



Centre for Advanced Study Sofia Newsletter

2023–2024

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CAS NEWSLETTER 2023–2024 CONTENTS

4 HIGHLIGHTS FOR 2023

5 ONGOING FELLOWSHIP PROGRAMMES

NEW FELLOWSHIP PROGRAMMES AND PROJECTS

- 7 Sustaining Ukrainian Scholarship
- 8 RE-ENGAGE: Re-Engaging with Neighbours in a State of War and Geopolitical Tensions
- 8 Mapping Trauma
- 9 Summer Institute for the Study of East Central and Southeastern Europe
- 9 Overcoming the Aggressor

COMPLETED PROJECTS

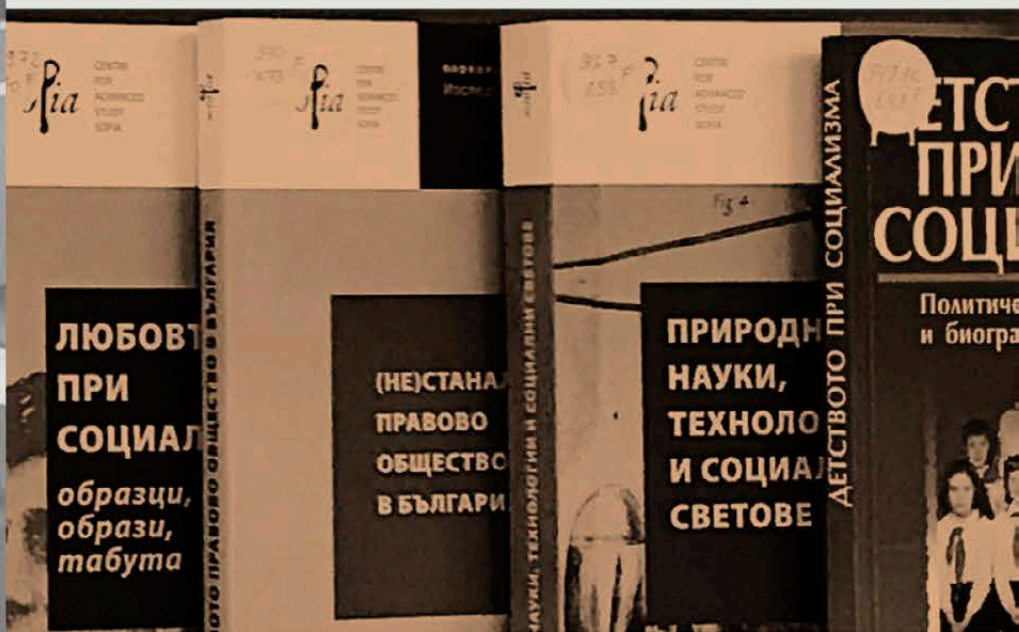
- 10 The Construction of Knowledge in Archaeology and Art History in Southeastern Europe

ADVANCED ACADEMIA PLATFORM: INDIVIDUAL FELLOWSHIPS 2023/2024

- 11 Bulgarian Module
- 14 International Module
- 20 FELLOWS' INTERVIEWS: A TALK AROUND THE TABLE WITH CAS FELLOWS
KIM HOLLEMAN, VICTOR PETROV, STRAHIL PANAYOTOV AND IVO STRAHILOV
- 22 About Prestigious and Unprestigious Layers of Historical Heritage:
Ivo Strahilov
- 26 From "Cyborg Science" to "Psycho Plus" – The Two Sides of One Coin:
Victor Petrov
- 29 The Human Mind – Then and Now: **Strahil Panayotov**
- 32 Living in a Place Surrounded by Untouched, Full-blown Nature:
Kim Holleman

DISCUSSION SERIES

- 36 Economic (Social) Bulgaria: The Future through the Culture of the Past
- 37 Religion and Culture
- 39 Why Byzantium?
- 40 Chernobyl
- 41 CALENDAR OF EVENTS 2023





For the 2023/24 academic year, 23 individual fellowships were awarded to early-career and established scholars in the Humanities and the Social Sciences from 12 countries in the framework of Advanced Academia Platform. A dense schedule of thematic discussions, public lectures and workshops accompanied the regular fellow seminars, while the Centre continued to enhance its reputation of a valued partner and cultivate close collaboration with leading academic institutions across Europe and beyond. Thus far, CAS has granted a total of 404 fellowships to early-career and established Bulgarian scholars, international academics and artists from over 35 countries, postdocs from the post-Soviet space, and the Bulgarian academic diaspora.

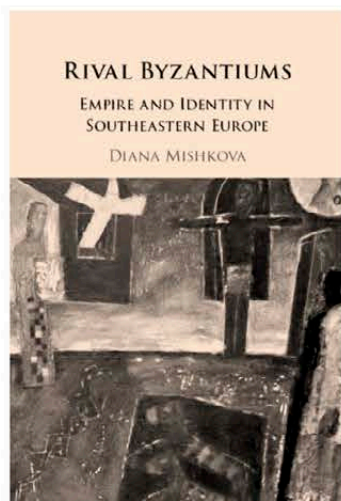
2023 marked the beginning of several major research projects: "Sustaining Ukrainian Scholarship" programme (co-run with the New Europe College in Bucharest and supported by VolkswagenStiftung); "Mapping Trauma" (supported by Köhler-Stiftung within the Stifterverband für die Deutsche Wissenschaft); "Overcoming the Aggressor" (financed by the Daimler and Benz Foundation and co-run with the University of Heidelberg); "Re-Engaging with Neighbours in a State of War and Geopolitical Tensions (RE-ENGAGE)" funded by the European Union's Horizon Europe programme and co-run with the Norwegian Institute for International Affairs; "Chernobyl Discussion Series" (a multidisciplinary group of scholars supported and hosted by CAS).

Of great strategic value for the Centre is the extension, until the end of 2024, of the Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Bulgaria and the State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation of the Swiss Confederation – a bilateral agreement providing support for Bulgarian scientists and ensuring CAS institutional stability. A new Memorandum between the two states is expected to be concluded at the beginning of 2025 for another 4-year period.

From January 2023, the CAS Sofia Working Paper Series (ISSN: 2683 - 1341), presenting the research outcomes of our fellows, are available in open access via the Central and Eastern European Online Library (<https://www.ceeol.com>).

In 2023, two new members of the CAS Academic Advisory Council were elected: Prof. Balázs Trencsényi (History, CEU Vienna, Director of CEU-IAS Budapest) and Prof. Viktoriya Sereda (Research Lead at Prisma Ukraina Research Network in Berlin and the Head Coordinator of the VUIAS project initiative of the Wissenschaftskolleg). They will replace Prof. János Kovács and Prof. Carmen Scheide, who for many years served the mission of CAS with dedication, expertise and generosity.

Last but not least, we would like to congratulate Prof. Diana Mishkova, Director of the Centre for Advanced Study, for the coming out of her book "Rival Byzantiums. Empire and Identity in Southeastern Europe" (Cambridge University Press, December 2022) and Assoc. Prof. Martin Ivanov, Academic Associate of CAS, for the publication of his influential book "The 'Former People' of Concentration Camp Bulgaria" (Ciela Publ., 2024).



CAS Team

ADVANCED ACADEMIA PLATFORM

This Platform summons the CAS “independent” fellowship programmes, i.e. those that grant support to early-career and established scholars, unrestricted in terms of their topic of research, to engage in free enquiry as participants in a multidisciplinary international community of humanities and social-science researchers.

ADVANCED ACADEMIA FELLOWSHIPS FOR BULGARIAN SCHOLARS

INDEPENDENT BULGARIAN-SWISS FELLOWSHIP PROGRAMME FOR BULGARIAN JUNIOR SCHOLARS AND BULGARIAN ACADEMIC DIASPORA (MON 2019–2024)

With the support of the Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science and the Swiss State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation

The programme is financed by the Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science (MES) in the framework of the Swiss-Bulgarian Memorandum for Understanding. It provides support for young Bulgarian scientists and researchers from the Bulgarian academic diaspora. Until the 2023/24 academic year, the programme has supported 33 researchers.

Fellowships for Bulgarian Junior Scholars: five nine-month scholarships per year are granted to promising early-career Bulgarian scholars (including one month in a foreign institution). (For more details, visit: <https://cas.bg/en/2024-2025-call-for-applications-advanced-academia-fellowships-for-bulgarian-scholars/>)

RE-LINK programme for representatives of the Bulgarian academic diaspora provides two three-month scholarships per year for representatives of the Bulgarian academic diaspora working in foreign academic institutions. (For more details, visit: <https://cas.bg/en/2024-2025-call-for-applications-re-link-fellowships-for-bulgarian-diaspora/>)

PFORZHEIMER FELLOWSHIPS FOR SENIOR BULGARIAN SCHOLARS (2019–2025)

With a personal donation from Carl H. Pforzheimer III

This programme, funded by a donation from the American philanthropist Carl H. Pforzheimer III (Co-chairman Emeritus of America for Bulgaria Foundation), provides for two to three five-month scholarships per year to established Bulgarian researchers and university professors. (For more details, visit: <https://cas.bg/en/2024-2025-call-for-applications-advanced-academia-pforzheimer-senior-fellowships/>)

ADVANCED ACADEMIA FELLOWSHIPS FOR INTERNATIONAL SCHOLARS

INDEPENDENT FELLOWSHIPS (2011–2024)

With the support of the Porticus Foundation, The Netherlands

These fellowships are granted to established and promising early-career non-Bulgarian scholars to pursue their individual research projects in-residence in Sofia. (For more details, visit: <https://cas.bg/en/2024-2025-call-for-applications-advanced-academia-fellowships-for-international-scholars/>)

GERDA HENKEL FELLOWSHIPS (2016–2025)

With the support of the Gerda Henkel Stiftung, Germany

The Gerda Henkel Fellowship Programme for fundamental historical research is aimed at scholars from the countries of the former Soviet Union, Central Asia, and Turkey and provides up to four scholarships per year. The five-month in-residence fellowships are granted to PhD holders from Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, China (only Tibet and Xinjiang Autonomous Regions), Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Mongolia, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Turkey, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan. (For more details, visit: <https://cas.bg/en/2024-2025-call-for-applications-gerda-henkel-fellowships/>)

SOCIAL RELEVANCE OF THE HUMANITIES (2021–2026)

With the support of the Porticus Foundation, The Netherlands

This programme seeks to encourage scholars to explore the relevance of their research fields/topics for the contemporary world and to highlight the potential of the humanities as critical disciplines when applied to contemporary issues. It provides in-residence fellowships of five to nine month duration to post-doctoral non-Bulgarian, junior and established, researchers. The programme is carried out in cooperation with New Europe College in Bucharest. (For more details, visit: <https://cas.bg/en/2024-2025-call-for-applications-social-relevance-of-the-humanities/>)

LANDIS & GYR INTERNATIONAL RESIDENCY PROGRAMME FOR ARTISTS AND WRITERS (2017–2028)

With the support of Landis & Gyr Foundation, Switzerland

This fellowship programme is aimed at stimulating and promoting the creative work of artists from various fields by integrating them in a community of humanities and social science scholars and spurring interaction between fundamental research and the arts. It provides one five-month fellowship per year to artists and writers from/working in East Central Europe. (For more details, visit: <https://cas.bg/en/programme/landis-and-gyr-artistic-fellowships/>)

NEW FELLOWSHIP PROGRAMMES AND PROJECTS

SUSTAINING UKRAINIAN SCHOLARSHIP (SUS) (2023–2026)

With the “Sustaining Ukrainian Scholarship” programme, CAS reinforces its efforts in support of scholars at risk. This is a joint fellowship programme of CAS Sofia and its Romanian partner institute, New Europe College, carried out in collaboration with Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin (Wiko) and funded by the VolkswagenStiftung in Germany. SUS awards grants to researchers in the humanities and social sciences from regions affected by Russia’s war against Ukraine with the goal of integrating them into the global academic network. It is linked with a Wiko’s initiative of creating a Virtual Ukrainian Institute for Advanced Study (VUIAS).

The fellowships are being tailored to the situation and specific needs of the grantees. Those of them who cannot leave Ukraine participate remotely in the fellow seminars; others can spend up to ten months in residence in Sofia. The programme offers additional financing for technical aid, academic networking, and the dissemination of research. (For more details, visit: <https://cas.bg/en/2024-2025-call-for-applications-sustaining-ukrainian-scholarship/>)

Photographs on this page are from the first SUS Conference that took place in Bucharest, Romania, on 14 March 2024, with special guests Dr Katherine Younger (IWM Vienna), and Ukrainian authors Andrey Kurkov and Andriy Lyubka.



VolkswagenStiftung





RE-ENGAGE (Re-Engaging with Neighbours in a State of War and Geopolitical Tensions – Grant agreement ID: 101132314) (2024–2026)



Since January 2024, the Centre for Advanced Study Sofia (CAS) has been involved as a key (regional) partner in the RE-ENGAGE project, funded by the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme (grant agreement No. 101132314).

The EU has re-engaged with its neighbouring countries following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, aiming to increase the resilience of the whole European community against external threats like hybrid warfare. However, the approach so far has been overly technical, preventing it from delivering on its promises. A thorough investigation is required to determine how to build strong, democratic, well-functioning, and stable neighbourhood states without compromising the EU's values and security.

RE-ENGAGE aims to help the EU refine its foreign policy toolbox, including enlargement and neighbourhood policies, by constructively informing the enlargement process, forecasting

external actors' geopolitical ambitions, demonstrating how to improve resilience against military threats, enhancing the Union's geopolitical leverage, and promoting democracy in its neighbourhood. To achieve this goal, the project will conduct in-depth studies in six candidate countries: three in the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, and Serbia) and three in the Eastern Neighbourhood (Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine).

The project is coordinated by the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, while CAS performs the key role of a partner institution responsible for coordinating the research activities related to the Western Balkans. The regional institutional network under CAS' guidance also includes the European University of Tirana (EUT) (Albania), the Institute for Contemporary History, Belgrade (Serbia), and the University of Sarajevo (Bosnia & Herzegovina).

MAPPING TRAUMA (2023–2025)

This is a pilot project, funded by the Köhler Stiftung (member of the Stifterverband für die Deutsche Wissenschaft), that aims at surveying, in a carefully sampled way, the traumatic experiences of victims of the communist repressions in Bulgaria, based on the taxonomy of the diverse forms of political terror and repression and their representations. It focuses on the collection of interviews with representatives of four categories of politically persecuted persons in Communist Bulgaria – survivors of concentration camps and prisons, representatives of the "second generation" members of persecuted families, members of the Muslim communities (ethnic Turks and Pomaks), and people who escaped the regime due to political persecution – in total, twenty interviews with victims or their relatives. A prospective second phase will deal with the representations of trauma in literature and art.

The research team consists of historians specialising in communism studies and oral history, psychologists, psychiatrists, and sociologists. A far-reaching ambition of the project is the creation of an "Oral History Archive" of communist-inflicted trauma, bringing together all existing recorded and video resources.



Krasimira Butseva, Lilia Topouzova, and Julian Chehirian
The Neighbours: Forms of Trauma (1945–1989),
Pavilion of the Republic of Bulgaria at the 60th International
Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia

SUMMER INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF EAST CENTRAL AND SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE (SISECSE) (2023–2025)

A project that experiments with a format new to CAS and which started in 2023 is the “Summer Institute for the Study of East Central and Southeastern Europe.” It was initiated and developed in collaboration between CAS Sofia and the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) and funded by a donation of Betty and Carl H. Pforzheimer III.

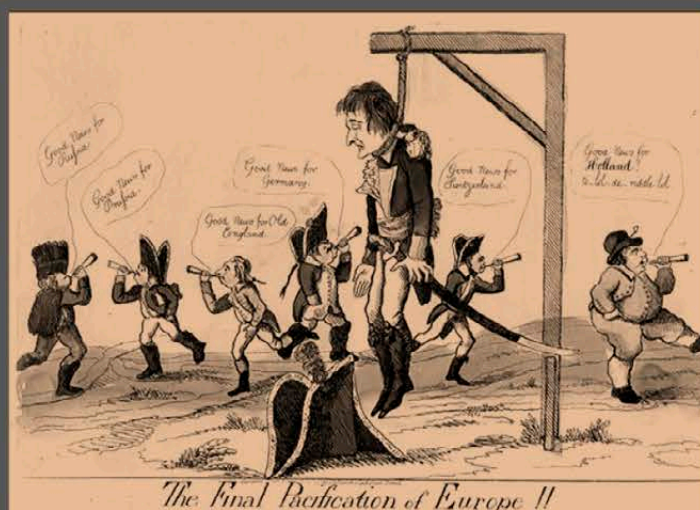
SISECSE provides scholars of Eastern Europe time and space to dedicate to their own research and writing in a collaborative and interdisciplinary setting. In 2023, 2024, and 2025, ACLS and CAS will convene leading academics from Eastern Europe and North America for a two-week residency, hosted by the American University in Bulgaria (AUBG), in Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria. Participants will also be able to undertake local fieldwork, including archival research, work in museum collections, interviews, site surveys, or other forms of data collection.

The programme will cover travel, accommodation, and per diem expenses. Scholars should apply with their own research proposals through the ACLS online system. (For more details, visit: <https://www.acls.org/competitions/summer-institute-east-central-southeastern-europe/>)



OVERCOMING THE AGGRESSOR. SELF-PERCEPTION AND EXTERNAL PERCEPTION OF AN ACTOR BETWEEN NATIONS (2023–2026)

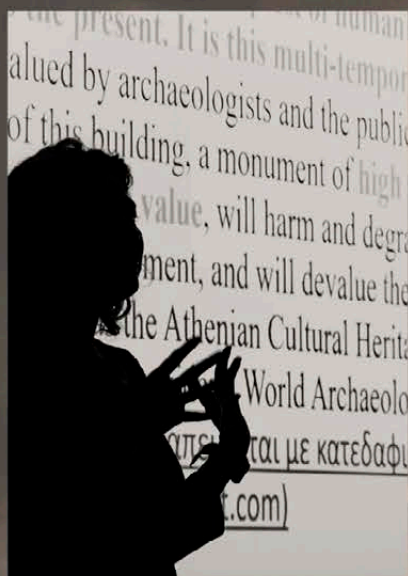
CAS partakes in a new international research network exploring historical narratives and memory politics. “Overcoming the Aggressor. Self-Perception and External Perception of an Actor Between Nations” (financed by the Daimler and Benz Stiftung, Ladenburg, Germany) is devised by a group of historians from Heidelberg, Bochum, Bologna, Budapest and CAS Sofia. Next to a larger circle of established scholars, it involves a group of doctoral students, affiliated to universities in Heidelberg, Bochum, Bologna, and two postdoctoral in-residence researchers, one of them, former CAS fellow Martin Valkov, to be hosted by CAS for a period of three years. The programme envisages a series of research seminars, three major conferences, and publication of a broad anthology and comparative monographic works.



"The Final Pacification of Europe"

[London Pub. June. 1803 by W. Holland 11 Cockspur Street.]
© The Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

COMPLETED PROJECTS



THE CONSTRUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE IN ARCHAEOLOGY AND ART HISTORY IN SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE (2019–2023)

This programme's overall structure consisted of a series of conferences and spring schools taking place over the course of three years in three different capital cities in the region: Sofia, Bucharest, and Athens.

The Third spring school took place in Sofia between 24 and 30 April 2023, under the topic "Archaeological Heritage Preservation and Cultural Heritage Discourses." The Closing conference in Athens, Greece, held on 3–5 November 2023, concluded the programme's final year with the theme "Local and global in the construction of knowledge in archaeology and art history: a view from Southeastern Europe and beyond."

Following the excellent assessment of the outputs of the programme and thanks to the generous financial support of the Getty Foundation, CAS will establish a multifunctional interactive platform - a website that will make collaboration easier and will expand the dissemination of initiatives and publications stemming from the programme, while seeking to involve a larger circle of scholars. This website will offer a space for networking and sharing valuable information – about publications, events, announcements, etc. – and will aspire to become a unique communication hub promoting methodological diversity in archaeology and cultural heritage studies.



ADVANCED ACADEMIA PLATFORM:

Individual Fellowships 2023–2024

Bulgarian Module



Ivo Strahilov

Bulgarian-Swiss Fellowship

PhD in Cultural Studies (Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”)

Affiliation: Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, Department of Theory and History of Culture

Project title:

Heritage Hierarchies: Unpacking the “Crossroads of Civilisations” Concept

The project aims to shed light on the complex dynamics of heritage production and consumption in Southeastern Europe, with a particular focus on present-day Bulgaria. It critically examines the concept of the ‘crossroad of civilisations’ as a representation of a historical amalgamation of various cultures and religions, and argues that this idea often neglects or obscures specific layers of cultural heritage. The project employs Critical Heritage Studies to challenge power structures, dominant narratives and

cultural conventions surrounding heritage-making. Through investigating different heritage fragments in Bulgaria – both nationally celebrated and contested ones – the research explores interrelations, dependencies, and hierarchies between them. The processes of heritisation are examined in relation to regional and European dynamics that reinforce or question the notions of Europe’s core and periphery. The study focuses on three recent Bulgarian exhibitions at the Paris Louvre Museum, with the aim

to investigate and analyse their respective heritage discourses. The hypothesis suggests that a collective examination of these cases can reveal interdependent relationships and hierarchical structures, which have the potential to deepen our understanding of current European heritage politics. Furthermore, this project intends to broaden conventional approaches towards interpreting heritage within the region, while making valuable contributions towards advancing the discipline of heritage studies as a whole.



Petar Parvanov

Bulgarian-Swiss Fellowship

PhD in Medieval Studies (Central European University)

Affiliation: National Archaeological Institute with Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Science

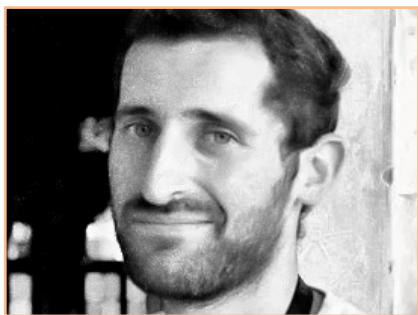
Project title:

Battlefield Archaeology of the Ottoman Conquest: Landscape, Heritage, Memory

Nothing quite captures historical imagination like warfare. And very few stories of conquest can match the Ottoman military expansion from Gallipoli to Vienna and its consolidation of power over the Balkan peninsula. My project aims to re-evaluate the accounts on four prominent battles through an integrated battlefield archaeology approach. The selected case studies include the battle of Ihtiman (c. AD1355), the

battle of Maritsa (AD1371), the battle of Nikopol (AD1396), and the battle of Varna (AD1444). In the centre of the chosen approach is the understanding that battle sites are not merely the setting for interpersonal violence, but culturally and socially constructed landscapes of conflict. Thus, the material signature of organised warfare holds a particular value for long-term commemoration and cultural heritage. Finally,

the comparative and interdisciplinary analysis on these foci of the Ottoman conquest aims to integrate them in the ongoing European-wide reappraisal of battlefields.



Victor Petrov

Bulgarian-Swiss Fellowship

PhD in History (Columbia University)

Affiliation: University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Project title:

Star Citizens: Alternative Knowledge, Science, and the Search for Meaning in Post-Socialist Bulgaria

Post-socialist Bulgaria was haunted by poltergeists, visited by aliens, and awash with 'phenomena' of various kinds. Why were these alternative forms of knowing the world proliferating in the first decades of 'democracy'? This project combines the histories of late socialism with new research into the post-socialist period to explore the intersection of official and unofficial science and knowledge-making communities. Utilising archival documents,

analysis of literature, digital tools, and oral history, it uncovers the role of socialist science and narratives in the shaping of post-1989 narratives around Bulgarian 'uniqueness', but also esoteric expectations about spirits, energies, and aliens. It argues that the print and digital culture of the post-1989 period enabled amateur communities to claim scientific expertise in novel ways, often utilizing but obscuring the theories' origins in earlier periods. Who could claim truth

and how did they defend it? More so, why was post-socialist Bulgaria receptive to such ideas and why do publics continue to flock to and fund such communities? Building on existing literature about both the lost utopias of socialism and the ways post-crisis societies deal with meaning and disenchantment (from political narratives), this project bridges the 1989 divide in political and cultural language in novel ways.



Madelaine Angelova-Elchinova

Bulgarian-Swiss Fellowship

PhD in Philosophy (Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski")

Affiliation: Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", Department of Philosophy

Project title:

A Novel Defence of Thomas Reid's Direct Realism About Perception

When we ask ourselves what the objects of our visual perception are, the most intuitive answer that comes to mind is that we perceive the things that constitute our reality or external

world, e.g. buildings, trees, tables, etc. In philosophy of perception, this account came to be known as common sense realism, naïve realism or direct realism. Regardless of its intuitiveness,

however, direct realism nowadays has close to no supporters to endorse it.



Strahil Panayotov

Pforzheimer Fellowship

PhD in Assyriology and Ancient History (Heidelberg University)

Affiliation: Institute for Historical Studies, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

Project title:

Comparative and Interdisciplinary Analyses of Medical Texts Concerning Coughing of Phlegm: From the Second Millennium BCE Mesopotamia, Over Ashurbanipal to Hippocrates

I identified and deciphered an unpublished cuneiform tablet from the Iraq Museum in Baghdad. Surprisingly, the Middle Babylonian text (ca. 1500–1200 BCE) turned out to be a forerunner to a medical treatise on Bronchial complaints from the Nineveh Medical Encyclopaedia. The latter is the foremost collection of therapeutic writings from the Ashurbanipal Royal Library (7th century BCE), and the most important

compendium of medical literature before Hippocrates. Moreover, cuneiform therapies against coughing phlegm as recorded on the Baghdad tablet bear unmistakable similarities to practices from the Hippocratic Corpus (post 4th century BCE). These sources offer a unique opportunity for medical historians, since we can now clearly see that therapies recorded in the Graeco-Roman world were in use in the Ancient

Near East, already during the 2nd Millennium BCE. The project aims to scrutinise the Baghdad tablet in context. The Mesopotamian evidence will be compared and juxtaposed with similar practices from the Graeco-Roman world, but also beyond, since we are aware from other case studies that common therapies circulated throughout the ancient world.



Momchil Metodiev

Pforzheimer Fellowship

PhD in History (Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski")

Affiliation: New Bulgarian University

Project title:

The Orthodox Church as a Driver of Modernisation: Bulgarian Church in a European Setting Between the Two World Wars

The aim of the project is to explore whether and to what extent the Bulgarian Orthodox Church was part of the general trend, characteristic of other European churches (regardless of denomination), of taking part and supporting the modernisation projects in their respective countries. The question seems to be important,

on the one hand, because it remains generally unexplored in historical literature. It is important also because nowadays the tradition of Church involvement in social work and modernization projects in Bulgaria is completely lost, mainly as a result of the official prohibition imposed on these activities by the communist authorities.

Last but not least, because most of the contemporary Orthodox churches envision themselves as the custodians of an imagined conservative tradition and seem unable to rethink their past in such a context.



Veneta Ivanova (Bulgaria / Greece)

Bulgarian-Swiss Fellowship - Diaspora

PhD in History (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign)

Affiliation: Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences

Project title:

The Unmaking of the Intellectual: A Social and Cultural History of Postsocialism in Bulgaria

The project explores the predicament of Bulgarian cultural and artistic intelligentsia in the unexplored post-socialist period when, for the first time in their two-century history, intellectuals were becoming uniquely insignificant figures. The project is envisioned as a social-historical and cultural analysis of how Bulgarian intellectuals, artists, writers, poets, and filmmakers experienced first the liberal-intellectual and then the social revolution engendered by

the transition from state socialism to neoliberal capitalism. It explores the paradox that while East European intellectuals and dissidents were instrumental in the demise of communism, it was ironically under neo-liberal democracy that they were relegated to a life of cultural and social irrelevance. Methodologically, the project weaves an economic analysis of the impact of the new market economy on intellectual and artistic production with a cultural

analysis of intellectual and artistic reactions to the cultural and political transformations of the 1990s and 2000s. Examining intellectuals' attitudes towards such issues as nationalism, pro-EU or pro-US sentiment, political activism, and post-communist nostalgia, this project seeks to understand how the marginalisation of the intelligentsia has affected not only post-1989 cultural and intellectual life, but also social and political mobilisation.



Liliana Milkova (Bulgaria / USA)

Bulgarian-Swiss Fellowship - Diaspora

PhD in Modern and Contemporary Art (University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia)

Affiliation: Yale University Art Gallery

Project title:

Museum Education and University Pedagogy

The research in object-based teaching and learning at US colleges and universities, as well as Dr. Milkova's pedagogic practice at leading institutions such as Yale University, the University of Pennsylvania, and Oberlin College, has been at the forefront of innovating and updating 21st-century liberal arts education in the US. My project encompasses research towards a book-length manuscript that introduces to academics and museum professionals in Bulgaria

the pedagogic value and benefits of teaching with collections across academic disciplines. Building upon my previous publications in English, drawing on recent scholarship in museum and higher education, and based on new research and data I obtain as a CAS fellow, I put forward (in Bulgarian) strategies applicable to different types of collections and museums in the country. The CAS fellowship enables me to research and write the final book chapter that

translates and adapts practices well-established abroad for Bulgaria's specific context. To do this, I investigate existing approaches to museum education through first-hand observations and interviews, workshops for faculty, students, and museum specialists, and through a review of the relevant scholarly literature produced in Bulgaria in the last two decades.

ADVANCED ACADEMIA PLATFORM: Individual Fellowships 2023–2024

International Module



Volodymyr Bureha (Ukraine)

Sustaining Ukrainian Scholarship

PhD in History (Institute for Slavic Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences), PhD in Theology (Moscow Theological Academy)

Affiliation: Kyiv Theological Academy

Project title:

Ukrainian Orthodoxy in the Face of the Challenge of War (February 2022 - August 2022)

With my project, I investigate life of the Orthodox Churches in Ukraine during the ongoing war, with a focus on the initial period between February 2022 and February 2023. After the Russian military invasion of Ukraine, profound transformations took place in the Ukrainian Orthodox Community – changes that will have an impact on Ukraine in the future. For my research, I examine the main official documents of the Orthodox Churches

in Ukraine dedicated to the war in order to understand these Churches' attitude to the war and how they carried out their ministry in the conditions of war. The study tackles the fundamental difference between the position of the Orthodox Churches in Ukraine and that of the Russian Orthodox Church, which fully supported the aggression. Special attention is paid to the deep transformations that took place within the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, from being a part

of the Moscow Patriarchate before the war to cutting off all relations with Moscow and with Patriarch Kiril after Russia's full-scale invasion. Another research direction of this project is to trace the evolution of relations between the Churches and the Ukrainian state authorities, while at the same time paying attention to the differences in the confessional policy of the central and regional authorities of Ukraine.



Ihor Dvorkin (Ukraine)

Sustaining Ukrainian Scholarship

PhD in History (National Technical University "Kharkiv Polytechnic Institute")

Affiliation: National Technical University "Kharkiv Polytechnic Institute"

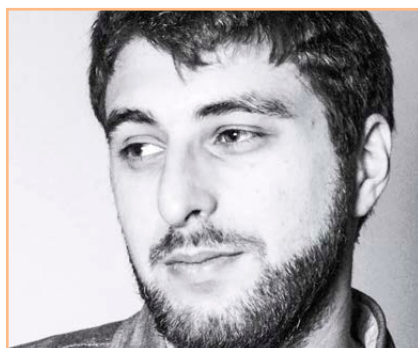
Project title:

Memory of the Second World War in Contemporary Ukraine

The World War II played, and continues to play, a key role in Ukrainian political, cultural, public, and scientific discourse. In the conditions of Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine, the memory of the World War II, the previous destructive war on the territory of Ukraine, becomes even more relevant for the state, scholars, and the public. In this project, I continue my erstwhile

research on the place of the World War II in the contemporary Ukrainian discourse, following the proclamation of Ukrainian independence in 1991. Characteristic of it is the coexistence of national and post-Soviet historical narratives in the political, scientific, and educational spheres. Yet, after the Euromaidan and the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2014, and

especially after the legislative changes of 2015, called "decommunisation laws", the situation changed in favour of a national approach. These events had a significant impact on the humanitarian sphere in Ukraine, the politics of memory and politics of history.



Denys Shatalov (Ukraine)

Sustaining Ukrainian Scholarship

PhD in History (Dnipropetrovsk National University)

Affiliation: "Tkuma" Ukrainian Institute for Holocaust Studies

Project title:

That War and This War: The Entanglement and Interaction of Imagination, Commemoration and Memory of World War II and the Ongoing War in Ukraine. Case of Kryvyi Rih

Most Ukrainians have grown up with the Soviet/post-Soviet tradition of commemorating the World War II as the "The Great Patriotic War". For decades, this topic has constituted a central part of the politics of memory and family history in Ukraine. Everyone has knowledge about the World War II, even those who might not be interested in history. It was this kind of knowledge that formed the general image of war as

a phenomenon. But since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, people gained direct experience of war in different roles: as soldiers, refugees, volunteers, or bystanders. The main research question of this project is to examine how the images of the World War II and of the current war interact in Ukraine. How does the ongoing war affect the image, memory, and commemoration of

World War II? And how do the image, memory and commemoration of World War II influence the perception and expectations of commemoration of the ongoing war? These research questions are being tackled with a focus on the local level, in the city of Kryvyi Rih, looking into how 'this war' and 'that war' phenomena is reflected there.



Natalia Kudriavtseva (Ukraine)

Sustaining Ukrainian Scholarship

PhD in Social Philosophy (Hryhorii Skovoroda Institute of Philosophy, National Academy of Sciences, in Kyiv); Doctor of Science (General Linguistics and Translation Studies, Taras Shevchenko Kyiv National University)

Affiliation: Kryvyi Rih State Pedagogical University

Project title:

Switching to Ukrainian from Russian in Wartime: Linguistic Conversion in Eastern Ukraine

The protection of Ukraine's Russian speakers was among the pretexts for the 2014 Russian invasion as well as the full-scale war unleashed by Russia in 2022. Russia's claims of authority over the speakers of Russian have been based on simplistic equations of language and national identification. To show that these speculations bear little resemblance to how the things stand on the ground, Ukrainians have started the process of linguistic conversion. The years following

the 2014 Russian invasion have seen a growing shift to Ukrainian from Russian, whereby language choice is perceived as a social action with an existential effect. My project is an ethnographic study of Russian speakers in eastern Ukraine who are involved in linguistic conversion. I concentrate primarily on those individuals who are switching to Ukrainian from Russian within grassroots Ukrainian language initiatives. Besides the motivations behind their language

choice, I explore the reasons prompting them to invest in language learning, as well as the process of education. I aim to establish the role of the war in the mass transition to Ukrainian from Russian, define its impact on Ukrainian language pedagogy, and also cast light upon the transformation of identities in eastern Ukraine.



Kim Holleman (USA)

Landis & Gyr Artistic Fellowship

Affiliation: Independent artist

Project title:

Future City: Art, Utopian Architecture, and Critical Research

"Future City: Art, Utopian Architecture, and Critical Research" encapsulates an artistic project that delves into the realms of art, architecture,

and urban development. This multidisciplinary endeavour seeks to reimagine our urban spaces with an imaginative blend of creativity and

critical inquiry, ultimately envisioning a more sustainable and harmonious urban future. At its core, this project celebrates the transformative

power of art. Through a diverse range of artistic mediums, including drawings, paintings, sculptures, digital art, and more, it aims to breathe life into the concept of a "Future City." The art created under this theme explores the interplay between human-made structures and the natural world, challenging conventional boundaries and inspiring viewers to see urban environments through a new lens. The term "utopian architecture" invites us to dream beyond the confines of practicality and imagine what our cities could be in an ideal world. This project delves into utopian architectural concepts, where buildings are not just functional but also serve as expressions of ecological harmony, innovation, and human well-being. It rethinks architectural design to prioritise sustainability, green spaces, and coexistence with nature.

This project is firmly grounded in research and critical research and intellectual inquiry. It involves rigorous investigation into the historical, cultural, and environmental contexts of urban spaces. Through critical research, it aims to uncover the challenges and opportunities that shape our cities. By delving deep into the past and present, it informs the artistic creations with an understanding of the complex forces at play in urban development. Together, these three elements converge to create a holistic exploration of "Future City." It challenges us to think beyond the present and consider the possibilities that lie ahead. It prompts us to ask critical questions about the role of art and architecture in shaping our urban environments, particularly in the context of pressing environmental concerns. "Future City: Art, Utopian Architecture, and

Critical Research" extends its visionary exploration to Sofia, Bulgaria, a city rich in history and architectural diversity. In Sofia, this project takes on a unique character as it engages with the city's distinct architectural heritage, ranging from the Byzantine and Ottoman influences to modernist, postmodern, and socialist-era structures. The project delves into Sofia's urban fabric, reimagining its iconic landmarks and urban spaces as potential canvases for utopian architecture. "Future City" is an invitation to embark on a journey of imagination, discovery, and transformation. It encourages us to envision urban spaces where the boundaries between the built environment and nature blur, where architecture is a vessel for sustainability, and where research informs creative expression.



Dragoș Gh. Năstăsoiu (Romania)

Social Relevance of the Humanities

PhD in History and Medieval Studies (Central European University in Budapest/Vienna)

Affiliation: Independent scholar

Project title:

Constructing Gender on Pilgrimage: Transformative Experiences of Women from the Eastern and Western Christian Societies in the Crusader Holy Land (1099–1291)

This research project examines the pilgrimage experiences of Eastern and Western Christian women in the Crusader Holy Land (1099–1291), and analyses the new behavioural patterns related to their gender roles that emerged as a consequence of the transformative character of the pious voyages. Regarding the performative aspects of gender and ritual, it explores the relationships between female pilgrimage practices and their male-authored descriptions.

By analysing the phenomenon cross-culturally and diachronically, the project highlights the differences in pilgrimage experiences between Western and Eastern Christian female travellers, and provides an explanation for the popularity of Holy-Land female journeys in the Western world in the subsequent centuries and the disappearance of this practice in the Eastern Christian tradition. As a working hypothesis, it assumes that the shared communal experiences

that distinguished the Western ladies' journey led to the pilgrimages' acquisition of a touristic character, whereas the focus on monastic experiences of Eastern women caused a shift from the external travelling experience to the inner spiritual journey, and led to the disappearance of the actual pious voyages in the late-medieval period.



Michiel Meeuesen (Belgium)

Social Relevance of the Humanities

PhD in Literature (KU Leuven)

Affiliation: KU Leuven

Project title:

Medical Culture and Learned Society in the High Roman Empire: Knowing the Body, Curing the Mind

This project aims to develop an innovative approach to ancient medicine, based on how non-experts interacted in its history. The project is provocative in its ambition to take the study

of ancient medicine away from the professionals by introducing a lay perspective. In so doing, it calls for a more inclusive, less hierarchical approach to the available sources, which will

further expand our knowledge of the ancient medical marketplace and the ways in which lay authors, as key stakeholders, tapped into it. Medicine was held in high regard in the High

Roman Empire. Numerous eminent learned authors (including sophists, philosophers, politicians, even emperors) wrote extensively about medicine/health related topics, both in Greek/Latin, and expected their readers to share that interest. The time is right for a revaluation of this

fascinating phenomenon based on a contextual reading of the available sources against the intellectual background of the Imperial period. By studying the human body as an object of elite knowledge and as a marker of societal normativity (along the fault lines of gender,

sexuality, class, ethnicity, religion), the project aims to make a meaningful contribution to the wider socio-cultural and intellectual resonance of ancient medicine in Graeco-Roman Antiquity and beyond.



Kalle Puolakka (Finland)

Social Relevance of the Humanities

PhD in Philosophy (University of Helsinki)

Affiliation: University of Helsinki

Project title:

Growth and Trust in the Experience of Literature. A Philosophical Defence of Literary Reading

The project concerns the cognitive value of literature. Is literature an effective cognitive medium? What sort of knowledge literature provides? How is this knowledge justified? These themes have constituted the focus of my recent research, which has already resulted in publications in significant journals. During my fellowship period, I will compose two articles on these themes. The first one defends the idea that literary works can give knowledge of

what it is like to have a certain kind of experience, usually termed “experiential knowledge” in aesthetics. The second paper deals with the issue of justification. How can the reader draw valid conceptions and perspectives on what it is like to have a certain kind of experience from literary works? Drawing on esteemed research on epistemic trust, authority, responsibility, and virtuosity, I argue that many literary works meet the same conditions that social epistemologists

have thought to lie behind valid epistemic trust. Together with my previous publications, these articles form the basis of a monograph, the manuscript of which I plan to finish by the end of 2024. The results of the project are important for understanding the threats related to the global decrease of literary reading witnessed in recent decades.



Wai-Yip Ho (Hong Kong)

Social Relevance of the Humanities

PhD in Social Science (Hong Kong University of Science & Technology)

Affiliation: Trinity Western University

Project title:

Social Relevance of Religious Studies in Asian Society: Confucian-Muslim-Christian Relations in the Imperial China

During the Ming and Qing Dynasties of Imperial China, Muslim Chinese scholars translated and transmitted Islamic thought from Persian-Arabian texts to Chinese readership through the intellectual framework and vocabularies of Confucian Chinese tradition. This intellectual thought in Islamic literature was called Han Kitab (Sino-Islamic texts) and those thinkers are known as Confucian Muslims (Hurui). Through

this new perspective of Islamic-Confucianism, I propose to carry out a pioneering research project to investigate how leading Confucian Muslims (Hurui) responded, interpreted, and criticised Christian doctrines in the writings of Han Kitab. By selectively translating and analysing Sino-Islamic texts in dialogue with Christianity, this research project attempts to retrieve Muslim Chinese scholars’ responses

towards Christian missionaries and the Christian doctrines. Through translating and analysing Han-Kitab, this research project aims at reconstructing the formative encounters and characteristics of Confucian Muslim-Christian relations in the context of Sino-Islamic intellectual tradition.





Blake Smith (USA)

Advanced Academia Fellowship

PhD in History (Northwestern University and Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales)

Affiliation: University of Chicago

Project title:

Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva's Personal Turn, 1975–1983

The project examines a moment in the history of French thought when the certainties of Marxism and Structuralism were collapsing. In the last half-decade of the 1970s and first years of the 1980s, Barthes and Kristeva, leading intellectuals on the French Left, began to break from this political formation towards a new kind of apparently a-political thinking. Following trip together to Mao's China, which Barthes dismissed

as a failure and Kristeva initially celebrated as a utopian experiment (before rejecting it in favour of a new appreciation for capitalist democracy, inspired by the United States, in the late 70s), each turned to writing about intimate emotional processes rather than political struggle. Barthes gave a series of lectures on 'the lover's discourse,' culminating in a book on the subject; Kristeva prepared a book on 'abjection,'

Powers of Horror, followed by her own analysis of love. And yet, I argue, their mutual turns to the personal were not only shaped by their different political reactions to Communist China, but represented a common project of rethinking the foundations of Western politics from a post-utopian vantage, founded on a careful analysis of psychic life.



Naum Trajanovski (North Macedonia)

Advanced Academia Fellowship

PhD in Sociology (Institute for Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences)

Affiliation: Polish Academy of Sciences

Project title:

The Bulgarian Political and Societal Responses to the 1963 Skopje Earthquake

26 July 2023 marked the 60th anniversary of the calamitous earthquake that struck the Socialist Republic of Macedonia's capital city of Skopje in 1963, taking the lives of 1070 persons and destroying more than two-thirds of the urban fabric. Building upon the memory- and critical disaster studies, I recently published several papers in which I argue that the natural

disaster shattered not only the material reality of Skopjans, but also the symbolic worlds they inhabited, thus influencing much of their imaginaries of the city and its future urban development. The present project aims at discussing the Bulgarian political and societal responses to the 1963 Skopje earthquake. In the midst of the present-day bilateral quarrel over history

and memory, I postulate that the mid-1960s episode of multilevel solidarity and support – such as, inter alia, the Bulgarian calls for aiding Skopje within the framework of the UN as well as the citizen-to-citizen help – challenges the prevailing understandings of shared history and memory in both societies as exclusivist, politically-driven notions.



Candan Badem (Turkey)

Gerda Henkel Fellowship

PhD in History (Sabancı University)

Affiliation: Independent scholar / Scholar at risk

Project title:

The Russo-Ottoman War of 1828–1829 and its Impact on the Balkans and the Caucasus

The project is about writing a book on the Russo-Ottoman War of 1828–1829, focusing on its long-term impact on the Balkans and the Caucasus. In the scholarly literature, the war has been studied from narrow and nationalistic perspective, with no use of Ottoman archives

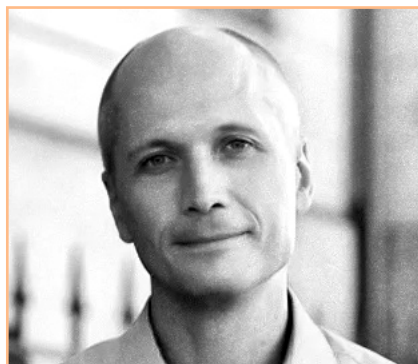
and scant use of the archives of Georgia and Armenia. My project and the ensuing monograph seek to develop a synthetic and comprehensive narrative and a more objectively balanced view of the war, without being drowned in technical details. The main research questions

I address include: What was the impact of the 1828–29 Russo-Ottoman War on the European balance of power, the Eastern Question, the Balkans and the Caucasus? Why were Russian military authorities reluctant to use Balkan irregulars in this war? Did the Bulgarian volunteers

played similar role as the Greek klephti? Why was Russia more successful than the Ottomans in gaining the neutrality of Kurdish tribes along the Caucasian borderlands? Why did Russia set

up an Armenian province out of the khanates of Erivan and Nakhichevan, ceded by Qajar Iran in 1828? Apart from the proclamation of Greek independence and of the autonomy of the

Danubian principalities, what was the legacy of the war?



Mikhail Maslovskiy (Russia)

Gerda Henkel Fellowship

PhD in Sociology (N. I. Lobachevsky State University of Nizhny Novgorod)

Affiliation: Sociological Institute of FCTAS RAS, Russian Academy of Sciences

Project title:

Historical Sociology, International Relations and Russian Civilisational Politics

My research project deals with civilisational analysis in historical sociology and new perspectives on civilisational politics in the field of international relations (IR). Contemporary civilisational analysis as a sociological paradigm devotes considerable attention to civilisational legacies in today's world. At the same time, the research programme of civilisational politics in IR regards civilisations as discursive constructs and focuses on the ways in which

political imaginaries become institutionalised. Apparently, these perspectives can be seen as complementary. However, current discussions of Russian 'civilisationism' are characterised by selective appropriation of insights from new approaches in IR and general neglect of the findings of historical sociology. The project evaluates recent research on civilisational aspects of Russian politics and stresses the need to reconsider this issue taking into account

the contributions of sociological civilisational analysis. The study of social and political imaginaries is a growing interdisciplinary field. It can be argued that the case of post-Soviet Russia is particularly relevant for the discussion of civilisational imaginaries. In particular, the project focuses on the relationship between the concepts of 'civilisation' and 'empire' in the construction of Russia's identity. The project employs the methodology of comparative-historical analysis.



A TALK AROUND THE TABLE

Our participants:



Kim Holleman is an interdisciplinary artist working at the cross sections of art, architecture and the environment. Kim attended *The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art* in New York, and lived and exhibited in New York for twenty years before joining *MIT Media Lab* at Massachusetts Institute of Technology as a Visiting Scholar, Resident Artist, and Research Affiliate from 2013–2017. Kim Holleman now resides in Bulgaria where she continues her work as an artist in the Artist-in-Residence Programme at Business Park Sofia. In 2023, Holleman competed to represent Bulgaria in the Venice Architecture Biennale and has recently presented her work at Urban Spaces Design Build Academy Sofia/Berlin. In 2023–2024, Holleman looks forward to undertaking an expansive project focusing on *Art, Utopian Architecture and Critical Research* in her role as a Landis & Gyr Artist Fellow at the Centre for Advanced Study in Sofia.



Victor Petrov is a graduate of the University of Oxford (UK) and a historian of modern Europe. His focus is on the eastern part of the continent, and the Balkans more specifically. In summer 2023, he published his first book on the socialist bloc's biggest computer industry, situated in Bulgaria, which combines the histories of technology and political economy with that of the Cold War and the modern Balkans, and challenges our hitherto concepts of backwardness and the importance of small states in large geopolitical systems. Victor Petrov partakes in the Independent Bulgarian-Swiss Fellowships Programme for Bulgarian Junior Scholars and Bulgarian Academic Diaspora. His research at CAS focuses on *Star Citizens: Alternative Knowledge, Science, and the Search for Meaning in Post-Socialist Bulgaria*.



Strahil V. Panayotov studied Assyriology, Ancient History, Egyptology and Near Eastern Archaeology in Berlin, Heidelberg, Sofia and Toronto. He began his doctoral study on *Mesopotamian Amulets* at the University of Heidelberg, specialized in Berlin and completed it at Sofia University. Large parts of his studies in Germany were funded by the prestigious stipend of German people – *Studienstiftung des deutschen Volkes*. Strahil was a post-doctoral researcher for the European Research Council's (ERC) project on Babylonian Medicine in Berlin – the first of its kind, under the leadership of Prof. Markham J. Geller, and a curator for Assyrian Medicine at the British Museum. Strahil is a research assistant at the Institute for Historical Studies, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences; his main interests are Cuneiform Medicine and Magic, and especially, the transmission of medical knowledge in the Ancient World. He is a fellow of the Pforzheimer Fellowship Programme at CAS and his research incorporates *Comparative and Interdisciplinary Analyses of Medical Texts Concerning Coughing of Phlegm: from the Second Millennium BCE, Mesopotamia, over Ashurbanipal, to Hippocrates*.



Ivo Strahilov is Assistant Professor at the Department of History and Theory of Culture at Sofia University "St Kliment Ohridski". He holds a PhD in Cultural Studies (2019) and works in the field of Critical Heritage Studies. His research interests include contemporary uses of heritage, minorities' heritages, environmental heritage and mobilisations. He is currently in charge of a research project investigating the historical, socio-economic, and cultural meanings of Ottoman public baths and water heritage. Ivo Strahilov is a fellow of the Independent Bulgarian – Swiss Fellowships Programme for Bulgarian Junior Scholars and Bulgarian Academic Diaspora at CAS, working on *Heritage Hierarchies: Unpacking the "Crossroad of Civilizations" Concept*.

with CAS Fellows Kim Holleman, Victor Petrov, Strahil Panayotov and Ivo Strahilov

Being around a table – as a particularly designed space – has manifold meanings in culture. Above all, sitting around a table creates a feeling of community and inclusivity, a sense of collaboration and dialogue. Our seminar table at CAS represents more than a piece of furniture – it embodies association and cooperation among our fellows, inspires valuable exchange of ideas and thus academic growth.

The current interview draws on the multifaceted purposes of our CAS seminar table, where, traditionally, fellows gather on a regular basis to present and discuss their scholarly findings. Instead of conducting our fellows' interviews separately, we invited the four participants to come together to informally attend and follow each other's academic story and engage in an intellectually stimulating talk.

Editor: Would you like to briefly present the fields you have been working in?

Strahil Panayotov: I am a historian of Ancient Near Eastern cultures. I specialise in cuneiform medical texts and the transmission of medical knowledge in antiquity.

Kim Holleman: I'm American and my background is in fine arts. Over the course of my career I went into interdisciplinary work, fusing art and architecture, sometimes engineering and nature, and the environment. I began to focus on large-scale public art projects and projects which incorporated urban planning or development, environmental concerns. I have been working with a lot of architects doing interior architecture as well.

Victor Petrov: I am a historian of Europe and Eastern Europe, and this is what I have been teaching for the past years - the 19th and the 20th century, the Cold War, modern Europe. I have specialized in the history of science and technology and currently, I have included the history of parascience in my field of interests, too. I will probably be staying there for a few more years.

Ivo Strahilov: I work on the topic of cultural heritage, or rather multiple heritages, from an anthropological point of view. A central question of my research is the entanglement between different Balkan and 'European' notions of heritage, which informs specific understandings of what is valuable and should be preserved, and what is neglected and doomed to oblivion.



About the Prestigious and Unprestigious Layers of Historical Heritage: **Ivo Strahilov**

Editor: Ivo, you have just returned from Paris as the focus of your research at CAS is the presentations and discourses surrounding three recent Bulgarian exhibitions at the Louvre. Please tell our readers more about these expositions – we know that they aimed at popularising Bulgarian art, culture and history in France and the European Union as a whole.

Ivo: I undertook the study of these three museum exhibitions because, from my perspective, they are significant for several reasons. First, they reflect the current understanding of what constitutes Bulgarian heritage. Second, they deal with different historical periods, namely Thracian Antiquity, the First Bulgarian Kingdom (its 'Golden' tenth century, in particular), and the Ottoman period, and therefore they can reveal specific perceptions of and conventions regarding these different heritage layers. Third, these are rather international initiatives, involving experts not only from Bulgaria and France, but also from several other countries. Hence, the preparation of the exhibitions has been accompanied by multiple discussions in which both the museum narrative of a given historical period and, more generally, the state of research produced to date by different schools and disciplines have been discussed, contested, and renegotiated. Next, exhibitions can be seen as acts of political performance, considering the representative function of museums, which assert, challenge, or legitimise specific readings of the past. Finally the debates and museum presentations reveal diverse and sometimes competing conceptions of European heritage, which can be perceived as shared or framed

within narrow national boundaries. This is particularly important in the case of the cooperation between Bulgaria and France. On the one hand, Bulgaria is a country whose 'Europeanness' is rather unstable and often questioned, but which is proud of its rich archaeological heritage. On the other hand, France is a country that claims and is considered to be the centre (or at least one of the centres) of this imagined "Europe", both in historical and contemporary terms, which fully applies to the cultural heritage sector. However, both the Bulgarian state and the Louvre, as a world-renowned cultural institution, follow their own agendas in this cooperation, which makes the issue even more intriguing.

Editor: While two of these exhibitions (in 2015 and 2018, respectively) were well-publicized in the Bulgarian media, the third one (2020) was not only perceived as unwelcome, but also as historically provocative and misleading, which eventually brought about its cancellation. What were the reasons behind these developments?

Ivo: In this context, the exhibitions offer a valuable terrain to reflect on different questions that extend into the realms of politics and national identity. Actually, all three of them were accompanied by certain tensions, as well as political and scientific negotiations. This also illustrates the validity of the understanding that any cultural heritage, being socially constructed, inevitably contains certain dissonance. It is true, however, that the last exhibition, the one on the Ottoman period, provoked the strongest controversy. It proved to be insurmountable, and the exhibition itself remained at the level of a project that was

never realised. It is important to emphasise that despite the opposition of some scholars and institutions in Bulgaria, which eventually led to the cancellation of the initiative, a number of Bulgarian scholars and museums were, in fact, involved in its preparation. From this point of view, we cannot speak of a monolithic position, yet the fact remains that, in the end, the resistance proved to be stronger than the will to cooperate.

Editor: Why was the time frame of the cancelled exhibition seen as provocative in its portrayal of Bulgarian culture abroad? Why did some scholars argue against staging an exhibition about the period from the 16th to the 18th centuries, denouncing it as scandalous and offensive?

Ivo: I followed the organization of this exhibition with great interest because it promised to throw into sharp relief the conceptualisation and understanding of the Ottoman period in Bulgarian history, which, traditionally, is rather marginally dealt with. The aim was to draw attention to the interactions and mutual influences between Islamic and Christian art, which can be found in material culture. This perspective sheds light on the common culture of the Ottoman ecumene, which is understudied and almost completely absent from the popular discourse on the Ottoman period, conventionally referred to as the 'Turkish yoke'. Although more and more in-depth studies are emerging, it appears that, overall, Bulgarian scholarship is still dominated by approaches that obey the premises of the nation-state formation period, interpret various issues of history, folklore, or vernacular architecture in an

exclusively local, isolated, and therefore fragmentary manner. On the other hand, we should mention Donna Buchanan's remarkable ethnomusicological study of the song 'Üsküdarı gider iken', which demonstrates amazing intercultural transformations and influences. This is the same song that featured in Adela Peeva's film 'Whose is this Song?' where the uneasiness, or outright deliberate resistance, of accepting the idea of a common or shared (post-)Ottoman heritage is very clearly depicted. It seems to me that the public sentiment against the planned exhibition in 2020, widely reflected and perhaps reinforced by the Bulgarian media, stems from similar perceptions. The latter are deeply ingrained in the public consciousness through school, textbooks, museums, and popular culture.

Even though the reasons for the exhibition's cancellation are complex, the Ottoman period is still considered as highly controversial and cannot be seen as 'nationally' representative. Admittedly,

it is deemed 'unprestigious', in contrast to more 'prestigious' heritage layers such as those suggested by the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences as alternative exhibition projects – the late prehistory (connected to the idea of 'the first civilisation in Europe') or the Second Bulgarian Kingdom (1185–1396). These cultural conventions are clearly evident in the exhibitions of Bulgarian museums, where the Ottoman period is often either absent or presented solely through the lens of national awakening and the struggles for independence from Ottoman rule. Organizing an exhibition on the Ottoman period in a European context, particularly in a renowned institution like the Louvre in Paris, poses an even greater challenge that undermines the foundations of the grand national narrative. For such representational purposes, the Bulgarian state has consistently chosen and displayed its 'prestigious' heritages. This practice dates back to the socialist era, when the concept of representative exhibition was formulated and when numerous such exhibitions toured worldwide

as part of intensified cultural diplomacy endeavours. This approach endured during Bulgaria's path towards European integration, imposed new imperatives and framed the conceptualisation of heritage in a specific manner. Notably, Bulgaria has organized large-scale exhibitions at pivotal political moments. For instance, Thracian antiquity was showcased in Paris during the country's accession to the European Union in 2007, while during Bulgaria's first presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2018, the magnificent Preslav Treasure dating from the First Bulgarian Kingdom was exhibited at the Louvre. Concurrently, the National Gallery in Sofia hosted another exhibition featuring luxurious and glamorous ancient artefacts. If taken in their socio-cultural and political context, these events reveal the self-representational efforts of the Bulgarian state, directed towards and drawing on the concept of 'Europe'. This, in turn, requires reinterpreting the country's heritage, such as labelling local prehistoric, Thracian, or medieval legacy as European.

Reenactment of the April Uprising (1876) in Panagyurishte
Photo: Ivo Strahilov, 2023





The Ottoman public bath (16th c.) near Burgas, now transformed into a museum as part of the touristic complex "Aquae Calidae".
Photo: Ivo Strahilov, 2023.

Editor: In terms of media, especially electronic media, there seems to be certain imbalance between the enthusiastic reports on the Thracian exhibition and those about the "Golden Age" exhibition. Would you agree? If so, what can this uneven distribution of media attention be attributed to?

Ivo: This is true, but there is also a purely pragmatic explanation to it. The Thracian exhibition stood as a significantly larger solo showcase, whereas the medieval treasure of Preslav was exhibited within the permanent collection of the Department of Decorative Arts of the Louvre. However, the issue of media coverage of these events in the Bulgarian context deserves special attention. Notably, the Bulgarian government dispatched journalists to Paris specifically to cover the Thracian exhibition, with many media reports emphasizing the efforts of politicians, particularly the then Minister of Culture, Vezhdi Rashidov, who played a pivotal role in the cooperation with the Louvre. Moreover, there was a narrative discrepancy. Although the exhibition was the result of significant international collaboration and a joint French-Bulgarian curatorial team, it was portrayed domestically as a national endeavour showcasing Bulgarian cultural heritage. Thus, in addition to their representational and diplomatic functions on the international stage, these exhibi-

tions were instrumentalized for internal purposes. Through such activities, the Bulgarian political elite sought to enhance its image not only within the European political sphere but also to bolster its position domestically.

Editor: As an expert in the field of critical heritage studies, you have been arguing that although the Balkans and Bulgaria have been traditionally described and advertised as "a crossroad of civilisations" the various layers of cultural heritage have been unequally, hierarchically represented in public sphere and popular discourse. This, in turn, has brought about a complex power dynamics among them. Can you give some examples?

Ivo: My research experience includes various heritage fragments in Bulgaria and the Balkans, encompassing both nationally celebrated (e.g., Thracian, Roman or Medieval Bulgarian) and contested heritages "from below" (e.g. Ottoman, Muslim, Romani, queer). While exploring these fragments separately, I have observed the potential for comparison even among elements that seem unrelated or incomparable at first glance. This has revealed an opportunity to study the interrelations, interdependencies, and hierarchies between the heritage fragments within their complex and interconnected context. Within

the national heritage canon, however, certain heritage layers are constructed and valorised in opposition, differentiation, or reaction to other layers perceived as less prestigious or more problematic.

These questions can be applied to specific heritage sites and one example could be the so-called Museum of Religions in Stara Zagora. Established in 2011 by the Ministry of Culture in a former Ottoman mosque, this museum emerged amidst debates and protests surrounding the building's ownership and future function. Subsequent archaeological excavations in the mosque unearthed the foundations of an Orthodox church, of a Thracian sanctuary, and purportedly a prehistoric cult site. These diverse heritage layers were then exhibited together within the well-preserved 15th-century mosque. Upon its inauguration, government officials compared the new museum to Jerusalem, lauding its representation of multiple religions, and insisting that this project is a symbol of ethno-cultural tolerance. However, in practice, the project resulted in the silencing or 'neutralisation' of the Ottoman heritage layer through museification and mobilisation of older or more prestigious heritages, thus displaying a lack of genuine tolerance. This phenomenon is by no means isolated or unique; in popular discourse, Ottoman bridges or *hammams* (i.e. public baths) are often presented as Roman. A typical example is the tourist site *Aquae Calidae* near Burgas, which similarly emphasizes and reinvents Roman antiquity, despite the fact that the Roman remains are less preserved there compared to the intact and recently functioning Ottoman *hammam*.

Overall, the Ottoman layer remains almost totally unexplored archaeologically. There is little scientific interest in this period among archaeologists, which consequently results in the scarcity of artefacts from this era in museums. At the same time, Bulgarian museums house intriguing objects from the Ottoman era that are not displayed to the broader public.

Hence, the cancelled exhibition project at the Louvre carries additional significance, as it would have provided some visibility to these artefacts.

Editor: So what does the official landscape of Bulgarian cultural identity look like? What identities “from below” have been underrepresented or, perhaps, entirely left out?

Ivo: Actually, the heritage fabric is much more complex and nuanced, and we need to look beyond the dominant official discourse. Indeed, the canon of national heritage wields considerable influence since it is endorsed by state institutions; it informs historiography, and frames museum presentations. Yet, it is far from exhaustive in its representation of Bulgarian or national heritage. For instance, while the Ottoman layer is to a large extent excluded or ambivalently absorbed by the national heritage canon, alternative visions of heritage do exist, even though they are less visible and powerful. They emerge within the interstices of the dominant canon to question the dissonance of Ottoman heritage by recognising its significance and valorising its material remains. Over the past decade, my colleague, Slavka Karakusheva, a former CAS fellow, and I have embarked on an exploration of these issues within the Bulgarian and broader Balkan context, with recent focus on marginalized and underrepresented voices. This endeavour has revealed the impact of the dominant discourse on the perceptions and sentiments of various communities whose heritages have been marginalized or omitted from the public domain. This is especially pertinent to Muslim or Turkish communities whose cultural and citizenship rights have been suppressed, but not only.

On the other hand, it has become evident that counter-voices and practices have emerged in response to the exclusivity of the hegemonic discourse. These dissenting perspectives challenge the neglect or erasure of certain historical layers, which are often experienced as deeply personal and intertwined with individual meanings, familial legacies, and communal bonds. This enhanced participation in heritage-

making, renegotiation, and reconfiguration shows that the question of heritage and its meanings extends beyond the realm of experts and institutions. At the present time, various individuals, groups, and communities actively contribute to the construction of heritage. This involvement is evident in specific initiatives aimed at preserving or restoring monuments that are inadequately maintained by authorities. It also encompasses everyday practices and personal memories that collectively shape the perception and interpretation of heritage. Accordingly, people are not merely passive consumers of the heritage prescribed by the official discourse; rather, they possess agency and play a pivotal role in generating diverse versions of this heritage.

This development reflects the broader phenomenon of participatory culture, which needs to be seen in the context of discredited politics and generally scarce civic activism. Victor Petrov's research (further down) highlights its particularly pronounced manifestation in post-1989 Bulgaria, where alternative perspectives on knowing the world are emerging and gaining popularity amidst political disenchantment and disillusionment. These dynamic underscores the intricate interplay between official and unofficial spheres of science and knowledge production. Likewise, the endeavours of numerous

non-professional historians, who criticize and reassess official historical narratives in pursuit of deeper roots of Bulgarian heritage, exemplify another aspect of this phenomenon.

Illustrative of this phenomenon is the recent proliferation of historical reenactments and related festivals across Bulgaria. These events not only reflect a deep emotional connection to the past and to specific historical epochs, but also highlight the strong social bonds and the desire to forge communities of shared interests. Through these activities, individuals have the opportunity for personal involvement, engagement, and firsthand experience, thereby also editing historical narratives. Reenactors engage in a dialogue with the official heritage canon, with some reaffirming and defending its boundaries, while others enriching and expanding it, and still others enacting alternative interpretations. However, concerning the Ottoman period, reenactments typically align with the dominant discourse and focus primarily on the struggles for national independence. It is noteworthy that participants readily take on the roles of Bulgarian revolutionaries and national heroes during battle reenactments, whereas recruiting volunteers to portray Ottoman characters – seen as undesirable and worthless – proves to be considerably more challenging...

Karaca Paşa Mosque in Gotse Delchev (15th c.), currently abandoned and left to decay.
Photo: Ivo Strahilov, 2019.





From "Cyborg Science" to "Psycho Plus" – The Two Sides of One Coin: Victor Petrov

Editor: Talking about prestigious and less prestigious historical legacies, let us continue with Victor who has extensively studied a highly esteemed fragment of recent Bulgarian history – a fragment Bulgarians are proud of, namely the history of the Bulgarian computing industry. In fact, Victor's monograph, bearing a suspenseful reference to a 'Balkan Cyberia' in its title, has recently been released on the international book market. Victor, while conventionally the former Communist Bloc has been described in terms of sluggish technological advancement when compared to the western world, your work seems to relativise this notion. It appears that after the 1970s, Bulgaria was undergoing rapid 'computarisation', culminating in the education of young Bulgarians knowledgeable enough to turn the country into 'the biggest creator and distributor of computer viruses in the world'; to quote a West German expert cited by you. What was the inspiration behind these phenomena in the Bulgarian socialist society?

Victor: The story has many faces, and answering the question usually boils down to the usual historian's answer – it's complicated and it depends on who you are looking at. However, there are clear reasons for the creation of the industry. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, socialist Bulgaria was facing both a problem and an opportunity: a debt crisis and looming specialisations within COMECON (The Eastern Bloc's economic co-operation organization). The fast industrialisation of the 1950s resulted in Bulgarian debt ballooning, while after Stalin's death the COMECON was slowly but surely moving towards a socialist division of labour, where each country was to specialise in a particular good or series of goods.

Seeking a way to avoid further debt, and escape the potential to be sidelined as an agricultural producer, and taking stock of the relative backwardness of computing in the Eastern Bloc, a few high-placed figures – led by Prof. Ivan Popov – turned to electronics and computers as a high-value, low-resource, but also prestigious good. The added bonus was that this was the good of the future, and the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP) was enamoured by the possibility of kick-starting intensive economic growth (as the growth rates of communist Bulgaria had slowed down by the 1960s). The computer was both profitable, and the future.

Editor: In your research, you mention that Bulgaria's computing industry cracked the seclusion of the country's Iron Curtain bubble and opened it up to the rest of the world. How genuine was this opening process?

Victor: To achieve its goals, the Party turned to both legal and illegal means. Mass production was kick started by Japanese licenses from Fujitsu, and indeed that country would remain key to further developments in Bulgarian electronics and robotics. There were other penetrations of the Iron Curtain, even with US firms, and technical information was generally swapped in the mundane way that many professionals do – in conferences or visits. However, the industry relied heavily also on the Scientific Technical Intelligence arm of State Security (DS). By the 1970s, this department was heavily focused on electronics and other high technology goods in its plans of 'acquisition' – political, military, and other information was deemed much less valuable. In essence, it often served as the research arm of the industry! I want to point out, however, that in the logic of geopolitical struggle and economic

and technological embargoes, licit and illicit really are quite meaningless terms. Both actors in the Bulgarian industry and Western scholars or even people involved in the intelligence game have told me as much when I presented such info – 'it was just how the game was played'.

Editor: Did this 'thaw' affect the geopolitical status of Bulgaria?

Victor: Bulgarian computer production was exported all over the world. I want to point this out. I use the case study of India, but there were Bulgarian computers on every continent. This most important technology of the late 20th century allowed socialist Bulgaria to trade and circulate much more widely than previously expected (as other historians have also shown for other goods or actions of the socialist regime). This is how I can answer the question whether it was a genuine opening.

Editor: How did this extraordinary opening venture resonate across the larger Bulgarian society then?

Victor: It really depends who you are talking about. The computer industry employed between 180 and 215 thousand workers – a huge number, the second biggest industrial group in Bulgaria. For the majority, those who made the computers on the factory floors, it wasn't a genuine openness. For thousands of educated engineers, however, it was. Whether they travelled (and they travelled for specializations and conferences in bigger numbers than any other technological sector, as this was a key economic niche for Bulgaria), or by way of the information they accessed – they had to be at the cutting edge. Even though Bulgarian electronics often lagged behind significantly, most engineers did not in terms of knowledge – which allowed

them to traverse 1989 more successfully, due to their skillset. For a few dozens at the highest levels – directors of factories, or those connected to the management of Bulgarian technology – it was an even bigger openness, as they moved into the world, into finances and export/off-shore companies.

Editor: Did the narrative of Bulgaria's computer progress collapse after the fall of communism in 1989 or did it extend into the 1990s and beyond?

Victor: Actually, I'd like to point out that there was another, less discussed, success to the computer endeavor in Bulgaria. As an economic policy it failed even prior to the political breakdown – there were never enough computers to automate production, nor were there enough PCs offered to most children and workers, as promised; let alone the debt crisis of the 1980s that contributed to the industry's hunger for Western currency for further improvement. However, as a cultural and philosophical obsession, it did not. The boom in sci-fi, computer education, even philosophical treatises on what it means to be a Human in a Machine world – those were as cutting edge in Bulgaria as anywhere. And that last generation, trained in computer classrooms and clubs in the late 1980s, carried this dream, their obsession and skillset into the 1990s and beyond. As an industry, the computing sector ultimately failed. As a human capital programme, however, I would argue it succeeded. Even today, Bulgarian IT is more focused on software than hardware, and these traces go back to this rich pre-1989 history, including the slow but real entry of PCs into education and social clubs in the 1980s. Therefore, I believe that in this sense the industry can be termed a success.

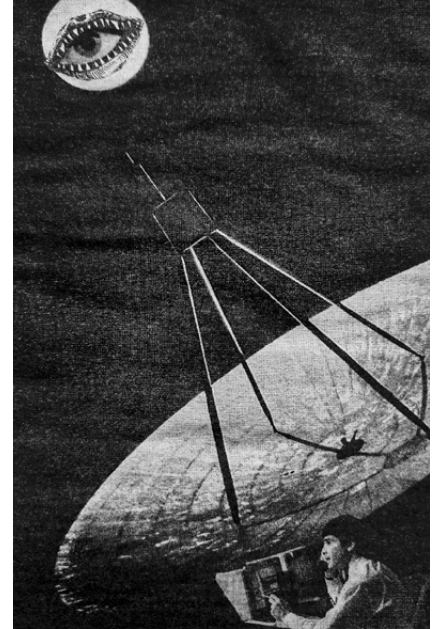
For the Party, too, the investment in the computer field was some sort of success – it allowed the country to function as a non-agricultural periphery in the socialist economic bloc. And even in the Global South, in Latin America, Asia, Africa, it enabled Bulgaria to successfully present itself as a technologically competent partner. But, overall, the 'computer success' only made sense within the socialist international economy – it had poor showings

on the Western markets. It couldn't save socialism from its economic decline. Yet, it did offer significant parts of society a window into the contemporary world, and disseminated knowledge, if not technology itself. For some of the highest placed managers, I would say, it was a true success as it allowed for some murky success stories to emerge into the 1990s and 2000s, but here we move into the realms of speculation and investigative journalism.

Editor: You grew up in the 1990s. Does your current research prompt you to reconsider your childhood memories and reevaluate life in post-communist Bulgaria? What colour would you use to describe this period of dramatic political, economic and social changes in Bulgarian history?

Victor: Grey. I grew up in a city where the grey colour dominates in my memory. Even though we have the blue of the sea in Varna, the panel blocks of flats were grey – despite what Kim might fight as a stereotype! I recall the 1990s as full of superstitions. Many people around me were reading newspapers about spirits and aliens, and there were psychics on TV (as well as of course The X-Files and Twin Peaks). By revisiting these "paranormal" newspapers today, the letter columns emerge like a brilliant, yet sad chronology of what impact the collapse of communism had exerted on people – physically and psychologically, on their bodies and souls. They document the medical history of that era because people reached out for newspapers filled with clairvoyants and healers to seek the care that the social services and the medical system were failing to provide. In 1989, there were about 250 hospitals in Bulgaria; by the 2000s, their number shrunk to less than fifty, leaving some towns without medical care. Re-reading the newspapers of the 1990s and reflecting on the time I grew up, alerts me to the traumatic experiences people had gone through then.

Strahil: There appears to be a cultural divide influenced by faith as well. Eastern Orthodox societies tend to lean more towards superstitions compared to the Catholic world.



Victor: Well, research on post-WWII Germany revealed that the post-war period witnessed the second largest explosion in mass healers, witches and belief in demons since the Middle Ages. It appears that following moments of social trauma, superstitions regain prominence. Thus, cultural dispositions alone may not fully account for these phenomena.

Editor (to Victor): Why do serious historians take up topics like clairvoyance or "close encounters of the third type" for scholarly research?

Victor: Besides deconstructing and reconstructing narratives, historians also tell stories. However, there is more to these stories; they hold deeper significance. In my PhD research, I used the image of the computer as an oblique angle to tell the global story of Bulgarian socialism and modernization. For me, the topic of alternative knowledge and the supernatural is another way to recount the story of Bulgaria's transition after 1989. The communist future-facing ideology had already collapsed, but the next forward-facing ideology of capitalism, democracy and overnight societal prosperity failed to deliver on promises. Let me recall President Zhelev's optimistic vision then, that it would take two, three years for the country to catch up and thrive ...

As a historian, I don't want the history of this period to be narrated as just a story of trauma: there were many positive changes in the 1990s, and many people stood firmly behind the radiant new future. But it is also a story of dashed dreams. From our current perspective, we may doubt

people's sanity then. However, historians should not allow an entire nation to be pathologised. A good historian needs to get into people's minds and empathize with them to comprehend why they turned to supernatural solutions. My research is not about whether aliens and the supernatural exist. Rather, it is about why, in certain eras, people believed in aliens, trusted the existence of poltergeists, and sought guidance from clairvoyants.

Editor: Your research on the spread of paranormal knowledge and alternative science involves analysing a vast collection of newspapers from the post-1989 period. How accessible were newspapers in the 1990s, when the media market, freed from communist censorship, began to flourish?

Victor: Newspapers were evidently a source of money-making at that time and what followed in Bulgaria in the 1990s, was an explosion of print capitalism. Yet, there is a noteworthy aspect to it: when comparing the volume of newspapers launched on the market in the former socialist countries, one may be struck by the disparities. For example, approximately one hundred newspapers were launched in the Czech Republic, a country with a population of around 10 million; whereas in Bulgaria, whose population was slightly less than nine million, the number of newspapers went up to about five hundred.

Editor: Where did the funding for those newspapers come from? Journalism is an expensive venture!

Victor: This is a good question that needs further investigation. I can see that many newspapers were amalgamated under publishing houses. For instance, *Psycho Plus*, a paranormal newspaper launched in 1990, boasted a circulation of 300,000 copies per week. In addition, its editorial board was also involved in the production of tabloids and children's newspapers. The latter were reportedly funded by the profits made from the sale of the paranormal publication.

Editor: Is it possible that all those numerous newspapers covering psychic phenomena and paranormal subjects had motivations beyond profit? Could they have deliberately been used to manipulate the readers? Would they serve as a tool in shaping a particular identity?

Victor: Well, nowadays, some of the largest publishing houses are amalgamations that resemble re-enactment societies, disseminating particular nationalistic theories about Bulgaria and her ancient history. These theories often intersect with certain spiritualistic ideas. However, some channelling started before this, during communism. Take, for example, the case of Vanga (a Bulgarian mystic and clairvoyant, widely recognised for her alleged abilities to predict the future – *the Editor*); she was institutionalised in the 1960s, studied by the Institute of Suggestology, which in itself is another pre-1989 manifestation of parascience. I believe that the groundwork was laid beforehand.

Personally, I prefer not to view 1989 as a breaking point in Bulgarian history, when everything changed completely. History does not work with clear-cut chronologies. After 1989, actual scholars, including physicists and engineers who had previously been involved in the Bulgarian space programme, nuclear physics, or scientific education, transitioned into the

realm of parapsychology, attempting to redefine themselves as a new breed of scientists. Moreover, some clairvoyants and journalists also tried to instil hope in people. However, early on, one could feel some kind of nationalism emerging around these spiritual worlds. Newspapers from the early 1990s acknowledged Bulgaria's spiritual crisis but noted that the country had been through similar crises in the past. Astrological analyses of the year 681 – considered the birth date of the Bulgarian state – were published, linking it to the influence of Saturn on the country. Saturn is a conservative planet, the slowest moving planet in the solar system, it states. The message that was broken was one of endurance: 'we, Bulgarians, were destined to suffer, but eventually, we will rise again, much like the phoenix'.

As I am pushing further with this research, I feel that the reaching for a 'Cosmic Consciousness' was a soothing way to look to the future, and to search for guidance elsewhere. It also allowed many to seek power in a unique mission for Bulgaria – the new era would be one of higher spirituality, higher 'energies', a natural resource which these 'industries' of seers said Bulgaria was rich in. However, it's worth noting that clairvoyants and healers are found everywhere, including the UK and the USA. I think the almost political draw for some, beyond the promise of healing or security, is best summed up by Japanese writer Yukio Mishima in his 1960s novel *Beautiful Star*, in which a whole family comes to believe they came from different stars in the Solar System: 'He dreamed of an utterly pure form of power capable of maintaining eternal peace on Earth. This was something that the Earth had never experienced before, so it needed instruction from the other planets. Moreover, this power was not religious or spiritual in nature, but blemish-free, pure as a new towel, and able to exert control over every aspect of life'. Where else was there left to look if you wanted guidance, after all Earthly politics and religions had failed you?





The Human Mind – Then and Now: **Strahil Panayotov**

Editor: As a historian of antiquity, can you provide any explanation for human fascination with the supernatural throughout time?

Strahil: This belief system is rooted in ancient understandings, and explanations of the world. Ancient people lived together with the supernatural. Gods and Demons were believed to exist in the cities along with the people. Ghosts of family members 'were' in the cellar and 'needed' food and drinks to stay calm. What is considered supernatural for many Western people was normal for the Mesopotamians. Look even at ancient Rome, at Cicero's *De Divinatione*. Everything that Victor discussed, apart from aliens, so far falls into the categories of divination, like all kinds of astrology, dream interpretations, incubation, prophecies, omens, oracles. Whatever you can imagine was perceived as alive and did develop in the Ancient Near East and Egypt (apart from Asia which is another vast topic).

Foreseeing the future was a widely spread practice, especially in Mesopotamia, where it was institutionalised by the Assyrian state, for instance. In antiquity, the wisest men served the ruler; they read the future in the liver or entrails of sheep, or predict what is coming from observing the movements of the stars. Stargazing omens generated crucial knowledge that gave birth to astronomy.

Ultimately, all goes back to the myths of Mesopotamia. According to the so-called Enuma Elish [Babylonian creation myth], meaning "When above (in Heaven)", the primordial, cosmic, ocean-like goddess, Tiamat, was slain by the god Marduk, and when Tiamat's water masses were split in half like a stock-fish, their upper parts

created the Heaven, while the lower parts – the Earth. Thus, whatever happens in the sky corresponds exactly to what happens on the Earth, because, after all, it was one body... What we now label as superstition, used to be integral to how the ancients viewed the creation and functioning of the world. It gave rise to seers and fortune-tellers. These beliefs did not die with time but persisted across centuries, passing and spread through Empires and landing into modernity.

Under communism, Bulgarians experienced a sense of collective depression – not just as individuals, but as a nation, as well. Apart from the ruling elite, people were deprived of the freedom to travel and explore the world. Thus, during communism and especially after the Perestroika, came a quest for national identity. Wild ideas were unleashed then. Sometimes, this quest would reach back to antiquity, to the Babylonian flood story, to ancient Babylon, Sumer or Egypt. Even today, some people draw connections between the village of Sumer in the northwest of Bulgaria and ancient Sumer. Also, Tangra (a deity proto-Bulgarians believed in) is compared to Dingir, the ancient Sumerian word for "god". While such associations lack any scientific basis, the social media readily publishes and popularises them. Sadly, awkward ideas even circulate in university setting. Unfortunately, with the spread of social media, historians and scholars are losing, or may have even lost the battle to effectively communicate factual knowledge to wider audiences.

Thus, although they may have undergone modifications, beliefs in the supernatural do continue to circulate nowadays. Some while ago, I conducted an experiment by scrutinising Bulgarian newspapers and

comparing the supernatural topics discussed then with those of interest resurfacing from Mesopotamia. My conclusion was that the human mind has not considerably changed. The motivations driving human behaviour are fundamentally the same: the pursuit of money, self-esteem, need of support, sound decision-making. Even today, there are Bulgarian politicians who consult personal seers (!)... However, what remains unclear is when these narratives were created in the Ancient Near East, how old they are, and how far back in history they extend. They precede the advent of writing and may even go back to the last Ice Age.

Editor: Strahil, your academic pursuits are remarkable as not only do they investigate ancient civilizations but also involve excellent knowledge of extinct languages to do so. What made you study dead languages such as Akkadian, Sumerian and Middle Egyptian? How did you discover this mysterious world and turn it into your field of scholarly dedication?

Strahil: I am a scholar of the Near East who has studied diverse subjects, scripts and their languages pertaining to the most ancient written history of humanity. My journey began at Sofia University, where I initially pursued History Studies. However, after my second year, I decided to further my education in Berlin to learn German and delve in Egyptology at Heidelberg, which I found an incredibly captivating subject at the time. Initially, my first minor subject was Assyriology, and I spent several semesters exploring Classical Archaeology, Semitic Studies, before ultimately choosing Near Eastern Archaeology. Fortunately, in those days, I had the opportunity to study under the Humboldt

system in its final years, allowing me to experiment with my education according to my interests and enroll in courses that truly intrigued me. It did not take long for me to realize that Assyriology held vaster potential for research and discovery than any other field within Ancient History. The overwhelming amount of unpublished and understudied texts in Akkadian and Sumerian are linguistic and epigraphic gems that offer insights into all spheres of daily life and ancient science. Thus, I decided to pursue Assyriology as my main subject, with Egyptology and Near Eastern Archaeology as minor. After the defense of my MA, I continued with a PhD in Ancient History and Assyriology. It took me fourteen years to complete my education. During this time, I studied ancient languages, participated in excavations in Europe and the Near East, and researched in numerous cuneiform collections in museums.

I was extremely fortunate to have been taught by one of the most seasoned scholars of the Near East, Markham Geller, in the field of cuneiform medical and magical texts. Fifteen years ago, cuneiform medicine and its connection to other ancient medical systems were largely unexplored subjects. Since then, I have specialized in cuneiform medical texts. I had the privilege of participating in the first ERC funded project on Babylonian Medicine in Berlin, under Geller's guidance. While collaborating with Prof. Geller on editing ophthalmological cuneiform texts, I made a significant discovery. I unravelled the structure of a substantial medical compendium, which I named the Nineveh Medical Encyclopedia. In fact, this compendium is the largest pre-Hippocratic holistic medical writing, organized according to regions of the human body. The British Museum, where the majority of the relevant cuneiform tablets are kept, expressed interest in this remarkable material. They successfully secured Wellcome Trust funding for a project, in which I served as curator for Assyrian Medicine. My colleagues and I completed the first comprehensive editions of the Nineveh Medical Encyclopedia, which are publicly accessible (at <https://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/asbp/ninmed/>). Nowadays, my primary interests are in exploring the transmission and dissemination of medical knowledge in the ancient world, as well as in the textual criticism of

cuneiform medical texts.

Editor: How difficult is it for somebody in the 21st century, who is used to employ a multitude of technologies advances in foreign language studies, to explore and perfect a vanished language? Wasn't it sufficient for you to study the extensive body of research already available on antiquity?

Strahil: Cuneiform is the oldest surviving script on Earth. Much like the Latin script, used in modern history to document languages such as English or Dutch, cuneiform script served as a medium for recording most prominent Ancient Near Eastern languages. If you consult secondary literature about that period, you will get limited insights into their cultures. Reading the original script and the languages behind, rather than relying on translations of others, allows you to read its authentic message, not someone else's interpretation of it. Languages are gateways to understanding the respective cultures. Secondary literature, as the name implies, offers second-rate information. Back to your question about how difficult it is to learn a dead language like Akkadian and be able to read cuneiform in the original. One needs to shift one's own thinking away from alphabetic terms, more like what you need to learn Hieroglyphs. The alphabet is a simplification of a complex writing system, it is like a simple theory, but not an essence. Cuneiform is able to convey messages you can never do with an alphabet. It is much more interesting and fun, since you can read between the lines. Imagine the difference between watching a box match on a small smart phone (alphabet) compared to being present near

the boxing stage (cuneiform).

Editor: You have been working with cuneiform tablets that date back to 3000 years BC, though some are more recent ones, of the AD era. What did they teach you anew about humans?

Strahil: It is fair to generalise here, because I do not think that there is much difference between us, the moderns, and the ancients. If one were to look fifty generations back in time, one would already find oneself in the pre-Christian era. This is not so distant from us, especially when considering the time needed for a minor change in biological evolution. Nothing fundamental has changed about humans since antiquity – people then made the same mistakes as we do nowadays, experienced the same feelings, the same greed or fear, and held similar superstitions. The only real change since then has been in technology. Advanced technology has transformed the way we approach the world.

Editor: You used to work as a curator at the British Museum in London. What is the feeling like to set your hand on a thousand-year-old artifact whose inscription you are about to translate and convert into a meaningful message?

Strahil: There is nothing exceptional about the object itself; a cuneiform tablet is made from clay, terracotta. It can be beautiful, but also broken and torturous to read. Cuneiform tables were made of sun-dried mud from riverbanks. Unlike papyri, which were made out of the fibres of the papyrus plant, or leather manuscripts, which were costly to produce, cuneiform tablets were inexpensive. They cost nothing as mud was readily available to everyone in Mesopotamia, and everyone could inscribe something onto it. Once no longer needed, these clay tablets were discarded, only to be discovered by archaeologists thousands of years later. This is in fact the longest surviving writing medium created by man until now. Stone will endure more, but it is precious and will be reused, but clay is just mud. Thus, it is not interesting when buried under the soil, which is an unintentionally genius solution for securing its endurance through the ages. What makes it special is the cuneiform text inscribed upon it. Sometimes, I realise that I am the first person to read a line after

Cuneiform tablet, Collection of the British Museum



3000 thousand years. I am not sure I can describe it well with a metaphor, but it is like a psychedelic trip, teleporting myself in ancient Babylon for a minute.

Editor: What type of information do these tablets contain? What topics do they tackle?

Strahil: You can find all possible information – from administration, literature and mythology to cooking recipes. There is information about magic, medicine, mathematics, astronomy, divination, rituals, cults, and incantations. There are texts related to architecture as descriptions of temples, there are instructions for producing glass, letters regarding people's daily trade activities with copper or precious metals, or records of the number of sheep owned. Cuneiform was used in manifold ways – to convey elaborate, technical, or just simple messages. Thanks to these tablets, we can reconstruct the landscape and ownership in antiquity. In addition, in ancient Mesopotamia, one can find numerous parallels to our modern-day genres in literature. This is why cuneiform heritage is so significant for historians.

Victor: Were complaints also documented?

Strahil: Absolutely! People got angry with each other, threatened others to commit suicide if their complaints are not met, wrote 'letters' to the gods asking why they had been abandoned by them ...

Editor: Does the abundance of cuneiform tablets suggest a high level of literacy during that time, too?

Strahil: Certainly, the cuneiform heritage is the largest one surviving on original manuscripts from the ancient world. People were supposed to have some knowledge of the script in Mesopotamia. In fact, due to the widespread use of cuneiform in the mid-second millennium BC, Akkadian – one of the earliest documented Semitic language – became the international lingua franca of its day and was used for diplomatic purposes. When the ancient Egyptian pharaohs corresponded with the kings of Babylon and the Hittites, they did so in cuneiform. Cuneiform could be used

for elaborate writings or simple notations; thus, I guess most people could use it to a certain extent.

Editor: Your current research at CAS involves work with unpublished cuneiform tablets from the Iraq Museum in Baghdad that you yourself have identified and deciphered. They focus on ancient treatments of diseases, particularly bronchial complaints and phlegm, which resurfaced in collections of therapeutic writings both before Hippocrates and in the Hippocratic Corpus itself, i.e. several hundred years later. How was ancient medical knowledge transmitted in time? From a twenty-first-century perspective, were the ancients ignorant or informed about diseases? Would some of the ancient cures be still valid today?

Strahil: These are very detailed questions. Some prescriptions provide instructions about what to do if someone suffers from an excess of phlegm, for instance, or from another related condition. They advise you to boil mint in a big pot and breathe in the steam. This is a type of inhalation what we still practice today in Bulgaria, though mostly with chamomile. It is an ancient technology that has survived over time. However, what differs is the concept and taxonomy of diseases. The way the ancients saw and described the world is different. As I mentioned earlier, they did not have modern technology. Thus, they had different ideas about the human body and how or why diseases affect us. This makes it difficult for us to precisely identify ancient diseases based only on philology, as we may get 'lost in translation'. However, we are very good at describing diseases, which is also what the ancients laconically did. The good thing is that now and then we have the same human body and mind. Thus, we are dealing with a one-to-one comparison. Yes, the ancients were very informed about diseases, since they collected data in writing for more than 2000 years. Can you imagine this from a modern perspective, when you envision that modern medicine has been doing this for less than 200 years? The transmission of medical knowledge is a remarkable topic and we are just starting to comprehend

the how and why. It seems to me that in certain periods ancient medicine had more common features than usually assumed. Ideas travel easily when they have similar grounds. This applies to the ancient world as it does to the modern one. Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Hittites, ancient Aramaic people, ancient Jews, ancient Syrians, Greeks and Romans treated night-blindness, for example, in the same way.

Editor: Your scholarly career includes work at Ruperto Carola University, the Heidelberg University, the Free University of Berlin, the British Museum – educational institutions renowned for their interest in ancient history. Now that you have returned to Bulgaria, how do you envisage your future career in this field? Is Bulgaria a fruitful place to pursue further investigations in this area and disseminate knowledge about the ancient world amongst the young generations?

Strahil: It is a matter of perspective. Renowned institutions hold valuable traditions, libraries and collections and, until recently, conducting real research outside of them was unheard of. However, with the advent of the digital era, the world has changed; now, we have e-access to literature, archives, and vast collections of photos of cuneiform tablets and objects. Your physical location no longer matters. If like, you can engage with the international academic community and be part of it. This has become much more accessible now, especially after COVID-19, as everyone has adapted to partly spend their professional life online. Sadly, the education system in Bulgaria remains stubbornly resistant to change. There are problems in Western cultures, too, with universities increasingly operating as corporate entities. Moreover, the constant struggle for grants, often on pre-determined topics, as well as the publish-or-perish mentality, have led to an emphasis on quantity over quality. This is detrimental to the humanities, depriving researchers of autonomy and critical thinking – the pillars of research. Nevertheless, institutions like CAS or the Academy of Sciences offer unique opportunities to escape this reality and concentrate on one's academic interests.



Living in a Place Surrounded by Untouched, Full-blown Nature: **Kim Holleman**

Editor: Kim, you have been living in Bulgaria for three years now. What impressed you the most about Bulgaria, once you landed here?

Kim: The colours of the Bulgarian flag. I noticed the green and red right away. They are bright, vivid, and happy! Then the landscape. From a distance, it looked dustier ... until I got close and saw the plants and flowers around. The light in Bulgaria is different, too. Everything is different in Bulgaria, but I was ready for that!

Editor: You were brave enough to exchange life in New York for the rural Bulgarian countryside. What motivated your gigantic leap overseas?

Kim: Moving to Bulgaria had to do with being locked down in New York during COVID-19. The measures taken in New York City were draconian! Everything that I loved about New York was gone overnight – there was no more music, no more art, no more galleries, no museums, nor friends. Personal freedom was gone, too. I felt like a caged animal, mentally going through a nightmare. And then, the question crossed my mind what it would be like to be somewhere else, with more freedom. This was an escapist idea that changed my worldview. I felt I no longer wanted to rent an apartment; instead, I wanted to own a house. I no longer wanted to make art about nature in a place where there wasn't much nature; I wanted to be in a place surrounded by rustic, rural, untouched, full-blown nature for kilometres on all sides. All I wanted was to be as deep in a natural environment as I could.

While searching online for such a fantasy place, Eastern Europe appeared on my radar. Western Europe, Portugal, South-

ern France – I felt they were too close to America. Then, on a real estate website, I discovered hundreds of old stone houses, with gardens and orchards, in Bulgaria. The more I researched Bulgaria, the more I saw that Bulgarian architecture was much like the old European architecture, while the folklore and the people had deep connections with ancient traditions. It was an amazingly small, yet rich country, where I could have a feel for nature. I could travel to the coast or the mountains, drive to a valley or a forest. As soon as the international flights from JFK airport were resumed, I booked a one-way ticket to Bulgaria. I have absolutely no regrets; it was the right decision.

Editor: You are an established artist, blending art and environmental issues. In fact, in your artist statement, you refer to your art as 'a utopian vision of environmentalist futures', and link environmentalism to humanism. How do you align environmentalist principles with humanist values?

Kim: The fundamental truth, that people may or may not understand, is that environmentalism is humanism. At the end of the day, the Earth will continue to exist, but if we destroy too much of our habitat, ultimately, it will be humanity who will suffer the consequences.

Editor: In your inspiring TED Talk in 2012, you mention that modern-day environmental problems are so complex, that solutions have to be found in translation, rather than in invention or creation. What did you mean by that and how does this attitude inform your design and work? Could you share some information about those fascinating projects of yours that have

been inspired by the interplay of city and wildlife?

Kim: Thank you. What I meant was that we can transform our way of life, our conscious planning of our cities and towns, our willingness to use 'old fashioned principles' mixed with modern progressivism in order to create and maintain sustainable, healthy communities integrated with their environment, not at the expense of it. It's possible to leverage environmental science and ancient agricultural knowledge to solve a lot of issues if people are willing to embrace new models, interdisciplinary models, 'utopian' models. One example of this is my project Trailer Park: A Mobile Public Park in NYC. It is a travel trailer, a typical caravan, but I gutted the interior and redesigned it as a living mobile public park with trees, plants, flowers, beaches, etc. It was a fun way to allow people to step off the sidewalk in the hustling and bustling concrete city and walk into a fuller immersive experience of living nature. It was also a fun technical challenge. It appealed to a lot of different concerns and types of people.

Editor: Now, as you have lived in Bulgaria long enough, can you draw a comparison between the ways Americans and Bulgarians address the environment and nature?

Kim: New Yorkers approach the environment in the progressive context of the Green Movement of the 1970s that picked up steam in the 2010s and, backed by academics and politicians, turned into a formidable force. It is about environmental conservation, renewable energy, clean technologies, sustainability, and policy change. It is a recent development. In NY people actually died in the 60s from a

severe smog event. This turned the tide for politicians, namely President Johnson, who worked on and signed the Clean Air Act and other legislation. Within a decade a measurable improvement was made. The more we are urged to move toward cleaner fuel, with less impact on the environment and creating less pollution, the more we should go for it. It shouldn't really be a political issue. Ultimately, it's a societal issue.

In contrast, Bulgarians have an ancient, deeply-rooted connection to the land. The conversations that I have with Bulgarians frequently evoke associations with grandparents and village life, and their knowledge of herbs, plants and herbal remedies. If you look around, there are fruit, nuts, and vegetables growing all over the place – everywhere, to the point that, at times, people overlook the presence of nature around them. Whereas I, as an American, notice it clearly while driving on the highways or less-travelled roads. These are lined with fruit trees; you can pull over and pick an apple or some mulberries... For hundreds of years, Bulgarians have cultivated and planted the land, ensuring there are fruit trees or nuts within a walking distance. In America, you wouldn't have that. In Florida, where I am originally from, people would plant a citrus tree in front of their house, mostly for decorative purposes. Citrus trees, however, are not native to Florida; they come from China. They are rather recent in American history.



Editor: What strikes you most about life in the Bulgarian countryside?

Kim: Traditional country houses in Bulgaria are like individual homesteads where you grow enough food to feed your family, and if something is left, it is traded with a neighbour. This may remind you of the Off-grid Movement, or the Sustainability and the Survivalist movements in the USA that have taken off over the last fifty years. However, they are different. In America, these are well-educated movements: people learn how to be self-reliant, how to produce and utilise their own resources, how to cultivate their own food and prepare food supplies. They learn how to collect

rainwater, how to kindle a fire or generate power, rather than rely on public electricity. It is a deliberately adopted lifestyle that fosters self-sufficiency, minimalises pollution and waste generation, and promotes sustainability and the preservation of nature and biodiversity.

Many people who are in these movements in the United States, were not raised with it. And so they grow up and become educated about how to achieve these things not from their parents, but from books and other people in these movements.

However, in Bulgaria, this is traditional knowledge that has been passed down from grandparents to grandchildren. It's been orally transmitted.

If feeling unwell, people here often advise me to look for a specific plant or fruit that would be good for me. Whether it is swollen glands or mosquito bites, people resort to herbal remedies. I recently cured a sore throat by wrapping a woollen cloth soaked in warm *rakya* (traditional, often home-made grape brandy – *Editors' note*). It might have been due to the increased temperature or inhaling the fumes, but when I woke up in the morning, I felt fine!

Bulgarians deal with nature differently because they have been raised with this knowledge; it is in their DNA. Americans, on the other hand, don't have that tradition. They came to the States from diverse backgrounds and their native knowledge was gone over time. Only recently have



Americans arrived at a revolutionary point where they wish to become more communal and slow down their lifestyle. But in Bulgarian villages, it has been like that for hundreds of years.

Editor: In your talk last night on future cities, utopian architecture and critical research, you also reached back to New York's past, marked by environmental pollution. However, fifty years later, New York's skyline has clear outlines, while, in contrast, aerial views of Sofia appear blurred and obscured by smog. You address this issue in your CAS project by suggesting amazing, eco-friendly artistic solutions. Would you like to share some of your ideas with our wider CAS audience? Have you considered implementing what you referred to as 'the dream of the seed' in Bulgarian urban environments?

Kim: I look forward to doing work, namely public art projects which focus on a cleaner environment for the people living in urban cities where there is more integration with healthy nature, where roof gardens are being utilised to grow food and curb 'heat island effect' and to provide more nature for city-dwellers. Other projects include installing public sculptures that clean the air and help mitigate the smog problem over Sofia and other cities in Bulgaria. A reason why I talk about green roofs, green infrastructure and deploying environmental public art, is that this also provides relief from smog. Because part of plants jobs, besides providing food for pollinators and for humans, is to clean the air and produce oxygen. The more environmental work you do in a city, the bigger the impact.

Some of the first conversations I had about Sofia were about the smog problem and how disturbed people are by it. This reminded me of New York in the 1970s. I thought that was something that I could tackle, as I am familiar with the science behind air purification. There are powerful, super massive devices for cleaning the air, but, as I made a point in my presentation, this would place another gigantic industrial object in the heart of a city and earn negative feedback. It will run counter to good intentions. My proposal is to disguise cleaning devices as public art sculptures

– something playful and tasteful that captures people's attention. Its tangential benefit is the purification of air. This will be something novel and fun, and people will love it. It is also something very serious, especially while we are waiting for legislation to regulate the waste discharged in the air or in the water. However, people should not feel compelled to accept yet another ugly device in the midst of their cities, regardless of how useful it may be. And this is where art comes in.

Editor: How long would the accomplishment of such a project take? Wouldn't it be a time-consuming venture?

Kim: In reality, you can build a large-scale structure in a few days, as its construction requires only basic materials – a turbine, a

date! It is very simple to transform a city if you have the legislators on your side. Just as developers and property owners have to update the electricity and plumbing systems in buildings, so could they be mandated to start roof gardens, too. This will reduce the electricity consumption as green roofs serve as natural insulators. Imagine the reduction in expenses! Not to mention the psychological benefits – the reduction of stress, the improvement of mood! ... There are wonderful parks in Sofia, but imagine all the additional square metres of green space if going vertically, on the rooftops of buildings. Wouldn't this be paradise? This is happening in Manhattan, but Manhattan is much denser than Sofia. The high-rises there are insane. I think it would be easier to accomplish this project here. As I have mentioned before,



metal core, some concrete and fibres. What is crucial, though, is getting people on board with the idea, obtaining permission, securing funding and support.

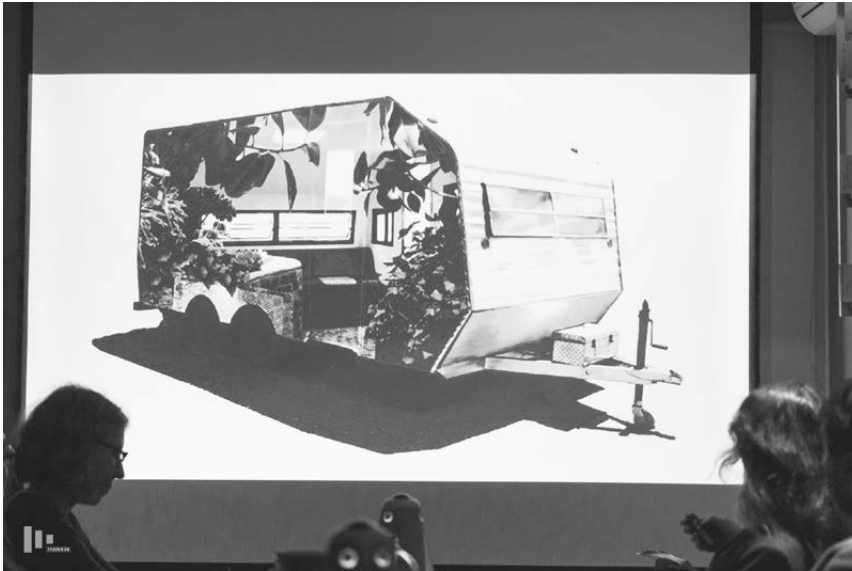
Editor: Now that forty percent of the Bulgarian population is concentrated in six cities, what other 'quick' and affordable recipes could artists suggest to help slowing down the pace of everyday life and further utilising nature for people's well-being?

Kim: If I were asked a similar question about New York, my answer would be easy: make roof gardens mandatory by a certain

Bulgaria has an abundance of plants, grasses and trees. It would be easy to cultivate them on roofs. What is more, roof gardens reduce the CO₂ and NO₂ emissions, and purify the air. They are applicable to Sofia and other Bulgarian cities.

Editor: How can people be persuaded to turn this seemingly utopian idea into reality?

Kim: Initially, people may resist, but in the end, they will be grateful for the change. This is what happened in New York in the 1990s, when the Smoke Free Air Act was introduced, banning smoking and the use



"Trailer Park: A Mobile Public Park" by Kim Holleman

of electronic cigarettes in workplaces and public spaces. The National Smokers Alliance protested against the anti-smoking legislation, but it eventually lost ground.

I believe that younger Bulgarians are becoming increasingly aware of environmental issues, largely due to the internet. Two years ago, I witnessed volunteers gathering for a clean-up of the Yantra River near Veliko Turnovo. They removed waste from the river, weeded the banks, and renovated a pre-existing, yet neglected wooden hut there. They transformed it into a sports and cultural centre, reclaiming the space for music, yoga, and meditation. These young people took the initiative themselves. Who would stop them? Absolutely, nobody!

Editor: As an interdisciplinary artist and a research affiliate at the MIT Media Lab in the USA, you were involved in designing spaces for Montessori learning. What was the aim of your project; what was its outcome?

Kim: The beauty of the Montessori Project was that I designed it to be a way to convert older commercial and retail spaces that were not natural, healthy and sustainable, into non-toxic, natural sustainable interiors for children. They were usually filled with nature and large scale nature installations inside the classrooms. The outcome is that you don't even need to "teach" environmentalism to them, they

are instead actively engaged with nature, because they have a direct relationship to the nature they take care of, as they learn how plants live, how ecosystems work, where food comes from, and more.

Editor (to all interviewees): Your fellowships at CAS are about to expire. How do you evaluate your stay at CAS? Have you considered any new steps and plans in your career?

Kim: I am moving forward with my project that I designed while at CAS. I have built a small prototype of my project that I plan to scale up to medium size and eventually, develop in a full-size structure. You keep

going in stages until you get it done.

Strahil: The topic that I was researching while at CAS opened new perspectives and will keep me engaged for years to come. CAS is a great academic environment and the discussions after the CAS seminars are priceless.

Victor: The work here has progressed great, and I have managed to consult a huge number of press, library, and archival holdings. I have read through too much of the 'yellow press' of the 1990s, and while professionally great, it has probably caused some mental health problems by now! But on a serious note, CAS has been invaluable in getting this project off the ground and also allowing me to clarify exactly which directions I want to take it in.

Ivo: I am very happy to be part of the vibrant international community of CAS, which is also an extremely important institution for the Bulgarian academic milieu. Following up on my work during the fellowship, I will continue to explore the question of heritage hierarchies and extend the research to the broader Balkan terrain.

Editor: Good luck to all with your work! I hope to meet you again around the table in the near future, to follow up with your accomplishments.

Interviewed by The Editor





Text by: Martin Ivanov
and Roumen Avramov

ECONOMIC (SOCIAL) BULGARIA: THE FUTURE THROUGH THE CULTURE OF THE PAST


After a nine-year break, the seminar “Economic (Social) Bulgaria: The Future through the Culture of the Past” was reinstated in January 2023. Organized between 2004 and 2014 at the Centre for Culture and Debates “The Red House”, it became a venue for vibrant academic discussions and home to a distinctive intellectual community. 132 seminar sessions were held, with 107 lecturers from Bulgaria and eight other countries, affiliated to 45 (including 17 foreign) research institutions.

The Centre for Advanced Study Sofia decided to support and host, on a monthly basis, the new “Economic (Social) Bulgaria” series. As previously, the discussions are moderated by Associate Professor Martin Ivanov (Sofia University, CAS Associate Fellow), and Associate Professor Roumen Avramov (Member of the CAS Academic Advisory Council). The original goals and format of the seminar series have been kept, namely, to foster the interest in the economic and social past of Bulgaria; to cover a vast range of topicalities and historical periods; to provide an interdisciplinary and inter-institutional platform to scholars from the humanities and the social sciences; to involve, to the extent possible, foreign academics into the ongoing national debates.

Twelve seminar sessions have taken place so far on the following topics:

- “The Economic Price of ‘Second (Soviet) Liberation’” by Professor Daniel Vachkov (Institute for Historical Studies, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences)
- ““The Harms of Education” by Professor Pencho Penchev (University for National and World Economy, Sofia)
- “The Shepherd’s Aristocracy” by Associate Professor Nikolay Todorov (Regional Historical Museum, Silistra)
- “From ‘Local’ to ‘National’ Cuisine: The Formation of the ‘Bulgarian National Cuisine’ - Resources, Stages, Techniques, Achievements” by Associate Professor Stefan Dechev (South-Western University, Blagoevgrad)
- “The Bulgarian Liberal Programme of 1990: Between Monetarism and the Social Market Economy” by Professor Dimitar Ludjev (Institute for Historical Studies, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences)
- “Between the Sultan’s Decree and Sheikh-ul-Islam’s Fatwa: Tobacco in the Bulgarian Lands During the XVIIth Century” by Professor Valentin Kitanov (South-Western University, Blagoevgrad)
- “A Tale About the ‘Servants of Mammon’: Attitudes to Interest and Usury in Ottoman Bulgaria (XVII – XIX Century). The Religious Perspectives.” by Associate Professor Hristiyan Atanasov (University of Library Studies and Information Technologies; Bulgarian National Library).





Text by: Simeon Evstatiev

RELIGION AND CULTURE DISCUSSION SERIES

- "The Food of the Medieval Bulgarians" by Doctor Joanna Bencheva (Sofia University)
- "Economic Growth in the Central Balkans During the XIX Century: Regional Peculiarities and Driving Forces" by Doctor Ivailo Naydenov (Institute for Historical Studies, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences)
- "Social and Economic Aspects in the History of the "Voinuks" from the Ottoman Imperial Stables, XVI–XVII Centuries" by Doctor Krastyo Yordanov (Institute for Historical Studies, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences)
- "Urbanisation Policy of the Ottoman Power in the Bulgarian Lands in the Third Quarter of the 19th Century" by Assoc. Prof. Ventsislav Muchinov (Institute for Population and Human Studies, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences)
- "The Socio-Economic Importance of Opium and Hashish in Bulgaria 1920–1944" by Assoc. Prof. Dimitar Gyudurov (New Bulgarian University, Sofia, Bulgaria)

The seminar became a popular debating spot for economic and social history researchers. The interest among potential presenters is high and the 2024 prospective programme is already established. For more details on the upcoming events, please visit CAS Sofia website at <https://cas.bg/en/events/>.

In 2023, several sessions of the Religion and Culture Discussion Series, the continuation of the eponymous seminar, chaired by Prof. Simeon Evstatiev (a Pforzheimer Fellow at CAS, 2019–20) in the Center for the Study of Religion (CSR) of Sofia University since 2009, took place at CAS Sofia. It was established in collaboration with CSR on the general 2022–2023 topic "Center and Periphery in Religion and Society", starting with a keynote by Professor Dale F. Eickelman of Dartmouth College in October 2022.

At its first 2023 session, Associate Professor Ilia Iliev from the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology of Sofia University discussed how the ancient Thracians and their "mystique", once marginal in the Bulgarian national imagination, would gain a centrality in the Communist cosmology of the 1970s and 1980s. These were the years when the regime sought to marginalise the established religions of both the majority (Christianity) and minority (Islam) population. The presentation delved into the ancient Thracian religion as it was conceptualized by the influential Bulgarian historian and public intellectual Professor Alexander Fol (1933–2006) and his followers in the 1970s. Three versions of his perception of Thracian culture were identified: (1) an occult element, the aspirations to personal immortality, and its compatibility with the humanist visions of Fol's contemporary New Age religious movements; (2) a retro-dystopia built on the narrative that ancient Thrace was a society totally controlled by a ruler who was God and who had absolute economic, military, social, and ideological power over his subjects; and (3) the orphic appears to be a lonely individual who has cut all ties with the others.

In the second 2023 session, Professor Vladimir Gradev, who teaches at the Cultural Studies Programme of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", dealt with Dante and Islam against the backdrop of center and periphery in the hereafter and in this world. For Edward Said, the *Divine Comedy* – a central work of Western Christian civilization – was the starting point of the "Orientalist vision" that turned Islam into an epitome of the enemy lurking on the periphery of Christendom, of the outsider against whom the modern European culture was founded and built. For others, including Asín Palacios, Dante was positively influenced by Islam, and his journey to the world's beyond was modeled on the Muslim account of the *mi'rāj*, the Prophet Muhammad's night journey. More than half a century, heated debates have continued as to whether the *Comedy* is an embodiment of the medieval "clash of civilizations" or, on the contrary, a testimony to a tolerance of religious and cultural differences.

For the audience of the third 2023 session, Professor Livnat Holtzman of Bar-Ilan University discussed the work of Ignaz Goldziher (1850–1921), illustrious Jewish Hungarian scholar, who is widely recognized as a key figure in the development



of Arabic and Islamic studies. Goldziher's groundbreaking contributions in the study of Hadith, Qur'an exegesis, and Islamic theology have garnered considerable acclaim and are studied to date. However, a substantial portion of his work which holds promise for further insights into the Arabic cultures and literatures remains undiscovered, including an unknown facet of his work – Goldziher's profound interest in gestures in the Arabic and Islamic written sources and oral traditions which remained in the periphery of later generation's academic interests. The seminar unveiled the secrets of gestures that Goldziher revealed through his laborious readings in the gigantic corpus of the Arabic sources and highlights the impact of Goldziher's work on gestures in various fields.

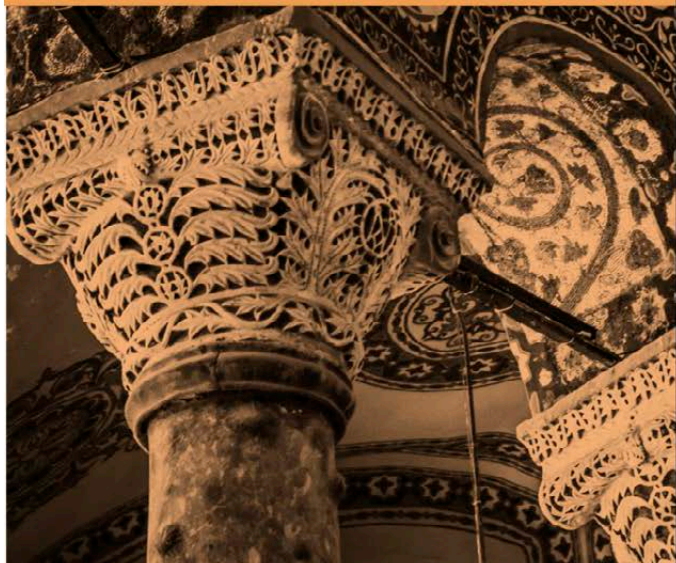
In the fourth session for 2023, Dr. Igor Dorfman-Lazarev, Established Researcher (R3) who teaches Oriental languages at Sofia University, examined peripheral Christianity and peripheral Islam in the South-Eastern Caucasus according to David of Gandzak (ca 1065–1140). The seminar addressed the social and religious conditions in the largely Islamized city of Gandzak/Gandja at the beginning of the 11th century. Facing the hardly accessible ravines of the Lesser Caucasus, which from the 14th century were known as Karabagh, Gandzak durably remained a north-western outpost of Islam, hosting successive waves of Arabic, Kurdish, Turkic, and Mongol settlers. The proximity of the Armenian highlands explains how, notwithstanding the ongoing assimilation to the city's Muslim majority, the Christian population of Gandzak could continuously be sustained and maintain its cultural and religious identity. The seminar focused on the activity and writings of the

Armenian ecclesiastical author David of Gandzak, which afforded a lens through which to observe cultural interaction in these marchlands between the Armenian plateau and the Caspian plains during the first decades of the Turkic colonisation of the lowlands.

The proposed conceptualization of *center and periphery* suggests that in social reality, we regularly face situations where multiple centers interact with various peripheries, which invites us to tentatively formulate three major implications for the intersection of religion and society. First, even though a phenomenon looks peripheral from certain perspectives, this does not necessarily mean that it is insignificant. Second, a better understanding of the process in which a periphery turns into a center and vice versa can help us deepen our understanding of how the intersection of religion and society works. Third, centers constantly shift, and the boundaries between them and their peripheries are often blurred, while influence is bi-directional and mutual rather than one-sided and fixed.

In parallel with this seminar discussions held in collaboration with CAS, the CSR implemented the one-year project "Religion, Center and Periphery: The Orient in Europe, Europe in the Orient" with the support of the Sofia University's Fund for Scientific Research (No. 80–10–55/25.4.2023). In cooperation with the Institute for Historical Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, CSR organized a conference "East-West: Religions, Centers, and Peripheries" (19 – 20 October 2023) with more than 30 participants from various universities and institutes in Bulgaria.





Text by: Ivan Biliarski

WHY BYZANTIUM?

The discussion series “Why Byzantium?” has been conceived by its convener, Prof. Ivan Biliarski, as a platform for reflecting on the history of the Eastern Roman Empire, called Byzantium, and the cultural community that formed around it in the Eastern Mediterranean, Eastern and Southeastern Europe. The legacy of Byzantium, its formation, its development, its present-day outreach, and influence on the identity of some of the Slavic peoples and peoples of the Caucasus, is another subject of inquiry at the seminars.

At the core of the discussion club stands an interdisciplinary group of researchers and a larger circle of interested scholars coming from various disciplines (history, art history, archaeology etc.). In 2023, three gatherings addressed some general and more specific subjects, which are still considered sensitive to the study of Byzantium and its legacy today. The first one, on the topic “The Enduring Problems with the ‘Brand’ Byzantium: Thoughts on the Empire and Its Scholarship”, was presented by Prof. Vlada Stanković, (Faculty of History, University of Belgrade). In addressed, in a refreshingly critical and polemical fashion, the failure of the students of Byzantium – more than a century after the institutionalisation of their field – to agree among themselves on even the most basic elements, principles, characteristics, and features of the Eastern Roman Empire as a historical and cultural phenomenon. Overwhelmed by the volume and nature of first-hand sources for more than a millennium of Byzantine history, the academia is still unable to look beyond the image of the “Byzantine brand”, coined already in the Middle Ages in Western Europe, and developed during the Enlightenment, and to break the academic isolation of the scholarly field of Byzantine studies from the wider scholarship of European Middle Ages.

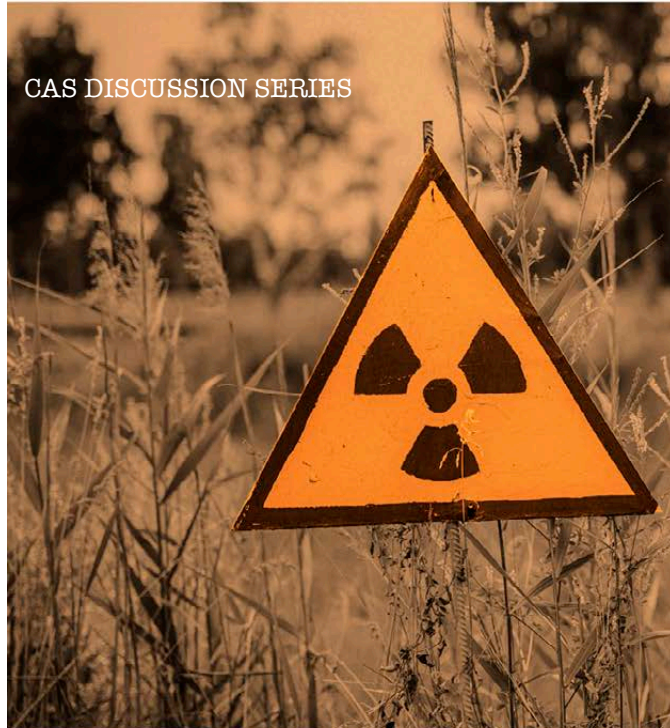
Another round of debates followed the lecture by Dr. Margarita Kuyumdzhieva titled “Why Byzantium in Bulgarian Art Studies.” In

her presentation, she sought to identify the main characteristics of the history of Byzantine Art Studies in Bulgaria, of their traditions, institutional framework and the extent to which the interpretative approaches they have established drew upon ideological paradigms. Specific examples showcased how the understanding of the relationship “Byzantine Art - Bulgarian Art” has evolved in Bulgarian Art Studies throughout the modern Bulgarian history.

The last seminar for the year was convened on a highly debatable subject: „Bulgaria as a ‘prime candidate’ for membership of the Byzantine Commonwealth?”, by Dr. Angel Nikolov. He argued that from a Byzantine perspective the conversion to Christianity of the Bulgarian people has created a specific relationship of spiritual dependence (‘sonship’) with Byzantium, which also presupposed a political union with it. However, at the time, Bulgaria had established itself as a powerful sovereign kingdom that defended its independence by building its own autocephalous church and the introduction of Slavonic as the language of liturgy and worship. This model of selective borrowing of the Byzantine political, literary, and cultural norms and patterns, and its subsequent adaptation to local demands, was eventually adopted by all Eastern European countries that converted to Byzantine Christianity. In this way, Slavia Orthodoxa was born – a new Christian world that shared the religious and cultural values spread by Constantinople but remained autonomous and separate from the empire. Nevertheless, this independent branch of the Eastern Christianity was regarded by the Byzantines as barbaric and alien to Roman traditions.

“Why Byzantium?” will persist with its ambitious agenda to resist the scholarly consensus of what is already known and bring to the table of debates new discoveries. To simultaneously provoke and unite the academic society on new discourses about Byzantium.





CHERNOBYL DISCUSSION SERIES

In the fall of 2024, CAS Sofia is launching a new discussion series initiated by CAS Fellows Prof. Momchil Metodiev and Prof. Dimitar Vatsov, focusing on **the Impact of the Chernobyl Disaster in Bulgaria**. Bulgaria is one of the few Eastern European countries, alongside Albania, that have not thoroughly investigated the occurrence and the short- and long-term effects of this catastrophe on the population. With the approaching 40th anniversary of the tragedy in 2026, the planned research has the potential to make a significant impact, extending beyond academia. An interdisciplinary group has already been formed around this initiative, and its members are eager to begin their studies in the coming 2024/25 academic year. The group is comprised of both

established scholars and doctoral students – ten researchers in five disciplinary panels, who have specialized in history, sociology, anthropology, political philosophy, atomic physics and radiology. Their task will be, in the first place, to gather data from multiple dispersed sources, organize it in a systematic way and then interpret it, relying on their disciplinary tools and conceptual expertise. Following discussions with the leading team, it was agreed that in addition to logistical support and hosting the seminar series, CAS will support financially the initial stage of the research (data mining) over the coming months.



CAS CALENDAR OF EVENTS 2023

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January

12 January 2023

Fellow Seminar

Dr Slavka Karakusheva

Population Politics and Nation Building: Migrations of Turkish and Muslim Populations from Bulgaria to Turkey (1925–1939)

17 January 2023

Discussion Series: Economic and Social History

Prof. Daniel Vatchkov

The Economic Price of “Second (Soviet) Liberation”

19 January 2023

Fellow Seminar

Dr Miguel A. Martínez

Political Outcomes of Housing Financialisation and Social Contention in Spain

26 January 2023

Fellow Seminar

Dr Bogdana Paskaleva

Pre-structuralist Semiology: Materiality of Language in Ferdinand de Saussure

27 January 2023

Discussion Series: Religion and Culture

Dr Iliya Iliev

The Mystique of the Ancient Thracians – Internal and External Audiences in the 1970s

31 January 2023

Discussion Series: Why Byzantium

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The Enduring Problems with the ‘Brand’ Byzantium: Thoughts on the Empire and Its Scholarship

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One’s Own Others: Balkan Christians in Ottoman Historical Writing (15th–16th Century)

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An Empire of Officials: Christians in the Ottoman Bureaucracy

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Interpretation of the “Rus” Concept in the Ukrainian and Russian Historiography in the Russian Empire (1805–1917)

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Prof. Pencho Penchev

On the Harm of Education

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Dr Valentin Kalinov

Between Repression and Resistance – A Look at the History of Psychoanalysis in Totalitarian Bulgaria (1947–1989)

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The Shepherd Aristocracy

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Policies of Professionalisation versus Policies of Memory: Architects and the Destruction of Architectural Heritage

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Intellectuals in Republican China and the Reception of Ancient Greek Political Concepts, 1911–1929

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The Fight against the Kulaks in Bulgaria – the Fate of the Large Landowners in Dobrudja after 1944

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Fellow Seminar

Dr Daehwan Kim

Cross-Country Differences in Wealth-Income Ratios



April

6 April 2023

Fellow Seminar

Dr Martin Valkov

Beyond Totalitarianism: Mass Internment, Concentration Camps And Forced Labor In Bulgaria In The 20th Century

11 April 2023

Discussion Series: Economic and Social History

Assoc. Prof. Dr Stefan Detchev

From "Local" to "National" Cuisine

20 April 2023

Fellow Seminar

Dr Stoyanka Eneva

The Cases of Bulgarian Female Care Workers in Greece and Spain

24–30 April 2023

Getty-CAS Archaeological Schools: Spring School 2023

May

3 May 2023

Advanced Academia Public Lecture Series

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Ecmnesia – Socialist Psychiatry in Bulgaria and its Legacy Today

4 May 2023

Fellow Seminar

Dr Slavka Karakusheva

Population Politics and Nation Building: Migrations of Turkish and Muslim Populations from Bulgaria to Turkey (1925–1939)

11 May 2023

Fellow Seminar

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The Theatre-caravanserai of Tbilisi. Reassembling a Civilizing Heterotopia from the Russian Caucasus, 1845–1876

16 May 2023

Discussion Series: Economic and Social History

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The Bulgarian Liberal Programme of 1990: Between Monetarism and Social Market Economy

18 May 2023

Fellow Seminar

Dr Maria Dimova-Cookson

Rethinking Meritocracy – Freedom, Wellbeing and the Common Good

22 May 2023

Discussion Series: Religion and Culture

Prof. Vladimir Gradev

Dante and Islam – On the Center and the Periphery in the Hereafter and in This World

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Discussion Series: Why Byzantium?

Dr Margarita Kuyumdzhieva

Why Byzantium in Bulgarian Art Studies

31 May 2023

Discussion Series: Religion and Culture

Prof. Livnat Holtzman

Ignaz Goldziher and Gesture Studies: From Periphery to Center?

June

1–15 June 2023

CAS-ACLS Summer Institute for the Study of East Central and Southeastern Europe

1 June 2023

Fellow Seminar

Dr Stamatia Fotiadou

Greek and Bulgarian Perceptions of National Catastrophes (1919–1922). A Comparative Approach

8 June 2023

Fellow Seminar

Dr Bogdana Paskaleva

Pre-structuralist Semiology: Materiality of Language in Ferdinand de Saussure

15 June 2023

Public Lecture

Dr Maria Dimova-Cookson

Isaiah Berlin's Two Concepts of Liberty



16 June 2023

Discussion Series: Religion and Culture

Dr Igor Dorfmann-Lazarev

Peripheral Christianity and Peripheral Islam in the South-Eastern Caucasus According to David of Gandzak (ca 1065–1140)

July

6 July 2023

Fellow Seminar

Dr Zbigniew Wojnowski

Pop Music in the USSR – Show Business and the Advent of Capitalism

October

3 October 2023

Official Opening of CAS Academic year

First meeting of all newly selected fellows for 2023 – 2024 academic year

19 October 2023

Fellow Seminar

Dr Dragos Gh. Năstăsioiu

Constructing Gender on Pilgrimage: Transformative Experiences of Women from the Eastern and Western Christian Societies in the Crusader Holy Land (1099–1291)

23 October 2023

Discussion Series “Economic and Social History”:

Prof. Dr. Valentin Kitanov

Between the Sultan’s Order and Sheikh-ul-Islam’s Fatwa: Tobacco in the Bulgarian Lands in the 17th Century

November

2 November 2023

Fellow Seminar

Dr Madelaine Angelova-Elchinova

A Novel Defence of Thomas Reid’s Direct Realism about Perception

3 November 2023

**Seminar within the international project
“Historiographical Wars in the Balkans”**

3–5 November 2023

Getty – CAS Closing conference in Athens, Greece

Local and Global in the Construction of Knowledge in Archaeology and Art History: A View from Southeastern Europe and Beyond

9 November 2023

Fellow Seminar

Dr Ivo Strahilov

Heritage Hierarchies: Unpacking the “Crossroads of Civilisations” Concept

16 November 2023

Fellow Seminar

Dr Victor Petrov

Star Citizens: Alternative Knowledge, Science, and the Search for Meaning in Post-Socialist Bulgaria

20 November 2023

Discussion Series: Economic and Social History

A Tale About the “Servants of Mammon”. Attitudes to Interest and Usury in Ottoman Bulgaria (XVII – XIX Century). The Religious Perspectives.

23 November 2023

Fellow Seminar

Dr Mikhail Maslovskiy

Historical Sociology, International Relations and Russian Civilizational Politics

30 November 2023

Fellow Seminar

Dr Volodymyr Bureha

Ukrainian Orthodoxy in the Face of the Challenge of War (Feb ’22 – Aug ’22)

December

7 December 2023

Fellow Seminar

Dr Strahil Panayotov

Comparative and Interdisciplinary Analyses of Medical Texts Concerning Coughing of Phlegm: From the Second Millennium BCE Mesopotamia, over Ashurbanipal to Hippocrates

12 December 2023

Discussion Series: Economic and Social History

Dr Joanna Bencheva

Food of the Medieval Bulgarians

14 December 2023

Fellow Seminar

Dr Petar Parvanov

Battlefield Archaeology of the Ottoman Conquest: Landscape, Heritage, Memory



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