Fair Encounters: Bulgaria and the "West" at International Exhibitions from Plovdiv to St. Louis

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In 1892 the young Bulgarian principality took a momentous risk. It staged an International Agricultural and Trade Exhibition in Plovdiv, with the idea of drawing crowds of international and domestic participants and spectators. And visitors to the fairgrounds in 1892 would have encountered a French hot air balloon, a Singer sewing machine, displays of western machinery, as well as goods and crafts from the far-flung Bulgarian provinces. Displays of Bulgaria's rich resources and manufactured goods shared the stage with local entertainment and displays of Bulgarian folk and high culture, carefully ensconced in an ensemble of specially commissioned works of architectural and landscape design. Though local trade fairs had a long tradition in the region, recent European and American "world's fairs"—which were all the rage—provided the model for this much more grandiose Bulgarian fair with its extraordinary scale and scope. A host of planners and coordinators coupled trade goals with spectacles of progress and pleasure that spilled well beyond the fairgrounds themselves into the hastily overhauled city of Plovdiv that came alive for the event. Though it was quite a stretch for the young de facto state to engineer such an event, its symbolic importance seemed to justify the effort. Indeed, the 1892 Plovdiv fair was a kind of "coming out" for the young Bulgarian principality, autonomous from the Ottoman empire only since 1878. National and local organizers went to astonishing lengths to bring Bulgaria onto the world stage, both by encouraging international participation, and via the more arduous task of collecting and arranging the disparate ingredients of Bulgarian culture and "progress" for domestic and foreign consumption.

By 1892 world's fairs had captured the imagination of the Bulgarian political and intellectual elite who shared in the fair enthusiasm that swept Europe, North America, and well beyond in this period. Growing out of the tradition of agricultural-industrial trade fairs, world's fairs had evolved into phantasmagorical spectacles of plenty and delight, dazzling and entertaining pilgrims from afar as well as local masses. World's fairs became arenas for broadcasting messages of national (and imperial) prowess though displays of a "sliding scale of humanity" that purposefully juxtaposed western "progress" to eastern or "savage" "backwardness."[1] Indeed these fairgrounds provided a physical and visual space in which the west could elaborate its own image as modern and civilized, while delimit-

1. Denton Snider, a well-known American literary critic at the time of the Chicago World's Fair of 1893, dubbed the seemingly hierarchical arrangement of "ethnic villages" at the fair a "sliding scale of humanity." Robert Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876–1916* (Chicago, 1987), 65.

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ing and objectifying the "east."[2] This encoding of relationships between colonizer and colonized within visually arranged spectrums of progress and backwardness has received much attention in the existing literature on world's fairs.[3] There is also a growing scholarship on nonwestern reactions to these carefully staged hierarchies, ranging from forms of resistance to imitation.[4] These studies have begun to provide a clearer picture of the historical importance of the fair phenomenon, but work on the complicated place of Europe's eastern periphery—how they displayed themselves at home or abroad—is still scarce.[5]

A growing body of scholarship, however, has begun to explore how east Europeans, who do not easily fit into east-west taxonomies, projected their own imperial or national images at domestic fairs and exhibitions.[6] These fairs, like the Plovdiv fair of 1892, combined economic-trade objectives with empire or nation-building gestures. From Vienna (1873) to Budapest (1896), from Prague (1891, 1895) to Lvov (1894), imperial and local officials invited foreign guests and the provincial populace to see carefully assembled artifacts of progress and colorful folk culture. While Vienna embraced and displayed its multiethnic populations with gusto as a legitimizing strategy for a modern "Habsburg" imperial identity, Hungarian, Polish, and Czech fairs had more explicit nation-building objectives that were in tension with imperial loyalties and political

2. Most of the literature on worlds' fairs tends to focus on the hegemonic intent and results of display. See, for example, Rydell, *All the World's a Fair;* Robert Rydell, John Findling, and Kimberly Pelle, eds., *Fair America: World's Fairs in the United States* (Washington, D.C., 2000); and Robert Rydell and Nancy Gwinn, eds., *Fair Representations: World's Fairs and the Modern World* (Amsterdam, 1994); Peter Hoffenberg, *An Empire on Display: English, Indian and Australian Exhibitions from the Crystal Palace to the Great War* (Berkeley, 2001).

3. A smaller but growing body of work includes the far messier and complex realm of the participant/observer side of the fairs. See, for example, Louise Pubrick, "Introduction," in Louise Pubrick, ed., *The Great Exhibition of 1851: New Interdisciplinary Essays* (Manchester, Eng., 2001); Keith Walden, *Becoming Modern in Toronto: The Industrial Exhibition and the Shaping of a Late Victorian Culture* (Toronto, 1997); Mauricio Tenorio, *Mexico at the World's Fairs: Crafting a Modern Nation* (Berkeley, 1996).

4. For a variety of eastern reactions to western displays, see Carter Vaughn Findley, "An Ottoman Occidentalist in Europe: Ahmed Midhat Meets Madame Gülnar, 1889," *American Historical Review* 103, no. 1 (February 1998): 15–49; and Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt,* 2d ed. (Berkeley, 1991), 1–134.

5. In detailed studies of these fairs, even when "ethnicity" is highlighted, discussions of east Europeans are totally peripheral if not absent. See, for example, Nancy Parezo and Don Fowler, *Anthropology Goes to the Fair: The 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition* (Lincoln, 2007). The comparatively ample works on Austrian-Habsburg displays at world's fairs, though generally focused on architecture and design, are the exception. See, for example, Christopher Long, "The Viennese Secession's Stil and Modern American Design," *Studies in the Decorative Arts* 14, no. 2 (Spring–Summer 2007): 6–44.

6. A number of books have chapters or sections that deal with the range of issues surrounding east central European fairs. See, for example, Cathleen Giustino, *Tearing Down Prague's Jewish Town: Ghetto Clearance and the Legacy of Middle-Class Ethnic Politics around 1900* (Boulder, Colo., 2003), 65–69; Alice Freifeld, *Nationalism and the Crowd in Liberal Hungary, 1848–1914* (Baltimore, 2000), 230–54; Maureen Healy, *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire: Total War and Everyday Life in World War I* (Cambridge, Eng., 2004), 87–122; Patrice Dabrowski, *Commemorations and the Shaping of Modern Poland* (Bloomington, 2004), 181–26.

reality.[7] These apparent tensions between nation and empire were not the only unique features of the fair experience at the eastern periphery. At all of these fairs, local innovation shared the stage with western "progress" that was both appropriated and confronted. To varying degrees, the west was a kind of specter at least in the imagination of many regional elites, a potential bulldozer to local distinctiveness, be it national or multinational.[8] This eastern encounter with the west that played itself out in politics, literature, and diplomacy was arguably a common feature of the east European experience, and fairs offered an important and concrete context for their evolution.

Though Bulgarians shared many aspects of the east central European fair experience, at home and abroad, they were also burdened by an even more acute sense of the "western specter." For Bulgarians, in this period the west alternated between a vague and generalized imagined monolith, to a spectrum of actors, from the distant (fabulous and barbaric) America to the Habsburg lands themselves, a more attainable and desirable model but nevertheless a potential threat to national existence. Small and peripheral, only recently granted autonomy from "Asiatic," Ottoman rule, Bulgaria yearned to be part of Europe but also feared its "hurricane" of cultural influence and economic competition.[9] Since the national revival period (1762–1878), Bulgarian national thinkers had been acutely aware that Bulgaria itself was "orientalized" by the "west" and seen as less than European.[10] In part as a reaction to this, the Bulgarian elite continually attempted to untangle the nation—both politically and culturally—from the Ottoman past while asserting a "European" pedigree, even as they often critiqued and rejected Europe in a decidedly "occidentalist" vein.[11] Central to the evolution of national identity, the situating of Bulgaria

7. On the Vienna Universal Exhibition of 1873 and also the Lvov exhibition of 1894, see, for example, Daniel Unowsky, *The Pomp and Politics of Patriotism: Imperial Celebrations in Habsburg Austria, 1848–1916* (West Lafayette, 2005), 54, 72.

8. The very concept of "eastern Europe" is quite controversial. See my introduction to this cluster for a more detailed discussion of the literature on these issues.

9. For the best overview of Bulgarians' complex attitudes toward the west, see Roumen Daskalov, "Images of Europe: A Glance from the Periphery" (European University Institute Working Paper No. 94/8, 1994). See also his more detailed discussion in Bulgarian in Roumen Daskalov, *Mezhdu Iztok i Zapada: Bŭlgarski kulturni dilemeni* (Sofia, 1998).

10. See my detailed discussion of this phenomenon and contested process, particularly in relation to Muslim minorities, in Mary Neuburger, *The Orient Within: Muslim Minorities and the Negotiation of Nationhood in Modern Bulgaria* (Ithaca, 2004). On the "Orientalization" of the Balkans, see also Milica Bakić-Hayden, "Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia," *Slavic Review* 54, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 917–31. See also Todorova's important work on the related phenomenon of "Balkanism," in Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (New York, 1997).

11. Findley describes occidentalism as a "counter-discourse" that developed in response to orientalism and "became an important component of anti-colonial nationalism." See Findley, "An Ottoman Occidentalist in Europe," 17. For more on the concept of occidentalism, or the construction of an essentialized west, see James Carrier, ed., *Occidentalism: Images of the West* (Oxford, 1995). For some discussion of occidentalist imagery in nineteenth-century Bulgarian literature, see Nikolai Aretov, "Shto e Oksidentalizŭm i ima li toi pochva u nas?" *Literaturna misul,* no. 1 (2005).

between east and west expressed itself in all realms of national life but was expressly played out in the fair experience.[12] On the one hand, the musings of prominent Bulgarian travelers to world's fairs were widely read, leaving permanent impressions on the national psyche.[13] But perhaps more critically, Bulgarian responses and contested imaginings of the nation in relation to east and west were increasingly enacted through the medium of the fair, in brick, mortar, and folk display.

When the already established negotiation of east and west, self and other, went from paper to pavilion, from simple musings to fair orchestrations, a unique set of dilemmas unfolded. Bulgarian fair participation required a disparate set of actors—national, local, and international—with vastly conflicting goals or readings of fair artifacts and structures. Most pointedly, economic objectives—profitability and commercial dealings—openly competed with disparate elite visions of national progress or purity. In the Plovdiv fair in 1892, for example, there was a clear effort on the part of Bulgarian officials to represent the Bulgarian nation as an apt student of European progress. But at the same time, many of its kaleidoscopic array of participants pragmatically wanted to sell Bulgaria as unique and even "oriental." The Plovdiv fair, though fleeting, was a notable moment in Bulgarian fair history, one that was connected in important ways to participation in fairs abroad that continued unabated in the period that followed. Indeed the same tensions and dilemmas that plagued the Plovdiv fair were also present when Bulgaria participated abroad, as in the Chicago World's Fair in 1893. Chicago, in fact, became as significant as Plovdiv, both because it became a colossal foil to the local fair and because Aleko Konstantinov, one of Bulgaria's most famous authors, described it in detail in a widely read travelogue. Konstantinov's experience at the American fair both complicated Bulgarian perceptions of the west and solidified Bulgarian yearnings for progress, asserted ever more flagrantly at the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904. The last and biggest of its era, St. Louis was the dénouement of the world's fair heyday, and Bulgaria did not fail to make an appearance, its displays in many ways out of proportion to Bulgarian resources and global status. From Plovdiv to St. Louis via Chicago, Bulgarians, like other east Europeans, were actively involved in representing and manipulating western readings of the national self, even as they continually reimagined the "west."[14]

12. A growing literature on Bulgarian national identity has explored the importance of situating Bulgarians between east and west. See, for example, Ivan Elenkov and R. Daskalov, eds., *Zashto sme takiva? V tŭrcene na Bŭlgarskata kulturna identichnost* (Sofia, 1995), 14. See also Neuburger, *The Orient Within*, 1–17.

13. On the significance of eastern travelers to the west, see especially, Wendy Bracewell and Alex Drace-Francis, eds., *Under Eastern Eyes: A Comparative Introduction to East European Travel Writing on Europe* (Budapest, 2008). On western travelers to the Balkans, see John Allcock and Antonia Young, eds., *Black Lambs and Grey Falcons: Women Travelers in the Balkans* (Bradford, Eng., 1991), 170–91; Božidar Jezernik, *Wild Europe: The Balkans in the Gaze of Western Travelers* (London, 2004); and Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*.

14. I would like to thank György Péteri for hosting me at his institution in Trondheim, Norway, where I benefitted from the useful comments offered on this article and the many engaging discussions on the broader concept of "Imaging the West." For some

Plovdiv 1892

The Plovdiv fair of 1892 was by no means the first (or last) fair to be staged on Bulgarian soil.[15] In fact, trade fairs were deeply imbedded in local (and broadly Eurasian) commercial traditions that stretched back to ancient times and had blossomed into events that had long provided a context for entertainment, as well as social and commercial networking.[16] Thus the Plovdiv fair was no mere "imitation" of world's fairs in the west, but rather world's fairs themselves were an outgrowth of a fair tradition that was as Balkan as it was western. Still the Plovdiv fair, on the world's fair model, went far beyond the scale and parameters of the local trade fair tradition and so was rightly called a *chudo*—a miracle or marvel—by those who witnessed it, organizers, participants, and observers alike. After all, Plovdiv had become part of the diminutive Bulgarian principality only seven years earlier in 1885 after its unification with Eastern Rumelia. Undoubtedly, the staging of this event in Plovdiv was in part an attempt to fully consummate the political, cultural, and economic connections between the old Bulgarian principality and its new province.[17] Prime Minister Stefan Stambolov sought to prove the legitimacy of the territorial merger, while also demonstrating that Bulgaria was worthy of both national sovereignty and further expansion into neighboring Ottoman Macedonia and Thrace with their substantial Slavic-"Bulgarian" populations.[18] Although numerous Bulgarians supported, debated, and planned the event, Grigor Nachovich, the Bulgarian diplomatic agent in Vienna and soon-to-be minister of finance, is often termed the "father of the exhibition."[19] The apparent inspiration was several recent Habsburg fairs, most recently the Prague

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of the more interesting work to emerge in connection with Péteri's "Imaging the West" project, see the special issue of *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 9, no. 4 (Fall 2009).

15. For a review of the 1892 fair and future fairs held in Plovdiv in the interwar period and to a lesser extent after World War II, see Matei Mateev, *Khronika na edin panairen vek: 1892–1992* (Plovdiv, 1993).

16. For a broad historiographical overview and a detailed discussion of these fairs in Bulgaria, see Evelina Razhdavichka, "Nineteenth-Century Balkan Fairs as a Social Space: Hierarchy, Marginality, Ethnicity, and Gender," *Balkan Studies/Etudes Balkaniques,* no. 1 (2006): 125–48.

17. Stefan Stambolov had significantly more political power than the ruling Prince Ferdinand during his years as prime minister (1887–1894). For an excellent survey of the Stambolov period, see Duncan Perry, *Stefan Stambolov and the Emergence of Modern Bulgaria, 1870–1895* (Durham, 1993). For more on the politics of the fair, see Vasilka Tankova, "Pŭrvoto Bŭlgarsko Zemedelsko-Promishleno Izlozhenie v politikata na Stamboloviia rezhim," in Elena Statelova, ed., *100 godini ot Pŭrvoto Bŭlgarsko Zemedelsko-Promishleno Izlozhenie* (Plovdiv, 1992); Parezo and Fowler, *Anthropology Goes to the Fair,* 19.

18. For a thorough discussion of Balkan and great power pretensions in the area, see Elisabeth Barker, *Macedonia: Its Place in Balkan Power Politics* (London, 1950). I put "Bulgarian" in quotes here because of the contested nature of the identity of Slavs (as well as other populations, for example, Greeks) in the region. For a discussion of this issue, see, for example, Keith Brown, *The Past in Question: Modern Macedonia and the Uncertainties of Nation* (Princeton, 2003).

19. See Aleksander Marinov, *Chudoto narecheno: Pŭrvo Plovdivsko Izlozhenie* (Sofia, 1992), 27–28.

Jubilee Exhibition of 1891, which impressed Nachovich and other Bulgarian observers with its power to stimulate economic growth and "raise the national spirit."[20] The Bulgarian regime in Sofia endeavored to stage a similar event with the goal of bringing Bulgaria in line with "the model of modern Europe."[21] The fair, it was argued, would both showcase postliberation Bulgarian progress and further stimulate economic development and national consciousness. According to local organizers in Plovdiv, it would also "provide a mirror" in which "we can see all that we need to know about ourselves—the good and the bad."[22] In short, for Bulgarians and foreign observers alike, organizers assumed that the fair would answer the critical question, "What is the Bulgarian nation?"[23]

Plovdiv, in many ways, was the obvious choice for the location of the fair.[24] Not only was it Bulgaria's largest city at the time with a population of 36,033, it was also the "spiritual capital of Bulgaria," the former residence of many of Bulgaria's well-known national revival figures and the site of impressive remnants of Bulgarian architecture from the national revival period.[25] The city was ideal because of its central location along traditional and new trade and travel routes, including that of the Orient Express as of 1885.[26] Historically a central caravan "port city" on the Thracian plain, Plovdiv lay at the base of the central Balkan Mountain region, and it was the center of both proto-industrial development in the early and mid-nineteenth century and of the national revival. It was also adjacent to the "Bulgarian" populations of Ottoman Thrace and Macedonia, who were offered cheap train fares and housing, and so encouraged to come and see the "New Bulgaria" on display at the fair. From the earliest planning stages, fair organizers wistfully contemplated, "and who of those Bulgarians, who live outside our borders, does not want to see the happi-

20. These were the words of Sava Datsov, a civil servant under Nachovich who attended the exhibition under his instructions. Ibid., 27. As an aside, a train with 160 Bulgarians on board was specially commissioned for a journey to the exhibition in Prague. Aleko Konstantinov, who was himself was on the train, later wrote a fictionalized account of this journey for a satirical feuilleton. See Aleko Konstantinov, "Baĭ Gano: Neveroiatni razkazi za edin sŭvremenen Bŭlgarin," in Aleko Konstanintov, *Sŭbrani sŭchineniia,* ed. Tikhomir Tikhov (Sofia, 1980), 1:14.

21. See Marinov, *Chudoto napecheno,* 8.

22. *Nasheto pŭrvo izlozhenie,* nos. 1 and 2 (December 1891): 1.

23. Ibid., 4.

24. Stefan Shivachev, "Plovdiv i Pŭrvoto Bulgarsko Zemedelsko-Promishleno Izlozhenie," in Statelova, ed., *100 Godini ot Pŭrvoto Bŭlgarsko Zemedelsko-Promishleno Izlozhenie,* 19.

25. Specifically a large number of "Ottoman baroque" houses remained (and still remain) in Plovdiv. An amalgam of Turco-Byzantine and Levantine influences, the Ottoman baroque has been appropriated as a national form from Bosnia to Syria. For a contextualization of the revival architecture of Plovdiv, see Mary Neuburger, "Dwelling in the Past: The Ottoman Imprint on Bulgarian 'Revival Houses' in Plovdiv and Beyond," *Centropa* 8, no. 2 (May 2008).

26. By the mid nineteenth century, 50 different trades were practiced in Plovdiv in some 400 workshops. The merchants of Plovdiv were engaged in trade with central and western Europe, Anatolia, Egypt, and even Calcutta, where there was an active colony of Plovdiv-based merchants. Elena Uzunska, "Plovdiv v navecheriia na osoboditelna voĭna," in Ivan Undzhiev, ed., *Plovdiv, 1878–1968: 90 godini ot osvobozhdenie na grada i Plovdivskiia kraĭ* (Plovdiv, 1968), 61.

ness and delight, the life force, riches and successes of their free brothers, which reflects the prosperous future of the whole nation?"[27]

Foreigners, of course, were also expected and needed as audience and participants in this grand affair. With this in mind, Bulgarian rail fares from central Europe were also lowered and a flurry of invitations and savvy negotiations assured an array of European—particularly Habsburg—exhibitors and guests at the Bulgarian event. Ironically perhaps, virtually all of the artifacts of "progress" put on display in Plovdiv in 1892—electric lights, the phonograph, the sewing machine, a hot air balloon, etc.—were imported directly from the west (broadly defined). In part these items were meant to amaze and titillate, to entertain and inspire Bulgarians from the provinces out for a day at the fair. At the same time, these exhibits were desirable from the standpoint of the explicit goal of the exhibit as a "school" for Bulgarian industry and agriculture. As reported in the weekly newspaper published by the newly appointed fair commission, *Nasheto pŭrvo izlozhenie* (Our First Exhibition), "the rich and varied exhibit in the Austro-Czech pavilion is a great help in the important task of our exposition, to make them [Bulgarians] feel what they are missing and to show them visually the only means through which to wage the struggle to get out of this backwards state."[28] While the fair was organized by a combination of officials from Sofia and the Plovdiv municipality, an array of pavilions were sponsored by prominent industrialists as well as other towns or districts of Bulgaria, and what was showcased included an impressive variety of raw materials, manufactured goods, and handicrafts from Bulgarian cities and their adjacent regions—Sofia, Tatar Pazhardhik, Stanimaka (Asenovgrad), Ruse, Kazanlŭk, Gabrovo, Varna.[29] Hence while the fair was meant as a tool to eradicate "backwardness" within Bulgaria, it was simultaneously a "showcase" for local resources and even "progress." Indeed, its very existence was emblematic of Bulgarian advancement into the club of modern nations.

In order to achieve such a feat, though, foreign technologies were appropriated and employed in overall fair construction and city improvements. That is to say, these technologies were not only displayed as western but were integrated into Bulgarian efforts to display their *own* national progress. The exhibition, for example, boasted a surprising array of some 200 buildings, most of which were designed by visiting and local Swiss and Austro-Hungarian architects or by Bulgarians trained in European institutions.[30] Electric streetlights were installed on the streets of Plovdiv for the first time by a Hungarian company. A telephone line between Sofia and Plovdiv and a telegraph were also inaugurated, both by Habsburg

27. *Nasheto pŭrvo izlozhenie,* no. 34 (8 August 1892): 6.

28. *Nasheto pŭrvo izlozhenie,* no. 46 (24 October 1892): 7.

29. Ibid., 43.

30. For details on specific architects and their training, see *Bŭlgariia 1900: Evropeĭski vlianiia v Bŭlgarskoto gradoustroĭstvo, arkhitektura, parkove, i gradini 1878–1919* (Sofia, 2002). A Swiss architect, Jacob Heinrich Meier, designed the fairgrounds, and the landscape designer was Lucien Chevalas, ibid., 174–75, and 246–47. The Austro-Czech Josef Vaclav Sniter was another key architect and engineer for the project, ibid., 251–52.

companies. The fair's small man-made lake boasted electric boats, also imported.[31] None of this is to belittle the Bulgarian capacity to pull together such an event given the numerous constraints. Rather it is to point out that the west was both displayed as a "foreign" model and subsumed into presumable *national* achievements.

Significantly, though, such emulation and appropriation unfolded in the shadow of growing fears of western penetration. Since the national revival period, Bulgarian intellectuals and revolutionaries had expressed a deep ambivalence toward the west that gained momentum with the increased penetration of western goods after 1878.[32] In the period when national consciousness was just taking root and national culture was searching for firm footing, the "aping" of western fashion—which often took the form of buying western over local products—appeared as both a cultural and an economic threat.[33] Prompted by the well-documented collapse of native handicrafts that accompanied the increase in western manufactured goods, the pages of *Nasheto pŭrvo izlozhenie* explain, "New times have come so quickly for us that we are not prepared, not acclimatized so to speak to the new conditions of life . . . our old ways of livelihood, our handicrafts are no longer viable."[34] In no uncertain terms, the paper encouraged Bulgarians to engage in technology transfer and make trade contacts so as to "adjust" to the tempo and requirements of capitalism. Instead of closing Bulgaria off to western competition, the fair commission, in line with the policies of the Stambolov regime, opened Bulgaria to the west to an unprecedented degree. These Bulgarian elites, in fact, hoped that through more direct competition with the west, Bulgarians would not "become slaves to them [the west]."[35]

This intricate tug-of-war was mirrored, in many respects, in Bulgaria's equally complicated relationship to the east that also unfolded in the planning and staging of the fair. After all, Bulgaria was technically still an Ottoman principality in 1892, so Sultan Abdülhamid had to provide approval for certain details of fair procedure. The sultan was opposed, for example, to the opening ceremonies being held on 3 March, the much celebrated date when Bulgaria had gained autonomy in 1878 and, more importantly, when the (later rescinded) San Stefano treaty granting much of Thrace and Macedonia to Bulgaria had been signed. To this and other requests of the Sultan, the Bulgarian regime duly complied, and the Otto-

31. Marinov, *Chudoto napecheno,* 139.

32. These dates are somewhat arbitrary but begin with the publishing of Paisii Hilendarski's *Slavianobŭlgarska istoria.* For a recent work on the national revival, see Roumen Daskalov, *The Making of a Nation in the Balkans: Historiography of the Bulgarian Revival* (Budapest, 2004). For a discussion of the penetration of western goods and fashions, see Raina Gavrilova, *Bulgarian Urban Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Cranbury, N.J., 1999), 151.

33. See Daskalov, *Mezhdy Iztok i Zapada,* 7–64.

34. *Nasheto pŭrvo izlozhenie,* no. 10 (8 February 1892): 3. See also Michael Palairet, *The Balkan Economies c. 1800–1914: Evolution without Development* (Cambridge, Eng., 2003), 186–97; and Roumen Daskalov, *Bŭlgarskoto obshtestvo: Dŭrzhava, politika, ikonomika, 1878–1939* (Sofia, 2005), 307–11.

35. *Nasheto pŭrvo izlozhenie,* no. 10 (8 February 1892): 6.

Figure 1. The Ottoman pavilion at the International Agricultural and Trade Exhibition in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, in 1892. Courtesy of the Central State Archive in Sofia.

mans participated in the exhibition with a lavish pavilion built at Bulgarian expense (figure 1).[36] Ferdinand, the Bulgarian prince, dutifully paid his respects at the Ottoman pavilion during his numerous tours of the fairgrounds.[37] And although the Bulgarian principality proceeded in almost all ways as de facto independent, it was clearly judicious to maintain good relations with their nominal overlords. In fact, in light of a recent diplomatic falling out with Russia, Stambolov had gone to great pains to reestablish friendly relations with Istanbul and these were apparent at the fair in 1892—where Russia, by the way, was notably absent.

But at the same time, Bulgaria's newly won freedom from Ottoman control was in many ways an overt subtext for the exhibition. The fairgrounds were evocatively situated on an old Turkish cemetery, the Shekhidlik, and the "horrors" of the Ottoman past were visually palpable. A painting by the famous Polish painter Antoni Piotrowski, for example, which was on display in the main government pavilion in the center of the fairgrounds, graphically depicted the massacre and fire of Batak, the famous bash-i-bozuk (Ottoman irregular troop) reprisals against Bulgarians after the

36. *Nasheto pŭrvo izlozhenie,* no. 12 (22 February 1892): 2. See also Marinov, *Chudo narecheno,* 32.

37. *Nasheto pŭrvo izlozhenie,* no. 44 (13 October 1892): 7.

April uprising of 1876.[38] As described by celebrated Bulgarian writer and witness to the fair, Ivan Vazov, this painting depicted "heaps of naked and half-naked corpses along the river with faces petrified with fear and bleeding wounds which became black in the night."[39] These horrors were from the near past—a mere sixteen years before—and were meant to stand in stark contrast to Bulgaria's "bright" future. Indeed, many touted the 1878 "liberation" as the presumed starting point for Bulgarian advancement and the fair itself as the next step, tantamount to a second "liberation." Khristo Danov, for example, one of Plovdiv's most beloved inhabitants and the father of Bulgarian publishing, is quoted as saying of the electrification of Plovdiv that accompanied the fair, "From the darkness of slavery, light, light is needed."[40] And in the newspaper *Svetlina* the flurry of fair preparations were compared to the fervor surrounding Bulgaria's 1876 April uprising. Significantly, though, instead of a revolt against Ottoman rule, this flood of activity was seen as part of an "uprising against foreign exploiters" and "a revolution in economic relations."[41] With the west in mind, fair organizers claimed that, "Bulgaria . . . is threatened with something worse than political slavery."[42]

Paradoxically, this involved both the appropriation of western technologies for the good of the Bulgarian economy, and the *selling* of Bulgaria to the west for the good of Bulgarian trade. The marketing of Bulgaria as a whole, and Bulgarian goods in particular, caused a number of contradictory tendencies to surface at the fair. On the one hand, fair organizers made concerted efforts to subvert western, in this case primarily west European, assumptions about the oriental nature of Bulgaria. In Plovdiv, key streets and buildings underwent a face-lift—repairing, cleaning, and building—in preparation for the big event.[43] Luxury hotels were hastily built for foreign visitors and a housing commission was formed because a deficit in beds was rightly foreseen. In a holdover from Ottoman urban organization, "elders" from the various *mahalle* (quarters) were called upon to organize and "rank" accommodations in private houses into four categories. The rankings captured the range of options from single beds with full privacy, to dorm-type room sharing, to nothing more than a mat on a floor. The higher the ranking, the better the assurance of clean sheets and towels, and for the highest rank hosts had to speak French or German.[44] This hierarchy of comfort ensured that foreigners would get the best possible accommodations within private households. The pages

38. This very painting was at the center of the Batak massacre controversy of May 2007. A conference that was scheduled that spring around the theme "Images of Islam" in Bulgaria had proposed using the painting as an explicit focus for the construction of national memory of the massacre and the Ottoman past more generally. The conference was canceled after media accusations that the event and its organizers were trying to "deny" the massacre or downplay the "horrors" of the Ottoman past.

39. Ivan Vazov, *The Great Rila Wilderness* (Sofia, 1969), 201.

40. Marinov, *Chudoto napecheno,* 20.

41. Ibid., 8.

42. *Nasheto pŭrvo izlozhenie,* no. 10 (8 February 1892): 3.

43. Marinov, *Chudoto napecheno,* 69.

44. Ibid., 16.

of *Nashe pŭrvo izlozhenie* were rife with angst about foreigners' reactions to local conditions in Bulgaria and every effort was made to impress a European standard of behavior on Bulgarian hosts. Bulgarian hosts, for example, were discouraged from accepting *bakshish* (tips) on the assumption that visitors would laugh at such an "oriental custom."[45]

At the same time, however, exhibition organizers pleaded with vendors to seduce western buyers with the "original" features of Bulgarian national culture. For the most part this meant Bulgarian folk art, which fair organizers gathered and displayed with gusto. *Nasheto pŭrvo izlozhenie* put out numerous entreaties to local officials and women's organizations to produce or gather "original" Bulgarian folk art, especially embroidery and ceramics.[46] Peasant delegations from the provinces, exhibition staff, and city carriage drivers were encouraged to wear folk dress, and in a special exhibition hall a small army of mannequins stood at attention in regional costumes.[47] The "eastern" sounds of Bulgarian folk music and dance provided a sound track and an exotic visual display to tantalize European visitors at the exhibition. The poster advertising the fair featured happy peasants in folk costume triumphantly presiding over artifacts of Bulgarian abundance, grapes, wool, and roses (see cover image). But folk motifs were not the only local flavor mobilized for the event. A number of exhibition structures were built in an explicitly oriental idiom; most notably, the prominent entrance gate with its pointed arches was built in the Ottoman-Mughul style (figure 2).[48] This was, in no uncertain terms, an invitation to experience the oriental pleasures within, reflected in other fair structures designed in a "purely oriental style" such as the tobacco pavilion of Plovdiv industrialist D. Stavrides (figure 3) and a "Turkish Sweets" kiosk.[49] In addition, Bulgarian vendors in the fair's market area were encouraged to put forth "oriental" goods in expectation of European demand for such products. As the pages of *Nasheto pŭrvo izlozhenie* implored: "If there is something that attracts a considerable number of foreigners, it is their curiosity to see the Orient and so the peculiarities of our life. Why not satisfy their curiosity, or is there a reason to hide our halva from them, our *lukanki* [sausage], our *pasturma* [cured meat], and so on? How do we know that our curious neighbors will not like the sesame halva from Yambol and soon want it at home?"[50] In another issue, a similar plea is made for the selling of dried mackerel. "We just need to label it 'oriental delicacy' and they will try it."[51] Without any sense of irony *Nasheto pŭrvo izlozhenie* reprinted a blurb from the French *Revue d'Orient* from

45. *Nasheto pŭrvo izlozhenie,* no. 7 (18 January 1892): 2.
46. *Nasheto pŭrvo izlozhenie,* no. 10 (8 February 1892): 6.
47. *Nasheto pŭrvo izlozhenie,* no. 50 (14 November 1892): 4–5.
48. The Ottomans, well known for their prowess and synthesis in architectural forms, borrowed from a wide variety of design idioms. In the eighteenth century Mughal and Persian forms became popular along with European baroque. See Shirine Hamadeh, "Ottoman Expressions of Early Modernity and the 'Inevitable' Question of Westernization," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 63, no. 1 (March 2004): 32–51.
49. *Nasheto pŭrvo izlozhenie,* no. 31 (8 July 1892): 3.
50. *Nasheto pŭrvo izlozhenie,* no. 10 (8 February 1892): 2.
51. *Nasheto pŭrvo izlozhenie,* no. 13 (29 February 1892): 3.

Figure 2. The entrance gate at the Plovdiv fair, 1892. Courtesy of the International Plovdiv Fair Press Center.

2 August 1892, which praised the Bulgarians for using "all the means which the east has at its disposal in order to increase the charm of an oriental exhibition."[52] Indeed, as Bulgarian organizers and vendors rightly noted, western constructions of the "east" were not wholly negative; western fair visitors associated the east, not only with backwardness and stagnation,

52. *Nasheto pŭrvo izlozhenie,* no. 34 (8 August 1892): 3.

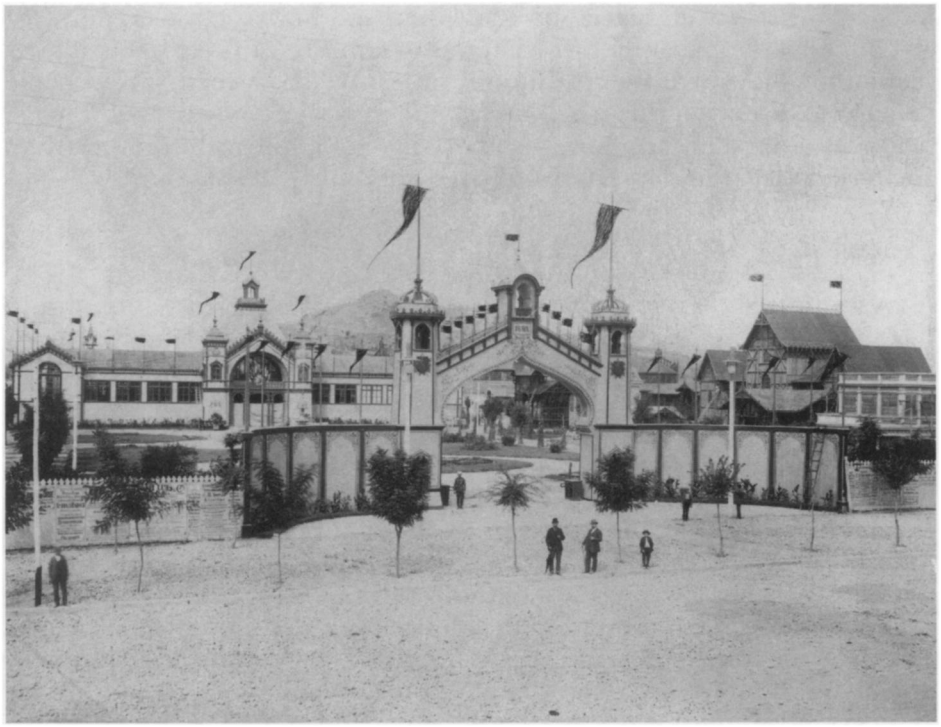

Figure 3. The Stavrides tobacco pavilion at the Plovdiv fair, 1892. Courtesy of the Central State Archive in Sofia.

but with pleasure and seduction. Fair planners hoped to simultaneously dispel notions of the former while capitalizing on fantasies of the latter.

Without a doubt, Bulgaria's intractable dilemmas in their relationships with the west (and the east) played themselves out during the preparations for and realization of the Plovdiv fair in 1892. The fair became both a school for westernization and a place to differentiate and construct what was expressly Bulgarian. As much as Bulgaria was motivated to emulate Europe in this period, Bulgarian fears of being subsumed by another "alien" culture also drove efforts to unearth, express, and display difference in relation to Europe. For in postliberation Bulgaria, relations with the west were increasingly direct and intimate but also fraught. Ironically, an Ottoman-influenced oriental flavor, in buildings, food, and other artifacts was part of the available cultural raw material out of which a specifically Bulgarian culture could be constructed and then sold. Admittedly, in economic terms the fair was never considered a success. Its negligible impact on trade might explain why the Plovdiv fair resurfaced as an annual event only in 1933. And Plovdiv's 172,000 visitors fell short of the over 6 million who went to Vienna in 1873 (let alone the 32 million who visited the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1889). But keep in mind that the Plovdiv fair was also considerably shorter, 76 days as opposed to 186 days (Vienna), and the population of the city was considerably smaller, 36,000 compared to Vienna's 829,000. Far more important was the fair's *symbolic*

impact, and it was embraced by many then and now as a *chudo* (miracle) given the conditions under which it was organized.[53] In retrospect it does seem miraculous that the small (and young) Balkan principality was able to stage an event on this scale with all the attendant expenses and logistical issues. In the end, however, the fair only highlighted, rather than answered, the central question, "What is the Bulgarian nation?"[54]

Chicago 1893

Answers to the question of what constitutes the Bulgarian nation would next be sought in Chicago, of all places, in 1893, where Bulgarian participation in the Columbian Exposition would make a lasting impression at home. The planning and realization of Chicago's Columbian Exposition during 1892–93 had always been of special interest to the Bulgarian organizing commission for Plovdiv, in part because preparations were contemporaneous with their own. *Nasheto pŭrvo izlozhenie* reported not only on the Bulgarian decision to participate in the fair but on every known detail of the Chicago fair's buildings, attractions, participants, and costs.[55] In fact, the Chicago fair was a constant—although distant and abstract—yardstick in writings on preparations for the admittedly more modest Plovdiv fair. These details made clear the large discrepancy between the resources available for the fair in America and in Bulgaria, but it was not until Bulgaria's own Konstantinov experienced and wrote about the 1893 Chicago fair that Bulgarians were profoundly humbled by the Plovdiv-Chicago comparison.

Though few Bulgarians were able to witness the fair for themselves, Konstantinov quickly grew famous for his travelogue, *Do Chikago i nazad* (To Chicago and Back), which was widely read by the Bulgarian public.[56] Faced with descriptions of western progress, concentrated and displayed on an unprecedented scale—alongside Bulgaria's own humble kiosks—the spectacle of Chicago 1893 provoked a dramatic reimagining of the power of the west, specifically in its American embodiment.[57] At the same time, Konstantinov's Chicago experience was punctuated by insightful

53. Virtually all Bulgarian studies of the fair describe it as a commendable effort and an extremely important event in Bulgarian history. For a more contemporary assessment, see a review of Sava Datsov, *Nasheto izlozhenie v Plovdiv,* in *Periodichesko spisanie na Bŭlgarskoto knizhovno druzhestvo v Sredets* (1893): 41–42. For the Vienna fair numbers, see John Timbs, "Miscelaneous," in W. Vincent, ed., *The Yearbook of Facts in Science and Art* (London, 1873), 33.

54. *Nasheto Pŭrvo Izlozhenie,* nos. 1 and 2 (December 1891): 4.

55. *Nasheto Pŭrvo Izlozhenie,* no. 18 (11 April 1891): 7.

56. An excellent recent translation of this work into English is Aleko Konstantinov, *To Chicago and Back,* trans. Robert Sturm (Sofia, 2004).

57. Even western European visitors were apparently astonished by the grand scale of the Chicago fair, by far the largest of all nineteenth-century fairs with three times the floor space of the 1889 fair in Paris. For west Europeans, as for others from around the world, the Chicago fair provided what one historian called a "clarifying moment in contemporary history . . . it woke up Europeans to the power of the US." Arnold Lewis, *An Early Encounter with Tomorrow: Europeans, Chicago's Loop, and the World's Columbian Exposition* (Urbana, 1997), 17.

criticisms of the west, on and off the fairgrounds. Konstantinov's experience and writings on Chicago, though by no means widely representative of Bulgarian thought at the time, had a critical impact in Bulgaria, in terms of both imaginings of the west and evolving national self-definitions.

Konstantinov, himself a world's fair and exhibition aficionado, had visited Paris in 1889, Prague in 1891, and Plovdiv in 1892—though he wrote about them only in passing—before setting off for the New World in 1893. The Chicago fair, in fact, was Konstantinov's explicit destination, and he was stunned to find out that other passengers on his trans-Atlantic vessel were not going to the exposition in Chicago but had come, as Konstantinov critically pointed out, "to look for happiness in the land of billions."[58] From the very beginning, Konstantinov's enthusiasm for America was that of an eager observer, drawn—as he assumed everyone should be—to the spectacle and experience of the Chicago fair. But he was also guarded and critical of America as seducing and corrupting Europeans, with its incessant and ubiquitous pursuit of wealth.

Upon arrival, Konstantinov spent a few days in "great and greedy New York," and then it was off to Chicago where the spectacle of the west soared to even greater heights.[59] The sheer scale of the Chicago fair was overwhelming to Konstantinov who could not help but compare it to Bulgaria's rather modest Plovdiv exhibition: "In the Palace of Manufacturing at the Chicago Exhibition you could fit not only our entire Plovdiv, Bulgarian exposition, but also all of the inhabitants of the second Bulgarian capital, together with all of their possessions and their livestock on top of that."[60] The Plovdiv fair, and Bulgaria in general, provided a reference point for the grand scale of the fair's many offerings. In describing the individual American states' pavilions, for example, Konstantinov marveled at the New York pavilion's "richly appointed" salon, which he claimed was "finer than the salon at Versailles." As regards the pavilions themselves, he added: "And when I say pavilion, please do not think that they look like the Sofia pavilion at the Plovdiv Exposition. For example, the Illinois pavilion is 72,000 square feet and above it they erected such an enormous cupola that all of the domes of Sofia's churches could dance the gallop inside."[61] Hyperbole aside, the Plovdiv exposition and Bulgaria itself was diminished in light of the grandeur of the Chicago exposition. But it was not just Bulgaria that was subject to comparison. As Konstantinov gazed upon the panorama of the fair one evening, for example, he rather callously asserted, "The view over all this is so majestic that I must tell you, when I remember the view over the World Exposition in Paris, excluding the Eiffel Tower, it seems to me like a group of gilded huts."[62] Not only Bulgaria, but Europe itself was vastly outdone by the American fair.

As for Bulgaria, according to Konstantinov, its meager displays were surpassed by virtually every other participant in Chicago. While the

58. Konstantinov, *To Chicago and Back,* 24–25.
59. Ibid., 92.
60. Ibid., 55.
61. Ibid., 70.
62. Ibid., 69.

scale of American progress was clearly out of reach, more disconcerting was Bulgaria's inability to measure up to the "first-class exhibits" of Europe—which even "oriental Japan" had found possible. As he opined, "The Damned Japanese are incredibly advanced. . . . In each area, lined up with the first class Europeans nations, you'll see imposing kiosks with the inscription 'Japan.'"[63] According to Konstantinov, the Greeks were the only national group that seemed to stoop to the Bulgarian level in terms of their feeble showing, with their mere "sack of olives" on display. As he snidely remarked, "Why couldn't they keep quiet, and mind their own poverty?"[64] These observations notwithstanding, it was the Bulgarian exhibit in the Palace of Manufacturing and the paltry kiosk, labeled "Bulgarian Curiosities," on the fair's famous causeway, the Midway Plaissance, that most concerned our author.[65]

In fact, upon arriving at the fair, Konstantinov headed directly to the rather modest state-sponsored Bulgarian pavilion nestled in a "dark and narrow alley" next to the Ottoman pavilion. This juxtaposition perhaps resulted from organizers' bewilderment concerning Bulgaria's status as de facto independent, yet still de jure part of the Ottoman empire. Interestingly, in the American catalogue on the fair, *The Book of the Fair,* the Bulgarian pavilion was given quite a positive reception in direct comparison to its Turkish neighbor:

> Somewhat in contrast are the exhibits of Turkey and Bulgaria, the former consisting of a single display of oriental rugs, while the latter had furnished well selected specimens, not only of her manufacturers but of her agriculture and her national costumes, those of the peasantry in their gay attire and those of her soldiery and civic officials . . . here also are attar of roses, wines, tobaccos, silk, and hand made textiles, including an embroidered carpet with 500 square feet in area in a single piece.[66]

Konstantinov, in contrast, gave voice to his clear sense of subdued disappointment when he assessed the meager contents of the exhibit, which he called a *diukanche* or "kiosk."[67]

A glutton for punishment, Konstantinov's second stop at the fair, was the "Bulgarian Curiosities" shop, a privately run affair built in "Turkish-Moorish style" set amid many of the pleasures of the famous Midway. Although Konstantinov did not make the distinction, the kiosk was clearly outside the control of Bulgarian officials and was guided quite blatantly by commercial rather than representational concerns. Interestingly, although Konstantinov had no apparent concern with Bulgarians being depicted as "oriental" on the Midway, he was worried about being seen as "savage" by

63. Ibid., 60.

64. Ibid., 72.

65. Significantly, Konstantinov seems particularly offended by the "Americans in fezzes," who sell kebabs and dance like dervishes at the "Turkish village," where he eats lunch on his first day at the fair. Ibid., 63.

66. Hubert Howe Bancroft, *Book of the Fair: An Historical Descriptive Presentation of the World's Science, Art, and Industry, as Viewed through the Columbian Exposition at Chicago in 1893* (Chicago, 1895), 1:218–19.

67. Konstantinov, *To Chicago and Back,* 55–57.

foreign spectators. On several occasions he ruminated that Americans will surely mistake Bulgarians for a "South American Tribe" since Bulgarian embroidery and other artifacts "resemble Native American folk art."[68] But whatever angst Konstantinov experienced at Bulgarians being mistaken for "savage," he channeled into his mostly ironic repartee with his readers that lightly made fun of Bulgarian backwardness. This tone became Konstantinov's trademark and the foundation of his later fame in Bulgarian literary circles and the Bulgarian national imagination.

For significantly, in the crowded back portion of the "Bulgarian Curiosities" shop, Konstantinov found a true curiosity that would provide the basis for his later literary notoriety. According to Konstantinov, Gano Somov, a Bulgarian who came direct to Chicago from Istanbul, perched cross-legged in "Turkish fashion" in his "endless blue bloomers" and sold *tereshe* (geranium, or "false" rose oil). Gano Somov's "oriental" dress, accoutrements, and mannerisms become the loose basis for Konstantinov's famous fictional character, Baĭ Gano, the anti-hero of a series of feuilletons later compiled into a novel, *Baĭ Gano: The Extraordinary Tales of a Modern Bulgarian* (1895).[69] Born from this encounter in Chicago, Gano became possibly the most famous literary character in Bulgarian history, perhaps as a result of his poignant encapsulation of the complicated Bulgarian negotiation between east and west.[70] In Chicago, Gano Somov was the unapologetically decadent "oriental," smoking and chatting, lounging phlegmatically in the midst of the heart of industrial capitalism. It was this show of "barbarity" that somehow captured Konstantinov's imagination. Perhaps, Konstantinov was exceedingly drawn to Gano Somov because he was in many ways the antithesis of certain aspects of American life.

Konstantinov, in fact, in the course of his travels, had become increasingly critical of American society. Perhaps most damning was Konstantinov's notion of the American as a machine, always in motion but intrinsically cold and unfeeling—only in pursuit of material gain. As Gano Somov himself grumbled about America, "It's a strange world. A cold world."[71] These simple words were echoed in Konstantinov's far more detailed diatribes:

> This mad motion of the railroads, boats, trams, and elevators. These streets covered by a net of wires, the smoke, the noise, the bustle . . . and those worried faces, those silent lips already shorn of the capability to

68. Ibid., 72.

69. This novel, one of Bulgaria's most cherished works of literature (along with *Under the Yoke*), concerns the bumbling travails of a Bulgarian rose oil merchant, Gano Balkanski (the Balkan one). Baĭ (an archaic form of address) Gano travels around Europe embarrassing himself with his uncivilized manner and lack of "European" decorum.

70. Debates about the true meaning of Baĭ Gano have abounded since its publication, and there is a school of thought that suggests that Baĭ Gano is emblematic of a specific social class—Bulgaria's nouveau riche. Although he still provokes serious controversy, Baĭ Gano is generally read and understood by Bulgarians as a "national" prototype, or at least a "Homo balkanicus." *Baĭ Gano* is by far the most debated and analyzed work of Bulgarian literature. For the best survey of historical interpretations of the work, see Daskalov, *Mezhdy Iztok i Zapada,* 116–83. See also Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans,* 37–42.

71. Konstantinov, *To Chicago and Back,* 58.

> portray a smile. Oh, it's so cold. All the Americans roam and dart around like cogs of a machine, as if unconsciously, automatically walking to and fro and interweaving, and dollars drop from the machine. They reinsert these dollars into the machine and again go to and fro like cogs. So, when will we live?[72]

For Konstantinov, the "coldness" of American culture was only escaped during various encounters with non-Americans like Gano Somov, a Serb, some Germans in New York, and even people he encountered in the "Turkish village" at the Chicago fair. Konstantinov clearly felt most comfortable among Europeans, especially those from the Balkans, who had an undeniable "warmth" that Americans seemed to lack. In a certain sense, Konstantinov discovered or solidified his own sense of Europeanness, if not Balkanness, in the "cold," wild, yet modern America.

Indeed, Konstantinov's adventures in the American context provoked a fresh set of imaginings about the Bulgarians' place in the world, in the west, and more pointedly in Europe. In many ways, America emerged as the distant, unobtainable, and also undesirably debauched west; simultaneously a Bulgarian (and European) fantasy and nightmare. In its encounter with America, Europe, which had seemed rather unattainably grand at the beginning of the travelogue, moved noticeably closer to Bulgarian reality and to shared cultural values in the course of the narrative. Konstantinov himself, after all, had *learned* to be European, with all that implied. Europe itself was a "west" that was unequivocally closer to home, warmer and more human. Upon his return to Paris from the New World en route to Bulgaria, for example, Konstantinov feverishly yelped, "Down with New York! Long Live Paris! Hurrah! Here's the city of cities. The pulse of Humanity!"[73] The reality of the west in its brashest American incarnation made Paris unexpectedly look like home. But after Konstantinov and his vivid narratives came home to roost, America could not be forgotten.

Konstantinov's works—both *To Chicago and Back* and *Baĭ Gano*—were widely read by Bulgarians in the period that followed and remain iconic to this day. Baĭ Gano became an enduring—though controversial—representation of the Bulgarian self, or at least some self-orientalized incarnation of that self. But Bulgarians, and in particular the Bulgarian elite, were far from accepting the implications of Baĭ Ganovshtina (the Baĭ Gano factor in themselves) as unchangeable fact. As direct encounters with the west—and literary ponderings on those encounters increased—Baĭ Gano provoked numerous responses. In general, Bulgaria's escalating contact with the west deepened its inferiority complex and conflicting strategies developed. On the one hand, ambivalence toward the west and nativist opposition to the penetration of western capital fueled increasingly protectionist economic policies.[74] On the other hand, discrepancies between Bulgaria and the west—with Europe as the most attainable and desirable referent—spurred efforts to lessen the apparent gap. For these

72. Ibid., 89.
73. Ibid., 92.
74. J. Lampe, *The Bulgarian Economy in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1986), 39.

reasons, Bulgaria not only did *not* leave the world's fair stage, but continued to "come out" in force, like a debutante flaunting her own modernized image to an admiring west.

St. Louis 1904

As Bulgarian statesmen continued to struggle with the oriental image of Bulgarians at home and abroad, world's fairs, European and American, continued to provide an opportunity for battling notions of Bulgarian backwardness. Among other things, the shame of Chicago in 1893—that is, the pathetic portrait that Konstantinov painted and popularized—were undoubtedly instrumental in driving Bulgarian efforts to organize a magnificent display for the monumental St. Louis World's Fair of 1904. While no other Balkan country had noteworthy representation at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1904, Bulgaria went all out in engineering a display worthy of a respectable "European" country. Of the other Balkan states, only Romania and Turkey had any representation at the fair, and they had only small unofficial confectionary stands, while Bulgaria had elaborate representation, not only in its own pavilion but in the many, varied sections of the fair. Unlike in Chicago, where the state had only minimal involvement in the official pavilion and no role in the "curiosities shop," in St. Louis an official Bulgarian commission ensured that Bulgaria's display was as respectable as possible. The result was fairly substantial, generating a great deal of surprise and admiration among the Americans as well as the Bulgarians who witnessed it.

Since no notable travelogues on par with Konstantinov's *To Chicago and Back* materialized, among the scant sources on the Bulgarian display are the reports to Sofia written by the official Bulgarian delegation to the fair. These reports, primarily the unpublished letters of the Bulgarian commissioner general at the fair, Petŭr Mateev, to the Bulgarian Prince Ferdinand, offer important insights into official objectives regarding the Bulgarian place at the St. Louis Fair in 1904. In spite of the obvious difference of perspective and audience, Mateev's letters are, in places at least, evocative of Konstantinov's travelogue. It seems quite clear, in fact, that Mateev must have read *To Chicago and Back* (and, of course, *Baĭ Gano*), and in many ways made it his express task to resurrect the Bulgarian image—real or most likely perceived—in America as well as for the benefit of the rather ambitious Prince Ferdinand. Though Mateev was clearly without the literary gifts or broader audience of Konstantinov, he did speak and write in excellent English (intermittently) and had more direct and intimate contact with his American hosts than Konstantinov had. In fact, Mateev, as a graduate of Istanbul's Robert College, had longtime contacts with a number of Americans that he reactivated in his quest to find Bulgarian favor at the fair.[75] Indeed, Mateev did not focus his rather lengthy

75. Robert College, established in 1861, was the very first American missionary school abroad. Significantly, Robert College graduated more Bulgarians than any other ethnic group, and five of its graduates went on to become prime ministers, while many others

letters to the prince on admiration or repulsion for America or the fair extravaganza but on the success of the Bulgarian exhibition, which he himself organized.

As self-serving as this might seem, American sources tend to corroborate his conclusions about the successful Bulgarian arrangements of goods and artifacts. As Mark Bennitt's chronicle of the St. Louis Exposition marvels, after only twenty-five years of autonomy, Bulgaria filled a 6,000-square-foot section of the "Varied Industries" building and "was well represented in seven groups of the Education and Social Economy department, in three Fine Arts groups, in five Varied Industries groups, in two Mines and Metallurgy groups, one Fish and Game group, and one Transportation group."[76] In addition, the *St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat* reported on the opening of the Bulgarian exhibit as a "delightful affair" where 400 "impressed" guests were served elaborate refreshments and the 150 women in attendance were given small bottles of Bulgaria's famous rose oil. The president of the fair gave a short speech in which he promised to cable the prince of Bulgaria to thank him for "the beautiful display that his country had made, notwithstanding the fact that it was one of the smallest countries taking part in the Exposition."[77] Although this report is perhaps slightly patronizing in tone, the Americans did positively ooh and ah over the Bulgarian treasures put on display for their viewing pleasure. One American newspaper described the Bulgarian pavilion in intimate and enchanted detail (figure 4):

> No visitor at the exposition will ever forget the delicate and delicious perfume that pervaded the vicinity of the Bulgarian section in the Varied Industries Building. Here was an ever-trickling fountain of rose water, flowing from a Balkan rock, on which there was a Turkish Bashi-Bazouk [irregular soldier], pistol in hand, peering down over a projecting ledge, under which a Bulgarian rebel crouched, ready and waiting for a death-grapple with his pursuer [figure 4]. Just below this figure was the little pool, overhung by ferns and grasses, from which the winged odors went away, attracting crowds from all other parts of the building.[78]

Although the anti-Ottoman imagery was most probably lost on most Americans, for Bulgarian exhibitors it was critical to impress upon American visitors that their present state of progress was quite remarkable given their very recent past of Ottoman "slavery," and this message did seem to get through.

In fact, as in Plovdiv 1892, the Ottoman past, and the status of Macedonia—still under Ottoman rule—was a clear subtext for the exhibit as a whole. By 1904 Bulgarian territorial ambitions in neighboring

became ambassadors, industrialists, and other people of import in post-1878 autonomous Bulgaria. See the memoirs of its second president, George Washburn, *Fifty Years in Constantinople and Recollections of Robert College* (New York, 1909), 95.

76. Mark Bennitt, ed., *History of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition: St Louis World's Fair of 1904* (St. Louis, 1905), 241.

77. *St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat,* 1 September 1904, 13–14

78. Bennitt, *History of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition,* 242.

Figure 4. The Bulgarian pavilion at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, St. Louis, 1904. Courtesy of the Missouri Historical Society.

Macedonia, with its substantial Slavic-"Bulgarian" population had reached a fevered pitch. Indeed, the more immediate context for the St. Louis fair was the still fresh memory of the 1903 Illinden uprising against Ottoman rule, in which Bulgaro-Slavic populations had played a central role and were subject to brutal reprisals.[79] As Mateev himself related in a letter to Prince Ferdinand:

> When showing eminent men around our section, I invariably wound up standing in front of the fountain rock and explaining the meaning of the sculpture: There you see the past life of the Bulgarian people as recent as twenty-five years ago, the Turk trying to annihilate us . . . twenty-five years of liberty has enabled us to cross a continent, an ocean, and another continent to come here and exhibit the produce of our country. You are astonished! I am more so than you at such a result. That life depicted there on the rock is the present life in Macedonia.[80]

79. On Illinden, see Brown, *The Past in Question,* and Angelos Chotzidis, Basil Gounaris, and Anna A. Panayotopoulou, eds., *The Events of 1903 in Macedonia as Presented in European Diplomatic Correspondence* (Thessaloniki, 1993).

80. Tsentralen Dŭrzhaven Arkhiv (TsDA, Central State Archive, Sofia, Bulgaria), f. 3k, op. 8, e. 594, p. 40.

In asserting a clear contrast between the Ottoman past and the apparent progress of the Bulgarian present, the Bulgarian commission clearly attempted to strengthen Bulgarian claims to full independence, and, more importantly, to the territory of Macedonia—still under Ottoman rule. Given that Bulgaria was still nominally under Ottoman control, Mateev's speech at the opening of the Bulgarian exhibit is somewhat astounding:

> Twenty-five years ago the Bulgarians were an ignored people. . . . They possessed nothing, they had one kind of existence, a cruel one, an alien's crushing rule, the same rule under which long-suffering Macedonia is even now gasping for the breath of life. . . . In its young life of a quarter of a century Bulgaria has experienced several struggles to preserve its freedom. . . . We desire to be known, to be appreciated for our worth and the Bulgarian government is grateful to that of the United States for the present opportunity.[81]

As in Plovdiv 1892, the Ottoman past was a clearly articulated source of blame for Bulgarian backwardness, but at the same time a foil and a point of reference for the amazing "progress" of modern Bulgaria.

The Americans' apparent awe seemed to vindicate Bulgarian goals of displaying Bulgarian "progress" as well as its efforts to "sell" Bulgaria to the west, both in the economic and political sense. As Mateev suggested to the authorities in Bulgaria, "We have made a wonderful *reklama* [advertisement] for Bulgaria."[82] As in the past, and in spite of Bulgarian protectionism, there was still a pressing desire to stimulate trade between Bulgaria and United States; thus the selling of Bulgaria was a necessary evil. In one letter to the prince, for example, Mateev boasted of the grandiose labors required to put in order the Bulgarian portion of the catalogue for jurors, "explaining to them our exhibits in a way to especially interest them in our country, to conceal from them the many insufficiencies; to suggest to them the awards we expected; and to bring influence to bear for a higher award."[83] Only grudgingly did Mateev admit both "insufficiencies" and his own efforts to put pressure on fair judges.

But in selling Bulgaria, unlike in Plovdiv and Chicago, exhibit organizers stressed Bulgaria's kinship to the west, instead of its oriental exoticism. To be sure, folksy Bulgarian costumes were on display along with other Bulgarian products like tobacco, wheat, and so on. But folk culture was presented in a sanitized display, without hints of eastern influence. As in the past, Bulgarian national "originality" abounded, but now in western packaging. The sculpture-fountain from which the scent of Bulgarian rose oil emanated, for example, attracted considerable attention among visitors, as its smell, "pervaded the vicinity of the Bulgarian section." For the American nose, this "delicate and delicious perfume . . . of the ever-trickling fountain of rose water" was reminiscent of a romanticized Orient. But, though offered up for all to smell, the rose oil was not meant to provide local visitors a taste of the "Orient." Instead, rose oil flowed

81. Ibid., p. 15.
82. Ibid., p. 58.
83. Ibid., pp. 29–31, 41.

over a sculpture fountain inspired by western artistic traditions and was packaged in attractive vials for "the ladies" at the opening because it was supposed to invoke the "civilized" western practice of perfuming, not the essence of Ottoman harems.

Like Konstantinov before him, though, Mateev was also highly judgmental about the furious pace of "civilized" American life, which appeared to serve only materialistic goals. As he reported to the Bulgarian prince in a letter written 17 April 1904: "The people here work and work as slaves are forced to do. They have Sundays and three or four national days a year. Their whole life is a race in the worship of the golden calf. In Europe people strive for thousands; here they are not content with millions. . . . Everybody is busy with his work and nobody appears to care for anybody else. . . . Everybody is in a hurry."[84] Although surely based on observation, Mateev's comments also echo an evaluation that is steeped in Bulgarian, as well as other nonwestern and even European critiques of American life.

Still, in spite of its flaws, the barbaric American "west" had much to offer the young Bulgarian state, economically and culturally. American (like European) fairs provided an avenue for Bulgarian modernization; trade was stimulated and technology transferred. America offered a stage on which Bulgaria could prove its newly procured Europeanness, displaying itself alongside the other "first-class" European pavilions. By 1904 Bulgaria was indeed more advanced by many indicators than it had been in 1892 or 1893, and it was determined to show the world this advancement in St. Louis. Ambivalence toward the west had not abated, but Bulgaria was firmly on the path of catching up—and Europeanization was central to this path. Because of this, Bulgaria was less willing in St. Louis than in Plovdiv or Chicago to market itself as "oriental" to the western world, in spite of western hunger for the exotic. Though the lure of the west would always be tempered by ambivalence, in St. Louis, Bulgaria attempted to firmly assert its entitlement to a place among the industrialized nations and indeed to its "westernness."

Bulgarian experiences at world's fairs, whether at home or abroad, were critical episodes in the complex and multifaceted engagement with the west that had cast its shadow over national self-identification since 1878. In these contexts, abstract notions of the west became more concrete through direct and participatory encounters. In Plovdiv in 1892, Bulgarians simultaneously appropriated and asserted themselves against western "dominance," while displaying and exploring the parameters of the national self. This fair provided the ideal context for concrete visual and experiential expressions of such imaginings, but it was not just on Bulgarian soil that these Bulgarian encounters were played out. The Bulgarian place in the world, as performed on the world's fair stage, was brought home through the writings of Bulgarian travelers. Chicago came to Sofia through the words of Konstantinov who brought home laughter

84. Ibid., p. 17.

as well as the shame of the lackluster if not "savage" Bulgarian showing at the fair. He highlighted the agony of Bulgarian invisibility—tucked into a dark corner of the fair—as well as its dubious visibility on the Midway, as simple Baĭ Ganos among the more sophisticated "western" nations. Fairs were contexts in which spectacle prevailed, and in St. Louis Bulgaria attempted to erase the shame of Chicago and assert Bulgaria's place of respectability among "western" nations, even as anxieties toward western dominance still held sway. Undoubtedly, fair encounters, at home and abroad, intensified the need for Bulgaria to assess, unravel, and confront the west as a place and cultural concept, even as it continuously disentangled itself from the east.