

REVIEW

by Prof. Vera Boneva, ScD (History and Museology), State University of Library Studies and IT,
of the doctoral dissertation of Denis Ivanov

“Ivan Drasov – unknown and underrated activist of the Bulgarian national liberation
movement”,

Professional field 2.2. “History and Archaeology”,
academic supervision by Prof. Plamen Mitev, PhD.

Information on the candidate and the procedure

Denis Ivanov earned a BA and MA from the Paissii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv (2014-2019). He then worked as curator of the Chirpan Museum of History (2020-2021). In 2021 he became a doctoral student at the Chair of History of Bulgaria of the St. Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia under the supervision of Prof. Plamen Mitev, and completed his doctoral studies in 2023. At present he is an external Assistant Professor of History of the Bulgarian Revival in the Paissii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv.

Denis Ivanov’s academic interests made him stand out even as a student. Part of his output was printed in academic publications before he became a doctoral student. Scientific contributions can be found in his Master’s thesis on the life and acts of Vassil Levski. He participates systematically in academic conferences (a document certifying that fact is submitted). He has completed the activities envisaged in his individual doctoral plan and finished in time the writing of his dissertation. He has published ten articles on his subject and two more are awaiting publication; two of these articles are in refereed and indexed journals. He has fulfilled the minimal national doctoral requirements two and a half times over, earning 200 points, while 80 are sufficient. All articles are included in the documentation in full. Each of them shows outstanding meticulousness and depth.

After reading the text carefully, I am convinced that it is fully authentic and does not contain any inappropriately used elements of other scientists’ work. The Abstract summarizes the structure and content of the dissertation convincingly and fully. The self assessment of the contributive moments is concrete and realistic. Both the dissertation and the Abstract are presented in a finished and reader-friendly form.

In my capacity of member of the academic panel I have received all the necessary documentation. Having studied it, I am convinced that neither during the doctoral course, nor

in the procedure authorizing the go-ahead of the defense of the dissertation have there been any irregularities. I declare that I do not have any co-authorships or other activities in common with the candidate that could have been a basis for a conflict of interest.

General information on the dissertation

The dissertation is 501 standard pages long. It comprises an Introduction, four Chapters, a Conclusion, and Lists of Sources and of Abbreviations. The chronological frame, the goals, tasks, and methods are defined clearly and categorically. The choice of the thematic approach over the chronological corresponds to the variety of activities of Ivan Drasov, and also to the multi-layered information, derived from the primary and secondary sources.

When working in the archives, the author has prioritized documents produced directly by Drasov. However, he has also drawn from many other sources, mainly the archives of persons who had cooperated with Drasov, especially before the Liberation, like Danail Christov Popov, Panayot Hitov, Nikola Obretenov, Todor Peev, Svetoslav Milarov, and others. Besides, he has quoted and analyzed material from an extremely wide array of revivalist newspapers, journals, and books.

The work with sources is one of the most serious achievements of the dissertation. Ivanov demonstrates an ability to distill from the source the information he is seeking, plus to test the source, displaying a flair for discrepancies, opinionated judgments, misleading clues, etc. This makes his conclusions very solid, and his reconstructions very convincing. The references form a most impressive, even somewhat cumbersome metatext, as there are 2217 of them! But the appearance of heaviness of the reference layer is, in fact, deceptive: it is not overburdened by unnecessary repetitions and does not usurp the functions of the main narrative; it is a tunnel between the concepts of the author and his sources.

Denis Ivanov shows respect to all the principal authors who have formulated positions on his subject matter but has the audacity to stand by his guns even when he is quite at variance with the “heavyweights” in academic historiography of Revivalist Bulgaria. On occasion, he would leave the answers “open” – to questions which cannot be supported by fact. That method is viable, especially as it gives the possibility to divide thesis from hypothesis make an opening for further research.

The thesis is packed with fact to the utmost. One doesn't encounter in this case any hidden or unwitting repetitions, in contrast to numerous other contemporary cases. Each paragraph is a whole, in essence and concept, and could evolve into an article or study, which would offer a self-sustaining narrative on topics of consequence relating to the Revival in the last decade before Liberation. The headings and subheadings are impactful and clear; on occasion, the author would aptly borrow a phrase from Drasov for them.

Analysis of the main text

Chapter I covers the life and revolutionary activity of Drasov until 1872. His date of birth is corrected and his formation as a person is addressed. Most of the chapter is devoted to Drasov's recruitment by the revolutionary movement in 1869, personally by Vassil Levsky. The special paragraph on the establishment of the Lovech revolutionary committee and the evolution of Lovech to underground "capital" of the revolutionary movement is meticulously researched and corresponds to existing sources. Drasov's contributions as "scribe" (secretary) of the Particular revolutionary committee of Lovech, subsequently elevated to Central committee, are described not only in terms of revolutionary activity and ideology, but also logistically: Drasov's house was one of the main "headquarters" of both revolutionary committees. Todor Tonchev's view that the reason why in August 1872 Drasov left his hometown was in order to continue his education abroad, and not in fear of the imminent revolutionary tempest, is upheld convincingly and buttressed by new arguments.

Chapter II reconstructs the first emigrant years of Drasov, from September 1872 to June 1875. The author explains correctly the choice of the town of Pisek in the Czech part of the Habsburg Empire as the place for Drasov's education. In detail are followed Drasov's attempts to continue his revolutionary activity by organizing the émigré Bulgarians in the Czech lands. Revealed is the attitude of Drasov to the fate of Levski and the revolutionary activity after the Arabakonak robbery, as well as to the so-called "Haskovo adventure". With special accuracy are systematized all historiographic sources concerning Drasov's participation in the Third general assembly of the Bulgarian Revolutionary Central Committee (August 21-24, Bucharest). Plenty of fact and some pertinent theory are used to describe and explain Drasov's dual position during the crisis of the Central committee at the end of 1874 and the beginning of 1875. The author's conclusion is that Drasov maintained an autonomous position and that his travel to Belgrade

on a political mission in the beginning of July was on nobody's orders, but on his own initiative: he was trying to revive the revolutionary work.

Denis Ivanov portrays Drasov as an agent of proliferation of revolutionary literature, revolutionary publicist and translator of revolutionary works. A particular paragraph is devoted to his relationship and connections with his fellow-revolutionists and friends, imprisoned in Asia Minor. His views on the Bulgarian Church Question and the educational movement are presented in detail. The candidate shows Drasov as a revivalist well versed in the national literary life, attempting to promote the dreams of an intellectual. The ample factology and serious analysis work to further overcome the dated historiographic view that radical activists were practically "sterile" when it came to contributing to evolutionary development, which was deemed rooted exclusively in clerical and educational *milieux*.

Chapter III deals with the most active years (1875-1878) of Drasov's pre-Liberation activities. After commenting on Drasov's participation in the so-called "Initiative Commission", together with Stefan Stambolov and Christo Botev, the author centers on the Committee's meeting of August 12, 1875, at which Ivan Drasov was elected one of five Members (and also Secretary) of the Bulgarian Revolutionary Committee; that committee was the one which took the decision to prepare an armed insurrection. Drasov held an important political position, therefore the author reveals in detail all that Drasov, as committee leader, did and planned, but couldn't achieve, for the all-Bulgarian rebellion. The author comes to the well-founded conclusion that Ivan Drasov had been a "central figure" and/or the real chief organizer of the preparation for the insurrection attempt of 1875 in Bulgaria.

In the last months of 1875, which were hard for the Bulgarian revolutionary émigrés, Drasov stopped cooperating with Botev, Sambolov, Hitov and other to-be organizers of the April Rebellion. He did not participate in the Giurgiu Revolutionary Committee. He did, however, attend the Brăila meeting of March 6, 1876, which took important decisions concerning the propaganda and the armed struggle in the course of the future insurrection. All this is meticulously reconstructed in several subparagraphs. The cultural and literary activities of Drasov at the time are also described. Drasov's work as co-Editor and publicist in the *Vazrazhdane* newspaper (Brăila, June-October 1876), is subjected to in-depth analysis.

Of general interest is Denis Ivanov's narrative re the "dove post", organized between the towns of Zimnicea and Svishtov on the eve and at the beginning of the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-1878. Ivanov then goes on to describe the administrative initiatives of Drasov as Chairman of the first Municipal Council of Lovech during the Russian occupation of Bulgaria (he held the position from August 31, 1877 to August 1, 1878). That part of the dissertation is a contribution not only to the history of Lovech town, but to Bulgarian national history as well.

Chapter IV is innovative for the dissertation *genre* "Biographies of Bulgarian Revivalists". It deals with Ivan Drasov's contribution to the historic memory of the revolutionary movement and with his presence in contemporary cultural and educational space. Ivanov presents a variety of facts from solid sources, proving that Drasov treated matters of memory responsibly and achieved important results, participating in relevant political initiatives. The author establishes, gradually and at length, that the memory of the revivalist Drasov himself in our contemporary society is fragile and almost imperceptible. It is incommensurate with the memory of his coworkers, such as Levski, Karavelov, Botev, Hitov, Stambolov, etc. That underrating is analyzed and explained in the context of Bulgarian history and historiography.

Evaluation of the contributions and critical notes

Denis Ivanov's dissertation is an academic *opus* which I can call, with a clear conscience, thorough, profound, and contributive to science. His is the audacity, characteristic of a young researcher, but also the skill of the historiographer characteristic of the seasoned scientist. Fact and reasoning follow one another naturally, according to the best academic standards, as should any text dealing with the Revival epoch, sacrosanct in our cultural memory.

The author's contentions are defended ably and intelligently. The terminology used is precise and appropriate. It follows the good practices of the Bulgarian historiographic tradition, as well as the conceptual framework of the all-European narrative concerning the 19th c. The style is academic, and grammatical and even typing errors are almost non-existent.

Re the *factological contributions*, it should be emphasized that this is the first comprehensive biography of Ivan Drasov, covering his pre-Liberation life, which can and should become the basis for his rehabilitation as leading figure in the revolutionary wing of our liberation movement during the last decade before the Liberation. Little-known or unknown archive documents are launched into professional discourse. Correct corrections have been made to

the interpretive part of the collection *Ivan Drasov in the Bulgarian national revolutionary movement (1871-1877)*. A better picture of the cultural, educational and political relations between the Bulgarian and Czech societies of the time is obtained. There is a reconstruction of acts and processes pertaining to the organization and functioning of the Central Bulgarian Revolutionary Committee in Bulgaria, which is historically convincing and founded in fact.

The *methodological contributions* that obtain are, in my view, even more important. The prioritization of the thematic over the chronological approach, in the case in question not just works, it works highly effectively. The authentic documents appear built-in the author's narrative, yet are treated with the respect to originals; that is in principle a hard and risky historiographical approach to depicting an epoch. Denis Ivanov has used it successfully and has pointed to developmental potential in that direction. His reconstruction eliminates the traditional confrontational clichés, following which all revivalists are pre-allocated to clear-cut camps: revolutionists vs. liberals, revolutionists vs. evolutionists, politicians vs. literators, etc. Ivanov's unfettered approach brings his reconstruction nearer to the reality of the fact and circumstance of the past, never one-dimensional or uniform.

My *critical remarks* are directed mainly at the volume of the narrative. Certain paragraphs could be shortened by reducing the number of examples, illustrative of a certain process. At some points the main trend gets lost amid so many hypotheses and opinion, fanned out to the utmost: part of all that could go to the bottom of the page in note form. Nothing is told about Drasov's private life prior to Pisek, after his settlement as emigrant and during his Lovech days of 1877-1878. The photographs, duly described in the dissertation, should be inserted: they will naturally tell a lot about the protagonist, and the historic memories connected to him.

Conclusion

The research thesis, presented by Denis Ivanov, is a thorough, profound, and contributive dissertation in the professional field "History and Archaeology". It meets the highest standards of contemporary knowledge of the past and is a credit to the author, the academic supervisor, and the Chair.

On the basis of everything written above, I submit my **POSITIVE** evaluation of the dissertation of Denis Ivanov "Ivan Drasov – unknown and underrated activist of the Bulgarian national liberation movement", and hereby vote with a **YEA** in the procedure of awarding the candidate

the educational and academic degree of “doctor” in Professional field “History and Archaeology”, doctoral program “History of Bulgaria”.

Prof. Vera Boneva, ScD (History and Museology)

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Translator Deyan Kyuranov