative European voice that schoolbooks and popular writings utilized in the overall construct of Ottoman backwardness vs. Bulgaria’s European-ness. It is even more pro-

³⁶ The category of *implicit knowledge* is in many respects similar to the categories of *common sense* and of *habitus*: cf. BOURDIEU 1980.

nounced in the image of *haiduts/haiduks*, the ambiguous bandit magnified as a “fighter for freedom” by all Balkan national ideologies. Interestingly, the imaginary world from Bona’s revelation thrives on the shadowy part of this national icon: the popular use of *haiduk* for *thief* is still part of the implicit knowledge of elderly Bulgarians. Perhaps this semantic shift might also be due to local realities: more than just insecurity maintained by *haiduks*, the area in question suffered from the anarchy of the *kirdzhali* at the end of the 18th and the first decades of the 19th centuries. They deeply marked the collective memory: popular songs and legends about famous *haiduk/haidut* Indzhe Vojvoda attest to the ambiguity of this memory. Often dismissed as mere folklore, such oral productions might well be part of the unique blend of local memories, oral data, and popular historical knowledge that forms the ideological frame against which Bona Velinova interpreted her vision/dream. It is against such a background of “knowing history” that divine revelations should be understood.

The figure of God’s messenger is of key importance here. St. Theodosius of Tŭrnovo from Bona’s vision shows an outstanding sense of historian and politician. His *revelatio* is in line with a basic concern of nation building: connecting places of history to the nodal points of the modern State’s physical and political geography, and making holy the landmarks of national territory. Thus “history” is literally built into the national territory, conferring to it political and symbolic meaning. We find the same logic in the saint’s (and the seer’s) endeavour to make past and present coincide: past experiences and events are interpreted according to the imperatives of the present. The mention of Bogomilism should be read against the debate on the role of this heresy in Bulgarian history, a debate that was especially heathen in the interwar period. The same holds true for Hesychasm: the very choice of an obscure saint – but the most distinguished Hesychast – to mediate the contact with the divine realm, at the very spot of one of Parrhoria’s possible locations, suggests that the prophetess must have interiorized what had become a common knowledge of Bulgarian history. Just as the academic knowledge on *nestenari*, once publicized, had become common and public – thereby subject to a variety of interpretations and uses outside the scholars’ control – the popular historical knowledge of the Bogomils, Hesychasm, of Ottoman conquest and Turkish times was deeply ingrained in Bona Velinova’s dreams, visions, and interpretations.

The analysis of this particular revelation can be applied to dozens of Bona’s prophecies published in *Uteha*, as well as to her prophecies and those of other people published in a range of similar newspapers of the interwar period. Messengers from Heaven play an impressive role: they both mediate and interpret God’s revelations. This is exactly what happened with St. Theodosius of Tŭrnovo: attentive to historical facts, figures and monuments, he did not miss the explanations that revealed historical concepts and language contemporary with the visionary. The words put in the mouth of this historical figure, whose dimension as a saint was almost never mentioned, are a mixture of popular historical knowledge about particular periods³⁷ and political discourses of the interwar period that play with history. It is precisely what we hear in the talk about the marble tablet purportedly bearing historical inscriptions,

³⁷ It should be kept in mind that popular representations about the *Roman age* generally (and vaguely) speaking rest on clichés like public baths and the *bathhouse* as an architectural monument; the Roman emperor seeking a cure in thermal baths; marble tablets bearing inscriptions and/or pictures, are just such clichés.

which had disappeared when the Greeks who “ruled over that land” left (for Greece). It is a good specimen of the discourse of “historical theft”: since the end of World War I, accusations about destruction, removal, or “theft” of valuable artifacts have been periodically raised from Greece to Bulgaria, and (to a lesser extent) *vice versa*. Historical monuments and artifacts are viewed as treasures in the proper sense of the word: on the marble tablet, “it was said that treasures were buried, ... and when they would be discovered.” Perhaps they are also national treasures, embodiments of capital highly symbolic precisely in the perspective of the nation’s past and present.³⁸ The revelation perfectly illustrates the transfer from a material treasure to a symbolic one, and the possibility of proceeding in the opposite direction.³⁹ The disappearance of the marble tablet (i.e. carried away to Greece) deprived Bulgaria of the buried treasure, but more importantly, of the very symbol of its rich ancient history buried in the ground, like the hidden archeological treasures.

ON THE REFUGEES’ TRACK

The revelation given in the village of Ustrem introduces a burning issue for the interwar period: leaving Bulgaria, the Greeks are supposed to have carried away “treasures” of its history and deprived the country of its historical memory (stored in marble inscriptions among others) in the same way that Greece took away “old Bulgarian” lands after the First World War. Also, it is not at all pure coincidence that this particular message from Heaven came in this village. Ustrem is located in the southernmost part of the Kariots’ area, at the border of the group of villages whose Greek-speaking population left for Greece in the late twenties.⁴⁰ Compared to the emigration of the Greek communities from other parts of Bulgaria, the Kariots’ seeking refuge in Greece had provoked the strongest regret and sadness: the most industrious part of the population left a border region that already suffered depopulation. The mixed feeling of loss and frustration has to be noticed: it renders well people’s mood towards the exchange of populations and the social construction of the refugees’ life in their new homes. Like the arrival of refugees of Bulgarian origin (mainly from Greek Macedonia), the migration of Greek-speaking population (or people identifying themselves as Greek) from Bulgaria to Greece were events that resounded for years, even for decades, giving food to the media of the interwar period. Issues such as “propaganda” of foreign emissaries who urged people to migrate, the ownership of land and houses, the difficult adaptation of refugees, were periodically raised in the press. Questions more delicate to deal with, like division of families choosing to leave or to stay, the sense of homeland, or nostalgia for the (somewhat idealized) harmonious life together in the old days, were chartered through rumour and oral accounts.⁴¹ No doubt, all these channels were captured into visionary experience giving credence to the local readings of many of Bona

³⁸ The use of the category of symbolic capital here follows the development of BOURDIEU 1980: 191–207.

³⁹ It must be noticed that the use of *hazna* in the previous passage – again a familiar (Ottoman) term for public treasury, helps to strengthen the association with treasure in the strict sense of the word.

⁴⁰ For the competing Greek and Bulgarian claims over the Kariots’ group, see DASKALOVA-ZHELIAZKOVA 1989: 5–39 (map p. 7).

⁴¹ For more information about these aspects see LADAS 1932: 101–263.

Velinova's revelations. Bona Velinova's vision repeated, in its specific symbolic language, both the nationalistic discourse embraced by *The Good Samaritan* and local people's frustrations.

The last observation is supported by the fact that other members of *The Good Samaritan* produced visions on the broader theme of refugees and Balkan exchanges of populations. An example is the following experience described in *Uteha* (No. 133 / 1936, p. 2) under the title "vision of the reunification of the Balkan nations":

The wife of brother (of our Society) Dimitar G. Mangurov, from Katuntzi, Sveti Vrach district, had the following dream. She saw that a twig of boxwood appeared from the Greek border, it was shining like gold and began to grow, getting bigger and bigger on the Bulgarian side, and when it came to our territory, it turned into three large bunches. At that time, many people came along from Greece, running to Bulgaria and saying that they had to flee because of the Bulgarians.

Again, we have a symbolic mediation of social problems, a "dream" translating social and political tensions into religious language; the particular case might correspond to an anticipated or (less probably) real return of small groups of refugees. To legitimate it as God's revelation, *The Good Samaritan* asked Bona Velinova to reveal the true meaning of the dream. In a prayer-inquiry, God sent her the following answer enounced by the Prophet Jeremiah:

The twig means the refugees in Greece who had gone there in large numbers and now, seeing how bad their situation was there, all of them get ready for a journey to their homeland. If Bulgaria keeps up to God and observes strictly what the Scriptures, the Orthodox Church and Commandments say, then as Serbia got closer, so Greece and Romania will try to get closer, and then all other countries will be willing to unite because humans all over have been made afraid by the wars and will seek peace and comfort. Then non-Christians will convert to Christianity and God's words will come true: and other sheep I have, them also I must bring, to eat My flesh and drink My blood. And I still say to you, if Bulgaria does not humble itself and does not believe the Scriptures and God's words but hatred increases, then worse will follow and Bulgaria will not expand but what it has will be lost and destroyed. That's what God says.

Like many other revelations given to the seer of Grigorevo, this one is for Bulgarian politics and society much more than for "purely" religious matters. Providing an adequate reading of it is a job fit for a historian.

CONCLUSION

Divine revelations that emphasize repentance and purification of sinners through prayers have been received in similar contexts in other places and times; this occurred also in predominantly Catholic European countries. The visions and prophecies of Bona

Velinova and the other “popular prophets” of the circle of *The Good Samaritan* can and should be interpreted as an embodiment of social anxiety about war violence, suffering and fear of the future. Providing a cultural translation of political and socio-psychological processes, the language of prophecy was well understood in a society whose traditional Orthodox culture had a deeply ingrained eschatological spirit (cf. Tapkova-Zaimova & Miltenova, 1996), and a certain apocalyptic “mood”. Studying dreams and visions that circulated in the public arena and had some public impact can contribute towards the history of mentalities of a crucial period and strengthen the (still lacking) anthropological approach in Bulgarian history-writing. Working on visionaries and clairvoyants amounts to understanding them as social actors, and their prophecies, as symbolic responses to broader concerns of the society in which they live. In a way similar to the history of dreams and *through* dreams, delineated in Peter Burke’s path-breaking (1973) study, research on visionaries and their religious and cultural imaginaries can contribute to better understanding of specific historical periods, as well as to the symbolic “refractions” of History more generally speaking.

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