

**Balkan Smoke: Tobacco and the Making of Modern Bulgaria.**  
**By Mary C. Neuburger. Ithaca and London: Cornell**  
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**Index. Hard Bound.**

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As an anthropologist with interests in social and political change who has often had to partake in the conversations and intimations only a cigarette break can offer, I was excited to learn that the history of tobacco production and consumption in Bulgaria has been re-evaluated in its own right in Mary C. Neuburger's book *Balkan Smoke: Tobacco and the Making of Modern Bulgaria*.

In seven idiosyncratic chapters written in compelling language, Neuburger deftly weaves a historical account of tobacco in social and political life as well as the social and political life of tobacco itself, making a case that “the pharmacological and sociological impacts of smoking were instrumental in the arrival of modernity to the Bulgarian lands” (2013:2). The choice of such a particular empirical lens could have made the work too narrowly focused--only of interest to economic historians. However, tobacco was in many ways pervasive and co-present at key moments of Bulgarian history. Thus, the author gives an account not only of economic history, but also of Bulgaria's social, cultural, and geo-political transformations--from the country's alliance with Germany to its subsequent loyalty to the USSR. The book surprises its readers chapter after chapter with unexpected turns. Neuburger invites readers to ponder the public sphere and changing notions of privacy; the fate of Bulgaria's Jewish tobacco merchants and Muslim minorities; export policies, leisure, and the inconsistencies and tensions in socialist moralities--all through the story of tobacco.

Neuburger begins by exploring smoking in Ottoman society, and elaborates on the *kafene*, *kruchma*, and *mehana*--various popular establishments where smoking took place. She shows how smoking was implicated in the development of the public sphere and public sociability. Neuburger gives an equally careful, skilful, and rich treatment of gender and ethnic dimensions: several chapters discuss how smoking and the tobacco business was a double edged sword for women and minorities (notably Muslim and Jewish) and how it was a key site for geo-political loyalties and alignments.

There are several elements which stand out prominently in my reading of the book, all of which revolve around the author's analytical and narrative decisions. For example, each chapter takes an unusual turn through Bulgarian history to examine the topic of tobacco from several different analytical angles--gender, ethnicity, and political economy. Although the author could have just as easily focused singularly on tobacco production and its ethnic dimensions, her decision to reveal tobacco's social life from a variety of angles makes for a particularly engaging account. I am aware that a different reader could ask how the chapters stack up, but I find the structure of this work a refreshing and engaging way to the overall arch of the monograph. As a whole, showing tobacco in different milieus and through

different periods and stories makes the book compelling to a broader audience both within and without the academy.

Another aspect which could work both positively and negatively for the book is the use of very evocative and vivid language, which pulls the reader into the narrative of tobacco and its consumption. I sympathize with this aspect since it is a key concern in ethnography as well. On the upside, such language has been long-called for throughout the social sciences in making academic work accessible to the non-academic public. However--and this is where I must balance my enjoyment of the author's stylistic choices against my ambivalence and concern about their effects, in the early chapters this language may well reinforce, however subtly, and especially for non-specialists, existing stereotypes associated with (post)Ottoman societies: a concern which has been well-argued and rehearsed. One example, if admittedly an extreme one, in the text where the language channelled either an unnecessary speculation or bordered on exotizing can be found on page 15: while I am in complete agreement that the *nerghile* featured as a "central prop in European images of [...] Ottoman life," noting that "its supple, curvy, almost womanly form [...] undoubtedly seduced Western consumers" is done with an unfortunate verb (2013: 15).

This leads me to discuss Neuburger's methodology, which struck me as both innovative and alluring, but one which raises questions worth more investigation. Specifically, the author departs from the usual repertoire of evidence for social history and incorporates and relies on literary works, such as the classic Bulgarian novel *Tiutun* (Tobacco). Although not used as direct evidence, Neuburger sees them as indicative of the larger social implications of the production, consumption and significance of tobacco in everyday life and socio-cultural imaginary. The book could have benefited from a discussion about the advantages and potential pitfalls of the decision to marshal literature in the methodology of exploring the history of tobacco in Bulgaria. This should be considered further, especially due to the fact that the author's example of how to merge literature and archive in a social historical research provides an exemplar and inspiration for those readers with more interdisciplinary inclinations.

Finally, even though Neuburger does not go as far as asserting tobacco was the singular force behind the modernization of Bulgarian society, I do leave the book feeling that the temptation for her to do so is at times strong. This temptation is present throughout the book, and remains unresolved, which may work productively for further discussions of the book's argument.

*Balkan Smoke* is not only an excellent book which can find an appreciative reader in classes on economic history and Southeast European studies but is also a volume which I hope will be translated into Bulgarian for the general public.