On Folk and Popular Literature in Post-Liberation Bulgaria

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With the support of a grant from the German Research Foundation, Dr. Roth has for several years headed a project investigating the growth of popular literature in Bulgaria. Whereas most models of literature posit two categories, folk or "low" literature on the one hand and classic or "high" on the other, he and his colleagues add a third, intermediate, category partaking of the other two. "We also distinguish popular, ephemeral literature from the mass literature which appeared in Bulgaria after World War I." says Dr. Roth. "The period between, say, 1880 and 1920 was one of great and rapid change; remember that at the time of Bulgaria's liberation from Ottoman rule in 1871 only a tiny percentage, perhaps 3%, of the population was literate. Until then almost all literature had been imported, and there was very little of it."

But with the advent of Western influence came an explosion of literary and publishing activity. Printshops and publishers sprang up everywhere, and most of their output was of the popular variety. "Bulgarian writers turned to traditional motifs for material," he says. "Often a folktale was revised, modernized and published as a sort of novel. Such an updated tale might have for its hero a dragon who, instead of returning to his remote mountain castle, checks into a hotel at night. He flips the light switch and takes off his 'dragon uniform.' That's actually what it's called, by the way. The hotel room has not only electric lights, but also running water and a
telephone. And the rest of the story continues in this fashion." The audience for these novels remained primarily an adult one during the transitional period, just as that for oral folktales had been. Interestingly, folktales were not published in collections, as was the rule in Western Europe, but as single tales in 16-32 page papercover editions.

In addition to modernized traditional tales, there appeared what are known as "trivial" novels. "These books don't much resemble Western trivial novels, which tend toward the Gothic, the fantastical. They were rather intended to give moral and practical instruction to the newly arrived and newly-fiterate hordes of villagers moving to the cities. They were very realistic stories. By portraying in graphic form the antagonism between the 'old' or Ottoman and 'new' or Western ways, they laid a clear path from a near-medieval society to a modern one." He emphasizes that the Bulgarians did learn to read in large numbers; by 1910 or so, the literacy rate was an astonishing 60%.

In the 1920s there was a shift toward mass literature in Bulgaria, with the introduction of detective stories, westerns, Tarzan novels and the like. Around 1925 fairy tales from other parts of Europe, especially the Grimm brothers' Household Tales, became vastly popular and supplanted the traditional tales. He says that "for the first time, editions were published especially for children. However, they retained the small booklet format; evidently people found the chapbook more acceptable, and certainly cheaper, than a handsomely produced hardback collection of tales would have been. I find the popular literature of the brief period after liberation and before World War I fascinating because it captures the transition so beautifully. The popular novels express the rapid changes occurring in Bulgarian society and also act upon that change, reinforcing the transitional process."

Dr. Roth notes that Munich, a European focal point for East and Southeast European studies, is home to such institutions as the Society for the Study of Southeastern Europe, concerned with Germany's political, economic and cultural relations with Southeastern Europe; the Southeast Europe Institute, whose members evaluate scholarly publications from Southeastern Europe and publish analyses of their content; the East Europe Institute, focusing primarily on Poland, Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union; and the Institute for German and Comparative Folklore, Dr. Roth's institution. Munich also houses the Bavarian State Library, which has the largest holdings of Southeast European material on the continent. In addition, the university has at least ten departments in which research on Southeastem Europeis conducted: "I
am currently chair of a working committee for this group of disciplines; my job is to coordinate the, research carried on by the various departments. At present I believe there are approximately 70 projects underway, one of them being ours which, by the way, is entitled ‘Popular Literature in Southeastern Europe in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries.’ For the work that I am doing, Munich is a wonderful place to be."