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## **NIKOLA VAPCAROV/VAPTSAROV: BETWEEN A BULGARIAN AND A MACEDONIAN IDENTITY**

The aim of my article is to reconstruct Nikola Vapcarov's/Vaptsarov's multi-tiered identity in the context of changing political circumstances. I analyse his poetry published in the Bulgarian leftist press as well as his statements from the time of the Macedonian Literary Circle's activity in Sofia in 1938-1941.

I retrace the material connected with his activity within the Macedonian Literary Circle in Sofia on the basis of the archive of Mikhail Smatrakalev, one of the Circle's driving forces. I researched the Mikhail Smatrakalev Archive in the State Archives of the Republic of North Macedonia in Skopje.

### **Historical Context**

In 1936 the legal organ of the so called IMRO-United (Internal Macedonian-Adrianople Revolutionary Organization) – *Македонски весѝи* (1935-1936) ceased being published, and it was the reason why Mikhail Smatrakalev (1910-1998) organized the 'Macedonian Literary Circle', but firstly he established the 'Journalists Circle' ('Публицистичен кръжок') which was an ephemeral organisation, before the 'Macedonian Literary Circle' started to exist (Ристовски 1997: 169-199).

At the same time, the official organ of the Bulgarian Communist Party, the weekly *Кормило* (1935-1936), had been closed because of the faction wars among the Bulgarian literary left. The weekly was edited by Georgi Karaslavov (1904- 1980) and was open not only to the antifascist left but also to individuals like Smatrakalev and Vapcarov/Vaptsarov, who in that time were not members of the Bulgarian Communist Party (Фонд Сматракалев,

кутија 10). The weekly was closed down due to internal antagonism, because it was a hub of the so-called qualitative group (качественици). Indeed, for the Editor-in-chief, Karaslavov, and the weekly staff, the form of published works (poetry) was an important issue. For the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party it was ‘wrong line’, and that is why the periodical was closed, and Editor-in-chief Karaslavov, two poets - Khristo Radevski (1903-1996) and Mladen Issaev (1907-1991), and the painter Aleksander Zhendov (1901-1953) ended up outside the Party (Цанев 1971; Dąbek-Wirgowa 1980: 195-212 i 236-239).

The young collaborators of the weekly *Кормило* was Nikola Vapcarov/Vaptsarov, and Mikhail Smatrakalev. The latter was also a collaborator of the Macedonian diaspora’s weekly in Sofia, *Македонски весџи*. Both periodicals were closed down at about the same time, in 1936. They met at *Кормило*, and it was the beginning of their lasting friendship (Фонд Сматаркалев, кутија 10). For Vapcarov/Vaptsarov it was a coming into Macedonian matters.

### Macedonian Literature

In 1945 in Sofia, at the session of the Macedonian Scientific Institute, Smatrakalev mentioned that at the founding meeting of the Macedonian Literary Circle (1938-1941) the members had not been in the habit to writing down their presentations or their contributions they or their fellow members discussed, so Vapcarov/Vaptsarov’s report, which will be quoted here, is the version cited by Smatrakalev in his memoirs<sup>1</sup>, which is written in Bulgarian Language (Фонд Сматаркалев кутија 10):

Нека организираме Македонския литературен кръжок и в него да ковим македонска, наша литература, в него да създадем произведения, които да разтворят очите на македонците, да им вдъхнат вяра в победата, в свободата, да разгорим тяхното национално съзнание, да ги мобилизираме за борба против реакцията, против върховизма, против шовинизма.<sup>2</sup> (Фонд Сматаркалев, кутија 10)

In his presentation, according to Smatrakalev’s memoirs, Vapcarov/Vaptsarov proposed not creating any kind of literature, but literature aware of its duties, committed to the struggle for future Macedonia which would be a separate political entity as well as a component of a future federation of democratic states in accordance with the Soviet model.

<sup>1</sup> Different meaning on that topic present in Vasil Tocinovski (Тоциновски 1995).

<sup>2</sup> “Let us organize the Macedonian Literary Circle and though it let us create Macedonian, our literature, through it, let us create works which will open the Macedonians’ eyes breathe faith in victory, in freedom into them, let us fire their national awareness, let us mobilize them to fight against reaction, against vrhovism, against chauvinism.” Eevery translation is translate by Jolanta Sujecka [JS] and Joanna Dutkiewicz [JD].

At the second meeting, Smatrakalev gave a lecture on Vapcarov's/Vaptsarov's poem *Родина* (Homeland), which had been published in 1935 in the 37th issue of the weekly *Кормило* in Bulgarian Language. It is worthy to cite a significant fragment of Smatrakalev's analysis of this poem:

/.../ Стихотворението е македонско. В него виждаме издигнатите граници на Пирин, орлите над бедните села, но не само тая картина го прави македонско, не. Навсякажде образа на родината е някак неразривно свързан с автора. И когато го боли и когато страда, той се отчайва и хули майка си, хули я не че му е далечна, а защото му е близка, защото на майката, най-близката, той може да каже най-горчивите и най-нежни думи. И като отрезнява, той ги казва неподражаемо просто - **“Сега си ми близка, по-близка от майка дори!”** **И на края неговия устрем естествено е свързан с имената на Гоце[Делчев - J.S.] и Даме [Груев -J.S.].** [J.S.] Но има и друго. Тука има и навлизане и към интернационализма. /.../<sup>3</sup> (Фонд Сматракалев, кутија 10)

The figures of Goce Delčev/Gotse Delchev and Dame Gruev from the poem of Vapcarov/Vaptsarov, according to the interpretation of Smatrakalev are symbols of Macedonian character, as well as the elements of poets ideological homeland. As Smatrakalev recalled years later Vapcarov/Vaptsarov and Anton Popov (1915-1942) - other member of the Macedonian Literary Circle - both from Pirin Macedonia heard for the first time about them from him (Фонд Сматракалев, кутија 10).

In aforementioned interpretation Smatrakalev also notices that the poets lyrical subject merges with the images of the homeland as a mother. It is connected with a much deeper issue, Vapcarov/Vaptsarov in fact combine his private biography with the lyrical subject he creates.

In my interpretation Vapcarov/Vaptsarov in his poem create a multi-layers image of his homeland - Macedonia, which does not stop being local, but at the same time begins to function as an ideological homeland. The hypostasis of locality is Pirin mountains and Bansko, poet's birthplace. The sign of ideological homeland are the historical figures of Dame Gruev (1871-1906) and Goce Delčev/Gotse Delchev (1872-1903). Gruev and Delčev/ Delchev are a heroes of most recent history, about whom Vapcarov learned (as I stressed

<sup>3</sup> “/.../The poem is Macedonian. In it we see the raised granite of Pirin, eagles above poor villages, but it's not just this picture thus makes it a Macedonian [work- J.S.], no. Wherever you look, in some way the image of the homeland is linked to the winter. Whenever he is in pain, when he suffers, when he is desperate and curses his mother, he curses her not because she is distant from him, but because she is close to him, because to his mother, his nearest, he can say the saddest [the most bitter] and the gentles words. And when he awakens he says ordinarily, in an inimitable way: **‘Now you are near to me – nearer even than my mother!’** **And finally, his aspiration is related in a natural way to Goce [Delčev – J.S.] and Dame [Gruev – J.S.].** But there is something else. We also have here a reference to internationalism /.../”

earlier) from Smatrakalev, though the press of the Macedonian diaspora in Sofia commemorated both the Ilinden Uprising and all the sites related to it.<sup>4</sup>

But the key term in the poem as well as in Smatrakalev's analysis is the lexeme *народ/narod* and its meaning. Vapcarov/Vaptsarov uses this lexeme in the next-to-last verse of his poem:

Вредъ мракъ.  
И въ мрака – тегло и робия.  
Глад.  
Остана стотици години назадъ.  
А нейде живота пулсира,  
израства  
заводъ  
след задодъ,  
бръмчат пропелери...  
**А моят народъ [J.S.]**  
работи,  
умира,  
както въ дълбоката  
бронзова ера.<sup>5</sup>

(Н. Вапцаров, Архив на Република Северна Македонија)

The lexeme *народ/narod* has been translated and explained as “nation” by many authors (Friedman 1975: 83-98; Felczak & Wasilewski, 1985: 247-249; 307-312; Kramer 2001; Jelavich 1983). I propose the philological translation of the term *народ/narod* as “people-nation”.<sup>6</sup>

Now we can return to Vapcarov's/Vaptsarov's poem and put forward a fundamental question. Who are the people-nation (*народ/narod*) in Vapcarov's/Vaptsarov's poem? The context of the first verse suggests the people-nation from Pirin Macedonia, meaning the Bulgarian part of Macedonia, from where he originated. Vapcarov/Vaptsarov was born in Bansko in Pirin Macedonia, but the last verse gives us a slightly different possible connotation of using the lexeme people-nation (*народ/narod*):

Азъ пакъ те обичамъ  
Родино на Гоце и Даме,  
защото израстнахъ,  
защото закрепнахъ въвъ Тебъ.

<sup>4</sup> See the magazines of Arseni Jovkov, published in Sofia: *Илindenъ* (1922-1924), *Пиринъ* (1923-1924), *20 Юли* (1924).

<sup>5</sup> “Darkness everywhere/And in the darkness – suffering and bondage /Starvation. /You fell behind hundreds of years. /And somewhere life is pulsating / there rises /factory/after factory, /propellers drone.../And my people-nation [J.S.] /works, /dies, /as in the distant/Bronze Age.”

<sup>6</sup> On this issue will be published my chapter *Territory and language from the perspective of 19th and 20th century Macedonia (as a representation of the Balkans)* in the Volume *Problems and Methods in the History of Language: Desired language* prepared by the University of Girona.

И нося въ сърцето си младо  
тревожното знаме  
и вѣчния устремъ  
на всички безъ покривъ и хлѣбъ.<sup>7</sup>

(Н. Вапцаров, Архив на Република Северна Македонија)

In this context the figures of Gotse Delčev/Goce Delchev and Dame Gruev suggest Macedonia, but Delčev/Delchev was from Pirin Macedonia and Gruev from Vardar Macedonia. In the cited verse both names are together, and are connected with the lexeme of homeland, which is written with a capital letter. On the other hand, the last part of the poem gives us a clear border of this homeland. Vapcarov/Vaptsarov speaks about a people-nation (*народ/narod*) of poor, homeless people, "... without roof [over their head] and without bread" to live on. The last verse gives the poem a universal dimension.

In his analysis of Vapcarov's/Vaptsarov's poem, Smatrakalev is very critical of the ending:

/.... После, нека отбележа нещо за композицията. Тя е на места много-добра, но последният куплет е някак откъснат. А то не е случайно. Докато навсякъде поетът, когато се радва и страда, когато се бунтува и отчайва, когато се озлобява и ругае – навсякъде чувства Родината, основата на мислите му е тя, в последния куплет не е така. И затова той стои някак настрана, неспоен не добре завързан за останалото. Ето – не е ли естествено да завъши при това общо настроение – и нося в сърцето си твоето знаме/ вместо тревожното – чие ?/ и вечния устрем на моя поробен народ/ вместо – на всички без покрив и хляб/. Аз му пожелавам да направи това. То не е само грях на стихотворението. То е отражение на дълбоко изрзания път на автора. Той иде от интернационализма към националното – затова е такъв завършека. И неговият път към Родината не е завършен. Прав ли съм – вие ще кажете. Не мисля, че там е корена. Аз пак му пожелавам – да дигне знамето на Гоце, на нашия народ, а не на всички без покрив и хляб и само без това ли – без радост, без свобода, без въздух. И – националната борба нали по тоя начин става интернационална. Националното движение винаги налива ведрост и устрем към всенародната борба за свобода и прогреса. Стига да не е изкълчено, профанирано, изкористено.<sup>8</sup> (Фонд Сматракалев, кутија 10).

<sup>7</sup> "I still love you/ Homeland of Goce/Gotse and Dame,/ because I grew up,/ because I was strengthened in you./ And I carry in my young heart/ the trembling banner/ and eternal aspiration/ of all those without roof and bread."

<sup>8</sup> "/.../ Then, I should mention something about the composition. It is very good in many places, but the final verse is somehow inconsistent. And this is no accident. Whereas everywhere the poet, when he rejoices and when he suffers, when he rebels and when he despairs, when he becomes angry and curses – everywhere feels his homeland, it is the foundation of his thoughts, this is not the case in the last verse. And that is why it stands somewhat apart, not connected, not tied well to the rest. And thus – is it not natural for it to end in the [same] general mood – and in my heart I carry your banner/ instead of the trembling [banner] and the eternal aspiration of my enslaved people-nation/ instead of – all those without roof and

As we can see, he directly instructs the young poet how to finish the poem. Smatrakalev knew that Vapcarov/Vaptsarov had little knowledge of Macedonian history, because he was educated at Bulgarian schools, spoke Bulgarian and all his poetry was in Bulgarian. Through his friendship with Smatrakalev, the author of *Родина* (Homeland) started to learn more about the Macedonian issue, and (more importantly) he started to develop Macedonian literature.

Among the members of the Macedonian Literary Circle, only Kole Nedelkovski (1912-1941) and Venko Markovski (1915-1988), who came from Vardar Macedonia, spoke and wrote in the Macedonian vernacular, and also had an open attitude towards national and social issues. The same could be said about Kočo Racin (1908-1943), who lived in Vardar Macedonia but published his works in Serbo-Croatian, Bulgarian as well as the Macedonian vernacular. There are some poems of Racin in the archives of Smatrakalev: *Туйуноберачиџе* [The Tobacco Harvesters] and *Уџро над нас* [The Sun above us] from his first collection of poems *Бели муџри* [White Daws] from 1939, and his first Macedonian poem published in 1936, *До един Рабоџник* [To a Worker]. (Фонд Сматаркалев, кутија 10).

## Conclusions

A special context for Vapcarov's/Vaptsarov's poem *Родина* (Homeland) which I analyse here is provided by his statements from the time of the Macedonian Literary Circle's activity in Sofia in 1938-1941. His first presentation, about which we learn from Smatrakalev's archive, is very significant. Another very important part of Smatrakalev's memoirs is connected with his meeting with Macedonian students from Vardar Macedonia in 1939 (Фонд Сматаркалев, кутија 10). This short document includes a very distinctive testimony about Vapcarov's /Vaptsarov's reaction and attitude towards Macedonian students:

Свитият и мълчалив пред хора Вапцаров ме стискаше за ръката над лакътя и току ми говореше на ухото: „Виж, ти какви славни, били нашите момчета... . Бива си ги /.... /” Едновременно с това той бе хванал за ръка един от студентите, нисък на ръст, но с миловидно и умно лице. Казваше се Ванчо. „Слушай, Ванчо, ти ще бъдеш с мене, ти у нас ще спиш. С тебе ще ударим моабет дълг и всестранен...”<sup>9</sup> (Фонд Сматаркалев, кутија 10)

bread/. I wish for him to do that. This is not just a sin [failing] of the poem. It is a reflection of the author's deeply carved path. He goes from internationalism to nationalism – hence the ending. And his journey to his homeland is not over.

Whether I am right – it is up to you to say. No, I think that is the root. I wish him – again to raise the banner of Gotse [Delchev], [the banner] of our people-nation and not of all those without roof and bread, and not only without that – without joy, without freedom, without air. And – the national struggle is thus becoming international. The national movement always adds clarity and purpose to the nationwide [people's and national] struggle for freedom and progress. As long as it [the national movement] is not warped, spoiled, exploited.”

<sup>9</sup> [Usually] Uptight and quiet in front of people, Vapcarov/Vaptsarov squeezed my arm above

His support for Smatrakalev's speech, which was dedicated to the Macedonian question and especially to the Macedonian nation (*нация - natsiya*), is a significant illustration of what the poet thought about these issues.

On the other hand, Vapcarov/Vaptsarov is part of Bulgarian literature, and not just because of the Bulgarian language of his poems. The Bulgarian dimension of his identity as well as the Macedonian and universal – international dimensions are part of his multi-layer consciousness.

The last significant context which I would like to mention is the biography of Rafael Moshe Kamhi (1870-1970), a Sephardi Jew born in Bitola (formerly Monastir) in the Ottoman Empire, geographical Macedonia, who was a member of the IMRO organization and was responsible for international contacts, working as a courier between the Central Committee in Thessaloniki (Solun) and the District Committee in Bitola, as well as the organization's representation abroad in Sofia. Kamhi participated in the Ilinden Uprising in 1903 (Сујеџка 2015: 137-144). Mark Cohen, the author of the very interesting book about the Jewish Community of Monastir (Cohen 2003), points out in the chapter dedicated to the significant period between 1903 and 1912 that to many Ottoman Sephardim who participated in the IMRO organization and the Ilinden Uprising (like Kamhi), "... the Macedonian movement appears to have acted as a substitute cause. In IMRO, Monastir's Jews could keep their religious identity while adding a national one" (Cohen 2003: 104). It was this vacuum the Zionist movement solved for many Jews.

In 1941 the body called 'Corporation Macedonia' (Корпорация Македонија) was established within the Macedonian Literary Circle. Its meetings being attended by left-leaning activists of the Thracian and Dobrujan brotherhoods (Фонд Сматракалев, кутија 10). Including them in the Circle's work lent a different meaning to the term *нация – natsiya* developing in Bulgaria within the left wing of the three diasporas, i.e. Macedonian, Dobrudjan and Thracian (Сујеџка 2013: 187- 198).

For Vapcarov/Vaptsarov and many other members of this society, it played the role of a formative movement for their identity. That is why a multi-layer identity - typical for the Ottoman Empire - in a way returned in the 20th century in the borderland between Bulgarian, Serbian, Greek and Macedonian identity<sup>10</sup>.

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the elbow and whispered in my ear: "Look how magnificent our boys were... They are capable [they are great] ..." At the same time, he grabbed the hand of one of the students, a short [man] but with a smart face and good looks. His name was Vančo. "Listen, Vančo, you will be with me, you will sleep with us. We will have a talk like friends, a long one and about everything..."

<sup>10</sup> The different meaning on that topic: Тодоровски 2008. On the issue of double identity of poets and writers from the territory of Macedonia very interesting view presents Ivan Dorovský (1997) and Milan Гурчинов (1998).

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The analytical material for the topic in question is the output of poet Nikola Vapcarov/Vaptsarov (1909-1942). My interpretation is based on his poetry published in the Bulgarian leftist's press as well as his statements from the time of the Macedonian Literary Circle's activity in Sofia in 1938-1941.

The material connected with his activity within the Macedonian Literary Circle in Sofia I retrace on the basis of the Archive of Mikhail Smatrakalev, one of the Circle's driving forces. The Mikhail Smatrakalev Archive I researched in the State Archives of the Republic of North Macedonia in Skopje.

The aim of my article is to reconstruct the poet's multi-tiered identity in the context of changing political circumstances. An important background for this analysis are the biographies of the Circle's other members as well as historical figures who had no formal connection to the Sofia-based Circle, (like Kočo Racin (1908-1943), but their life and output is an interesting context for identity issue in the region in that time. The same illustrative role in my article play the biography of Rafael Moshe Kamhi (1870-1970).

*Keywords:* Nikola Vapcarov, Vaptsarov, identity issue, Macedonia Literary Circle Kočo Racin, Rafael Moshe Kamhi.

