

REMEMBERING BSA/BAN I: BULGARIAN STUDIES AT UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN IN THE 1970S

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On the occasion of the 10th joint Bulgarian/American conference on Bulgarian studies, I am prompted to look back at the first BSA/BAN conference, forty three years ago. This article presents my memories of that first conference, at which I was present as an undergraduate student, and the circumstances surrounding it. I also comment on some differences between 1973 and 2016 conferences. This is very much my personal take on the events; others may remember some things differently and my perspective is certainly incomplete, though I have tried to fill some of the gaps by consulting others who were at the first conference.

Madison, Wisconsin in the early 1970s presented an unusual confluence of factors that led to a flowering of Bulgarian studies. These included the popularity of Balkan folk dance, the energy and enthusiasm of a young Slavic linguistics and literature professor, Thomas Butler, and the support of faculty in other departments in the University of Wisconsin system. I'll discuss each of these briefly in turn, and then present an overview of the conference itself.

First, folk dancing. International folk dance was surprisingly popular in the 1970s in the US. In Madison as throughout the country, international folk dance groups (which had earlier emphasized dances from Western Europe and then in the 1960s discovered Yugoslav kolos¹) had recently fallen in love with Bulgarian dances, largely through the influence of a French Canadian workshop teacher, Yves Moreau. Yves presented a couple of workshops in Madison in the early 1970s, as well as several in nearby places such as Chicago (Fig. 1). The Madison folk dancers (including my teenaged



Fig. 1. Yves Moreau leading a Bulgarian folkdance workshop, Chicago, early 1970s.

¹ For more on the phenomenon of Balkan folkdance in the US, see Ivanova-Nyberg 2011 and especially Laušević 2007. Ever since its beginnings in the early 20th century folk dancing in North America has been associated with progressive or leftist politics and with “urban, highly educated, professional people” (Laušević); the concentration of folkdancers in the university town of Madison was and is typical of its connection to college campuses across the country.

self) were thoroughly smitten with the intricate rhythms of Bulgarian music, the sound of the gayda and kaval, and the dance steps. Some of us learned to knit Bulgarian socks or took an interest in the history of the Balkans. We danced for fun (Fig. 2) and we sang too (Fig. 3). Teaching ourselves from recordings by the Pennywhistlers, Ethyl Raim, Martin Koenig, and other musicologists, as well as a few available records of the Koutev ensemble, some of us began to learn and sing Bulgarian and other Balkan songs. We found more-or-less accurate transcriptions of songs, or tried to write them ourselves phonetically. This naturally led to wondering what the words we were singing meant. A few of us became interested in the Bulgarian language and began studying it, on our own (teaching ourselves cyrillic and poring through the Bulgarian-English dictionary in the University library) or in any available classes.



Fig. 2. American students dance a Bulgarian horo by Lake Mendota, on the University of Wisconsin campus, 1970. I am second from the right.



Fig. 3. Singing Bulgarian songs in my apartment, 1973.

Thus, there was significant interest in Bulgarian studies in the community, though most of it was not in traditional academic settings or fields. This interest in music and dance eventually pushed a number of us into more academic engagement with the Balkans. Not only in Madison but across the US, a whole generation of Balkan linguists, historians, and so on were originally attracted to the field by folk dance. I come back to this later.

The second important factor in the development of Bulgarian studies was the presence of Balkan experts at the University of Wisconsin, especially professor Thomas Butler, though his colleague Michael Petrovich was also important, as was Philip Shashko at the Milwaukee campus of the UW (Fig. 4, 5, 6).

When I met him in 1971 Tom Butler was in his early 40s, and a relatively recent Ph.D., having received his degree in Slavic Languages and Literatures from Harvard in 1963. He spent 1967–1968 in Yugoslavia as a Fulbright scholar, and was hired to teach Serbo-Croatian, Bulgarian, and Russian linguistics and literature at the University of Wisconsin, Madison in 1968. Later in his career

he published anthologies of both Serbo-Croatian and Bulgarian literature. His interest in the Balkans was deep-rooted. In his obituary² he is quoted as having written “The Balkans are a love and not an interest for me. I hope that my teaching and writing have contributed to an understanding of the history and culture of Yugoslavia and Bulgaria.”

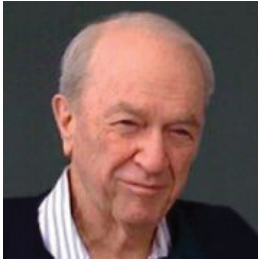


Fig. 4. Thomas Butler



Fig. 5. Michael Petrovich

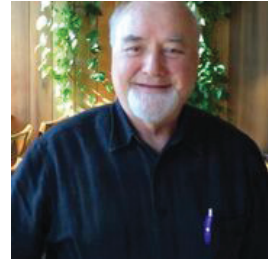


Fig. 6. Phillip Shashko

In the fall of 1971, when I was a freshman, Professor Butler offered a class in beginning Bulgarian for the first time, and a dozen of us folk dance fanatics signed up en masse. I suspect he was astonished when, instead of a handful of serious Russian grad students doing their obligatory second Slavic language, he got a roomful of rowdy kids, mostly undergraduates, all folk dancers, who knew no Russian, and who revelled in singing folk songs in class, taking excursions to the zoo to talk about the animals in Bulgarian, breaking into dance moves, and generally wreaking havoc on the traditional language-and-literature curriculum. But we learned a lot. Much to Tom’s credit (and in keeping with his “love” rather than just academic interest), he more or less ditched the syllabus, followed our lead, encouraged our enthusiasms, and came to take paternal pride in us. I quite simply adored him. Several of us signed on for a second semester class, and a couple of us continued to a second and third year by independent study. After the first year two of us (John Kasten and I) went to Bulgaria, to the Leten Seminar za Chuzhdestrani Bulgaristi i Slavisti (Fig. 7). I don’t remember exactly how it was arranged, but I am sure Tom Butler must have pulled some strings with IREX and BAN to get a couple of 18-year-olds accepted to the program, which normally catered to graduate students and faculty.



Fig. 7. Leten Seminar za Chuzhdestrani Bălgaristi i Slavisti, Sofia 1972. I am near the center, in bluejeans. Another University of Wisconsin student, John Kasten, is on the far right.

² The obituary is online at <http://www.obitsforlife.com/obituary/842213/Butler-Thomas-J.php>

It was about at this time that Tom Butler and a couple of his colleagues had the idea to invite a group of Bulgarian scholars to a meeting in Madison the following spring, the first joint meeting of Bulgarian and American Bulgarians, and went through all the necessary bureaucratic negotiations to get the meeting funded by IREX and agreed to by BAN. I wonder whether our enthusiastic class and his dealings with IREX over the Leten Seminar are what inspired him. The BSA, which was the joint host with BAN, was very much the junior partner in the collaboration: It had been founded only a year or so before the meeting was organized, and in fact was not even known by its eventual name yet. On the BSA website³ Martha Forsyth writes “The Bulgarian Studies Association was started under the name of Bulgarian Studies Group, in the spring of 1971 “at the AAASS Convention in Denver”. It was an informal group, with no officers. Indications are that Marin Pundeff acted as the first leader (Coordinator) of the group.” The first officers were elected in 1975, the name changed to “Bulgarian Studies Association” in 1978, and a constitution was adopted in 1979. At the time of the first Bulgarian-American meeting, the main activity of the future BSA was putting out a newsletter mailed to scholars interested in Bulgaria.

Another professor at the University of Wisconsin at the time, Mike Petrovich, an authority on Balkan history and an extremely popular lecturer, co-organized the meeting. Phillip Shashko, another historian at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, travelled to Bulgaria with an invitation letter from the president of the University of Wisconsin and presented it to colleagues at BAN. Shashko remembers that the letter was made to look as impressive and official as possible, with seals and signatures, and that it took some persuading on his part to convince the Bulgarian scholars that they could accept an invitation from the US, at the height of the Cold War.

There must have been considerable behind-the-scenes negotiation involved in obtaining all the necessary visas, tickets, and travel permissions, but we students were unaware of these issues. All we knew was that the conference was announced, and professors Butler and Petrovich rounded up their graduate students to help, along with several of us starry-eyed undergraduate folklore enthusiasts. Those of us studying Bulgarian were assigned to drive the Bulgarian delegates from the airport and guide them around the university; we were among those who spent most time with the visiting Bulgarians, since by that time we spoke enough Bulgarian to communicate and were eager to do so.

As a naive sophomore I had no idea what a big deal this meeting was – that no such meeting had ever taken place before, that travel outside the country was barely possible for Bulgarian academics; in short, that it was a historic event. The Bulgarian delegation consisted of respected senior scholars:

³ <https://bgstudies.org/about-us/history>

Petar Dinekov
 Velichko Dobriyanov
 Emil Georgiev
 Vladimir Georgiev
 Hristo A. Hristov

Dimitar Kosev
 Boris Kremenliev
 Evgeni Mateev
 Nikolay Todorov

I was thrilled to get to hang out with these exotic visitors, enjoyed chatting with them and no doubt treated them with shocking lack of deference, having no idea how distinguished they really were. If the mostly elderly, very high-level scholars were surprised to be taken around by a bunch of teenaged hippies, they hid it pretty well. In fact, they seemed as amused by us as we were by them.

The American conference attendees were also a pretty impressive bunch, but a little more mixed than the Bulgarian delegation, including graduate students and young faculty as well as established scholars.

Ronelle Alexander
 John D. Bell
 Cyril E. Black
 Thomas Butler*
 Frederick Columbus
 William J. Daniels
 Victor A. Friedman
 Herbert Galton
 Zbigniew Golab

Micaela S. Iovine
 Barbara Jelavich
 Robert J. Karriker
 Huey Louis Kostanick
 John R. Lampe
 Albert B. Lord
 Thomas Meininger*
 Charles Moser*
 Kenneth E. Naylor

Michael B. Petrovich
 Riccardo Picchio
 Thomas M. Poulsen
 Marin Pundeff*
 Irwin T. Sanders*
 Ernest A. Scatton*
 Phillip Shashko*
 Robert N. Taaffe
 Ian White

The star marks those who were or later became BSA officers.

Those who were respected elders at the time mostly are no longer with us; these include the organizers Butler and Petrovich, as well as Cyril Black, Herbert Galton, Zbigniew Golab, Barbara Jelavich, Huey Louis Kostanick, Albert Lord, Riccardo Picchio, Marin Pundeff, Irwin Sanders, and Robert Taaffe. Phillip Shasko is retired but still lives in Milwaukee.

A number of the very young scholars at the meeting went on to become the grand old men and women of Bulgarian Studies in the US in later times; most prominent among these are Ronelle Alexander, who wrote a respected textbook for teaching Bulgarian, Ernie Scatton, author of an excellent reference grammar of the language, and Victor Friedman, who is omnipresent in Balkan studies.

Several of the attendees were later honored by having their names attached to prizes or endowments: the Barbara Jelavich ASEES book prize, the John D. Bell BSA book prize, and the Kenneth E. Naylor annual lecture and chair at OSU are among these.

A few of the delegates left academia but kept ties to Bulgaria or the Balkans: Micaela Iovine ended up working for the State Department, Ian White teaches English in Izmir, Charles Moser became a political activist in both the US and Bulgaria.



Fig. 8. The conference volume cover.

The proceedings of the meeting were collected in a book (Butler, 1976); Fig. 8 is a scan of the cover, showing the wear of many years of use. The table of contents makes interesting reading. The papers were divided into five broad topics, each with both Bulgarian and American contributions. Linguistics was the largest category, but History also had a large number of papers, and there was a surprisingly substantial group of papers on “Modernization and urbanization”. Literature and Folklore/music had smaller numbers. Here is the complete list:

PART I: History

Communities and the Bulgarian national revival (Hristo A. Hristov)

The city in the Bulgarian lands from the fifteenth to the 19th century (Nikolay Todorov)

Teachers and school boards in the late Bulgarian Renaissance (Thomas A. Meininger)

General Ivan Kishelski's program for the liberation of Bulgaria (Phillip Shashko)

Vasil Levski and the Bucharest Bulgarian Revolutionary Central Committee (Dimitar Kosev)

The Bulgarian Crisis of 1885–1887 in British Foreign Policy (Barbara Jelavich)

Special barriers to Bulgarian industrialization before 1914 (John R. Lampe)

Alexander Stamboliski and the theory and practice of agrarianism in Bulgaria (John D. Bell)

Bulgaria's academic historiography (Marin Pundeff)

Bulgarian historical studies in America (Michael B. Petrovich)

PART II: Modernization and urbanization

The process of modernization: the Bulgarian case (Cyril E. Black)

Characteristic demographic features of Bulgaria 1880–1980 (Velichko Dobriyanov)

Demographic structure and changes in Bulgaria (Huey Louis Kostanick)

Changes in the socio-class structure of Bulgaria (Velichko Dobriyanov)

Factors influencing the contemporary Bulgarian family (Irwin T. Sanders)

The urbanization of communist Bulgaria (Robert N. Taaffe)

Administrative and economic regionalization of Bulgaria : the Territorial Reform of 1959 (Thomas M. Poulsen)

Models, prognoses and programs of planning in the People's Republic of Bulgaria (Evgeni Mateev)

PART III: Literature

Bulgarian literature in the context of Slavic and European literature (Emil Georgiev)

Hesychasm and the revival of Bulgarian literature in the 14th century (Ian White)

Early humanistic trends in the Turnovo School (Riccardo Picchio)

Metropolitan Kiprian and the Orthodox Slavic revival (Micaela S. Iovine)

Jovkov's place in modern Bulgarian literature (Charles A. Moser)

PART IV: Linguistics

The system of the Bulgarian verb from a diachronic point of view (Vladimir Georgiev)

The language of Sofronij Vracanski's second copy of the *Istoriija Slavenobolgarskaja* as a source for one grammatical phenomenon in modern Bulgarian (Frederick Columbus)

The Balkan pattern for purpose clauses (Thomas Butler)

On the mechanism of Slavic-Rumanian linguistic interference in the Balkans (Zbigniew Golab)

Transitional West Bulgarian dialects: a structural approach (Ronelle Alexander)

Bulgarian dialects in the South Slavic framework (Kenneth E. Naylor)

A Bulgarian syntactic model (Herbert Galton)

Liquids, schwa, and vowel-zero alternatives in modern Bulgarian (Ernest A. Scatton)

Word stress assignment in a generative grammar of Bulgarian (William J. Daniels)

The question of a Bulgarian indefinite article (Victor A. Friedman)

Phonological considerations in planning a computer-assisted course in beginning Bulgarian (Robert J. Karriker)

PART V: Folklore and music

Studies in the Bulgarian epic tradition: thematic parallels (Albert B. Lord)

Problems of the Bulgarian Xayduk folksongs (Petar Dinekov)

Bulgarian folk music: some recent trends (Boris Kremenliev)

A fair number of the papers were general-overview surveys of a kind that would be rare to find at a conference today. Presumably this is because it was the first meeting of its kind; the Bulgarian and American scholars were largely unaware of each other's work, it was much harder to have access to ongoing research from the other side of the iron curtain, and broad survey papers giving an idea of what kind of work was being done by each side were actually useful.

Another aspect that rings very oddly in 2016 is that nearly the entire conference was male. Several of us student helpers were female, but of the

presenters, only 3 out of 36 were women, and two of those, Michaela Iovine and Ronelle Alexander, were very young (Iovine a student; Alexander just finishing her dissertation). Barbara Jelavich was the only senior scholar who was a woman. The Bulgarian delegation was entirely male. This contrasts starkly with this year's 10th BSA/BAN conference, at which more than half of the presenters and all four of the organizers are female.

The 1973 participants were unusual from a current perspective in another way too: the American presenters were by and large not of Bulgarian or even Slavic background. There are a few exceptions, but very few. Most of the surnames in the list of American participants are English, German, Italian, or other random flavors of the American melting pot. This has changed radically; in the last few decades Bulgarian studies in the US and Europe has shifted to most participants, especially the younger scholars, being themselves first generation Bulgarian immigrants. Those of us with non-Slavic names, who became interested in the language or culture for reasons other than our own family backgrounds, are now mostly the older generation. The same is true for other Slavic and Balkan fields: most younger people now working on Polish are immigrants from Poland, those interested in Romanian studies are from Romania, etc.

Before concluding I want to share a few other people's memories of the 1973 conference. I had a chance to talk with some participants of that first conference recently, and their memories both reinforced and complemented mine.

Victor Friedman remembers that he gave his very first academic paper at the 1973 meeting, and out of nervousness was talking so fast that Zbigniew Golab yelled "slow down!" in the middle of his talk. He was ill with a toothache but still excited about the meeting and especially excited about playing host to some of the Bulgarian participants in Chicago after the conference. He recalls that eight of the Bulgarians opted to go to Chicago (IREX gave them the option to visit various places in the US and nearly all chose Chicago). As an available graduate student Victor was given the task of showing the group downtown Chicago; he took them by train from the University to downtown and they had lunch at the Hancock building, the tallest building in town at the time. The scholars were surprised and to various degrees amused by Victor's talking Macedonian instead of the literary Bulgarian or Russian they expected, and the Georgiev brothers had a discussion in the elevator over whether he was speaking Bulgarian or not.

Ronelle Alexander also remembers the 1973 meeting as an early highlight in her career. By email she told me "I remember the Wisconsin meeting well. I had not yet filed my dissertation at that point, but had already been teaching full time for a couple of years [...] It was really a special conference for me, the first international conference I attended [...] It was great to meet all the Bulgarian scholars and watch them encounter America; for some reason what sticks in my mind most is Vladimir Georgiev telling the joke, in his quiet deadpan way, of how Академия на науките got its name (you've surely heard it, there were all these aging academics wondering what name to choose and then giving up and

getting ready to go home but not able to find cap, walking stick or whatever – А къде ми е това, а къде ми е онова – акъдемия!!).” She mentions memories of several of the American participants, and then adds: “And I do remember the folk dancers entertaining us (Na Lesa, was that it?) I don’t recall if I got up and danced, though I well could have (I think I was still dancing recreationally at that point) [...] that was what got many of us into this walk of life – I remember a big headline in the Bulgarian newspapers at the time I was given the Ivan Vazov medal – Вашата музика ме доведе в България!, or something like that.”

Not all of the American participants were folk dancers, but both Victor Friedman and Ronelle Alexander were, and both of them, like me, had gotten into Bulgarian studies at least partially through interests in Bulgarian dance and music. Ronelle was married at the time to a well-known dance teacher and researcher, Bob Leibman. Several people who were not official conference participants but were involved in the Madison folk dance scene also sent me their memories of the 1973 meeting. Amy Shapiro and Jeff Olenik were dancers, musicians, and members of the Bulgarian class with me. They did not go on to careers involving Bulgarian (though Amy still sings) but did attend the conference, and especially remember the dancing at the conference banquet. Jeff thinks the local international group performed but I am almost sure we just joined in the open dancing after a performance by Na Lesa, a folk dance group from Milwaukee. Michael Kuharski, who has since become the main leader of the folkdance scene in Madison, had been dancing for just a couple of years in 1973 but was already deeply committed to it. Like Amy and Jeff, what he remembers about the conference is the entertainment: “I do have a vivid recollection of some conference at which the Na Lesa Bulgarian Dancers of Milwaukee performed and at which all of us did most excellent dancing together (Izzy Matusiak and I were contending as to who would lead Daichovo).”

To conclude, the first joint BSA/BAN meeting was a success, in many ways. The seed that was planted by Tom Butler’s idealism and fertilized by the enthusiasm for Bulgarian culture associated with the American folk dance movement grew into a productive exchange of ideas across continents and initiated personal and professional contacts that have continued through the decades. Perhaps the best measure of its success is that it still continues; there has been a meeting every 5 years or so ever since that first one, alternating location between the US and Bulgaria. The following list of the ten meetings to date is taken from the BSA web site’s history page, compiled by Martha Forsyth.⁴ I hope to see many of you at the eleventh meeting, to be held in 2020 somewhere in America.

⁴ http://bgstudies.org/about/bsa_history.php

#1	3-6 May, 1973	University of Wisconsin Madison
#2	June 1978	Varna
#3	11-13 October 1982	Hellenic College and Harvard University
#4	22-26 June 1987	Smolyan
#5	26-27 May 1994	University of Pittsburgh
#6	30 May – 3 June 1999	Blagoevgrad
#7	9-11 October 2003	The Ohio State University
#8	13-15 June 2008	Varna
#9	31 May – 2 June 2012	University of Oregon, Eugene
#10	26-30 June 2016	Sofia

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BEYOND THE BORDERS

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