

Unlikely Encounters: Ideas about India in Two Nineteenth-Century European Nationalist Narratives (Joseph Méry and Georgi Sava Rakovski)

Abstract. For many centuries up to the present day, Europe’s fascination for India has inspired a plethora of writings, which, while talking about India, creatively mirrors the assumptions of their authors about their own societies and zeitgeist. Since Voltaire, who moulded out of a less than perfect knowledge about India abundant ammunition for his war against the Catholic Church, imaginative interpretations have flourished, tinted by ideological commitments, intellectual biases, and emotional attachments of many hues. To invoke Benedict Anderson, the nineteenth century has seen the development of the concept of nations as “imagined communities”, a process intensified by the democratisation and growing affordability of printed books and, in particular, the emergence of periodical press in national languages. In this chapter we will show how images of India were embedded in the creation of nationalist narratives through two very different examples taken from the far ends of Europe: the works of Joseph Méry, a popular French novelist, playwright, poet, and librettist, and the articles of Georgi Sava Rakovski—a Bulgarian revolutionary intellectual and an activist of the independence movement against the Ottoman empire. The commonality in the examples lies in the type of readers they targeted: both addressed popular audiences, a fact which shaped the content of their messages as well as the particular way they made use of Indian references.

Keywords. India, Joseph Méry, Georgi Sava Rakovski, nationalism, narratology.

In his widely influential book *Imagined Communities* Benedict Anderson locates the birth of European nationalism towards the end of the eighteenth century.¹ As he convincingly argues, it was an assisted birth, the result of seemingly fortuitous

1 The inclusion of this chapter is itself, in retrospect, the result of an unlikely encounter. I met Professor Maya Burger briefly at a conference in 1997. A few months later she called me in Sofia and offered me a position at the University of Lausanne as her assistant. I am not sure how she evaluates, in hindsight, that particular decision of hers. As for me, it changed my life in more radical ways than is appropriate to detail here. Another source of inspiration were the discussions with my students from the Interdisciplinary Seminar offered by the Jindal School of Liberal Arts of O.P. Jindal Global University, India.

but nevertheless congruent historical factors. During the following decades, its fuzzy contours solidified in images and narratives fuelled by a specific kind of imagination, nurturing a sense of brotherhood between people who would never meet, promoting collective memory (or, occasionally, collective oblivion), generating fresh supplies of meaning and purpose where other sources were drying out, and establishing a firm sense of the community's borders, beyond which otherness reigns. While the historical circumstances and cultural roots shaping emerging ideas of nation-ness varied greatly across geographical space, the commonalities are striking. Even today the hold of nationalism on the public imagination, the persistence of its emotional power against the forces of globalism, continue to intrigue and puzzle.

In the slow process of the emergence of national identities in Europe, the conceptualisation of the Other was a necessary parallel outcome. A nation, says Anderson, is an "imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign",² inferring the importance of borders in this definition. The workings of human imagination need support. An ideal entity is easier to perceive, understand, and explain when framed by other entities, similar in structure, differing in content. Thus a nation, any nation, would remain a fuzzy concept if not solidified by the awareness of limits beyond which other nations exist. In some respect borders hold together nations in the manner of exoskeletons.

Borders, though, are problematic. While their very existence sustains and reinforces the idea of nation-ness, locating them is a risky and contested affair, fuelling feelings of animosity and, sometimes, major wars. The Other just across the border is an intimate enemy, too close to feature in nation-building narratives without prompting a sense of rivalry or competition. Hence the appeal of distant Others, located beyond undisputed borders. Such an Other provides a malleable and unthreatening support against which the creativity of national storytellers can work unchallenged. For a very long time India has been to European nationalisms such a harmless Other. This chapter aims to bring into focus how two historically and stylistically very different European nationalist narratives, born at approximately the same time but thousands of miles apart and in very different historical circumstances, can be connected through the unlikely Indian theme. Through close reading and comparative analysis, I hope to make apparent structural similarities in the way ideas about India are embedded in and support the respective conceptual frameworks of the authors.

2 Anderson 2006: 6.

1 Sublime colonisation: Joseph Méry's India

In the story of this research the first narrator came into view as the result of an unlikely encounter: some years ago a colleague from the Centre of Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, and Latin American Studies at Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University, Professor Sovon Sanyal, presented me with a very short nineteenth-century novella by Joseph Méry called *The Elephants and the Monsters* (*Elefantes e Monstros*), which he had translated from Portuguese.³ The text was intriguing. It was a cheap, dime-store novel, articulating the Indian reality as entertainment for a popular, unsophisticated audience. While the history of intellectual exchanges and (mis) understandings between Europe and India⁴ has attracted a lot of scholarly attention, this kind of glimpse into common assumptions in nineteenth-century popular culture is rare. The French original was located in a volume collecting several novellas by Méry, *La comédie des animaux: histoire naturelle en action*, published in 1886, twenty years after the death of its author.⁵ It is safe to assume that the text first appeared during Méry's lifetime as a feuilleton in the periodic press.

Joseph Méry was born in Marseille in 1797 or 1798. His early years in the south of France are reflected in his oeuvre as a longing for warm climates and sun-drenched landscapes and have certainly informed his fictional engagement with the exotic horizons of India, Java, and Africa. At his heyday he was a notorious figure of Parisian literary life. A prolific and multifaceted writer, he crossed genre barriers and produced poetry and opera librettos as well as more than fifty novels and novellas. Part of the Romantic movement, he was connected to, and occasionally lauded by, Victor Hugo, Gérard de Nerval, Alexandre Dumas, Honoré de Balzac, and Théophile Gautier. His wit and talent for improvisation were recognised and appreciated and he was a staple in the Parisian salons. At least three biographies of him were published during his lifetime or shortly after his death in 1866. As the Portuguese novella translated by Sanyal suggests, he must have even enjoyed some international notoriety. This makes his fast decline in fame soon afterwards puzzling. Throughout the twentieth century Méry is practically unknown.

One of the reasons may be that Méry does not seem to have invested much energy in attending to his literary legacy. Much of his fictional work appeared as feuilletons in the *Revue de Paris* and other periodicals. While many of them were later collected and reprinted in books, their very briefness and profusion,

3 Méry 2014.

4 I will mention here only Wilhelm Halbfass's *India and Europe* (1990), now regarded as a classic, but a number of less wide-scope publications have appeared since.

5 I am grateful to the editors of this volume, Philippe Bornet and Nadia Cattoni, for helping me locate this reference.

the melodrama, the exoticism, and the high productivity rate of the author work towards classifying them mostly as commercial crowd-pleasers. Brian Stableford, who produced a recent annotated English translation of some of Méry's works, qualified as "speculative fiction", suggests in his introduction that Méry may have succumbed to the temptation (since writers for periodicals were paid by the line) to fill in space by unduly prolonging informal dialogues. Nevertheless, Méry's talent and wit, as well as his bold experimentation with formats mixing fiction and non-fiction, brings Stableford to compare him with Edgar Allan Poe.⁶

As Stableford's publication suggests, there may be a renewed interest in Méry's work since the French National Library made available some of his previously undiscoverable books through the Gallica website.⁷ It seems amateurs of science fiction and fantasy were the first to identify Méry as an early representative of the genre. On the other hand, Claudine Le Blanc has produced a study of the Romantic adaptation of the Sanskrit drama *Mṛcchakaṭika* (The Little Clay Cart) by Śūdraka for the French theatrical scene by Nerval and Méry.⁸ There are certainly more rewarding explorations to be conducted, even though the most original parts of Méry's creation are scattered amid an incredible abundance of printed words.

The so-called "Indian trilogy" by Méry was a critical and commercial success. The preface to the 1861 publication of *Héva*, the first of the three novels, mentions thirty preceding editions since the first one in 1840. The other two novels are *La Floride* (Florida) and *La guerre du Nizam* (The War in Nizam—"Nizam" surprisingly featuring here as the name of a province). Out of the three only the first and the third take place in India. *La Floride* is located in Africa, as the term was apparently used throughout the nineteenth century in reference to diverse alien territories. *Héva* is a prime example of the way Méry takes advantage of the Indian context—it is no more than a setting, a series of props thinly spread over the plot to give the readership a sense of exoticism. The author gives hints about the imaginary character of the territory he is mapping. This is the beginning of *Héva*:

On the Coromandel shore, not far from Madras, in lands formerly deserted, lies a landscape of such beauty that travellers never described it, because it is beyond words [. . .]. I have over my predecessors a substantial advantage in rendering this landscape: I have never seen it. If I had, I would have renounced any attempt. Hence this is my portrayal, and I guarantee to its likeness.⁹

6 Méry 2012: 7.

7 See <https://gallica.bnf.fr>.

8 Le Blanc 2009.

9 Méry 1861: 27–28. Unless otherwise specified, all translations are the author's.

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As fictional as his Indian setting may be, it is still consistently informed by the various readings of Méry on Indian history, geography, and culture. References are interspersed throughout the plot in a quantity sufficient to give it an aura of realism and solidity without compromising the freedom of the author to arrange, interpret, twist, and extrapolate according to his own vivid imagination and, probably, to the expectations of his readers. Thus, amid the paradisiac South Indian landscape, in the middle of a jungle, composed of exotic trees, populated with a fauna both ferocious (tigers) and benevolent (elephants), lies a “ravishing country house” (une ravissante maison de campagne) where Héva, the heroine of the story, languidly enjoys, in the company of her husband and a swarm of enraptured suitors, a dinner of extravagant sophistication under “un *chattiram* délicieux”.¹⁰ The skin tone of the gallants may be brown and their compliments may allude to “the blue God” (Vishnu) and Lakmé (Lakshmi); but they are still featured as elegant grand bourgeois in the salon of a Parisian coquette, weirdly reminding the reader of the protagonists of a Balzac novel.

The plot of *Héva*, like that of most of Méry’s other novels and novellas, is a melodrama, mixing heroic deeds (a tiger hunt), a murder plot, male comradeship, treason, jealousy, and romance. The signature combination with a faraway setting is typical of his oeuvre, a key to his critical and commercial success and to his stature and reputation as a popular writer. The fact that he often followed his own perfected recipe to produce an extraordinary volume of publications should not translate into assumptions about its lack of literary merit. Méry’s prose can be, at times, surprisingly original and witty, if too abundant (or hastily written) for its own good. Méry continuously expressed and articulated the Romantics’ fascination with the Orient as a wonderland which embodies much of what Europe lacks, undisturbed by an absence of accuracy which his contemporary audience would not have recognised but sounding captivatingly imaginative and even humorous to their present-day counterparts. Like Syaly, the learned brahman, a secondary character in *Héva*, who, after offering hospitality and supper to two lost foreign travellers, launches into a rant spurred by “a nationalist pride worthy of an Englishman”,¹¹ makes fun of Homer’s lack of poetic imagination, and mocks the religious architecture of the ancient Greeks, arguing that both are incomparably inferior to their Indian counterparts.

India in Méry’s so-called “Indian trilogy” functions as a narrative tool to exotify the otherwise conventional melodramatic plot, to set the writer’s imagination free from the demands of plausibility, and to feed a certain escapist appetite, kindled in

10 Conjuring a sense of tangibility and scientific seriousness Méry goes as far as explaining in a footnote that *chattiram* (by which he means an open, roof-covered structure) comes from *tchatour*, Sanskrit for “four”.

11 Méry 1861: 100.

the audience by the Romantic zeitgeist. Revealingly, the Indian “trilogy” actually features India in only two of the books. The fact that the second novel, *La Floride*, takes place in Africa did not seem to trouble any of his readers—a clear indication that, to the general French public, India was not quite yet the name of a concrete entity (geographical and cultural) but more of a symbolic dreamland where the exquisite and the horrendous coexist on a scale unimaginable in everyday life. These common assumptions of the nineteenth-century French reader regarding India are perhaps one of the most interesting insights Méry’s novels offer us—the abundance of deities, both crude and terrifying, a fuzzy understanding of the caste system, the perceived arrogance of the British, tigers versus elephants, the horrors of the 1857 rebellion (in *The Elephants and the Monsters*). In this free-handed instrumentalisation of India, Méry merely follows some illustrious footsteps. A hundred years before him, Voltaire, through a plethora of writings, moulded out of a limited or frankly erroneous knowledge about India an arsenal for his personal brawl with the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, Voltaire’s fame as well as his witty and dazzling style probably contributed more to shaping the emerging perceptions of the French public about India than the more scholarly works and translations already available during his time.

But this is not the only India Méry is hiding up in his sleeve, or, more precisely, it is not the only usage he puts India to. In one of the most original pieces of his abundant fictional prose he explores the subgenre of alternative history through a novel about Napoleon under the title *Histoire de ce qui n’est pas arrivé* (The Story of What Never Happened).¹² He transforms the unsuccessful siege of Acre (Saint-Jean d’Acre) in 1799 by the young General Bonaparte into a victory. Thus he imagines the Egyptian campaign to have continued eastward to Syria and, finally, to Mysore, where an alliance with Tipu Sultan (Tippoo Saïb in Méry’s version) culminates in a triumphal battle, opening for the French army the gates of the East to further conquests. Méry was an admirer of Napoleon. Together with his writing partner of the early years, Auguste Barthélemy, they produced an epic poem, *Napoleon en Égypte* (Napoleon in Egypt) (1828), as well as two shorter continuations—*Le fils de l’homme* (The Son of Man) (1829) and *Waterloo* (1829). He was also most certainly inspired by another exercise in the same genre of alternative fiction around a similar theme—Louis Geoffroy’s *Napoléon et la conquête du monde* (Napoleon and the Conquest of the World) (1836; reprinted as *Napoléon apocryphe*), which reimagines a more positive development of the disastrous Russian campaign. *Histoire de ce qui n’est pas arrivé* was published in a collection titled *Les nuits d’Orient: contes nocturnes* (Oriental Nights: Nocturnal Tales) in 1854.

12 Stableford translates it as *The Tower of Destiny: A Story of Events That Did Not Happen*, in reference to a Napoleon quote figuring as a motto in the novel.

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There is historical truth in Napoleon's ambitions towards India. The French admiral Suffren was an ally of Hyder Ali, father of Tipu, during the Second Anglo-Mysore War in 1782–1783. Subsequently, Tipu Sultan sent several embassies to Louis XVI to plead for an alliance against the British. In the meantime, however, the French Revolution intervened, and contacts were resumed only with the rise of Napoleon, who announced to the Directoire his intentions to join forces with the Indian prince and attack the British. He had to renounce his strategy after the unsuccessful siege of Acre. This is where Méry's story deviates.

The portrait of Napoleon is undoubtedly that of a national hero. The general is a visionary, an idealist, the embodiment of the French spirit, at once powerful and enlightened. Its foundation is grounded in another mythological figure—that of Alexander the Great. In Méry's grand narrative Alexander was more a cultural hero than a conqueror, driven by the idealistic vision of a spiritual union between the East and the West. Alexander's poor health as well as the weakness of his army prevented him from achieving his goal, which gives legitimacy to Bonaparte's endeavour.¹³ Alexander is a "semi-God",¹⁴ constantly recalled throughout the journey, in characters' dialogues or narrator's explanations. Traces of him are everywhere and Bonaparte is just following in his illustrious footsteps. This elevates Bonaparte above the vulgar aspirations of the belligerent coloniser. Towards the end of the novel Méry's tone reaches a messianic pitch:

There was something stirring and supernatural about that great name [of Bonaparte], which frightened the imagination. Bonaparte had not revealed himself as some vulgar conqueror disembarked on the coast of Malabar or Coromandel; he was like a providential genius emerged from the confines of the world, escaping the English fleets, crushing the cavalries of Egypt between the pyramids and Tabor, the human mountain and the mountains of God, and, always driven by the divine breath, arriving across immense solitudes on Indian soil to accomplish there a mysterious work of civilization, which would be the renaissance of the Indian Orient.¹⁵

The function of Alexander in the narrative is to mark the contrast between Bonaparte's lofty, almost philosophical aspirations and the vulgarity of the British—the bad Other, the greedy colonisers, the usurpers of Destiny's righteous demand. They lack the sophistication of French culture, they are cruel and pragmatic, they even lack a proper army (a noble extension of the young general's persona), pos-

13 "Prenons Saint-Jean-d'Acre, et cherchons ensuite les traces d'Alexandre ; elles sont imprimées au désert" (Méry 1854: 14) / "Let's take Saint-Jean-d'Acre, and then seek the footprints of Alexander; they're imprinted in the desert" (Méry 2012: 154).

14 Méry 1854: 64.

15 Méry 2012: 199; Méry 1854: 66. Henceforward when Stableford's translation is cited, it will be given first, followed by the reference in the original text.

sessing only a fleet, and they have a despicable capacity of forging opportunistic alliances with rival Indian princes. Why did the French miss the opportunity to secure their Indian territories? Why were they deaf to Tipu Sultan's pleas for help? They were too busy listening to philosophers and making revolutions!

That conquest, which shook Bengal and caused consternation among those who were then our enemies, scarcely gazed the ears of the Statesmen of Paris; they had so many other things to do! They were reading *Candide*, and learning by heart the twenty-four verses of the anti-national poem that stigmatized the Maid of Orleans, victorious over the English, and the philosophical Titans were building the folio foundations of the *Encyclopedia* in order to climb up to heaven and dethrone God!¹⁶

This is perhaps the place to mention that *Histoire de ce qui n'est pas arrivé* is not a straightforward apology of French superiority. The text is multilayered, peppered with irony and wit, and altogether fun to read in spite of some unnecessarily lengthy passages or repetitions. The French are often mocked—for being self-centred, verbose, inefficient, poor-spirited, and for assuming that the world is uniformly charmed by their grace, intelligence, and general brilliance. To this list Méry adds, when it comes to military ambitions, a stubborn affinity for gloomy cold realms, like the Rhine or Russia, instead of the sun-lit South. The author's light-heartedness goes as far as including, in the middle of the story, a witty entr'acte at the Paris Grand-Opéra where le tout-Paris discusses and, in a way, appropriates, the news of Bonaparte's Indian success.

This being said, let us move to the image of the good, the distant Other, against which the French national soul is made to emerge—namely, India. To Méry's typical nomenclature of exotic sunny landscapes, vegetation (tropical oaks, baobabs, palm trees, miraculous herbs), animals (tigers and elephants, again), and the idea that Indian arts, poetry, and culture are even older than those of Egypt and Greece¹⁷ are added some darker shades, never really explicated, but consistently alluded to. Méry mentions “dead cities”,¹⁸ desert spaces, a civilisation that is in dire need of a revival, a proper renaissance. From those references we can infer an assumption, common throughout eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe: while India is the land of a great ancient civilisation, its present state is deplorable. Indians have degraded from being the upholders of human spiritual progress to a sort of sleepy existence amid the ruins of their former glory. This view was shared and actively disseminated in France by Voltaire himself across a number of his “Indian” writ-

16 Méry, 2012: 201; Méry, 1854: 68.

17 Méry 1854: 28.

18 Méry 1854: 79.

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ings, in particular *Fragments sur l'Inde* (Fragments on India).¹⁹ In other words: India needs help, and Bonaparte, or France, is destined to be her saviour. The letter of Tipu Sultan²⁰ states it in unambiguous words: Louis XVI did not fulfil his colonial projects; it falls on the brave ruler of the Christians to complete the noble task. The French army is most welcome to march into Mysore.

The pragmatic motivation of Tipu Sultan, spurred by the necessity to find an ally against the army of the British and their Maratha supporters, is superseded in Méry's narrative by a grander and more fundamental sense of urgency. It is not about stopping the advance of the treacherous Lord Cornwallis in Karnataka; what is at stake is India herself. And France happens to possess what India lacks:

What, then, is lacking in that land, the cradle of the word's wisdom and poetry? It lacks the intelligent breath that awakens. France retains that breath on her lips; she will exhale it everywhere.²¹

Méry gleefully imagines an intrinsically Francophile India. More than an encounter between cultures, alien to each other, what takes place is a sort of instant recognition of inborn affinities. It is a sweeping love at first sight, a match made in heaven where India is the bride. As Méry puts it: "L'Inde est française de coeur" (India is French by heart).²² And he elaborates:

We excited the most passionate sympathies among the sons of Aureng Zeb and the worshipers of Brahma. [. . .] the two peoples seem to have been born together in perfect accord [. . .]. The Indians understood everything that was charming and serious in the people of France, who made Bengal tremble on a day of battle, gliding with laughing on the foam of their gulfs, playing with tigers in the jungles, and holding a ball the day after a combat or on the eve of an attack.²³

Languid and wasted before the salvific touch of her beloved, India becomes once again "fecund with arts, poetry and enthusiasm".²⁴ Or, perhaps, should we speak of a colonisation made in heaven? The Romantic metaphors throw a veil of beauty

19 For instance: "Toute la grandeur et toute la misère de l'esprit humain s'est déployée dans les anciens brachmanes et dans les brames, leurs successeurs. D'un côté, c'est la vertu persévérante [. . .]. De l'autre, c'est la superstition la plus méprisable." And, a bit further: "La plupart d'entre eux vivent dans une molle apathie. Leur grande maxime, tirée de leurs anciens livres est qu'il vaut mieux s'asseoir que de marcher, se coucher que s'asseoir, dormir que veiller, et mourir que de vivre." See Voltaire 1773: 42–43.

20 Méry 1854: 70.

21 Méry 2012: 210; Méry 1854: 79.

22 Méry 1854: 74.

23 Méry 2012: 206; Méry 1854: 75.

24 Méry 1854: 77.

and magic over the self-evident subjugation of the bride in this newly formed matrimonial union. Elsewhere in the novel Méry speaks, in less lofty terms, of the advantages for Europeans to take Indian brides: they are graceful, docile, ready to adopt their husband's religion, and produce healthy progeny ("The children of these mixed races are superb."²⁵).

The end of the novel is an epic ode to the completion of the union between the Orient and the Occident, imagined by Alexander, brought to fruition by Bonaparte; where the borders between nations, classes, and cultures fuse in a euphoria of cosmic proportion, a triumph of united humanity:

At that sight the Occident uttered a cry of enthusiasm heard by the two neighbouring seas; the Orient replied with a religious hymn in that harmonious language, composed of golden notes, the sound of pearls, the melody of waves, the murmur of palms, and sunlight. All the ranks soon became confused: people and soldiers, conquerors and conquered, mingled their hands, their weapons, their banners, their flags; there was neither a victory, nor victors.²⁶

And this is only the beginning. Méry's final paragraphs are a premonition of the world to come, where Java, Borneo, Japan, Nepal, Siam, Bhutan, and Assam come to benefit from the same awakening breath. The immense and noble endeavour, confided to France is assimilated to nothing less than a second Creation, after that of God.

In spite of the grandiloquence of the ending, the novel has the lightness of day-dreaming, a nationalist fantasy venting the frustrations of the French in the face of the British colonial success, without much agenda or gravity. The French national character, their assumptions of superiority and sophistication, their fondness for philosophising over action, their lack of pragmatism, and their inefficiency and petty political quarrels are often the target of an irony not deprived of subtlety. The success of the novel was most probably due to that overall pleasing quality, the expression of a collective wish to rewrite history fed by dreams of national grandeur. India, of which just enough was known to trigger fascination and desire, unhindered by considerations of veracity, is assigned the role of a malleable and friendly receptacle, a good and patient wife, waiting for her rightful master to oust the imposter from the nuptial chamber. Assumed to be incapable of autonomy or self-determination, she is longing for her perfect, soulful, coloniser.

25 Méry 1854: 39.

26 Méry 2012: 209; Méry 1854: 78.

2 A tale of origins: Georgi Sava Rakovski's India

Meanwhile, at the opposite end of Europe, a different national narrative was taking shape, with higher stakes and in dramatic circumstances. Georgi Sava Rakovski, as he came to be known,²⁷ was a contemporary of Méry and an important figure of the Bulgarian struggle for independence against the Ottoman empire. Like Méry he was a writer, poet, and journalist, but also a scholar, polyglot, political thinker, and ethnographer, as well as an adventurer and a revolutionary, who spent the best of his active years as a fugitive avoiding arrest. He died of tuberculosis in 1867, just one year after Méry, at the age of forty-six.

His extraordinary life is difficult to summarise. Born in 1821 to a wealthy family of craftsmen in the small mountain town of Kotel, he received an excellent education, first at home and then at the Greek Orthodox College in Istanbul. Istanbul is also where his political activities against the Turkish power began. In 1841, under threat of a death sentence, he took advantage of a Greek passport and flew to Marseille—the only geographical location where his and Méry's itineraries intersect. This stay in France was crucial for his later scholarly writings, which will be discussed here. Later he returned to his hometown and from that point onward lived the life of a rebel, relentlessly working to stir the national sentiments of his compatriots (and encourage them to open their purses for the cause of independence), constantly persecuted for his subversive activities, spending some years in an Istanbul jail, devising mostly disappointing alliances across the Balkans and beyond—in Serbia, Austria, Romania, Moldova, and Ukraine, organising and sending armed groups of guerrilla fighters to Bulgarian territory, setting up a Bulgarian government in exile, all the while writing—some books but mostly articles in short-lived newspapers and magazines.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Romanticism was at its height and Rakovski, as a public intellectual in tune with novel European ideas, embraced the excitement. Unlike Méry, his Romantic ideas are not so much embodied in his creative writing. He was more attracted to the German thinkers, Alexander von Humboldt in particular, and the legacy of the Grimm brothers. He took inspiration from their effort to uncover the soul of the German nation by collecting and studying folklore. He created an ethnographic questionnaire and, while criss-crossing Bulgaria to prepare the future insurrection against Turkish rule, asked his local contacts to fill it with descriptions of beliefs, customs, rituals, and folk songs and tales. This was intended to give shape to the idea of a Bulgarian nation and to stir emotional

27 He was born Subi Stoykov Popovich and changed his name several times throughout his tumultuous life. Although Rakovski figures prominently in history books and literary anthologies, few texts are exclusively devoted to him and his oeuvre. The most detailed biography available seems to be Traykov 1974.

commitment among the masses, against the lure of Greek language, orthodoxy, and education. He used this material extensively to back up his big theory on the origins of the Bulgarian people which he developed towards the end of his life.

The special aura the European Romantics cast upon India was not lost on Rakovski. Having in mind his immediate preoccupations with the organisational aspects of the freedom struggle, India pops up surprisingly often even in his politically motivated short journalistic pieces. Not much was known about India in the Bulgarian public space. Few traders had ventured as far as Bombay and Calcutta. India had started to appear in publications in the Bulgarian language through books on geography. Traykov mentions an article on the East India Company in one of the early cultural periodicals *Bulgarski knijitsi* (Bulgarian Booklore) in 1858, as well as a book on ancient India and Egypt, translated by another famous activist of the period (known as the Bulgarian Revival), Lyuben Karavelov. The most thoroughly covered Indian event in the Bulgarian periodical press was the rebellion of 1857 against the rule of the British East India Company. Rakovski regularly published in his newspaper *Bulgarska dnevitsa* (Bulgarian Daily) news about the military actions of the British against the Indian rebels, with vivid comments and sympathy for the plight of the Indian insurgents. At some point, he emphatically announced that “India was Indian once, and India will be Indian!”²⁸ The basis for this strong emotional commitment is clear: the analogy between the Indian mutiny and the situation of the Bulgarian people, subjugated and suffering under foreign rule. Rakovski says India, but means Bulgaria. Moreover, Great Britain was, at the time, one of the most prominent allies of the Ottoman empire on the international scene.

But beyond politics, Rakovski’s engagement with the Indian theme developed far more robustly in different kinds of writings. From his French readings he came to share the view that India’s past is glorious, having produced the foundations of European philosophy, science, and wisdom, but that her progress had been interrupted, due to attachment to superstitions and idolatry, thus condemning her to dullness and passivity. This is what he writes in the introduction to one of his books, on the importance of history:

Otherwise [history], instead of yielding the expected benefit to future generations, can lead them into confusion and damage them, by instilling in them fear and weakness, so that they are stilted in a deadly immobility, awaiting all good and bad to be bestowed on them by fate [. . .]. The clearest example of this is with the multitudinous people of Hindustan, who, despite being the oldest people in the world and having been the first to develop sciences and arts and educating in them almost the whole world, and in spite of the fact that learned Europeans continue to this day to draw from their source, have

28 Traykov 1997: 43.

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remained stuck in their old fables and prejudices, explaining everything happening in the world, good or bad, with their gods and invisible imaginary spirits and have thus persisted in this state, losing their virility and courage and falling under the domination of one evil conqueror after the other.²⁹

Rakovski's most "serious" (and often quoted even today) work dealing with India, *Bulgarska starina* (Bulgarian Lore), was published in 1865, shortly before his death. It was supposed to be part of a series, a scientific magazine on Bulgarian history, language, and ethnography, which never went beyond the first volume. It was conceived as the scholarly foundation of what had been Rakovski's lifelong mission: to awaken the national consciousness of his fellow countrymen, while simultaneously bringing Bulgarian culture into the field of vision of the European learned community, where it had been given, according to him, undeservedly little attention. Frustrated by this lack of visibility Rakovski set for himself a formidable goal: to prove that the Bulgarians were the first people to settle in Europe from Hindustan—the cradle of human civilisation—and, in addition, are the most legitimate and authentic heirs of the prestigious ancient tradition based on Sanskrit.

Throughout the more than 200 pages-long treaty Rakovski quotes extensively from European (mostly French, or in French translation) scholarly literature on ancient Indian philosophy and the Sanskrit language, using works of uneven merit but obviously popular and available in print at the time (Victor Cousin, Eugène Burnouf, Guillaume Pauthier, and Friedrich Max Muller, among others). From considerations on the antiquity and sophistication of Indian philosophy, as well as from works of comparative linguistics, where the connection between Sanskrit and most European languages had already been firmly established, he draws a radical conclusion: not only did European languages come from India, but humanity itself, born in Asia, started to disseminate westward from the Himalayas where it had taken refuge from the biblical flood. This first migration wave was led by the forefathers of contemporary Bulgarians, who populated the Middle East and Europe as far as the Atlantic Ocean:

We will prove irrefutably that we are the first and oldest inhabitants of Europe and the purest heirs of the Aryans, [. . .] and that they [the Bulgarians] were not Tatars, as the foreign historians wanted to present them, influenced as they were by the biased and ignorant Byzantines who followed their own goals and agendas.³⁰

For this ambitious aim Rakovski establishes two sets of proofs: one based on etymology, the other on a collection of Bulgarian folk sayings, rituals, and songs,

29 Rakovski 1969: 139.

30 Rakovski 1865: 11.

which, in true Romantic fashion, he considers a more authentic source of history than written documents. History (and here he blames explicitly Herodotus and Thucydides) has integrated fables and inventions, mostly coming from the priesthood, in order to keep the masses in ignorant darkness and to live on other peoples' toil and sweat³¹—an idea with Voltairean resonances, though Voltaire himself never appears among Rakovski's references.

In clearing the path for re-establishing the Bulgarians in the European historical narrative Rakovski has some accounts to settle first. One could imagine, given his lifelong political struggle against the Ottoman empire, that Islam and the Turkish dominance would bear, at least in part, the blame for the unfair oblivion. But in fact Rakovski's sharpest arrows are directed towards the Greeks and the undeserved, according to him, prestige of their classical antiquity, as language and texts. The critiques form several layers. First come several references to Hellenistic myths, suggesting that Greek philosophers owe more to India than they have admitted in their writings. Quoting Pauthier, who himself referred to a "curious tradition from Dabistan", Rakovski relates that Alexander the Great had sent from India to Macedonia, "among other curiosities", a logical system, on which Aristotle based his method.³² Rakovski voices the kind of Hellenistic legends, according to which Democritus, Plato, Pythagoras, and others travelled to India³³ at a time in late antiquity when the prestige of "Indian wisdom" was well established. In Rakovski's version, though, that makes the Greeks plagiarists, the unsophisticated students of a brilliant tradition they later appropriated. The second point is the moral decadence of Greek gods and goddesses, who are nothing more than a bunch of drunkards, whores, and sodomites.³⁴ Their character testifies on the level of morality of the ancient Greeks themselves. The third argument comes out as a linguistic one, formulated in chapter four, "The Advantage of Bulgarian Language over the Old Slavic or the True Vocabulary of Hellenic Language". This is one of the longest chapters, where through long lists of words Rakovski attempts to establish that the "Hellenic" language is of mixed origin, that its words are mostly borrowed, but, first and foremost, that its connections with Sanskrit are far looser and more indirect than those of Bulgarian. In the conclusion of the book, describing the hypothetical itinerary of the first migration of humanity from Asia to Europe, this is the place he attributes to the Greeks:

The minuscule *Hellenic* or *Greek* tribe also came out of their primitive dwellings in Hindustan, together with the *great clan* of the Bulgarian-Slovenians, but they were walking separately and apart from the Bulgaro-Sloven-

31 Rakovski 1865: 17.

32 Rakovski 1865: 7.

33 Halbfass 1990: 16–17.

34 Rakovski 1865: 24.

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nians, through the forests, never mixing with them. The very name *Hellen* or *Greek* was attributed to them by the Bulgaro-Slovenians.³⁵

Just like the British for Méry, the Greeks work for Rakovski as the bad Other, the anti-Bulgarians. Curiously, when it comes to consolidating national identity, Rakovski has no bone to pick with the Turkish language, culture, or identity. Even if he must have known that a minority of Bulgarian Muslims existed, in his mind the border between Turkish and Bulgarian did not need to be defended. On the other hand, Greece, who had recently gained its independence from Turkish rule, was exerting a fatal attraction to the nascent Bulgarian bourgeoisie through the prestige of its schools, its culture, and, in particular, through Christian Orthodoxy, as the Bulgarian clergy was subordinated to the Patriarchate in Istanbul, administered by Greeks. Rakovski states his animosity very directly:

Hellenism with its “grand” ideas has been the greatest persecutor and destroyer of Bulgarianism, because the small Greek people has always tried to multiply at the expense of the Bulgarian one, with the goal to absorb it.³⁶

The resentment leads Rakovski to avoid the very terms *istoriya* (history) and *filosofiya* (philosophy), compromised in his eyes by their Greek origin, and to replace them with *povestnost* and *lybomudrie*, two terms forged not only on Slavic lexical components but also, according to Rakovski, closer to Sanskrit and hence more “authentic”.³⁷

India, as the good Other, provides Rakovski with tools to fight for the soul of his nation, by belittling the Greek contributions to world history, relentlessly emphasising the antiquity and richness of his own language and culture and criticising in the process Western scholarship for failing to acknowledge the facts. The bulk of the text is a meticulous enumeration of concordances between Bulgarian customs, ritual formulas, folkloric songs, and their perceived Indian equivalents. From a scholarly perspective, these are at best speculative, often completely fantastical, based on shallow similitudes and homonymies, as well as a superficial understanding of Sanskrit concepts and realities. For instance, the use of decorated dogwood sticks (*survachka*), which children use in a sort of traditional New Year benediction, still practised today, are associated by Rakovski with the cult to the *lingam*, the phallic form of Shiva.³⁸ Rakovski is at his most creative, though,

35 Rakovski, 1865: 206. The emphasis in italics is in the original text.

36 Rakovski, 1865: 26–27.

37 The reception of Rakovski’s lexical innovations was facilitated by the fact that the Bulgarian language was not completely standardised yet. For that reason, his prose is much more difficult, to a modern reader, than that of Méry.

38 Rakovski 1865: 36.

when it comes to etymologies—he seems to be able to find a Bulgarian root, or interpretation, for every name, across an array of languages, and to further demonstrate how these relate to Sanskrit. The very name of Sanskrit is attributed a Slavic origin—from the roots *sam-* (the most) and *skrit* (hidden).³⁹ The crucial term *Aryan*, through a complex logico-semantic chain, is discovered to be the equivalent of *Bulgarian*.⁴⁰ Since the first migration throughout Europe reached the Atlantic, the druidic religion also has Bulgarian roots and references to it can be found in folkloric songs. The ethnonym *Frank* is also, predictably, of Bulgarian origin, and so are all the names of the Merovingian kings. The rivers Rhine and Rhône are related to a Slavic root associated with the act of flowing. The Belgian tribes of yore are self-evidently Bulgarian. And so on.

Rakovski intended to be taken seriously—and he was. Unlike Méry he was not forgotten—a celebrated hero of the National Revival period, a town in southern Bulgaria was named after him, and so were many streets, schools, and institutions, including the Bulgarian Military Academy. His connection with India is also acknowledged in the public space—he is regularly pronounced “the first Bulgarian Indologist”. The Georgi Stoikov Rakovski Sarvodaya Kanya Vidyalaya, a government school in Defence Colony, Delhi, also carries his name. His 200th birthday was celebrated with conferences, book releases, and exhibitions. Present-day Bulgarian nationalists have not forgotten him either and cite with gusto on social media his grand theories about the Bulgarians.

Because of Rakovski’s stature and popularity, India also came to gain a stronger presence in the Bulgarian imagination, as a wonderland of gods and wise men but also as a faraway place with which Bulgaria is mysteriously, spiritually, connected. That idea too has persisted and survived in the public space today, even if the ancient Aryans are no longer perceived to be Bulgarians.

Conclusion: On the tangibility of shared imaginings

All things considered, Rakovski’s *Bulgarian Lore* is no less the product of nationalist daydreaming than Méry’s *History of What Never Happened*. One text presents itself from its very title as more than fiction, an openly distorted version of history; the other wants to be anything but fiction, an emanation of pure science. One is content with massaging pleasingly a hurting national pride, the other is engaged with the serious and demanding task of building that pride. The first dreams of an ideal colonisation, the second upholds dreams of independence from not one but two colonisers, one holding the land, the other, the soul. Strangely, they meet

39 Rakovski 1865: 61.

40 Rakovski 1865: 97–98.

in India, or rather on India. Ginzburg says that “between testimonies, both narrative and non-narrative, and the reality to which they bear witness there exists a relationship that needs to be analysed from time to time”.⁴¹ In spite of the apparent differences, already depicted and analysed above, the reality of Méry’s and Rakovski’s India is fairly consistent: a conveniently flexible Other, to be looked at for a pleasing reflection of the national self; a soft clay which yields to asperities and fills cavities, giving the appearance of a perfectly adjusted complement, allowing humanity to finally live to its fullest potential through the union of the Orient and the Occident; a stepping stone, ancient, prestigious, and welcoming, upon which a nascent nation can ground its honour and reclaim its pride; a mysterious and distant land, about which just enough is known to stimulate without obstructing the workings of imagination. The reality of this India is not diminished by the fact that it is imagined. After all, as Yuval Harari⁴² has convincingly argued, some figments of our imaginations can be very real, as long as they are shared. Both Méry and Rakovski addressed a large and popular audience; both have drawn from as well as contributed to establish common perceptions about India in their time. Sometimes those perceptions got embedded in or gave support to emerging systems of references and conceptual frameworks; they evolved in the shared imagination of Europeans in a manner at least partially disconnected from “the reality to which they bear witness” – the geographical, cultural, historical India. In that respect, perhaps, the idea of India is not so different from the idea of nation.

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