

REVIEW by
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of a dissertation *"From the rice of Asia to the peppers of America. An intertwined history of food and cuisine in Ottoman Bulgaria and the neighboring lands (from the end of the 14th to the beginning of the 19th century)*
according to the procedure for obtaining the scientific degree "Doctor of Sciences" in the doctoral program
"Anthropology" of the New Bulgarian University in a professional direction 3.1 Sociology, anthropology
and cultural sciences with PhD candidate Stefan Ivanov Dechev

1. Legality of the procedure By order of the rector of the New Bulgarian University No. 3-RK-310/22.07.2024, I have been appointed as an external member of a scientific jury for the defense for the acquisition of a scientific degree "Doctor of Sciences" in a doctoral program "Anthropology" by professional direction 3.1. **"Sociology, anthropology and cultural sciences"**, 3. Social, economic and legal sciences. The only participant in the competition is **Prof. Dr. Stefan Ivanov Dechev** - lecturer in the doctoral program "Anthropology" at the New Bulgarian University with the decision of the scientific jury, taken at its meeting on 30.07.2024

d., I am designated as a reviewer.

My review of the procedure for admission to participation in the competition and the formation of the scientific jury did not find any deviation from the prescriptions of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the Regulations for its implementation. According to the documents provided, the applicant is responsible for

the minimum national requirements, which is why I think the procedure is completely legal. For the preparation of this review, all documents necessary

for the defense have been received, including: dissertation work; abstract; resume; list of scientific citations; list of doctoral students supervised by the candidate; list of scientific publications after obtaining the scientific degree "doctor"; compliance table with the minimum national requirements, as well as an order for the appointment of a jury.

2. Relevance of the topic The dissertation ***"From the rice of Asia to the peppers of America. An intertwined history of food and cuisine in Ottoman Bulgaria and neighboring lands (from the end of the 14th to the beginning of the 19th century)*** by Assoc. Dr. Stefan Ivanov Dechev takes one of the untrodden

still trails in Bulgarian historiography. At first glance, such a statement may sound provocative, especially against the background of rich ethnographic, agronomic, culinary and generally historical scientific research. And yet, as the author shows us in impressive detail, the rational grain that can be sifted from this otherwise very voluminous existing literature is insufficient to construct even a superficial answer to the question: What are the historical roots of what we are today used to calling "Bulgarian national cuisine"? and related sub-questions: What did the Bulgarian eat during the Late Middle Ages and the beginning of the Modern Age?; Does the diet of the "great-grandfathers of modern Bulgarians" change over time and how? Instead of answers to these questions in the otherwise abundant literature on the matter Art. Dechev quite rightly discovers "some timeless, anti-historical 'tradition' and 'folk culture'" (p. 24). A

deliberate attempt to "archaize" the emergence and entry of certain foods of distinctly Oriental or American origin is noted (p. 24). There is also "an effort to hide the participation of minority ethnic and religious groups in the cuisine" (p. 25). Worrying, according to Dechev, is also the "reluctance of Bulgarian authors to recognize the Ottoman-Turkish influences on Bulgarian cuisine", trying to attribute a primitive Bulgarian origin not a few foods and dishes brought by the Ottomans (p. 26).

The strength of the thesis is that from the outset it resolutely abandons the romantic and at times anti-historical approach of its predecessors. Instead, Prof. Dr. Stefan Dechev positions his monograph entirely in the fairway of world science. And she, as the author shows us, has already achieved significant breakthroughs in this scientific field for several decades: "The comprehensive study of the history of food and cuisine - which we will strive for in the following pages - involves tracing a wide range of problems such as natural conditions ; agricultural and livestock practices;

food production; food movement in space; growing food crops; food trade; the acquisition of food from relevant markets and the overall state of consumer culture; the development of kitchens and cooking; meals and their consumption; food consumption patterns; religion and food in view of certain taboos; the production, preparation and consumption of food and the connections of these processes with gender roles; the eroticization of food and its function as an aphrodisiac, etc. A particularly interesting problem is the perception of food as an ethnic and national mark, as well as the formation of the modern idea of "national cuisine", its evolution, construction, thematization and the stages through which this process passes." (p. 8).

I allowed myself this very long quote from the dissertation, because it maps the huge deficits of the existing Bulgarian literature and hence the relevance of the topic and the contribution nature of the monograph. And something even more important:

it is in this full-fledged intellectual tradition that the author enters his research, in which food and nutrition can be neither frozen ethnographic categories, nor a source of patriotic pride, nor an end in itself. In fact, they are an integral part of a common complex, including the daily life of our grandfathers, their economic activity, the social structure in which they participate and ultimately - they become an expression of their culture. Because "eating has always been not only biology, but also culture" (p. 11), and its study must necessarily bring together "history, sociology and anthropology." (p. 17)

3. Volume and structure of the dissertation The

dissertation is 546 pages long and consists of an introduction, six chapters, a conclusion and a bibliography consisting of published travelogues and guides, memoirs, culinary books, monographs and articles in Bulgarian, Serbian, Croatian, Macedonian, French, German, English, Greek, Turkish, etc. languages. It is explicitly stated (pp. 7, 46) that even in its impressive size our proposed monograph is only part of a much more comprehensive research project which, at its conclusion, would greatly expand the research field both vertically (reaching probably at least the middle of the twentieth century, and perhaps until later), as well as horizontally (adding the consumption of drinks and tobacco).

4. General analysis of the dissertation work The

purpose of the dissertation work is outlined quite clearly in the first pages of *the Introduction*. In the words of the author himself, his ambition is to present to us: "a history of food, ways of eating and cuisine in the Ottoman province of Bulgaria and its surrounding lands from 1396 to the first decades of the 19th century." (p. 7) This however, the story is by no means an end in itself and will serve in the future to "shape the building blocks of what, sometime in the 30s of the 20th century, will begin to be called "Bulgarian folk feasts", and in the second half of the last century... will be thematized and turned into "Bulgarian national dishes" and "Bulgarian national cuisine" (p. 7). The goals described in this way are subsequently specified with a number of important questions: When do certain new foods appear and how are they established among the population? What do the people inhabiting a given space at different social levels eat every day and what determines this consumption? In what cases are the services of the market resorted to? What is bought there and from whom?..." (p. 40)

Along with the objectives of the study, the Introduction includes a definition of the basic concepts (p. 41) and a historiographical overview of the rich ethnographic literature, historical literature and studies of the natural sciences (p. 21-36).

The latter were already marked in

the present review, so I see no point in going over them again here.

In the finale of the Introduction, the chronological framework of the study and

the methodological problems that arise due to the interdisciplinary nature of the topic
serious challenges for the author.

Getting into the essence of their research, *the First and Second Chapters* scrupulously study all the foods and dishes typical of Ottoman Bulgaria, but also of its surrounding lands - part or not of the Ottoman cultural and food area. As you might expect, the narrative starts with bread, through rice and pasta, meat, vegetables, pulses and fish. Somewhat inexplicably, at least to me, however, milk and milk products are brought out in a separate, second chapter. Probably for this, without being explicitly indicated, for this compositional decision of his, Assoc. Dr. Stefan Dechev was guided by his serious participation in

the preparation of most dairy products by the representatives of minority ethnic and religious groups (Yuruts, Vlachs, Karakachans, etc.). Considering the nature of the diet followed by Bulgarians, if any paragraph at all should be separated from the others, it would be suitable mostly for bread, rice and in general - pasta foods. Faithful to the framework already laid down in the Introduction, Dechev strives to keep in his focus both the elite (palace) and everyday (village) cuisine, as well as the available

themselves as mediators between them - cities, wealthy provincial and central elites, imarets, inns, shops, janissary corps. Neither "nearby Europe" (Serbia, Romania, Austria-Hungary, including Transylvania, Banat, Vojvodina and Bosnia) nor the "haute cuisine" of Italian and Spanish cities are left out. This one

a tangle of levels—domestic and international—definitely adds to the impressiveness
quality of the narrative and allows to position much more precisely the food phenomena in our lands and their chronological trajectory. The same polyvalence of focuses allows Assoc. Dr. St. Dechev noticed important details that had eluded a number of other researchers before him (about cucumbers, eggplants, making bread, fasting).

At the same time, the reader is left with the impression that in some places the narrative is denser than in others, where the narrative seems more unfocused (eg about the beans, about the salt, about the meat). Perhaps it is not entirely inevitable that some foods (rice, fruits, beans, etc.) will be re-examined simultaneously in Chapter One and Chapter Six. Here, as everywhere, the question is in measure and, it seems to me, from the more schematic presentation of these foods in the First Chapter, at the expense of their more detailed consideration in the Sixth Chapter, the general exposition would only gain. At least for me, the examples and information about Sultan cuisines and Istanbul in general are heavy (for fish, for chickens) and it seems that they could be reduced. In the paragraph on spices (pp. 159-166), the author quite accurately notes their negligible consumption by the rural and urban lowlands, without however clarifying that they often resorted to onions and garlic instead to flavor their food. It is striking that, speaking of the cheeses "invented" by the Vlachs, Karakachans and Yuruts, he omits the sporadic but otherwise curious mentions of the "sharp" Bulgarian cheeses by Teofilakt Ohridski or

Gregory of Antioch. In general, for the pre-Ottoman period Art. Dechev relies almost entirely on the book by Y. Bencheva, whose information could be supplemented with the otherwise not bad articles of Al. Rusev, N. Khrisimov, Al. Pavlova and others.

And finally, with the significant "empty places" in the plains - because of the low density of the population - and with the possibilities for high mountain pastures in the summer, it seems to me difficult to defend the author's statement: "Before the Ottoman conquest in the Balkan lands [sheep farming] it was mainly a livelihood of Vlach shepherds" (p. 174). In another place it is claimed that "we owe the development of sheep farming in our lands to the Ottomans, who built a large-scale system for supplying the capital city with sheep meat" (p. 236). Vlachs or Ottomans, but "the orientation of the Bulgarian population towards sheep breeding is... something that appeared precisely in the period we are considering, and which refers more to specific regions and settlements" (p. 466). Here, one inevitably gets the impression that Dechev only understands transhumance (semi-nomadic) and nomadic sheep farming, excluding the far more popular "migratory grazing" among Bulgarians. With her, in settlements around and above 500 m above sea level, in which the majority of Bulgarians actually live during the period, the hot summer months are spent in the mountain meadows, and in the winter the herds stay in *pens* and *sheds* near the village and are released on the already harvested fields, the mowed meadows and harvested agricultural plots. When the family owns fewer sheep and goats, around and above 15-20, in the summer they are given in collective herds.

The above disagreements and suggestions should by no means be read as any particular criticism of the text of the first two chapters. On the contrary, in general, their narrative is fascinating, peppered with interesting observations, often correcting unfounded theses expressed earlier in the literature. For example - about the general deficiency of the Bulgarian table, which made "fasting itself not so difficult to implement" (p. 127), about cooking almost completely without fat (p. 159) or about the unleavened, baked daily bread (p. 76, 456). The described picture of the "too monotonous and seasonally limited food" of the Ottoman Bulgarians is completely convincing (p. 168).

Chapter Three is also logically connected to the previous two chapters, but unlike Chapter Two, its separation sounds significantly more logical. The narrative here turns to a more luxurious and rarely found in everyday life - fruits, nuts, spices (sesame), sweeteners (sugar and honey) and sweets. With them, the Bulgarian contribution is expectedly minimal, but I would at least like to read what is the explanation of Assoc. Dr. Stefan Dechev about the almost complete absence of sweets from the diet of our grandfathers. How much of this is due to general poverty (which would not, however, prevent one from eating one's own fruit, honey or nuts) or some unexplained nutritional preferences.

If the first three chapters are inevitably more descriptive, from here on the narrative enters significantly more analytical and interesting for the reader. As a substantial contribution to the text

the decision in *Chapter Four* to trace institutions, external and internal culinary influences, and main dishes could be noted . Filling the gap between high (sultan) and low (peasant) cuisine is especially valuable

through the inclusion in the narrative of the janissary corps, the markets, the inns, the inns and shops that St. Dechev rightly considers as powerful channels for diffusion ("filtering of cultural information" - p. 234) the sophisticated food habits of the Ottoman elite to the local provincial elites and to the wealthier urban ones layers. The role of the Islamic postulate of charity to the poor is also important, which allows at least some of the refined practices of the high culinary world to "seep down" to the lower social strata, although not to the rural and urban poor (p. 89, 246, 272). More limited, but undeniably worth noting, is the contribution in this direction of the Christian monasteries (p. 312-316).

The following Fifth Chapter is developed in the same analytical spirit , the focus of which falls on the present but also the absent culinary contacts. With Arabs, Persians, nomads, Italians, Germans, Vlachs, Russians, etc. The frank but quite convincingly defended conclusion of Assoc. Dr. St. It is Dechev that "Bulgarian food or cuisine is completely absent" (p. 373). On the other hand, we observe a general imperial, Ottoman culinary culture, an "Ottoman culinary empire" (here the connection with the world system of I. Wallerstein is purposefully sought by the author - see p. 510-511). Undoubtedly, the last *Chapter Six* seems to be the most beneficial, but also requires the most polishing . After the "classical", "traditional" first few centuries, the Ottoman (and to a lesser extent

the Bulgarian) culinary tradition is finally beginning to open up to changes. New American foods are slowly entering it, some of the masterpieces of the Sultan's culinary art (stews, kebabs, dolmas, sherbets, baklava, etc.) are becoming popular (at least in urban and provincial elite environments). Still this, I would call it - a *food Renaissance*, remains to a large extent alien to the people's lowlands in the villages and cities, but even among them changes are beginning to be observed, which in no case should be missed.

Here and there in the 18th and 20th centuries, monotonous grain production was already diversified with new crops - sesame, tobacco, roses, corn, beans, peppers. This will inevitably affect the diet of the Bulgarian peasants, who will more and more confidently reach for the strange taste of these new foods. The boundaries of this process are outlined as generally as possible and with all possible convention "from the Treaty of Karlovac in 1699 to the Gulkhan Khatsheriff of 1839." I fully share this extremely important, even at the theoretical level, observation of the author, although, perhaps, he offsets its beginning too far back. However, the sixth chapter deals mainly with the second half of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century.

What deserves further consideration is the author's explanation of the dietary changes occurring. The ones offered by Prof. Dr. Stefan Dechev

answers are scattered throughout Chapter Six: (1) the "westernization of empire" and the associated increasingly dynamic foreign trade (pp. 432ff); (2) the settlement of foreigners (mainly Hungarians) on our lands (p. 439); the migrations of Bulgarians outside the Ottoman Empire (pp. 440-441); "consumer passion" among the upper strata of the population (p. 444). For me, at least here, I only miss the inflationary spiral from the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century, which was marked in passing on p. 450, as well as the chaos in the empire during the so-called "Kardzhalian times" and the internal migration

processes.

The changes of the 18th-19th centuries, as important as they are, are in fact only the beginning of a long process of complicating the Bulgarian national cuisine, of a gradual breaking of its monotonous, uniform and seasonally dominated character, of its leanness - directly, but also figuratively, content. And yet, even these timid overlays on the traditionally poor diet of our ancestors are a real breakthrough, the opening of a long-locked door through which new crops and foods (beans, peppers, corn) enter faster, sometimes more slowly, rice, ground red pepper, soups with oil, salads with carrots and radishes, etc.) led to a substantial enrichment of the food of the Bulgarians.

To outline the long contours of the time, which was already called *the food Renaissance*, which stretched from the 18th to at least the middle of the 20th century, is the subject of *the Conclusion*. The motley threads of the narrative from the previous six chapters are woven into it in a masterful way. Attention is paid to the climate, to the geography, to the social factor, everything important determinants of the food diet of the "ancestors of modern Bulgarians". Again, the key international parallel is given here: "The lack of refined food for the vast majority of the population of the Ottoman Empire, including the Bulgarian population, is not at all surprising in a broader international perspective" (p. 503) Thus "the scarce and unattractive food" (p. 505) turns out to be in fact the norm for vast swaths of the far wealthier West, the norm. A norm that in our country is gradually beginning to retreat under the pressure of the New Age.

If they must be summarized, the merits and contributions of peer-reviewed scientific work are impressive. Prof. Dr. Stefan Dechev's dissertation, which is rare in its depth, can be read in different ways. First of all, for the general public, it will represent a real food encyclopedia of the (missing) Bulgarian national cuisine at least until the middle of the 20th century. For historians, the work of St. Dechev will further open the curtain to a number of important observations about history, the social picture, the economic situation and the culture of Bulgarians in general. For ethnographers, it will undoubtedly be an important corrective, a compass, with the help of which processes can be returned to their true historical times. And for economic historians, Stefan Dechev's future book

will provide invaluable quantitative and qualitative information about the daily life of our ancestors and from there - about the economic dynamics in the Bulgarian lands.

5. Evaluation of the abstract and the other documents provided by the author

The abstract is prepared accurately, meets the regulatory requirements and correctly presents the results and content of the dissertation work. The publications cover key parts of the dissertation and also meet regulatory requirements.

6. Conclusion

After I got acquainted with the dissertation work presented in the procedure and the accompanying documents and based on the analysis made of their significance and scientific and scientific-applied contributions contained in them, I confirm that the presented dissertation work ***"From the rice of Asia to the peppers of America. An Interwoven History of Food and Cuisine in Ottoman Bulgaria and the Neighboring Lands (from the end of the 14th to the beginning of the 19th century)***, as well as the quality and originality of the results and achievements presented in it, meet the requirements of the ZRASRB and the Regulations for its Application for Acquisition from the candidate of the scientific degree "Doctor of Sciences" in professional direction **3.1. Sociology, anthropology and cultural sciences**.

In particular, the candidate satisfies the minimum national requirements in the professional direction and no plagiarism has been found in the submissions submitted to the competition scientific papers.

Based on the above, I will vote "for" the awarding of the scientific degree "Doctor of Sciences" to ***Prof. Dr. Stefan Ivanov Dechev*** in professional direction **3.1. Sociology, anthropology and cultural sciences** and I strongly recommend the other members of the scientific jury to support this choice.

Sofia, 25/08/2024

Reviewer:



(Assoc. Dr. Martin Ivanov)