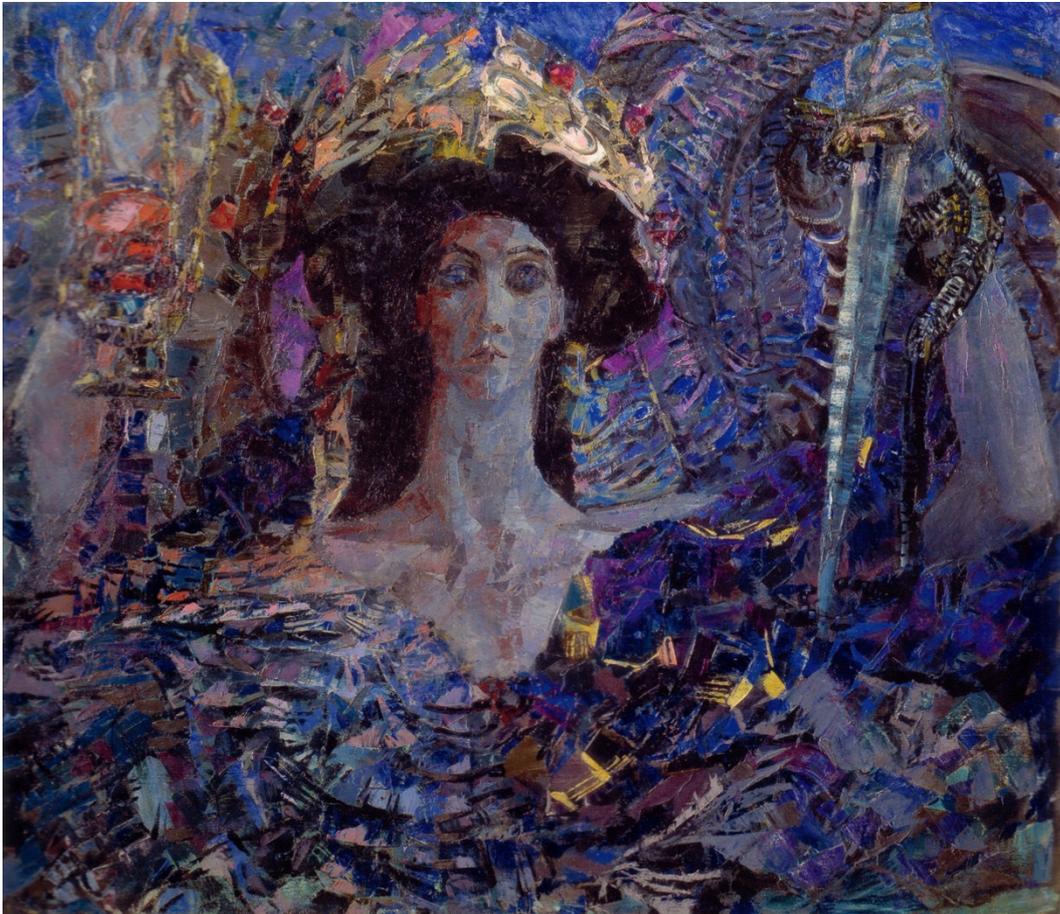


*Travel Journal*

***BULGARIA - TURKEY:***

***the Russian Modernists and the Eastern Orthodox Church***



*September 2022*

***Paula Domingo Pasarín***

*In collaboration with*

***The Roger Short Memorial Fund***

Disclaimer:

1. In most religious sites, interior photos are not allowed. Hence the predominant lack of interior photos. Exceptions to this rule were taken with the explicit permission of those taking care of the site and/or using the site as a place of spiritual practise.
2. Similarly, some photos might feature other tourists, visitors, or locals. No photos have been kept where the featured person explicitly demanded that their picture be deleted.
3. While this travel journal occasionally shares academic notes or references, it is intended as a personal account of my impressions and reflections. Thus, it is NOT an academic or critical piece. For the sake of objectivity and authenticity, I have allowed myself to express my impressions freely, even on those occasions when they might reflect a West-centric and/or Eurocentric point of view. I believe there is greater value and more room for personal growth in letting that biased viewpoint emerge freely, and subsequently address it openly when detected, than in sanitizing it out of my personal account.
4. Translations and transliterations feature inconsistently throughout this journal. Again, this is NOT intended as an academic piece.
5. I am not a churchgoer, nor was I brought up in any spiritual tradition. In other words, I am spiritually illiterate. If my observations appear ignorant and/or obvious, I kindly ask some interpretational charity on the side of the reader. My efforts, if sometimes insufficient, are always genuine.

*This journey could not have been undertaken without the generosity of the Roger Short Memorial Foundation, to which I am extremely grateful.*

*Thanks to Father Ian Sherwood, for his kind hospitality, and his readiness to share his endless knowledge.*

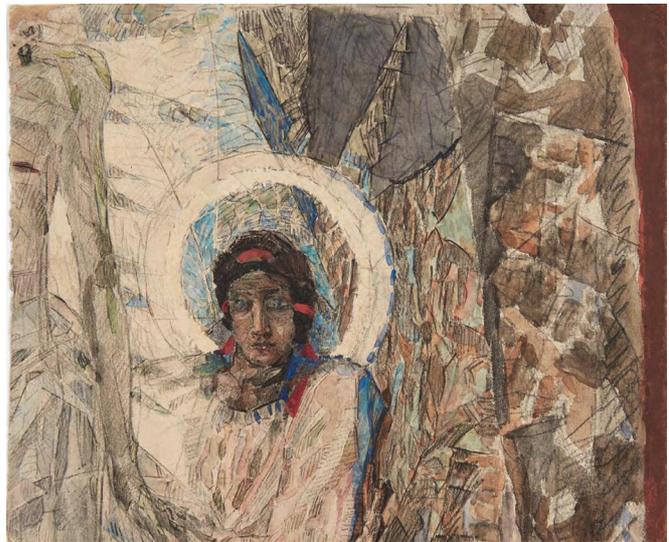
*And my most heartfelt 'Thank you' to Mrs. Victoria Short, who most kindly shared some music and some of her time with me, in a delightful exchange of impressions, insights and reflections.*

## *On the eve of departure, sleepless*

The reason for this trip is that, during this first year of my MPhil in Slavonic Studies at Oxford, I have taken Bulgarian and Old Church Slavonic. I chose to do so because my main topics of research is the religious renaissance that took place during the Silver Age, that is to say, during Russia's Modernism (roughly 1890-1920/30). The Russian modernists faced some existential questions: as Russians, they struggled with their impression that Russia was both European and "non-European."<sup>1</sup> And as modernists—just like the French, the English or the German modernists—they were more than done with the present; they sought to usher in an utopian future that, they were sure, would return mankind to the primordial past, to an age of blissful perfection.

Thus, for the Russian modernists spatial and temporal dichotomies were breaking down and borders were becoming extremely porous. As they concluded (rather logically) being neither in Europe, nor in "non-Europe" is the same as being both in Europe and "non-Europe" at the same time. With regards to time, their eyes were set on a future, a future that looked like a past and seemed so ineluctable that it already felt present.

How was this perceived breaking down of temporal and spatial axes conveyed in their works? Well, one of their devices was to "rediscovery" and "make intelligible" the "essence" of the past, that essence that was also the essence of the future. Thus, their works filled with poems, writings, paintings and scores filled with religious imagery, phraseology, themes and rituals from Christian Orthodoxy. That religious content was however used to express the inevitable coming of a new era, the advent of the impending utopian future.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, given that spatial boundaries were no longer existent, nothing was distinctively "eastern" or "western". As a result, e.g., Russian icons could be painted applying western techniques, and wearing "historical" dresses.



*An example of modernist religious material: Mikhail Vrubel's Angel. Painted in 1889, as part of his larger "Resurrection."*

What I find so appealing about the modernists at large, and the Russian modernists in particular, is that, while their solutions might appear bizarre nowadays, the questions they contended with appear distinctly current. Is Eastern Europe so "Eastern" that its "Easternness" merits mentioning—i.e., there is really a "Western" and an "Eastern" Europe? And if so, is there really a "Western Europe" and an "Eastern Europe," or is there "Europe" (France, Spain, Italy, Germany) and its weird eastern deviation, Eastern Europe?

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<sup>1</sup> It is tempting to say "Asian," but to avoid lengthy scholarly discussions about orientalism, eurocentrism and colonialism, let's leave it in "non-European."

<sup>2</sup> Needless to say, the Russian Orthodox Church did not appreciate this Modernist recycling of religious imagery.

And what about the future-past vs. present relation? If we are to judge by the current bout(s) of cultural nostalgia, it would seem that we too are living in a time in which we wish our future looked like our past, and most definitely had nothing to do with our present.



*Leon Bakst's design for one of the Ballets Russes "Afternoon of a Faun," 1912. The Ballets Russes were promoted around the world as a Russian product. However, note the Ancient Greece theme of this production.*

However, the study of the Russian modernists and their religious renaissance comes with a danger, one that I have sought to confront in my first year at Oxford. The religious material they were recycling comes from Russian Orthodoxy. As a form of Christianity, is Russian Orthodoxy accessible, intelligible, to a scholar that does not come from an Orthodox cultural background? In true "Eastern Europe" fashion, the answer is yes and no. Indeed, the overarching ideas and concepts are the same, but emphasis is put on different aspects. Most importantly, the material expression of faith (sacred spaces, iconography, rituals, prayers) are markedly different. Hence, this last academic year I have tried to learn as much as possible about Orthodoxy, and most specifically, the beginnings of Orthodoxy in the Slavonic world. With that in mind, I took Church Slavonic and Bulgarian (Orthodoxy came to Russia from Constantinople through Bulgaria) and with that in mind I am now travelling to Bulgaria and Istanbul.

In this trip I want to see and hear as many of the things I have encounter academically during my first year in Oxford as possible. I hope to see the practise to the theory I have studied for one year. But most importantly, in this trip I want to wear Modernists glasses. Maybe if I look at what they looked, and I do so with a similar mindset, I will be able to understand their proposals better. Thus, I want to find the familiar in the unfamiliar, and the common denominator in that which appears markedly foreign. In a word, I want to have an eye for boundaries, and most especially, for those boundaries that are permeable, whether they are so spatially, culturally, or temporally.

September 14<sup>th</sup>, 2022 – Sofia, Bulgaria



*Approaching Sofya. If it weren't for the lack of a sea, this could have been captioned as "approaching Barcelona."*

Other than the 45min of delay, my flight is uneventful. From up in the sky, Bulgaria looks oddly familiar: the landscape is very similar to my hometown, Barcelona—the effects of a long summer are visible. But the geography puzzles me a bit: next to some mountains, the terrain is very flat. Flat as in “we are approaching the coastline” flat. But there is no coastline. In other words, the landscape is Mediterranean, but the sea is missing.

During the flight I have been paying attention to the cabin crew announcements, made in English and Bulgarian. Other than *Дами и Господи, добре дошли*, and *София* I must say I haven't understood a thing. However, as soon as we disembark things get better on the language front. Some of us try to use the terminal's ATM, but the machine doesn't feel like cooperating today, as I discuss with a young lady in Bulgarian. Similarly, while waiting for the shuttle bus to Terminal 1 (to get the metro from there) a couple ask me if that's the stop for

the shuttle bus, and if there's a metro station in Terminal 1. *Да, да, на терминала има метрото*. Probably not idiomatic, but understandable all the same.

I reach my accommodation in Sofia by 3pm. When I booked it I didn't realised its metro station was 'Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski' (*Софийски университет „Свети Климент Охридски“*). Now, that is a lovely coincidence. St. Kliment of Ohrid has been one of the main characters in my academic year. He was a disciple of St. Cyril and Methodius, the credited inventors of the Cyrillic alphabet (ca. 862), nowadays used as the script for Belarusian, Bulgarian, Macedonian, Russian, Serbo-Croatian, or Ukrainian, to name but a few.<sup>3</sup> As a matter of fact, St. Cyril and Methodius created the Glagolitic alphabet. It was their disciples—who had moved southwards, to the area of the First Bulgarian Kingdom (7<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century)—who developed the Cyrillic alphabet by adapting the Greek alphabet. Among those disciples was St. Kliment of Ohrid, whom most scholars currently accept as the most likely creator of Cyrillic. St. Kliment of Ohrid was also the founder of the Ohrid Literary School, one of the major cultural centres of the First Bulgarian Empire, together with the Preslav Literary School.<sup>4</sup> Hence, St. Kliment of Ohrid is considered to be the first bishop of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, and the patron saint of North Macedonia, the city of Ohrid and the Macedonian

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<sup>3</sup> All the aforementioned are Slavic languages. Slavic languages are a branch of the larger Indo-European linguistic family, including Germanic, Romance. Cyrillic is also used by many non-Indo-European languages with historical relation to the Slavic world, such as Caucasian, Eskimo-Aleutian, Iranian, Mongolic, Turkic, or Uralic languages.

<sup>4</sup> A school that has created much division among linguists, as I discovered thanks to Dr. Eckhoff's tutorials on Church Slavonic, where I was encouraged to peak into the nest of vipers that is the debate around whether there's a lexical stock characteristic of the Preslav school.

Orthodox Church.<sup>5</sup> It is because of him that Bulgaria prides itself on being the country that gave the Slavic world its writing system, as I was able to find out through many of the Bulgarian articles I have translated.<sup>6</sup> And so, it's lovely to see now that what I've come to know in theory, materializes itself in practise; one of Sofia's main streets is the 'St. Kliment Ohridski' street.

Although I am rather tired (I've only slept 4 hours tonight) I fancy wandering a bit. That way I can start to have a feeling of what the city is like, how walkable are the distances, and so on. Hopefully I'll find somewhere nice to eat, too.. Following another beautifully named street—"Slavyanska St," Slavonic Street—I reach the National Theater. There's an ad for *Orpheus* that I can't but appreciate; the inspiration seems to have been the infamous eye-cutting sequence of Luís Buñel's *Un Perro Andaluz*. I guess the shocking power of some images is universal. After crossing the theatre gardens, I continue until the *Ротонда „Свети Георги“* (Rotonda "Sveti Georgi"), a 4<sup>th</sup> century red brick rotunda consecrated to St. George, originally built as Roman baths. I walk around it but today I won't be going into any building; this is just an exploratory outing.



*A reference that feels close to home*



*The Rotunda "Sveti Georgi," point of unexpected encounters.*

As I come to the end of my circumvallation of the rotunda, lo and behold; is that Prof. Andrei Zorin? My Oxford supervisor? Talk about finding the familiar in the unfamiliar! Prof. Zorin kindly invites me for a quick coffee, and introduces me to his colleague from Poznan, whose name I unfortunately can't remember. While I do appreciate the gesture, I take my leave sooner rather than later; I don't want to interrupt them, and I'm too sleepy and surprised to make any interesting conversation. As a matter of fact, I even forget to take a picture of the three of us, something I later regret; I'd have loved to have material proof that this is a small world indeed.

My wanderings take me to the St. Nedelia Cathedral, and then down to the Bul. Todor Aleksandrov and the Bul. Stefan Stambolov, the latter offering a very familiar sight: it's full of women (mostly old ladies) that have taken their chairs out on the street and are sitting in a circle, chatting, and as my grannie used to say, "taking some fresh air." From there I walk down

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<sup>5</sup> It might surprise that St. Kliment of Ohrid is relevant in North Macedonia too. That is so because North Macedonia and Bulgaria share many historical and linguistic connections. Unfortunately, the two countries' relationship is currently at a low, since Bulgaria has vetoed North Macedonia's candidacy to join the EU on linguistic grounds. Bulgaria claims that Macedonian doesn't exist, that the language spoken in North Macedonia is Bulgarian, and North Macedonia should officially acknowledge this.

As practice for my Bulgarian examination I translated some Bulgarian articles on the topic, such as [this](#), or [this](#).

<sup>6</sup> For example, [this](#), also [this](#), or [this other one](#).

Ekzarh Yosif St., which seems to concentrate a small Romanian community, as indicated by the presence of a Romanian Orthodox church. This is something I will hopefully get used to with this trip, namely, the fact that Orthodoxy isn't organized within one shared hierarchy. In other words, there's no Orthodox Pope, no central authority. This is an idea that I struggle with; given my cultural background, for me religion *is* hierarchical organization. Looking now at this Romanian Orthodox Church of the Holy Trinity, it does look different from the Rotunda or St. Nedelia, which to me have a distinctive "Hagia Sophia" look.

At the end of Ekzarh Yosif I cross the Bul. Knyaginya Mariya Luiza, pass by National Museum of Archaeology (which is a priority in my list) and from there I go back home. Sofia's centre is definitely on the smaller side (as big cities and capitals go), and very walkable. While some streets are very polished, others seem to have been run down by some major catastrophe from which there hasn't been enough time yet to recover.

Speaking of time, on my way back home I find this bookshop, with this wonderful misquotation of Daniel Pennac: "Finding time to read is like finding time to love."<sup>7</sup>



"Да намериш време да четеш е като да намериш време да обичаш," free-styling on Pennac.

<sup>7</sup> The actual quote from *Comme Un Roman* goes: "*Le temps de lire, comme le temps d'aimer, dilatent le temps de vivre,*" that is, "time spent reading, like time spent loving, increases our lifetime."

## September 15<sup>th</sup>, 2022 – Sofia, Bulgaria



*While the Russian national tree is the larch, Russia has the largest population of willows*

There's a school next to my Airbnb, and since today is the first day of the academic year in Bulgaria, they are celebrating Knowledge Day. This is customary in most former Soviet republics. Knowledge Day, usually known simply by its date ("1<sup>st</sup> of September" in Russia, "15<sup>th</sup> of September" in Bulgaria), was institutionalized to honor and celebrate schoolteachers. In Russia, teachers are gifted flowers and students sing and dance, as we do in Christmas shows. Apparently, it's the same here in Bulgaria. While I have breakfast I hear an average Do-re-mi song (A-B-C song), a brass rendition of Eurhythmics' *Sweet Dreams*, and some choir folk songs, which are hauntingly beautiful. Bulgarian folk music has been popularized mostly by [The Bulgarian State Television Female Vocal Choir](#), also known by their French name "Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares" (The Mystery of the Bulgarian Voices). Their songs have been used more than once in films, such as Disney's *Brother Bear*, the popular anime *Evangelion*, or the campy 90s show *Xena, Warrior Princess*.

On my way to the National Archeology museum I stop by the "Russian Church," officially known as the Sv. Nikolay Chudotvoretz (St. Nicholas Miracle-Maker), with the corresponding statue of Pushkin in front of it. Apparently, the church was built on the site of a mosque, destroyed in 1882 after the Russian liberation of Bulgaria from the Ottoman Empire. It was named after the patron saint of the Russian emperor of the time, Nicholas II, as was customary for diplomatic churches. No photos are allowed inside, but the church is designed in the Russian Revival style, emulating the decorations of Muscovite Russian churches of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Its architect was Mikhail Preobrazhenski, a man who shares his surname with one of Bulgakov's famous protagonists, the geneticist Prof. Preobrazhenski, from *Heart of a Dog*.<sup>8</sup>



The deceptively humble National Archeology Museum offers a wonderful opportunity to witness Bulgaria's extremely long

*A sample of what humanity could do more than eight millennia ago. My schoolteacher was quite disappointed with my clay moulding skills.*

<sup>8</sup> "Preobrazhenski" is a name both befitting for a Church architect and Bulgakov's character. It means "Transfiguration," in the religious sense.

history. Some of the artifacts displayed here date from the 6000 BC. I'm struck by the level of craftsmanship shown at impossibly remote times. Some of the bronze artifacts dating from the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC appear impossible to replicate. How could the ancients do it? The answer is a couple of steps away: by the 6000 BC they were doing incredibly well, as some of the clay vases attest. Maybe the problem is actually that we always tend to conceive people from distant times as ignorant and helpless. The National Archeology Museum proves otherwise. By the way, the museum also provides a wonderful example of one of those symbols that appear to travel effortlessly through time and space: the double-headed eagle. While nowadays the bicephalous eagle is perhaps mostly associated with Russia, its origins go back to Mycenaean Greece, and throughout history it has come to represent the Byzantine Empire, the Holy Roman Empire, Al-Andalus, the Sultanate of Rum, or the Mamluk Sultanate. It currently features in the Albanian official flag.



*The Tetrevangelia and a chronicle, written in Church Slavonic (Bulgarian recension)*

On the second floor of the museum, I finally come into contact with some Church Slavonic manuscripts. In the third room (fourth if counting the separate “Treasure room”) there’s the Tetrevangelia, a gospel, and a letter. I cannot fully read the page at which the Tetrevangelia is open, but I can read enough to know it’s not one of the passages I’ve done in class. The exhibition section provides some general information about the invention of Cyrillic, and even mentions Glagolitic. It doesn’t show well in my pictures, but the books have luxurious and ornated covers, made of the finest materials. This is partly due to the text being religious, but—as I have come to know—it’s also due to the written word itself. It’s impossible to overstate the significance the invention of Cyrillic had for the Slavs—a significance that’s still very much felt today in a certain messianic narrative mostly exploited by Russia. The creation of Cyrillic has always been an articulating point of a national discourse of divine chosen-ness: unlike any other

people, the Slavs received gospel in their own language, for Slavonic was added to the three sacred biblical languages, Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. Their relationship with God is thus one of closer proximity.

After four hours in the museum, I go for lunch somewhere closer to the Zhensky Pazar (Женски Пазар “the Women’s Market”). The abundance of produce in the bazaar makes for a stark contrast with the rather dingy buildings surrounding it. I’m starkly reminded of certain areas of Prague, Krakow or Warsaw, which had a very similar look. After walking through the entire Zhensky Pazar I find myself at the Lion Bridge. I want to go to the synagogue, which means walking down the Bul. Knyaginya Mariya Luiza. While doing so I cross streets with



*On the bottom left corner, the street plaque reads St. Cyril and St. Methodius St. A splendidous name that clashes with the not-so-splendidous current reality*



*The two competing heads of the bicephalous eagle: State vs. Church. In this case the winner is quite undisputed, given that for nearly 500 years Bulgaria was under Ottoman rule. Christianity played a crucial role in the preservation of Bulgarian identity*

names that evoke a past far more splendid than current state of affairs: Pop Bogomil St,<sup>9</sup> St. Cyril and St. Methodius St, Tsar Simeon St.<sup>10</sup> My Bulgarian teacher usually referred to this: “Bulgaria cannot face the future because it keeps comparing itself to its glorious past, and it always finds itself lacking.”

Unfortunately, the synagogue is not open to visitors, so I take Iosif St. and head towards the Aleksandr Nevski Cathedral instead. It’s a charming street, as beaten down as any other non-centric street in Sofia, but young people seem to be rescuing it from its gloomy state with small craft shops and cafes. By the way, Sofia seems enamored with Charles Chaplin. On Iosif St. I count three Charles Chaplin murals, and the front door of my Airbnb also displays a full-body depiction of Chaplin. I wonder where the

infatuation comes from. At some point during my short walk, I also encounter a street exhibition of iconic covers of *The Sofianer*. Many of them allude to a rather modernist (and modern!) preoccupation: the clash between past and present, and the daunting uncertainty of the future. Looking at them, one feels that the experience of our modern times is the same for everybody, everywhere.

The Aleskandr Nevski Patriarchal Cathedral it’s the largest cathedral in the Balkans, built in Neo-Byzantine style—a style that emerged in the 1840s, replicating the Byzantine style of Eastern and Orthodox Christian buildings, with Constantinople’s Hagia Sofia at its main reference. The cathedral is given spatial prominence in an area full of national symbols, including the Monument to the Unknown Soldier and the monument to those who died during the Liberation. However, Nevski looms over the Unknown Soldier, especially if one approaches the area from Georgi S. Pakovski St. (another national hero). The juxtaposition of these two symbols (the national and the religious) reminds me of our HT discussions with Dr. Chitnis and Dr. Fellerer regarding nationalism and its substituting role in replacing religiousness with nationhood. It would seem that, in



*Clearly, a very important building. Space has always been a premium.*

<sup>9</sup> A 10<sup>th</sup> century Bulgarian priest connected with the origins of Bogomilism. The Bogomils were a neo-Gnostic Christian sect, who called for a return to what they regarded as the early and true spiritual teaching, rejecting the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Their primary political tendencies were resistance to the state and church authorities. In their attempted return to the original forms of Christianity, they did not use the Christian cross, nor build churches, and their priests and leaders lived in extreme chastity and austerity. The Bogomil heresy (for they were, as could be expected, decreed to be a heresy) spread westwards, inspiring other non-canonical forms of Christianity, such as Catharism.

<sup>10</sup> Tsar Simeon ruled over Bulgaria from 893 to 927, during the First Bulgarian Empire. His successful campaigns against the Byzantines, Magyars and Serbs led Bulgaria to its greatest territorial expansion ever, making it the most powerful state in contemporary Eastern and Southeast Europe, and prompting an unmatched cultural prosperity, nowadays deemed the Golden Age of Bulgaria.

Bulgaria, the religious has prevailed. After all, as many of my readings indicated, during the almost 500 years long Ottoman yoke, “Bulgarian” and “Christian” became synonymous.



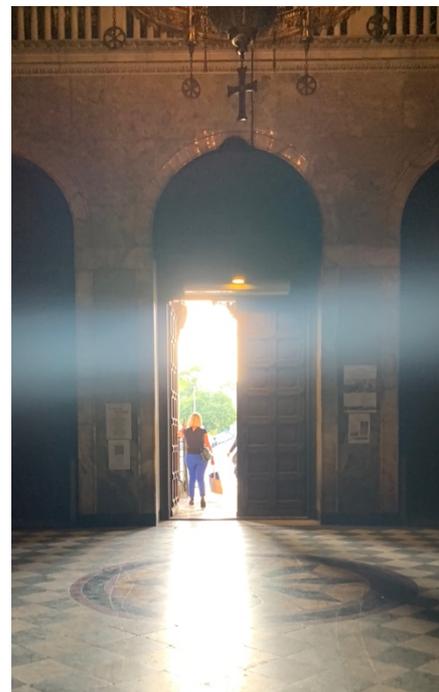
*A profile view of Nevski. The Neo-Byzantine style is very perceptible from this angle.*

After entering the cathedral, there’s an ante-hall with a souvenir shop and a candle/donation post. The walls are decorated with rather modern (and in my opinion, gaudy) paintings of kings and queens. So far, it all looks like any other cathedral back home. Entering the main nave of the cathedral is familiar too. Spanish cathedrals have a reputation for being rather dark. Their darkness is an intended effect, for it creates an extremely sensorial boundary; outside is bright, so bright that achieving such a sudden darkness truly seems an act of God. The rapid change of light humbles the visitor too; as one enters the cathedral, one is momentarily blinded. And with your eyesight still adjusting, your gaze naturally gravitates towards the only source of brightness available; by the time you’ve regained sight, you are contemplating the golden altar. The Aleksandr Nevski Cathedral has all these architectonic sensorial tricks too but dialled up to the max. It’s even darker, with no other source of lightening provided than the churchgoers small

candles, the gold of the altar, and the silver of the two icons situated at each side of the altar; Mary on the left, Jesus on the right.

These icons are at eyesight level. The idea of having images to whom you pray is not foreign to me; but I’m not used to see those images at human eye-level. I find their placement to be very significant. It creates a different relationship between the churchgoer and the icon. Back home, images—full body statues, not portrait-like icons—are lifted, thus their position being more hierarchical. Here, I see churchgoers approaching the icon individually (they queue for their turn) and praying to them as if in dialogue with a friend.

Now that I’ve got used to the darkness a bit more, I finally look up, and so I realize that the cathedral domes are entirely covered in paintings, with a golden Christ Pantocrator on the central dome. Following the dome’s curve downwards, more paintings emerge. It turns out the *entire* cathedral is covered with paintings, but the light is so dim that, standing at the centre, one would think there’s nothing but darkness and empty space. However, as one moves to the left or to the right, closer to the walls, faces and wings slowly emerge. They can’t never be fully seen though, and Jun’ichirō Tanizaki’s *In Praise of Shadows* comes to my mind time and again.<sup>11</sup>



*From the main nave's entrance, facing the exterior door. Notice the camera struggling with the drastic change of light. And that's only the Ante-hall. It gets even darker in the main nave.*

<sup>11</sup> In his acclaimed essay, Tanizaki discusses the (according to him) Eastern love for the shadow and opposes it to the Western love for light. In his view, this major difference in aesthetics stems from divergent epistemological approaches: the West believes that knowledge comes from *seeing*, from that which is visible and holds no mystery;

Churches and cathedrals back home are silent too, but once more, the silence here is denser. Although there isn't a lack of visitors or churchgoers, not a single sound can be heard. One must near the prayer candles holders to have a break from this uncanny silence. That is so due to another peculiarity. Candles in Catholic churches are lit in individual candle holders or—more frequently—in red plastic containers. That way they don't drip wax while burning. But this also means they are soundless. Here, the thin and flimsy candles of churchgoers are stuck in communal candle holders, and they eventually come to lean towards this side or the other. As a result, when standing around a candle holder, one gets a respite from silence, and hears the soft crackling of twenty or thirty candles burning and dripping wax.

Right before leaving, I notice what is perhaps the most remarkable difference with any other church I've ever visited (be Catholic, Anglican or Protestant): where are the benches? There are no benches! Do churchgoers just stand?!

Through a small exterior door on the cathedral's left wing, one gets down to the crypt. There, the largest collection of icons worldwide is accessible to the visitor for a mere 2 lev (a little less than one pound). In this museum I find an element of shared religious symbolism that I'm sure would have delighted the extremely syncretic Russian modernists: in many of the earliest icons (11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries), the saints are portrayed pressing their ring finger and thumb together, or their ring and peaky finger together with their thumb, like in a Yoga mudra. Now that I come to think about this detail, many of the earlier Romanesque depictions of the Christ Pantocrator back home also showcase this sign.<sup>12</sup> Another element shared across time and space: in different triptychs, hell is depicted as a monster's mouth opening, frothing with fiery spit. Just this very summer I've seen this exact depiction of hell when visiting El Prado, in Hieronymus Bosch's *The Haywain Triptych*. This image is present too in Bulgakov's masterpiece, *The Master and Margarita*.

The museum also hosts some incredible gospels: I've never seen such richly decorated books (and I've seen a few). Their covers are cased in silver and gold reliefs depicting Pantocrators, saints and martyrs, and different biblical scenes. The covers themselves are made of engravings in mother of pearl, and their spine are covered in bead work, surpassing by far the Tetrevangelia I've seen this morning in the Archeology Museum. With such treasures I conclude my day, go home and get to bed early; tomorrow I'm visiting the Rila monastery.

A note on language: Bulgarians have the, from a Spanish perspective, the ill-reputed "Eastern European" seriousness: they don't greet you with a smile, as would be the case back home. But as soon as they hear me butchering Bulgarian, they become incredibly chatty, not to mention warm, helpful and friendly. I know the effect well, for I have been at its receiving end whenever a tourist has asked me the whereabouts of La Sagrada Familia in Catalan. There's a quote by Nelson Mandela that sums up this phenomenon well: "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart." Indeed, languages earn you kindness.

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the East believes that knowledge resides in that which is difficult to see, in that which is mysterious and elusive. While I'm no expert in the history of aesthetics, Tanizaki's statements seem to find echo in Byung-Chul Han criticisms of modern western societies presented in *The Agony of Eros* or *The Transparent Society*.

<sup>12</sup> Like, say, the famous Pantocrator of St. Climent in Boí i Taüll, or the one in the Panteón de los Reyes of San Isidoro in León. Actually, don't they have a distinctly Byzantine/Eastern style?

## September 16<sup>th</sup>, 2022 – Rila, Bulgaria

To get to the Rila monastery I've had to get a guided tour. It's not my preferred way of visiting places, but the public transport options were abysmal; supposing that everything ran smoothly, I'd have had just two hours to visit the monastery. So, guided tour it is. At least I'll be visiting the Boyana church too.

In fact, the Boyana church is our first stop. The church is located roughly 10 km away from the city centre and is a UNESCO World Heritage site. It was precisely its remoteness which guaranteed its survival through history until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the locals wanted to demolish it due to its limited capacity. Fortunately, Bulgaria's queen, Princess Eleonore—the second spouse of King Ferdinand I—intervened to stop the demolition. In her deathbed, she requested to be buried in Boyana too, for she had become very attached to the little church.



*Looks like nothing, but has a treasure inside*

The church has two squarish naves, one dating from the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the other from the 13<sup>th</sup>. As it's customary of medieval Orthodox churches, it's completely covered in frescos. As a matter of fact, there are two layers of frescoes, dating from the time of construction of each nave. To preserve the frescoes, the interior temperature is artificially maintained at a constant 17-18 degrees Celsius. We are only allowed to enter in groups of eight and can stay inside for a maximum of 10 mins.

Our lovely guide, Nelly, explains that what makes the frescoes so singular—other than their antiquity—is the degree of personalization exhibited by the different figures, which defied religious conventions.<sup>13</sup> The artists took locals for reference and, as a result, each saint has distinguishable and expressive facial features. This is particularly visible in the scene of St. Nicholas saving the sailors: the sailors express fear and horror at the large waves. Many of us can't help but smile when Nelly points another example to us: the table of the last supper is covered with bread and garlic, food that could be typically found in a Bulgarian table, and that didn't usually make it into the dignified depictions of Jesus's last meal. Similarly, the treachery of Judas is displayed with him reaching across the table to take some food from Jesus's plate.

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<sup>13</sup> There's been much written about this topic, especially given that, from the Renaissance onwards, it has given reason to Western Europe to look down on the art produced by Eastern Europe—until the latter adopted the techniques of the former. According to Orthodox dogma, the representation of sacred figures cannot be modified. This prohibition stems from a different conception of the “representation” of the figure in the icon, a conception which does not regard the icon as a mere depiction, but as being the thing *itself*. Thus, one cannot modify the representation of, say, Mary Theotokos because that would imply trying to alter Mary Theotokos herself. This, however, meant that for a long period of time, iconography was viewed as an example of the backwardness of Eastern Europe, its inability to develop new pictorial forms.



*The abundantly decorated (with exterior and interior frescoes) main Rila church*

Given that women were meant to stay at the back of the church, female saints occupy the back area, closer to the entrance, which is guarded by St. Nedelia and St. Barbara. St Nedelia's eyes have been rubbed off, and now she appears eyeless. The locals blamed the disappearance of St. Nedelia's eyes on Ottoman foul play. But as Nelly, points out, only St. Nedelia has suffered this rubbing-off, and that has led scholars to believe that it was actually locals who scrapped the ink of St. Nedelia's eyes believing it had curative properties.

From the Boyana church, we set off to the Rila monastery, another UNESCO site. Rila is the largest monastery in Bulgaria, despite its remote location southwest of Rila mountains, at 1,147m of altitude. It was founded in the 10<sup>th</sup> century by the hermit Ivan of Rila (876 - 946 AD), who actually lived in a cave, in an extreme vow of poverty. The monastery was set up by Ivan of Rila's disciples, and currently houses about forty monks, although Nelly says that it has housed up to ten times as many monks. This means it's an active monastery, and Bulgarians frequently peregrinate to it, to pray or request prayers from the monks. Rila has been raided or destroyed more than once through history. Its current form came to be in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, during the Bulgarian national revival. Today, it consists of a main church, the Nativity of the Virgin Mother, and the residential area surrounding it in a triangular shape. Next to the main church, there's the oldest building in the complex, the Tower of Hrelja.

During our visit to the main church, Nelly's explanations get more and more interesting. We are told that Orthodox churches are purposely dark, for the churchgoers' candles aren't a source of light amidst the vast darkness but the symbolic expression of their faith. Hence candles being so flimsy, and their tilting light being the only light available; faith is the only source of light. Nelly also explains that Orthodox churches have no benches as to emphasize that Christians are awaiting the Second Coming, and that their waiting is an active one; they aren't sitting down, they're on their feet and ready. I find this snippet of information fascinating. I've made numerous academic readings which discussed the rather eschatological found in the Orthodox tradition,



*Detail of one of the exterior frescoes, with an image that is now becoming recurrent (bottom right)*

which holds the apocalypse as a central theme. But nowhere have I found such a tangible, everyday-life example of this greater emphasis on the end of times—which, needless to say, was a favourite theme of Russian Modernists, whose works are plagued with apocalyptic imagery.<sup>14</sup>

On our way back it starts raining. Just when we are entering Sofia’s centre through Bul. Hristo Botev, close to Opalchenska, we partake in a chain collision. The accident catches me completely unprepared; I am distracted looking at the dirty brutalist buildings that have gained a niche audience on [Instagram](#) in the recent years, and so, I only see our driver turning on the emergency brake light as we very evidently fail to stop on time. Our bonnet rams into the boot of the car in front of us—which goes from convex to concave—and so do five more consecutive cars. The only one that leaves unscratched (other than the back plate, that goes flying and pirouetting around) is a Mercedes. The two German girls in our group grin from ear to ear. “Na, was habt ihr denn erwartet, Leute?”<sup>15</sup>

In the evening I receive a sweet email from the tour company, and so I finally learn the name of our unfortunate driver, Pavel



*The Rila Monastery and the Rila mountains*

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<sup>14</sup> It might look like I’m overblowing the importance of such a small detail, but the most recent attempts of engineering a scholarly definition of “religion” are advocating for a stronger balance between theory and practice, i.e., one that acknowledges the fact that yes, religion is a set of “theory” (dogmas, teachings, morals, ideas), but it’s also a set of “practices” (going to church, calendar dates, especial meals at certain times), that usually become independent from their “theory”. This is what I’m contending with in my approach to Russian Modernism: religious imagery/phraseology/narratives were reworked because they were a shared language, a shared culture between the westernized *intelligentsia* and the uneducated peoples.

<sup>15</sup> “Well, what did you guys expect?”

## September 17<sup>th</sup>, 2022 – Sofia, Bulgaria

Today is my last day in Sofia and it's raining cats and dogs. Around midday it stops for a bit, and I go out to have a bite, and have a look around the churches I haven't visited so far. It's Saturday, so I'm confident I might catch some service.

My previous claim turns out to be the understatement of the year. At Sv. Georgi's Rotunda there's a christening going on. I'd have never guessed a 4<sup>th</sup> century church would still be functioning, but the iconostasis<sup>16</sup> is open, the priest goes back and forth, and the congregations sings non-stop. Christenings seems to be as lavish an affair as they are back home, judging by the attire of the congregation. Now that I finally see it open and being used, how symbolically heavy is the iconostasis (I had struggle to understand what the point of it was). Services involve moments of miracle-making, moments where the divine becomes present in human non-divine reality—e.g., the Eucharist. So, how to express that? How to express that during service these two realities—God and churchgoers—come into contact, meet each other? With a door, of course! By *physically* having a frontier between these two realities and a way of crossing them back and forth. This even makes the priest's role all the clearer; he's the one who's task is to perform that back-and-forth crossing, to ensure those two realities connect.



*Christening in the Sv. Georgi Rotunda. On the left, the mother poses with her child and relatives for a tourist. On the right, the priest enters the iconostasis through the right door.*

St. Nedelia's Cathedral takes my "I might catch some service" understatement to a new level. The church is completely open, with all its four doors accessible. There's a constant flow of visitors, and an even more remarkable flow of weddings. Yes, a flow of weddings. While one ceremony is taking place, the next bride and groom wait outside for their turn. It's such a different concept of a wedding. Back home, a church will officiate at most two weddings per day. Although nobody will forbid anybody entrance to a church, it is understood that, while a wedding ceremony is underway, the church is reserved for those involved in that ceremony.

Here, the opposite seems to be true, and that's why, in just one morning, I am present at three weddings, an absolute record of mine. It takes me a while to warm up to the idea of being there, for I feel like I'm intruding or trespassing, and even become conscious of my plain outfit. But the weddings attendees seem to be completely unbothered by their everchanging

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<sup>16</sup> The iconostasis is a wall (decorated with paintings and/or engravings, depending on the wealth of the church in question) that separates the nave from the sanctuary. It has three doors, the central and larger one being the "divinity door", from which one can gaze at the cross. The iconostasis *raison d'être* is to separate the holiest and most inner part of the sanctuary, where the Eucharist takes place, from the rest of the temple. There seems to be scholarly consensus that this layout was inspired by the Temple of Jerusalem, built in three differentiated spaces, with the most inner containing the Ark of the Covenant (i.e., the holiest of all the elements present in the temple).

audience, or for the kids running around and throwing themselves down on the floor. As a matter of fact, the whole business would appear very casual and chill, if it weren't for the lavish gold of the church, the singing (the almost constant singing), the smell of the incense (a lot more flowery than the one used in Catholic churches), the formal attire of the attendees, and the priests and their golden cassocks.

I especially like (what an entitled comment, as if the whole thing was a show performed for my enjoyment), I especially like, I said, the singing. I might be mistaken, but it seems to be dialectical, with a soloist asking questions/making statements, and the choir answering/commenting. Every now and then the congregation signs too, either alone or with the choir. For what I can understand, their sentences are restatements of what the choir has said, an *amen* of sorts. Music is frequently present across Christianity, but here it seems to be very prevalent. It must be taking around 70-80% of the entire ceremony. I will have to contrast that with some scholarly sources back in Oxford, but this emphasis on music, together with all the other aspects I have observed so far, is creating in my mind a picture of a form of religiosity that is particularly sensorially and experiential, at least in comparison with the more didactic approach some other forms of Christianity seem to adopt. In other words, Anglicanism, Catholicism or Protestantism seem more abstract than Orthodoxy, which, e.g., materializes sacredness through an iconostasis. I wonder if it was partially this materiality which predisposed Russian Modernists to accept more readily than other intellectuals in Europe the idea of the transformative power of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Around 4:30pm it starts pouring again. I go back home and take the rest of the day to catch up on writing and to pack. Tomorrow I'm leaving for Veliko Tarnovo.

## September 18<sup>th</sup>, 2022– from Sofia to Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria

I leave my accommodation at 10am sharp, take the metro (three stops) and get to Sofia’s central bus station. For the next few days, I’ll be visiting a few bus stations. I’m travelling with Global Biomet, a name that sounds funny to me, especially for a bus company.<sup>17</sup>



*Paradise, according to 9 years old Paula*

saying that Bulgaria is stunning; ever since we have left Sofia we haven’t come across any major cities—the landscape has been an uninterrupted succession of hills and valleys, with scenic mountains in the background.

The coach drops me at Veliko Tarnovo’s South Bus station. It looks like I’m in the outskirts of the city/town. However, I’m told I can walk to the city center (5 min), and so I do. I’m staying at the other end of the city center, but indeed, I end up walking a grand total of 20 min (despite not being at my fastest; I carry two heavy bags).

After dropping my bags, I go straight to visit the Tsarevets Fortress. During the Second Bulgarian Kingdom (end of 12<sup>th</sup> century-14<sup>th</sup> century) Veliko Tarnovo was the Kingdom’s capital—hence the name, “veliko” meaning “great”. The city was reputed to come second only to Constantinople, and it extended its domains across the Trapezitsa and the Momina fortress slopes, and to the natural water barrier of the Yantra river and its terraces. Its neuralgic center was the fortress of Tsarevets, which enclosed the royal complex and the patriarchal complex.

For just 10 lev I’m given the chance to regress to infancy. I spent my early childhood obsessed with King Arthur, Merlin and Lancelot. To prepare myself for my impending future as an errand knight, I learnt as much as I could about falconry, life in medieval

We leave at 11am sharp and despite the many works we encounter while on route arrive at Veliko Tarnovo two min before schedule, at 14:13. I’m unsure how I should call the roads. According to the map, the entire journey from Sofia to Veliko Tarnovo is done on highways, but 75% of our journey was on a single lane road. Bulgaria’s countryside is stunning, and for what I’ve seen so far, that is the same as



*No sitting or dancing allowed on the walls*

<sup>17</sup> Am I the only one who imagines some sort of global pharmaceutical enterprise when hearing “Global Biomet”?



*Still unsure whether I like them or not*

castles, weaponry, and the like. Blinded by paternal love, my parents took me to Carcassonne during the summer of my 9 years old; in return, for the rest of the year I delivered them a non-stop monologue about Carcassonne.

In the Tsarevets Fortress I'm back at 9 years old. The complex is large, since almost the entirety of the encircling wall has been preserved, together with watchtowers, cisterns and storerooms, kitchens and some of the walls of the royal palace. Moreover, there are almost no areas restricted to the public. This means one can wander around, climb watchtowers, walk by the walls, and so on. All at your own risk, as many signs kindly remind me (and to be fair, some of the falling heights are no joke). To enhance the sense of adventure and vertigo, is extremely windy today, and most visitors (myself included) reach the top floors with an un-knightly crawl. But the views are well-worth the sacrificed dignity.

The Tsarevets half hill-half crag is crowned by the Patriarchal Cathedral of the Holy Ascension of the Lord. It hosts a little surprise. Here, at the center of medieval ruins stands the first church I've seen in Bulgaria decorated with modern frescoes. They are Guernica-like, and apparently rather disliked by most. I must confess that, at first, I find them hideous; they don't fit at all. On second thoughts though, they aren't that bad. Just unexpectedly modern, amidst a large territory where the Past seems to reign.

After Tsarevets I wander around Veliko Tarnovo in search of food, which proves surprisingly difficult. I'm aware that it's Sunday, but the town is meant to be very touristy. Indeed, there seem to be plenty of visitors and traffic, but one third of the shops and establishment are open, the other third closed, and the other third abandoned. Veliko Tarnovo somehow reminds me of Venice. A once great place that is slowly sinking, not in the waters, but in oblivion. It's very beautiful, with what I take to be typical Bulgarian houses, but it's also very abandoned. It would seem that Veliko Tarnovo is losing its battle against the host of продава се ("for sale") and отдава се под наем ("for rent") ads.



*Tempus fugit, I guess. Or memento mori*

September 19<sup>th</sup>, 2022 – *Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria*

Today I'm heading to Arbanasi, or at least I'm trying to. It's unclear whether I'll succeed, since information is really scattered online and quite outdated (by digital standards, that is). There should be a regular city bus going to Arbanasi. The route begins in the West Bus Station and crosses Veliko Tarnovo before heading east to Arbanasi through Sheremetiya (south of Arbanasi). I walk 15 min to the central bazar, where the bus should be stopping. I see no bus stops, but there's a large group of people waiting, so I ask around. Indeed, regular buses stop there, but the bus I'm looking for „*бя, но сега няма номер до Арбанаси*” (existed once, but nowadays there's no bus to Arbanasi).



I return to the city center to see if I can get a taxi, or even better, share a taxi. But there are no taxis at the taxi stop, or anywhere for all that matters. However, I have one last card up my sleeve. Online I found the blog of a fellow traveler who, in 2017, walked to Arbanasi, an option that I quite fancy. It's only three km and the directions he provides are very well detailed. But while double-checking I also found a Bulgarian website emphatically discouraging the use of that route. Apparently, it's been abandoned for some time now, and the path is not well maintained. The blog does mention that in some areas the trail is rather faint, with some rockslides. I'm a relatively experienced hiker though, so I choose to, at least, find the trail and have a look at it.



*My loyal companion, waiting for the change to hunt my scarf again while on our way to Arbanasi*

To find the trail I climb down to the bottom of the valley, in order to cross the Yantra river, which meanders tightly around the Tsarevets fortress's crag, with Arbanasi to the north-east of the fortress. The walk affords—as anywhere in Veliko Tarnovo—beautiful scenery, and while on my way I encounter a four-legged friend, who follows me for a stretch trying to bite my scarf. Eventually we ran into its owners, an old couple who assure me they used to walk to Arbanasi when they were kids, but haven't done so in a long while, so can't really tell me whether the trail is doable anymore. But they can invite me to tea, and I oblige, for they have many questions: how come I speak Bulgarian? Why have I come to Veliko Tarnovo? Do I like it? Will I stay here for long? There are many houses I could rent, if I wanted, the town is getting empty anyway, but I could find some friends if I stayed here... Do I have a boyfriend? Bulgarian men are very honest, very kind, very hardworking... After some tea and a few biscuits, I leave with my entire future life in Veliko Tarnovo planned and try to finally find out if that trail is doable.

Spoiler alert: it isn't. It's thin and faint for the first 500m, and from then onwards stays intermittently visible. It really pains me to turn around and walk away, since I'm on the right

track—I can hear the traffic from the road that runs parallel to it. But I’m on my own and I don’t want to risk it. I really don’t fancy having to call for a mountain emergency in Bulgarian.

Back in Tarnovo, I visit the rest of the town, from its worn-out Cathedral of the Nativity of the Mother Virgin to the (pardon me, my Bulgarian friends) utterly hideous Monument to the Assen Dynasty, a black steel spiky and grandiose horror that spoils another tight valley of the meandering Yantra.

After lunch I get lost in the steep little streets of Tarnovo. The town is spread out among the many hills and crags formed by the course of the Yantra, and three minutes of effort can take you a long way, views-wise. By the end of the day, I’m utterly exhausted though. According to my phone, in these two days in Tarnovo I’ve climbed 93 floors. But I would choose this type of workout any day; wandering around Tarnovo’s alleys is an absolute pleasure.



September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2022 – from *Veliko Tarnovo to Plovdiv, Bulgaria*



*To buy tickets just knock on the window*

From my accommodation to the West Bus station there's a fifty minutes' walk. There's no way to book the bus ticket online (I confirmed it on a Bulgarian forum) so I leave with plenty of time: some people report that they found the bus tickets sold out, and I want to avoid that at all costs.

The walk to the Bus Station gets progressively worse as I leave the city centre behind. The transition to the outskirts—and eventual end—of the city is signalled not so much by an increasingly worn-down look, but by the gradual disappearance of any form of urban planning. The last fifteen minutes of my walk are wasted finding ways to cross roads, roundabouts, and industrial polygons. Bulgarian drivers are chivalrous though: they always stop even though the area is clearly not designed for pedestrians.

Another detail that catches my attention: there's a significant number of buses with "Verkehrsmittel" printed on them, or "Second Hand Transport". A Bulgarian friend complained to me once that the clothes Western Europeans don't want end up at the charity shops in Eastern Europe. Apparently, fashion is not the only hand-me-downs that travel west to east in the Old Continent.

Veliko Tarnovo's West Bus Station is worthy of featuring in the earlier Almodovar films, the ones which portrayed the most remote and forsaken regions of Spain. Finding something similar back home would be difficult nowadays, but I'm sure that if one digs deep enough in Aragon, La Mancha, or most likely, Extremadura, there must be a bus or train station that looks remarkably alike.

The "Plovdiv Express" departs punctually and immediately gets into the Balkans. With the same immediacy, I get sick and stay so until we stop for a bit somewhere before arriving at Gabrovo. After a thirty minutes' break we carry on to Stara Zagora. The roads are bad and this side of Bulgaria seems very rural, and extremely poor.

However, as soon as we leave Stara Zagora, the roads become substantially better, despite our bus insistence of avoiding the main highways (for reasons I can only fathom—even though I have yet to see a toll). After our stop at Stara Zagora, the bus is absolutely rammed, but luckily, we only have one more hour before Plovdiv.

Even more luckily, contrary to what the internet claimed, the "Plovdiv express" arrives at Plovdiv's South Bus Station (not the north), which is much more convenient for me. From the station to my hotel there's only a half an hour's walk.

September 21<sup>st</sup>, 2022 –*Plovdiv, Bulgaria*



*Get ready for the glamour's galore*

BC. Around the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC it became a Greek city, then a Roman enclave from the 1<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, before being destroyed by the Huns in 447. The Slavs occupied Plovdiv in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, and from there onwards it was passed back and forth between Byzantines and Bulgarians, before the Ottomans took control of it in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. After the Bulgarian Liberation of 1878, the city was returned to the Ottomans (it was part of Eastern Rumelia, but in 1885 it reunified with Bulgaria. The reason behind this convoluted history? Plovdiv's location, on the route between Istanbul and Western Europe

Nowadays, Plovdiv is Bulgaria's second-largest city, and its most renowned for its Old Town, full of National Revival mansions. Most of these mansions were built in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century for wealthy merchants, whose opulent lifestyle had to be showcased both on the inside, but also on the outside. Since the Old Town is in one of the three hills that configure Plovdiv's

landscape, the many of these houses have projecting floors supported by wooden ribs, to better adapt to the steep terrain. One of those mansions is the Lamartine house, thus named after Alphonse de Lamartine, who stayed there in 1833, during the travels he described in *Voyage en l'Orient*. This is another case of my readings coming into life. During the Enlightenment and the Romantic period, the journey eastwards became an aspirational steppingstone for every intellectual. Interestingly, it was through these journeys that the notion of "Eastern Europe" came to be; time and again, Poland, Bohemia, Rumelia, the



*Lamartine's house, with its protuding floors*

Carpathians, etc, were described as the getaway to the east, a liminal place where one could enjoy all the orientalism of the "Orient" with the advantage of still dealing with white people. Lamartine's work illustrates this point perfectly, and it's no coincidence that he would have stayed in Bulgaria—apart from its geographical convenience.

Strolling down the Old Town streets is truly magical; the whole place seems to come straight out of a fairy tale illustration page. Still, it looks like many shops have been closed and/or abandoned. Given the healthy number of tourists wandering around, it's probably just the nasty aftermath of COVID. The exit from the old town is abrupt though; one is suddenly thrown into a four lanes urban way, with no possibility of crossing it in a civilized manner other than using a cars' tunnel. A group of French tourists tell me I don't need to go through the tunnel; there's a high pass hidden just around the corner. They are actually going that way. I follow them and voila! I'm back at the foot of the Old Town hill.

After that I visit the singing fountains (which aren't singing, they only sing at night) and manage to buy some bread at a local bakery in Bulgarian—black bread with seeds, the smaller one, already cut, please. I thus will be leaving Bulgaria very impressed with myself, even if *продавачка* who assisted me spoke with that parsed enunciation only heard in recordings for language learners.



## September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2022 –from *Plovdiv, Bulgaria to Istanbul, Turkey*



*Platform 1, from where international coaches depart to, e.g., Madrid, Prague, Athens or Thessaloniki*

The coach to Istanbul departs from the south station, since Istanbul is slightly southwards (and eastwards, of course) to Plovdiv. As testament of Plovdiv's strategic location, from its bus station one can get almost everywhere in Europe, including Madrid, over 3,000km away. Fortunately, Istanbul is only 422km away. Our coach arrives and I immediately know that the driver is Turkish; his smile is unfaltering and, most tellingly, he's wearing an undershirt. Turkey is one of the few countries where I've seen a remarkable majority of men consistently wearing undershirts.

Nobody checks any tickets, and once we're all on board, the coach departs to its first stop, Haskovo. For some reason, that's where our tickets are checked. After a fifteen minutes' stop, we carry on until we reach Lyubimets, the last Bulgarian stop. Or so it should be technically; it turns out we have one extra stop at a small supermarket with tinted windows located right before the border. There, our driver gets off and returns with bags full

of spirits and tobacco. After he has distributed them among some passengers, we carry on.

I have befriended a Spaniard (Jose) and his Bulgarian wife (Annie), who are frequent travellers between Bulgaria and Turkey. Apparently, due to the ongoing inflation in Turkey and the restrictive taxes on alcohol, prices have skyrocketed, thus affording coach drivers the possibility of making some extra money. All they need is some passengers willing to collaborate so that they don't exceed the limit of "goods for personal use."

Passing the border takes almost an hour, and while we wait, we befriend more people, since Annie is quite keen on informing other Bulgarian fellow travellers that I speak Bulgarian. At first, I get the usual battery of questions, but later the conversation leads to Annie and her Spanish husband and emigrating. At one point, Annie asks the chattiest lady why is she travelling to Turkey. "To visit one of my grandsons," "Are all your grandsons scattered around?" "*Не ми говори за това! Толкова е тъжно...*" ("Don't mention it! It's so sad..."). "*Es triste, muy triste, lo que pasa en Bulgaria,*" says Annie to me in Spanish, "*Las abuelas búlgaras tienen que recorrer el mundo para ver a sus nietos, porque todo el mundo se va del país.*" ("What's going on in Bulgaria is sad, very sad. Bulgarian grandmothers have to travel around the world to see their grandchildren, because everybody is leaving the country.")

While discussing such matters we eventually get to the passport control. For some reason, the policewoman is unsure whether that's my passport. I'm asked for my Spanish ID card, my old passport (which I don't have since 2019), the last time I was in Turkey, the reason for my visit, why I am coming back, etc. I confess I get a little worried I'm going to be denied entrance. But what I find most annoying and scary is how quickly I'm made to feel that I'm

suspect of something. Why would I have my old passport with me?!<sup>18</sup> Eventually though I'm given a pass and my passport is stamped. Make no mistake, I'm grateful for all the security measures we have in place nowadays, and I understand why we need them. Yet, for the next twenty minutes or so I can't get Stefan Zweig's *Die Welt von Gestern* out of my head:

*Indeed, nothing makes us more sensible of the immense relapse into which the world fell after the first World War than the restrictions on man's freedom of movement and the diminution of his civil rights. Before 1914 the earth had belonged to all. People went where they wished and stayed as long as they pleased. There were no permits, no visas, and it always gives me pleasure to astonish the young by telling them that before 1914 I travelled from Europe to India and to America without passport and without ever having seen one. One embarked and alighted without questioning or being questioned, one did not have to fill out a single one of the many papers which are required today. The frontiers which, with their customs officers, police and militia, have become wire barriers thanks to the pathological suspicion of everybody against everybody else, were nothing by symbolic lines which one crossed with as little thought as one crosses the Meridian of Greenwich. [...] The humiliations which once had been devised with criminals alone in mind now were imposed upon the traveller, before and during every journey.*

Once in Turkish territory, our first stop is Edirne, when a new driver boards the coach, and takes on the driving. Our former driver stays on board though; he will get off later, somewhere in the middle of a highway (no kidding). As a matter of fact, that's apparently an on-board service: four or five more passengers request similar disembarking.



*First glimpses of the Marmara sea, which means Istanbul is near*

We get stuck in an hour-long traffic jam and it starts raining just when we were reaching the outskirts of Istanbul. By the time I get to the metro, it's already twilight and there's a proper storm going on. But when the metro crosses the Haliç bridge, I can see that the minarets of Hagia Sofia and the Blue Mosque are lightened up, making their domes faintly visible. I missed Istanbul dearly. I've always have had a soft spot for it; it was the first place I travelled to completely alone, without parents, relatives or group leader.

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<sup>18</sup> In Spain our old passports get cut in half when we're issued a new one. It's possible to keep the cut old passport, but I've never done so because I don't like collecting rubbish. All this gets literally lost in translation, since I don't speak Turkish, and the Turkish border agent doesn't speak English. We communicate through Google Translate.

## September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2022 – Istanbul, Turkey

It's still raining intermittently in Istanbul. I go out for breakfast confident that it won't get worse, but it does. When I get back home, my shoes, socks and trouser hems are all wet. After lunchtime it finally stops, and we're all rewarded with a breezy afternoon. I've got the impression that there are way more tourists in Istanbul than the last time I visited.



*View of Topkapi from the Marina*

I go for a walk around Beyoglu, to acclimate myself. I first descent all the way down to the Marina, just to have a look at the Bosphorus and see if the Marina and the Galata bridge still smell of grilled fish—fishermen set along the Galata bridge, and the fishes they catch are then grilled in small street food posts. Yes, the smell of grilled fish is felt in the entire area. Nearby there's a very famous patisserie, specialised in baklava, which I have been emphatically recommended.

The place is full of tourists and it operates like those old shops where you choose what you want, pay, and then go pick your item with the ticket you're given at the checkout. I first fail to realise that, but a Japanese girl who's also trying to order points that out to me. We end up having baklava and tea together. Her name's Yuriko, from Fukuoka—a southern prefecture on the northern shore, she tells me. She's been traveling alone for 4 months and a half now, having been in Vietnam, Thailand, India, Nepal, and now Turkey, before continuing across all Europe. At first she wasn't sure she'd enjoy traveling solo, but as she says with a nervous laugh, now she doubts she'll ever be able to travel in a group again. She loves the freedom solo traveling affords her, and she also likes that, when you're solo, people approach you more frequently, and it's easier to make friends and acquaintances. That's what I like too.

After tea with Yuriko, I climb back to the Galata tower. During my ascension (no less than 41 floors according to my phone) the impression I got this morning is progressively confirmed: Istanbul is crammed with tourists. Way more tourists than I remembered. A lot, lot more. Unless my memory, in a remarkably successful glamourizing effort, has erased a lot of people, when I first visited Istanbul, we hardly had to queue at all for the Galata tower. Similarly, Istiklal was as busy as any high street, but not massified. Now it's as overcrowded as it gets. Big crowds overwhelm me a bit, but I want to visit a couple of churches, and after all, it is what it is. I just wasn't expecting Las Ramblas levels of crowdedness. I should have known better though; tourism in Barcelona has grown exponentially in the last decade, and Istanbul is as popular as is Barcelona.

Istanbul fares better than Barcelona in one department though—if I may joke about the horrific war that is ongoing in Europe: after Turkish, the language I hear most is Russian. I had heard that the Russian community in Istanbul was already growing significantly before the war,

but that after Putin’s “special military operation,” many Russian dissidents fled to Istanbul.<sup>19</sup> Now, I can confirm that at least that piece of news isn’t fake news: Turkey has become a refuge for some Russians, and one of the few holiday destinations left for others.

Mid-Istiklal I’m really getting tired of the noise, the crowd, and most importantly, the shops. True, unlike the Turks, we don’t turn ice-cream upside down in Barcelona,<sup>20</sup> but all these big touristy streets end up looking the same. Just when I’m about to pass by Mango I remember something important: in Barcelona, Zara, Mango, H&M and the like are getting some of the best historical buildings, to glam up their look and distance themselves from ultra-fast fashion brands. This results in a weirdly modern paradox: one can visit a local historical building for free, provided one walks into the store of a global franchise. Is it the same here in Turkey? I give Mango a shot, my intuition is proved right. While the building is non-descriptively modern, it boasts an incredible view over the Bosphorus.



*View from a Mango store*

Shortly thereafter I reach the entrance of St. Anthony of Padua’s church. It’s a Catholic church, but the gate to its quad couldn’t look less familiar to me. Later I confirm my impression with my relatives; when I show them a picture of the gate their guesses are “a palace,” “a mosque,” “a hammam” or “a governmental building.” Once inside the quad though, the main façade is closer to what I might expect a church to look like, although if I was to guess wildly, I’d say Orthodox, rather than Catholic. But the interior leaves no doubt of its Catholicism, even if slightly lacking in decoration. Or maybe I’m just disappointed; the gate and the quad were promising, but this is too familiar, too similar to what we have back home.

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<sup>19</sup> Turkey is one of the few countries in Europe that has kept its borders open to Russian citizens.

<sup>20</sup> A selling gimmick; Turkish ice-cream it’s prepared in such a way that it doesn’t melt. This allows ice-cream sellers to stack scoop after scoop of ice-cream, and then flip the ice-cream cone upside down with the scooping spoon still stuck to the last scoop.



*The lavish Hagia Triada Greek Church*

kindly invited to enter after a donation. This means I get to visit the church on my own, and thus have a respite from the noise and the crowd outside. The church is a far cry from what I've seen in Bulgaria. It looks extremely clean and well-taken care for, with bright frescoes, shining marble floors and a very polished iconostasis.

After visiting Hagia Triada Greek Orthodox Church I go back home through the hip area of Cihangir. It's packed with cool cafes and bakeries, and best of all, a humble Turkish vegan restaurant offering local dishes. This is heaven, and faced with so many options, I ask the owner what she would recommend. She grins. "Turkish cuisine, lady, it's all good." Yes, that's precisely the problem.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> I ended up getting the bulgur salad with spinach, some stewed aubergine, another stew of green beans and different vegetables, and some pilaf with chickpeas.

September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022 – *Istanbul, Turkey*

I've check online, and Chora Church is temporally closed temporally. I decide to go to Hagia Sophia, without realizing it's Saturday and hence the number of visitors may spike up. Indeed, by the time I'm around the Species Bazaar, the crowds are massive. It saddens me a bit; the Istanbul I remembered was clearly a touristic destination, but we didn't have to queue at all for the Blue Mosque or Hagia Sophia. Neither was the surrounding area almost unwalkable due to the huge crowds.



*The delicate central dome of Hatice Turhan Sultan Tuerbesi's mosque*

diaphanous. There seems to be a shared *horror vacui* with Orthodox Churches; the walls and the ceilings are all decorated, be it with paintings or with tilework. However, the effect is strikingly different. Since there aren't any human figures, these interiors are comparatively light and clear.

The Species Bazaar is different too from what I remembered. It's been renovated and its shabby look is gone. The boards with catchy (and cheeky) phrases in all languages with which shop keepers used to lure buyers in have disappeared. But the little shops around the bazaar—located, in fact, in the undercrofts of Rustem Pasha Mosque—are closer to what I remembered. Each shop has three or four sellers screaming at the top of their lungs; the edible goods are kept in the open air, despite the smoke from small grilling restaurants blowing in their way. And tea circulates between shops non-stop.

Around 2pm I start heading back to Beyoglu. On my way back I can't stop thinking about the Istanbul I saw in 2007 and the one I see now. I'm torn between two minds. On one side, I know more tourists means more money, and probably more jobs. But, as I have seen in my own city of Barcelona, something seems to be lost with the arrival of massified tourism. Cities become uniform and they seem to lose their local flavour. Yet how legitimate it is to wish for a city (or a country) to stay "local, authentic"? Isn't that just a desire for an exotic destination, available to us (non-locals), at the expense of the economic advantages derived from global modernity?

With these musings I arrive at the Swedish consulate. I'm meeting Mrs. Victoria Short, who very kindly has planned a lovely afternoon for the two of us. A couple of streets away from the consulate we get into Kirim Church, an Anglican Church built on land donated by

Sultan Abdulmecit to the British community living in the area in acknowledgement of British support during the Crimean War. At 3:30pm there's a short organ recital, performed by Sergei, a Russian citizen from Crimea to whom I'm introduced shortly before the recital, and with whom I get the chance to mix Russian and the more recently used Bulgarian.

The organ recital becomes another occasion of that syncretism and syncretism that Russian modernists so appreciated; a Bach prelude, a Vivaldi concerto in A minor, and Haendel's Hallelujah (from the Messiah) in an Anglican church in Istanbul. Apparently, that's not multicultural enough: during Vivaldi's larghetto the Muezzin's adhan takes place. So, to recap: in an Anglican Church in Istanbul, I listen to the music of a Venetian (and Catholic), played by a Roman Catholic Russian from Crimea, while the Muezzin calls to Islamic prayer. This, I think, is what true cosmopolitanism and positive globalisation looks like, rather than finding the same uniformed Zara store in every corner of the world.

After the recital, the church vicar, Father Ian Sherwood, kindly invites us to some tea. There I learn about the different autocephalous Orthodox churches in Istanbul, and the dialogue (or lack thereof) between the different confessions that co-exist in Istanbul. At one point we discuss my stay in Bulgaria, and I bring up the information Nelly shared with us during our tour in Rila. It turns out that, as Fr. Sherwood explains, the Orthodox custom of attending service standing is fairly new, and only started after a "medievalization" of service that took place mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Still, he says, it is remarkable and significant that Nelly immediately mentioned the awaiting of the Second Coming as the reason behind their standing. It really proves how widespread that notion is among Orthodox churchgoers. Fr. Sherwood is an endless source of information and contacts, and I leave feeling slightly disappointed with myself for my lack of foresight: I should have planned for a longer stay in Istanbul.



*The Golden Horn during the golden hour (from Mrs. Short's terrace)*

After tea with Fr. Sherwood, Mrs. Short invites me to enjoy the view from her terrace. From there, she points out to me a couple of Russian churches close to the Beyoglu's marina that I completely missed yesterday. She also has an explanation for the extremely large crowds I've been encountering everywhere thus far; since 2013, Istanbul has embarked in an almost sonic development of its metro network, resulting in the construction of no less than six new lines (with many more projected). This has finally made the historical centre accessible to everybody living in the city. One-day excursions to the centre have understandably become a popular way to spend the weekend.

Later, during our dinner together, she shares many more interesting facts and anecdotes over Turkish *mezze*.

September 25<sup>th</sup>, 2022 – *Istanbul, Turkey*

Following Fr. Sherwood indications, I wake up early to attend the 9:30am service at the seat of the Oecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. Although Constantinople is an autocephalous church (like any other Orthodox Church in Eastern Orthodoxy), it holds a special place of honour due to its historical location at the capital of the former Eastern Roman Empire and its role as the mother church of most modern Orthodox churches.

This predominant role is however disputed, especially when it comes to its nature, i.e., whether Constantinople's prominence is simply honorary, or whether it has any real superior authority or prerogatives over all the other autocephalous churches. The main antagonist in that dispute is no other than Moscow. While Constantinople is the oldest, the Moscow Patriarchate is currently the largest in terms of population. Moreover, ever since the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans in 1453, Moscow has perceived itself as the Third Rome, that is to say, as the heir of Constantinople in its central role within the world of Orthodoxy.

Currently, the relationship between the Patriarchate of Moscow and the Patriarchate of Constantinople is at a historical low. In October of 2018, Constantinople's Patriarch Bartholomew I accepted Kiev's petition for the recognition of the autocephaly of a Ukrainian Orthodox Church.<sup>22</sup> The Moscow Patriarch, Kirill, a close ally of Putin, qualified Bartholomew I's acceptance as "schismatic" and broke all formal relations between the two Patriarchates. Recently, Bartholomew I has condemned Kirill's support for Putin and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, stating that the attitude of the Patriarchate of Moscow is "[damaging to the prestige of the whole of Orthodoxy.](#)"

In terms of splendour, after centuries of hostile relationships with Turkey nowadays the Patriarchate of Constantinople is said to be a faint shadow of what it was. Yet I find the church it occupies, St. George Cathedral to be truly impressive, an impression that is increased manifold by a service I can't understand (I don't speak any Greek) and that makes heavy use of chants and incense.

Afterwards, I visit St Stephen of the Bulgars, a lavish Bulgarian Orthodox Church with a slightly Russified appearance and a large number of Bulgarian visitors. From there I set off to visit Hagia Theodosia, but it's closed. However, I find a rather artsy sound exhibition nearby. It's part of the Biennale of Istanbul, and the sound installation has been set up in a former hammam. It's no wonder the Biennale has chosen such a location; this is the Fener neighbourhood



*St. Stephen of the Bulgars, a very shiny Bulgarian Church*

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<sup>22</sup> Previously, Ukrainian Orthodox Churches were under the Patriarchate of Moscow's authority.



(traditionally Greek neighbourhood during the Ottoman Empire), next to Balat. Balat is in the old city on the European side of Istanbul, and historically, it was the centre of the Jewish community in Istanbul. Nowadays it's a distinctively artistic neighbourhood, a spirit that matches its coloured houses.

After lunch, I walk back to Sultanahmet through the Ataturk boulevard and the Istanbul University district. I'm hoping that, since it will be the early evening by the time I get there, Aya Sofia won't be as crowded. However, that's not the case. Before going back home I stop to visit the Rustem Pasha mosque, which I missed yesterday, and which has some impressive decorative tilework.

*The coloured houses and Balat, and their accompanying feature, steep streets*

September 26<sup>th</sup>, 2022 – Istanbul, Turkey



*On the left, the only seraph with a preserved face. Center bottom, the veiled Mother of God mosaic.*

public, but I'm told that's due to some undergoing restorations.

The veiling of the altar's mosaic (the Mother of God) seems a bit gratuitous to me at first, mainly because it's the only mosaic that's been veiled. Thus, its veiling appears a bit random. For instance: the main dome is guarded by four seraph, one of which still conserves its face, and it hasn't been veiled; ditto for the mosaics on the second floor, visible from the ground floor; and ditto for the mosaics surrounding the main nave and guarding its entrances. Why then bother with that particular one? Once I get past my initial disappointment at being unable to have a look at that mosaic the answer becomes painfully obvious: it's the only one that stands in the direction of Islamic prayer. It's not a perfect match, of course. The Mother of God mosaic is on the altar, that is, on the eastern dome of Hagia Sophia (per Christian tradition), and Mecca is more towards the southeast of Istanbul. Still, if it weren't covered it could look like the Muslims praying in Ayasofya were bowing in the direction of a human (and Christian) figure.

Today I wake up at 7am. I *will* get inside Hagia Sofia.

By the time I arrive to Sultanahmet (8am) crowds are already forming, but I still get in after queuing for only fifteen minutes. When I first visited Hagia Sophia (or in Turkish, Ayasofya) it was a museum. Today it's a mosque, as was decreed on the 10 of July 2020, and the first way in which that change makes itself felt is that headscarves are mandatory. So is taking off your shoes, and to that end, a massive installation has been set up, with thousands of shoe-racks.

But as couldn't be otherwise, the most significant changes have taken place inside the basilica. It's now all carpeted, with massive chandeliers. The byzantine mosaic representing the Mother of God has been veiled and the second floor isn't open for the

Suddenly, not only isn't the veiling of the mosaic that annoying anymore, it's also proof that an effort has been made to maintain visible Hagia Sophia's rich history as a site that has served many faith. Hence, only the one mosaic that could cause trouble has been veiled; the rest are well visible. And so, today one can witness Muslims praying next to Christian symbology. Once again, isn't that true cosmopolitanism? The type of cosmopolitanism that has enriched first Constantinople—Istanbul, and any other enclave located right at the edge? The type of cosmopolitanism that can only emerge in the most genuine points of encounter, those set close to open borders—like Istanbul—where people cultures, ideas and faiths can dialogue? I believe so, and I'm a bit sadden that I fail to take any good picture portraying that juxtaposition of realities.



*Multiculturalism at its finest; the entrance to a mosque is guarded by a Christian mosaic.*

Another detail that has been on my mind ever since I started visiting mosques in Istanbul and that now Hagia Sophia confirms: mosques and Orthodox churches have similar floorplans, especially in contrast to Anglican, Catholic or Protestant floorplans. The former are squarish, with mosques being an almost perfect square, and Orthodox churches having a Greek cross floorplan—a square with the corners chipped away. The latter are rectangular. This is testament, I believe, that any form of human expression (be it language, art or architecture) is a continuum, rather than cleanly delineated blocks chained together by time or space. From the Middle East to the West, in terms of temple floorplans it goes like this: take a square (mosque), chip its corners away (Orthodox church), elongate one axis, reduce the other (Western church).

It's a gradual logical transition.



*Not exactly the lavishness of Hagia Sophia*

After visiting Hagia Sophia, I look for the Russian churches Mrs. Short showed me from her terrace. They are extremely well hidden, since they do not have dedicated buildings. Rather, they occupy the top floor of blocks closer to the Marina. They're however well worth the visit, not so much for their lavishness (they're very

modest, as can be expected) but for the nice ladies who maintain them, and who are delighted to have somebody to chat with.

After lunch, I spend the rest of the afternoon looking for souvenirs and saying goodbye to Istanbul. I'm leaving tomorrow.

September 27<sup>th</sup>, 2022 – *Istanbul, Turkey*

Nothing worth mentioning today. I have to check out by 11am, and my flight is at 5:50pm. Getting to the airport takes about one hour, so the day is pretty unremarkable. Unlike Istanbul's new airport, which is massive, shiny and new. Very Dubai-esque.



Actually, the day turns out to be a bit remarkable. My flight gets rescheduled, leaving now at 8:50pm, which means that we shall be arriving at Heathrow around 10:35pm. Which eventually becomes 11:20pm, since our flight also gets delayed. I end up staying the night at one of the hotels in Heathrow.

## **On the eve of return, sleepy**

The Russian Modernist authors I am researching envisioned a grand future, the achievement of Utopia, humanity once and for all united in love and fairness, with no division of nationality, age, gender, faith or class. Their vision was far from realised, and in hindsight it might appear magnificently naïve and exceedingly idealistic. But I believe it had one major redeeming quality; it was a vision arising from a profound humanism, a humanism that refused to lose hope in mankind's ability to find points of encounter and acceptance, rather than reasons for rejection and intolerance.

Hence the unfaltering obsession—so prevalent among these authors—with borders, boundaries and frontiers. For the Russian Modernist, borders, boundaries and frontiers were to be crossed time and again, in a perpetual search of that human common denominator which eventually renders all divisions artificial and unnecessary; the same human common denominator that allows us to accept the Other in good faith and with an open heart. If the Russian Modernists were obsessed with alterity, with peoples distant in time and space, it is only because they hoped to, one day, shrink that distance down to non-existence.

Crossing boundaries, shrinking that distance which separate us from the others, takes tremendous courage. When facing the foreign Other, it might be tempting to barricade. And indeed, many times the chosen answer to alterity is the raising of walls and the establishing of well-guarded borders. In more than one occasion, the decision to barricade has been influenced by those who have made it their calling to spread fear and terror among humanity, so that each encounter be tainted with mistrust and rejection, so that distances be perpetually enlarged, rather than diminished.

Like the Russian Modernists, in this trip I have endeavoured to have an eye for the similar, and for locating the familiar within the unfamiliar. This journal is a collection of the resulting observations. With it, and with the ongoing research that has been enriched with my visit to Bulgaria and Turkey, I hope to make a small contribution to the naïve and courageous project of humanism. A project that, as I realised upon meeting Mrs. Short, is closely connected with the spirit of the Fund which has made my traveling possible. There is no better answer to those who with fear and terror seek to distant peoples and nations than to insist on crossing borders, meeting the Other, and discovering a bit of ourselves in him. I hope this journal will encourage future travellers to partake in the Fund's spirit, so that they may cross many, many borders.

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*In Memoriam*

**ROGER SHORT**