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Citation Details

Evguenia Davidova, "Re-interpreting the Past: Shifting Perspectives from a Commercial Archival Fond in the Bulgarian Historical Archive," *Revista Arhivelor/Archives Review* 2 (2011): 36-42.

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Re-interpreting the Past: Shifting Perspectives from a Commercial Archival Fond in the Bulgarian Historical Archive

Evguenia Davidova

Keywords: *Bulgarian Historical Archive; Balkan Commerce; Bulgarian Historiography; Bulgarian National Revival; Nationalism; Ottoman Rule*

This article offers a historiographical interpretation of an exceptionally rich personal archive; namely, fond Number 6: “*Tŭrgovska kŭshta* [Commercial Company] ‘Khristo P. Tŭpchileshtov’”, kept in *Bŭlgarski istoricheski arkhiv* (Bulgarian Historical Archive), *Narodna Biblioteka* (National Library) “Sv. Sv. Kiril i Metodii” in Sofia. The analysis is organized around three issues: the biography of the archive’s founder; the acquisition of the archive by the National Library; and the ways the archival material has been interpreted in the Bulgarian historiography. More specifically, I am discussing the ideological motivation behind the arrangement of the documents and their multiple uses in the historical studies during the interwar, socialist, and post-socialist periods. There is a paradoxical situation: the fond Number 6 is not only one of the biggest archival personal collections but also one of the least actually used archives. And yet, one of the most cited in Bulgarian historical research. Accordingly, the fond provides a window into more substantial historiographical issues. I am arguing that the way the fond was catalogued by its first archivist, predetermined the way it was interpreted in the subsequent historiography; namely, within the confines of a national narrative almost ignoring the ample information about the Ottoman, Balkan, and European context.

Khristo Tŭpchileshtov: a Self-made Merchant, Sarraf, and Entrepreneur

The business biography of Khristo Tŭpchileshtov (1808-1875) was quite representative for the merchants from Christian origin in the central part of the Balkans. He started his career as a craftsman – he was an *abacı* like his father, which means that he was engaged in production and trade of wool and cloths of rough woollen material. It is quite significant to mention it here because this was one of the major Balkan industries in the mountain villages of the time. Tŭpchileshtov followed a well-known pattern – he had established a commercial company within the family with his brother: The Tŭpchileshtov Brothers (1822-1851). Gradually, their trade grew up in geographical terms all over the European and Asian regions of the Ottoman Empire. They set up an office in the capital Istanbul (Constantinople, Tsarigrad) in 1838 and became *Avrupa Tuccarları* (European Merchants). Although later the two brothers separated, both continued to live there. Khristo Tŭpchileshtov established one of the biggest Bulgarian trading companies (1851-1895) in Istanbul,

whose business life continued for twenty years after his death, run by his three sons. He expanded his trade and became a *sarrafi* (banker) and a tax farmer, member of the rich and powerful multi-ethnic entrepreneurial milieu in the capital. His experiences captured a wealth of significant political, social, and economic changes in the Ottoman Balkans. Except from commerce and tax farming, Tŭpchileshtov was engaged in multiple social activities, such as support for Bulgarian education, newspapers and book publications. He also participated in the movement for Bulgarian autocephalous church, and left a huge archive.

The History of Fond Number 6: Tŭrgovska kŭshta “Khristo P. Tŭpchileshtov”

The archival fond number 6 consists of approximately 28,235 various documental units covering the period from the 1830s until the 1890s. According to the Bulgarian Historical Archive’s Inventory, the documents comprise commercial correspondence in 26 copybooks in several languages; 58 ledgers and account books from 1848 - 1895, commercial contracts, bills of exchange, price lists, insurance notes, *berats* (imperial patent), and multiple petitions to the Ottoman government by municipalities and town councils, guilds, church boards, and individuals¹. Most of these materials offer private, non-governmental perspectives on politics, economy, culture, and society through the eyes of social actors who belonged to different networks, with active connections all over Rumelia, Anatolia, Egypt, Russia, Austria, France, Britain, and even the USA.

In 1930, the Bulgarian Ministry of Education bought the archive for 1,300,000 leva from Tŭpchileshtov’s younger son who moved to Sofia and became a Secretary to the Ministerial Council. The main argument for its acquisition at such a high price was that it contained documents of “national significance” about the Bulgarian socio-political and cultural history during the period called *Bŭlgarsko Vŭzrazhdane* (Bulgarian Revival, 18th-19th century²). The Bulgarian Historical Archive, known earlier as the Archival Section, was one of the first archives founded after the establishment of the Bulgarian Principality. In 1878, the Bulgarian National Library was instituted and almost immediately began accumulating archival collections from the preceding period of Ottoman rule. Thus, the Archival Section acquired the significance of national archive and functioned as such until the establishment of the State Archive in 1951³.

Recently, in 1998, the Central State Archive obtained a small collection of documents (79 archival units) from heirs of the Tŭpchileshtov family; namely, fond

¹ Konstantin Mutafov, *Arkhivŭt na Khristo Tŭpchileshtov*, “Bŭlgarska misŭl” 2 (1932), p. 132-139; *Inventaren opis na arkhivite sŭkhvaniavani v Bŭlgarski istoricheski arkhiv* (ed. by Kirila Vŭzvŭzova-Karateodorova *et alii*), 1, Sofia, 1963, p. 39-62.

² For a recent revision of the conceptualization of the term, see Rumenski Daskalov, *Kak se misli Bŭlgarskoto vŭzrazhdane*, Sofia, 2002; Aleksandŭr Vezenkov, *Ochevidno samo na prŭv pogled: ‘Bŭlgarskoto vŭzrazhdane’ kato otdelna epokha*, in *Balkanskiat XIX vek. Drugi prochiti* (ed. by Diana Mishkova), Sofia, 2006, p. 82-128 (87-89).

³ <http://www.nationallibrary.bg/cgi-bin/e-cms/vis/vis.pl?s=001&p=0122&g=> (accessed on 2012, 31 July).

2066k: “Semeen fond Tüpchileshtovi (1808-1893)”⁴. It consists mostly of correspondence and a few ledgers and has precious documents concerning the younger Tüpchileshtov brother – Nikola, whose archive has been lost⁵. Although many of the documents have commercial character, the historical information about the founders of the archive pays attention to Khristo Tüpchileshtov’s public contributions and his commercial success is barely mentioned. This is an older pattern that was established when the bigger archival collection at the National Library was bought, an issue that I will discuss in the following paragraphs.

Konstantin Mutafov, the first archivist of the fond number 6 at the Bulgarian Historical Archive, arranged the documents in an order that reflected an ideological approach; more specifically, highlighting the founder’s social, political, and national contributions to the Bulgarian National Revival. However, these claims about primacy of the documents of national, cultural, and ecclesiastical significance are not entirely true since the commercial documents prevail. Moreover, merchants constitute a group that transcended ethnic, social, linguistic, confessional, political, cultural, and geographical borders. Such archives offer informal views of an intermediary group employing various modes of communication with state bureaucracy, church, other social groups, and within itself. They have also another advantage of revealing contacts with a considerable number of correspondents. Thus, the archive discloses a much wider picture of traders of medium and smaller status, of their informal way of co-operation and simultaneous belonging to different networks. Along these lines, fond number 6 is a consummate example.

The purchase of the fond number 6 occurred 55 years after the death of its founder⁶. As mentioned previously, the Tüpchileshtov family left Istanbul and moved back to Sofia in 1895 but sold the archive in 1930. In 1935, a detailed biography of Khristo Tüpchileshtov was published. The biographer described the content and the number of the copybooks – 26, each of 500 pages, covering the period 1861-1875.⁷ This information was corroborated and slightly corrected by a “Report by the Librarian-Archivist [*bibliotekar-urednik*] of the Archival Section K. Mutafov to the Director of the National Library in 1930.”⁸ Again, there were 26 copybooks listed but the lower chronological limit was pushed 11 years earlier -- 1850. As per the correspondence’s content, he asserted that it was predominantly of “public character.”⁹ This is quite incorrect because the majority of copybooks contains

⁴ <http://www.archives.government.bg/1> (accessed on 2012, 25 November).

⁵ Supposedly, a fire destroyed his archive. Ivan Shishmanov, *Konstantin G. Fotinov, negoviat zivot i negovata deĭnost*, “Сборникъ за Народни, Умотворения, Наука и Книжнина” 11 (1894), p. 539.

⁶ K. Mutafov, *Arkhivŭt na Khristo Tüpchileshtov* cit., p. 132-139.

⁷ Nikola Nachov, *Khristo P. Tüpchileshtov. Zivot i negovata obshtestvena deĭnost*, Sofia, 1935, p. 16-19.

⁸ Bulgarian Historical Archive [hereafter, BIA-NBKM], f. 35, non-catalogued part, March 1931, p. 6. I am grateful to Keti Mircheva for this information.

⁹ K. Mutafov, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

commercial correspondence¹⁰. A second body of documents consists of letters and petitions (around 12,000) addressed to Khristo Tŭpchileshtov, and a third group encompasses 57 ledgers and other accounting documents. After reading the detailed report by Mutafov, the Library Committee decided to buy the collection for 1,300,000 leva. Due to lack of funds, however, the Ministry of Education postponed the purchase¹¹. Another report, written seven years later by Mutafov, included more documents, which suggests that in the meantime the money was found and the archive was bought between 1930 and 1937.

The emphasis in Mutafov's reports, presented to the Library's Director and Library's Committee, about the civic and national significance of the fond number 6 was not quite accurate for the following reasons. First, this is a huge massive of documents written in multiple languages with a variety of handwriting that could not be perused in such a short period. Second, and more importantly, one has to take into account the historical context in the 1930s; especially, within the countries that lost WWI, where nationalist ideologies and movements were on the rise expressing revanchist claims. Mutafov, as an expert who understood the uniqueness of the archive, tried to use this general mindset and overemphasized the patriotic value of the archival materials. Such line of thinking is articulated in an article of his, published in *Bŭlgarska misŭl*, where he wrote that the Tŭpchileshtov's archive represented a "quite valuable and all-encompassing history of the most important period of the Bulgarian national movement in the 19th century."¹² He had given a priority to *mahzars* (petitions) and letters from various Bulgarian municipalities (1856-1867) in order to highlight the ecclesiastical movement for autocephalous church, which included territories that at the time were not part of Bulgaria. In such a manner is organized the fond itself – these documents bear the first call numbers – and are the most often quoted documents in historical works. Mutafov also discussed the historical value of some documents that reinstated the tarnished reputation of some participants in recent events. Yet a close reading of his reports will not reveal anything of Tŭpchileshtov's economic significance or aspects of the socio-economic history during the second and third quarter of the 19th century. It was much later – 1963 -- that one can read about the multiple documents with economic value in the Library's Guide to the Archives. In addition, the number of the documents increased up to 28,235 archival units, comprising around 85,000 pages without counting 19 non-catalogued ledgers¹³. Although this is one of the most often-cited archives in the Bulgarian historical research, it was used not only partly but also partially, a topic to be discussed in the next section.

¹⁰ I have spent years working with this particular fond and consider that more than 2/3 of its content is commercial. Evguenia Davidova, *The Economic and Social Activity of the Tŭpchileshtov Brothers*, unpublished PhD, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia, 1998.

¹¹ BIA-NBKM, f. 35, non-catalogued part, *Doklad na bibliotekaria-urednik na Arkhivnia otdel K. Mutafov do Direktora na Narodna biblioteka Sofia za izvŭrshenoto prez 1937 godina*, 1938, 10 January, p. 3.

¹² K. Mutafov, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

¹³ *Inventaren opis cit.*, p. 39-41.

The Historiographical Peregrinations of Fond Number 6

There is almost not a book that deals with the Bulgarian history of the 19th century that does not mention the name of the Tŭpchileshtov brothers. Below, I am addressing these writings in five thematic groups.

The first one encompasses biographical information, and among those works the previously mentioned biography by Nikola Nachov occupies a central position¹⁴. It belongs to a common hagiographic trend of the biographical genre at the time, which highlighted social, public, and cultural contributions to the Bulgarian nation. There were many contemporaries, still alive at the beginning of the 20th century who venerated the “ideal era” when merchants like “Kh. Tŭpchileshtov, G. Moravenov ... competed with the other patriots in manifesting their patriotic deeds.”¹⁵ This romanticized version of the recent past was nurtured by the sober reality of the early years of institutional nation building and by a disappointment with the territorial losses from the Balkan and First World Wars.

A second set of works, including memoirs, is focused on the Bulgarian colony in Tsarigrad, and especially its leading position in the Bulgarian demands for autonomous church, education, and political representation¹⁶. All the writers who analysed the ecclesiastic struggles and the conflict with the Ecumenical Patriarchate include the Tŭpchileshtov brothers in their accounts¹⁷. In those works, however, the Tŭpchileshtovs are placed in the position of background to other activists. They are mentioned within various groups: Bulgarians in Constantinople, merchants, activists from Kalofer, and members of the ideological “parties” within the ecclesiastical movement. While most research highlights their patriotism many authors also discuss their moderate visions and pragmatism¹⁸.

A third body of research deals with nineteenth-century socio-economic history. It is commonly accepted that the Ottoman Empire was gradually incorporated into the world economy, and its Balkan provinces paved the way¹⁹.

¹⁴ N. Nachov, *op. cit.*, p. 234.

¹⁵ S. S. Bobchev, *Predi 25 godini obnarodvaneto na pŭrvata mi publitsisticheska rabota*, “Bŭlgarska sbirka” 3 (1896), 3, p. 217.

¹⁶ N. Nachov, *Tsarigrad kato kulturen tsentar na bŭlgarite do 1877 godina*, “Сборник на Българската Академия на Науките” 11 (1925), 1, p. 1-206; Evlogi Buzhashki, *Bŭlgarskata obshchina v Tsarigrad i politicheskite techenia v neia (1856-1868)*, “Izvestia na Bŭlgarskoto istoricheskoto druzhestvo” 37 (1985), p. 29-106; Plamen Bozhinov, *Tsarigradskite bŭlgari mezhdu reformite i revoliutsiata 1857-1877 g.*, Sofia, 2012.

¹⁷ There is an extant literature on this issue. For a recent work, see Vera Boneva, *Bŭlgarskoto tsŭrkovnonatsionalno dvizhenie 1856-1870*, Sofia, 2010, who cites all the relevant research.

¹⁸ For a recent research, see Ilia Todev, *D-r Stoitian Chomakov (1819-1893). Zhivot, delo, potomtsi*, 1, Sofia, 2003.

¹⁹ *The Ottoman Empire and the World Economy* (ed. by Huri Islamoğlu), Cambridge, 1987. Whereas early authors emphasized the impulses coming from the West, later scholars presented a more balanced picture of coexisting internal Ottoman economic development. Resat Kasaba, *The Ottoman Empire and the World Economy. The Nineteenth Century*, New York, 1988.

Many scholars from the Balkan successor-states did not participate in the debates about world-economy and processes of Ottoman peripheralization but seem to perceive trade as the main tool for the Balkan economic incorporation. The industrial boom in Western Europe turned the Ottoman provinces into both suppliers of raw materials for Europe and markets for European manufactured goods. Consequently, the Balkan merchants benefited from the change even more than the European traders and enjoyed an “unprecedented prosperity.”²⁰ Researchers also emphasize the absence of Ottoman protectionist policy as reason for economic decline and saw the Bulgarian Revival as a process that had a “commercial” basis, which reflected the scope and size of the expanding trade with Europe than the development of agriculture and industry²¹. There are many works researching the Bulgarian commercial relations with the West, such as France (Khristo Gandev, Virginia Paskaleva) Austria (Virginia Paskaleva), England (Khristo Glushkov), etc., which mention the Tüpchileshtov’s company. More details about commerce and usury, as forms of capital accumulation, contains the monograph by Konstantin Kosev, where Khristo Tüpchileshtov’s business occupies quite a prominent place²².

There are also works that analyse regional economic development or history of some urban centres. Earlier work in this field presents commerce in a “personal” way as accounts of local families engaged in trade. A classic example is Nikola Nachov’s book about Kalofer, which contains 31 detailed prosopographies²³. Again, the attention they paid was on local and national patriotic deeds than specific economic analysis. The newer research that focuses on local histories usually has a chapter on economy and trade²⁴.

Finally, a very few works are dedicated to specific commercial houses and merchants, and many of them mention the Tüpchileshtov’s company²⁵. A variety of opinions exists about the material power of Bulgarian merchants. Some authors talk about their poverty others hyperbolized their prosperity. Indeed, the archival fond number 6 provides an ample evidence of both: economic affluence and impoverishment. More recent scholarship discusses Khristo Tüpchileshtov as representative of the Bulgarian business and social elite²⁶.

²⁰ Traian Stoianovich, *The Conquering Balkan Orthodox Merchant*, “Journal of Economic History” 20 (1960), 2 (June), p. 259.

²¹ Krüstio Manchev, *Istoria na balkanskite narodi*, Veliko Tŭrnovo, 1979, p. 44-45.

²² Konstantin Kosev, *Za kapitalisticheskoto razvitie na bŭlgarskite zemi prez 60-te i 70-te godini na XIX vek*, Sofia, 1968.

²³ N. Nachov, *Kalofer v minaloto*, Sofia, 1990, p. 356-514. A few prominent exceptions were: Mosko Moskov, *Minaloto i bŭdesheteto na V. Tŭrnovo v ikonomicheskoto otnoshenie*, Veliko Tŭrnovo, 1910; Simeon Tabakov, *Opit za istoria na grad Sliven*, 1-3, Sofia, 1911-1929; Petŭr Tsonchev, *Iz stopanskoto minalo na Gabrovo*, Sofia, 1996; Iurdan Trifonov, *Istoria na grada Pleven do Osvoboditelnata voŭna*, Sofia, 1933.

²⁴ *Istoria na grad Tolbukhin* (ed. by Evlogi Buzhashki), Sofia, 1968; Simeon Damianov, *Lomskiat kraj prez Vŭzrazhdaneto. Ikonomicheski zhivot i politicheski borbi*, Sofia, 1967; Mikhail Grŭncharov, *Pleven i Plevenskiat kraj prez Vŭzrazhdaneto*, Sofia, 1989.

²⁵ Ev. Davidova, *A Centre in the Periphery: Merchants during the Ottoman Period in Modern Bulgarian Historiography*, “Journal of European Economic History” 31 (2002), 3, p. 663-685.

²⁶ Svetla Ianeva, *Bŭlgari otkupvachi na danŭtsi vŭv fiskalnata sistema na osmanskata imperia*.

Conclusion

In conclusion, one has the impression that a Bulgarian-centric and parochial approach dominates the Bulgarian historiography. As Maria Todorova has mentioned, the provincialism of the Bulgarian historiography was shared by the other Balkan historiographies as well. Moreover, the neglect of the Ottoman Empire is concealed by European parallels, which allow for distancing from the “Asian backwardness.”²⁷ Yet the prevailing view in national historiographies that the Turks (Muslims) avoided trade and were involved mostly in bureaucracy is brought into question by a plethora of documents in fond number 6. Moreover, many primary sources manifest a high level of economic multi-ethnic collaborations. The economic stimuli of the huge Ottoman markets and the cosmopolitan city culture created an amalgam of concurrent support and opposition to nationalist movements and ideologies²⁸.

There is continuity within the Bulgarian historiography expressed in the narrow way the rich archival materials, preserved in fond number 6 and other archival collections, are interpreted. This approach was established in the interwar period with the acquisition of the fond and its classification, which privileged the patriotic social deeds over the economic massive of information. In the socialist era, when the Marxist historiography paid special attention to class formation and transition from feudalism to capitalism, the economic value of fond number 6 was elevated; in the post-socialist period scholars who work in the field of socio-economic history still use unevenly the fond while it continues to be copiously quoted in research on cultural history. The new element is that some researchers began to leave the parochial confines of the national narrative and place the Bulgarian history within the broader Balkan and Ottoman framework. Fond number 6 is one of those archival collections that encapsulates and to some extent is instrumental to this transition to broader questions and contexts.

Kŭm istoriata na bŭlgarskia delovi i sotsialen elit prez XIX vek, Sofia, 2011.

²⁷ Maria Todorova, *Bulgarian Historical Writing on the Ottoman Empire*, “New Perspectives on Turkey” 12 (Spring 1995), p. 97-119; Eadem, *The Ottoman Legacy in the Balkans*, in *Imperial Legacy. The Ottoman Imprint on the Balkans and the Middle East* (ed. by L. C. Brown), New York, 1996, p. 45-78.

²⁸ Ev. Davidova, *Balkan Transitions to Modernity and Nation-States through the Eyes of Three Generations of Merchants (1780s-1890s)*, Leiden-Boston, 2013.