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## **Bulgarian Visual (Hi)Story of the WW I**

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The article offers a discussion of the visual coverage of the WW I in Bulgaria at the time. The author draws on the use of images in the Bulgarian journal *Илюстрация Светлина* (Illustration Light), which was published from 1891 to the 1930s, to exemplify the way media in Bulgaria accounted for the war visually. A visible change in the coverage of the war is outlined after Bulgaria entered the war. Particular attention is paid to the way allies and enemies were depicted. The author comes to the following conclusions: First, the visual content of the journal played a role in the process of mobilizing Bulgarian people and supporting their high spirit. Visual material was used by the editor of *Illustration Light* to commemorate important lieux de mémoires (à la Pierre Nora) in the recent history of Bulgarian people and state, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, as a means of communicating news about the contemporary events. Second, from the point of view of the form, the WW I was covered in *Illustration Light* by a mix of “traditional” and “modern” representations (drawings and reproductions of paintings, lithographs, and cartoons vs. photography). The new forms of visual media pretended to reproduce reality and truth but the photograph is not just a registration of what happened, it always is an image chosen by someone. Third, having in mind the fact that visual materials were used for mobilization and propaganda and the existence of censorship, the reading audience was made to take notice of what Bulgarian government wanted Bulgarian people to pay attention to.

*Key words:* WW I, Bulgarian illustrated press, visual representations, images as historical evidence

In his book *Eyewitnessing* (2001), the British cultural historian Peter Burke writes: “Relatively few historians work in photographic archives, compared to the numbers who work in repositories of written and typewritten documents. [...] When they do use images, historians tend to treat them as mere illustrations, reproducing them in their books without comment. In cases in which the images are discussed in text, this evidence is often used to illustrate conclusions that the author has already reached by other means, rather than to give new answers or to ask new questions.” (Burke 2001, 10)

The use of the images as a source of historical information is not new. It suffices to mention the two important studies by Philippe Ariès – on history of childhood and on history of death (Ariès 1960 and Ariès 1977); in the English-speaking world too, Simon Schama based his narratives on the Dutch culture in the Golden Age and on landscape and memory (Schama 1987, Schama 1995) on a variety of images too. It was at the beginning of the 1990s when scholars started talking (and writing) about the pictorial turn (Mitchell 1994) or iconic turn, both terms being replicas to Richard Rorty’s linguistic turn (1967). Most of the examples of uses of images in historical scholarship, however, come from the field of the art history; only lately the visual evidence has made a room for itself in social history too, and particularly in the history of the everyday life. In the other fields of history and particularly in the military history, the visual is still used more as illustrative material rather than as a source of information.

My aim in this text is to problematize the use of the visual material in representing the “current history” in the Bulgarian illustrated press. I will draw on the use of the visual during the WW I time in the journal *Илюстрация Светлина* (Illustration Light) which was published from 1891 to the 1930s.

The journal *Light*<sup>1</sup> had already established a kind of a pattern of representing war and violence before the WW I started: for example, his publisher Yurdan Mihaylov commemorated the Serbian-Bulgarian war of 1885, he also paid attention to other wars all over the world (e.g. the Greek-Turkish war of 1897, Spanish-American war of 1898, Anglo-Transvaal war of 1899-1900, Russo-Japanese war of 1904-1905). The visual material used as a means of communication in all mentioned cases consisted mainly of reproductions of painting, drawings and caricatures. The time of photographs and their domination came at the time of the Balkan Wars in 1912-1913. During these regional wars two major changes occurred: on the one hand, the photo reportage from front line was used for the first time in the Balkans; on the other hand, also for the first time, special arrangements for the journalists and photographers were introduced<sup>2</sup>.

This continued to be the case during the WW I, about whose coverage at the beginning two main characteristics can be outlined from the point of view of the visual. On the one hand, there were all those pictures representing “the horrors of the war” at both West and East fronts: wounded Germans in the city of Lyon (ill. 1), French peasants executed by German soldiers (ill. 2) (both pictures published in *Light* 1915, issue 4, p. 5), and many others. In addition, some materials depicting the everyday life at front as well as behind the lines were published, such as a picture of a soldier writing letter to home (*Light* 1914, issue 10-12, p. 25 – ill. 3) or a picture presenting an example of entertainment at the Russian positions (*Light* 1915, issue 5-6, p. 21 – ill. 4). On the other hand, very often reminders (not only visual) about the glorious victories of the Bulgarian army during the First Balkan war appeared. This is not surprising: despite the diplomatic defeat after the Second Balkan war the military victories of the Bulgarian army continued to be a stimulus for the national pride of Bulgarian people.

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<sup>1</sup> In this text I will use the short name *Light*.

<sup>2</sup> I have already elaborated on the topic previously, with particular interest in the time of the Balkan Wars (Parusheva 2014).

These reminders disappeared from the pages of *Light* with the entry of Bulgaria in the war in October 1915. Mobilization of the public spirit through recalling the glorious recent past made way to other strategy, already used in 1912-1913: first, the army call-up was praised in various ways, and immediately after that a glorification of the successful new military actions of the Bulgarian army took place. Pictures played their role in this process too. Special attention was paid to the actions of the Bulgarian army and administration in the occupied territories<sup>1</sup> in Macedonia (*Light* 1916, issue 3, p. 4 – ill. 5; 1917, issue 5, p. 12 – ill. 6). In the texts accompanying such pictures, the happiness of population and their warm welcome for the liberators was emphasized. The return of the representatives of the Bulgarian church was also discussed and presented visually, e.g. by the photo called *The Metropolitan (Bishop) Gerasim coming back to the town of Tikvesh* (*Light* 1916, issue 7, p. 8 – ill. 7).

Along with the heroism of the Bulgarian soldiers and officers in the battles, their life before and after these deserved attentions too. The peaceful moments in their everyday life, such as preparation of food, care for their toilet and outfit, coming of the post, entertainment was also represented visually, e.g. *At the front. The Barber* (*Light* 1916, issue 9, p. 12), *The life of our soldiers at the front. Letters to home* (*Light* 1916, issue 5, p. 9), *The post at the front* (*Light* 1918, issue 4-5, p. 12), *Theatre at the front* (*Light* 1916, issue 4, p. 12; also 1918, issue 6, p. 4), etc. It is important to underline that the peaceful everyday moments were presented mainly by the use of photographs, while the military operations were usually depicted by drawings or reproduction of paintings. The explanation is “technological”, perhaps: the contemporary photo technique did not allow the direct footage yet, hence photography accounted for the calm situations and the battles were left to the pencils and brushes of the painters.

There is one big difference in the visual war coverage in comparison to the Balkan wars: contrary to the extremely rare presence of the Bulgarian allies on the pages of *Light* in 1912-1913, during the WW I the opposite trend is visible enough. During the first war year when Bulgaria remained neutral, the presence of both

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<sup>1</sup> The term “occupied” is used in the journal.

fighting coalitions was rather balanced. Immediately after Bulgaria entered the war the attention to Bulgarian allies raised enormously while at the same time the room left for the enemies was gradually diminishing.

Most often the Germans were in the focus of attention, the Austro-Hungarians' appearance was rather rare, and the Ottoman Empire as an ally reached the pages of *Light* only exceptionally. There were also pictures which directly introduced the idea of alliance: at the beginning of 1916, a photo of seven officers was published, who were walking in a street arm in arm, with a title *The Central Union* (*Light* 1916, issue 2, p. 12 – ill. 8). Once more the same allusion of alliance was drawn in the summer of 1916. In this case the picture was accompanied by the following text: „[...] *The Balkan train*. These are German, Austrian, Hungarian, Bulgarian and Turkish officers in Wiesbaden, whose order follows the order of the state which the Balkan train crosses. The Bulgarian officer is Captain Trayko Kotsev.“ (*Light* 1916, issue 7, p. 8 – ill. 9) Almost in all issues of *Light* the allies of Bulgaria were present on the pages. It was either through portraits of their heads of states, e.g. Tsar Ferdinand and the Emperor Wilhelm II (*Light* 1916, issue 2, p. 4 – ill. 10) and military leaders, such as Fieldmarshals Hindenburg and von Mackensen (*Light* 1916, issue 1, p. 12 and 13 – ill. 11, 12), or by covering some of their military achievements and victories.

The alliance with the Ottoman Empire – the centuries old enemy – was represented in a quite curious way. Information about the activities of the Ottoman army were almost absent. In fact, this ally appeared only when all allies were in the focus of attention, for example in the group photographs already mentioned. Apart from this, the readers of *Light* “met” this not-particularly-loved-ally of Bulgaria only twice during all war time. First time, on the occasion of the murder of Naum Tyufekchiev, when next to his portrait another photograph was published (of him with Tallat Bey, Halil Bey and Enver Pasha) reminding the role he played in the negotiations of the Ottoman-Bulgarian agreement in 1915 (*Light* 1916, issue 5, p. 13 – ill. 13). And the second and last time, when the battles in the area of the Suez Canal took place, in which also Turkish forces participated (*Light* 1916, issue 8).

Opposite to the case of the allies, the enemies did not frequent the pages of *Light* much. In addition, they were represented in a contrary different manner. The directly drawn allusion to black (“Negros”) and dirty should be outlined. Images of Negros were published few times, introduced for example as Types of Anglo-French culture at the Macedonian front (*Light* 1915, issue 9–12, p. 21 – ill. 14). Readers’ attention was focused in a similar way on the dirtiness of Russian captured soldiers: the editor pointed to the contrast before and after they had bath (*Light* 1916, issue 1, p. 8 – ill. 15).

Special attention deserves the attitude to Bulgarian neighbours, all of them – except the Ottoman Empire – on the other side of the front line. Similarly, to the case of the Second Balkan war, during the WW I the direct confrontation resulted in an increased attention. This was particularly true when the Bulgarian troops engaged in battles with the Romanian army in Dobrudja in the late 1916. On the cover page of the autumn issue in 1916 a photograph was published under the title *The Wallachian massacres in Dobrudja* (*Light* 1916, issue 9–10, p. 1 – ill. 16), with the following text: “Powerless against the powerful elan of our troops, the Vlachs poured out all their rancor on the Bulgarian population in Dobrudja. [...] Our photo shows the corpses of Bulgarians in Dobrudja killed by the Vlachs and their accomplices Russians and Serbs. Above them are the relatives of the victims, who mourn them.” Same picture appeared once again in the next issue, this time only with a caption (*Light* 1916, issue 11–12, p. 12). The juxtaposition of two drawings *The heroism of Mamuligarescu in 1913* and *His inglorious escape in 1916* in one of the first issues in 1917 (1917, no 3, p. 4 and p. 5 – ill. 17 and 18) also does not come as a surprise. Victories of the Bulgarian army and the return of Dobrudja were considered by the editor of *Light* – as well as by the majority of the Bulgarian people at the time – as compensation for the drama experienced three years ago, when Bulgaria lost Southern Dobruja (Cadrilater) to Romania.

As far as the other neighbours and war enemies – Serbia and Greece – are concerned, the information about them, in text or in images, was almost absent in the journal. And, one may say, no reactivation of stereotypical images on the pages of

Light was observed and respectively no use of such as a means of propaganda. This fact deserves mentioning, particularly if compared to the existing trends in some satirical newspapers and journals at the time, which were publishing many caricatures of Serbs, Greeks and Romanians (cf. Parusheva 2013).

Let me try to wrap up my observations about the way WW I was represented in the journal Light:

First, the content of the journal's publications played its role in the process of mobilizing Bulgarian people and supporting their high spirit. Visual material was used by the editor of Light in two main ways. On the one hand, as a tool of maintaining collective memory. The aim was to commemorate important lieux de mémoires (à la Pierre Nora) in the recent history of Bulgarian people and state, for example, recalling the victorious battles of the Bulgarian army in the First Balkan war. On the other hand, as a means of communicating news about the contemporary events. This way of using the visual gradually turned into a major feature of representation at the time of the WW I – of course, to the extent one monthly journal such as Light could pretend to provide its readers with an in-time coverage from the front lines.

Second, from the point of view of the form of the visual, the WW I was covered in the Bulgarian illustrated press, exemplified here by its herald Light, by a mix of “traditional” and “modern” representations. Drawings and reproductions of paintings, lithographs, and cartoons were used along with the new means of the press photography and this is well visible on the pages of the journal. First photographs related to wars far away from Bulgaria appeared at the turn of the century. When the wars in 1910s started, the use of photography significantly increased. Not only professional photographers like brothers Dimitar and Ivan Karastoyanov and Georg Woltz were reporting from the front line. Some officers were also taking pictures and sending them for publication. The new forms of visual media<sup>1</sup> pretended to reproduce

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<sup>1</sup> During the Balkan Wars documentary films were screened for the first time in the region. See Kardzhilov 2011;

Kostov 2006. On the visual culture in the Balkans in general and its modernization during the war decade see, e.g., Kaser 2013 and Kaser 2014.

reality and truth. Usually we say the painters “create” drawings and paintings while photographers “take” pictures – nevertheless, the photograph is not just a registration of what happened, it always is an image chosen by someone. Hence, it would be “unwise to attribute an ‘innocent eye’” to these means of communication, as Peter Burke states, “in the sense of a gaze which is totally objective, free from expectations or prejudices of any kind” (Burke 2001, 19).

Third, the question about the communication between the journal and its reading audience is very important. Although usually difficult to approach and investigate for a distant period, the context helps in this case. During the war time, visual materials were extensively used for massive national and war mobilization and propaganda. Bearing in mind also the existence of censorship, we may assume that what the editor of the journal *Light* made its reading audience to take notice of, was actually what Bulgarian government wanted Bulgarian people to pay attention to.

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