Martina Baleva

Revolution in the Darkroom: Nineteenth-Century Portrait Photography as a Visual Discourse of Authenticity in Historiography

Historical photography has always played a crucial role in historiography, in the creation of collective memory, and in the perpetuation of historical traditions. Of all the photographic genres, portrait photography is the most prevalent genre and remains the “vera icon” of illustrated histories. The significance of portrait photography in historiography is amply illustrated by its use in the creation of so-called “Bulgarian national heroes,” historical figures that acquired an almost mythic significance largely through their depictions in photographic portraits. In this article I examine the specific use of this particular photographic genre in Bulgarian illustrated histories and provide analyses of the motifs and symbols of the portraits themselves, both as historical primary sources and as epistemological instruments that have had a decisive and continuous influence on the historical process of the creation of “true” national heroes. My aim is to outline the genesis of these photographic portraits in order to shed light on the process of their framing within the historical imagination as authentic representations.

Keywords: visual history, illustrated histories, April uprising, portrait photography, carte-de-visite, national heroes

In his essay on the constitutive role of photography in the construction of ethnic identity in the nineteenth century, historian of photography Adrian-Silvan Ionescu identifies a genre of photographic portraits as representations of “Bulgarian national heroes”.1 While Ionescu leaves open the question of whether this category of images can be explained by the ever growing number of photographs of Ottoman Bulgarians in a diverse array of military uniforms, the large number of portrait photographs from the second half of the nineteenth century suggests that this may well have been the case. They are today an integral part of the historical tradition and have become deeply imprinted in the visual memories of generations as “authentic” photographic testimony to and documentation of the national revolution. Not a single history book has failed to include reproductions, and they hang in every school and public building,


http://www.hunghist.org
almost as if an obligatory adornment. Even the uniforms of the National Guard today are influenced by this tradition.

The enormous influence of historical photographs on our conception of history is not a Bulgarian peculiarity, but rather a fundamental phenomenon, for which the photographs of “Bulgarian national heroes” are simply revealing specimens. The example of Bulgaria is particularly appropriate, however, in a discussion of the question of the construction of historical “authenticity” through visual representations, in particular through the use of photography. In spite of or specifically because of the postulated convergence of photography and history, I would like here to examine their intricate interrelationships with regards to discourses of visual authenticity in the writing of history. In a comparative analysis of both of the subject-specific perspectives on visual “truth”, the historical and the photographic, I would like to discuss the conflicting interpretations of pictures in order to draw attention to the displacements, reallocations, reconfigurations, and new configurations of historical knowledge in photographic images.

Historical Remarks

Most of the national movements of the nineteenth century took place at roughly the same time as the general and rapid spread of portrait photography. In the case of Bulgaria, one can in fact date the convergence of national ideology and photographic technique to the year 1867. In the 1860s the global mass production of portrait photographs reached its first historical zenith. At the same time, in the Balkans an anti-Ottoman coalition came into being in the European part of the Ottoman Empire under the leadership of the Serbian

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3 In the course of the constructivist turn, the study of nationalism has shown that the emergence of the concept of the nation is closely linked to modern technology and its market uses, as well as the growing role of public media in society (the formation of media-societies). The technologies that allowed for the reproduction of text, such as book printing and the launch of newspapers, were the most important transmitters of the concept of national belonging. According to historians, the technological innovations that allowed for the reproduction of images, such as the wood engravings (xylography) that were used in the illustrated press, also acquired considerable importance in the creation of imagined communities and the global spread of the notion of the nation state. It is therefore remarkable, to say the least, that a comprehensive study of the relationship between photography and nationalism still remains to be written.
Prince Mihailo Obrenović III. This was to become a decisive impetus for many national movements in the region.

One of the long-term goals of the Serbian Coalition with the Albanians, Bulgarians, Greeks, Montenegrins, and Romanians was to create an alliance and wage war against the Ottomans, the end result of which was to be a confederation of the Balkan peoples. One of the most important parts of the military tactic of the anti-Ottoman coalition was the recruitment and military training of the Christian subjects of the Sultan. They were assembled into armed units that were supposed to launch regular incursions into the Ottoman Empire from the outside (from Serb controlled territories) in order to provoke the Ottomans not simply to react, but to overreact, and in doing so to draw the attention of the rest of Europe to the Balkans and prompt an attack by the European great powers.4

In the 1860s, the Serbian government formed a Bulgarian legion in Belgrade, alongside the Bosnian and Herzegovinian legions. It consisted of Bulgarians who had been recruited with the goal of creating armed groups of soldiers with military training which would support the Serbian struggle for independence from the Ottoman Empire. The first Bulgarian legion was created in 1862 with the agreement of the Serbian government. The formation of this Bulgarian legion marked the birth of the radical political movement for the creation of a Bulgarian national state. Many of the Bulgarian recruits had been guerrilla fighters before joining the legion. Prominent figures like Ilyo Markov and Panayot Hitov, for instance, who today are two of the best-known persons of the Bulgarian national movement, had been compelled to flee the Ottoman territories because they were wanted for murder, robbery, and armed assault.5

Most of the legionaries of 1862, including Vasil Levski (1837–1873), the emblematic Bulgarian national hero, were also part of the Second Legion of

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5 In the 1850s, Ilyo Markov (?–1898) and Panayot Hitov (1830–1918) were active as so called “haiduks” in Ottoman territories. Compelled to flee from the authorities, they emigrated, like many others, to Serbia or Romania. Hitov wrote an autobiography that was to be published first in German. It was published by Georg Rosen with the title “Lebensgeschichte des Haidukenführers Panajot Hitow, von ihm selbst beschrieben, nebst Nachrichten über jetzige und frühere Wojwoden,” in Die Balkan-Haiduken. Ein Beitrag zur inneren Geschichte des Slawenthums (Leipzig: F. U. Brockhaus, 1878), 73–261.
1867. It was formed on the basis of the first legion and under the aegis of Mihailo Obrenović III. Most of the first photographic portraits of “Bulgarian national heroes” were photographs of members of this legion, and most of them were taken in Belgrade. The photographic portraits of many of the Bulgarian legionaries were taken by Anastas Stojanović and Anastas Jovanović, who were Obrenović’s court photographers, as well as Pante Ristić.

However, at pressure from the great powers, the Second Bulgarian Legion was quickly dissolved without ever having been involved in any military engagement. The dissolution of the legion led to mass expulsions of the recruits from Serbia. Many of them emigrated to Romania in order to be able to continue to agitate against the Ottoman authorities. The armed bands ("chetnik" from which the word chetnik is derived) led by Hadzhi Dimitar (1840–1868) and Stefan Karadzha (1840–1868) consisted exclusively of recruits who had been part of the former legions. These bands became legendary in no small part because of the use of images in the creation of memory and historical narrative. Before coming to Belgrade, both Hadzhi Dimitar and Karadzha had had careers as outlaws in the Ottoman territories. In 1868, they led a group of guerilla soldiers for the last time on an incursion from Romania into what today is the northern region of Bulgaria. Hadzhi Dimitar died in the fighting and Karadzha later died of his wounds as a prisoner of war. Like many other Bulgarian emigrants, both had photographs taken of themselves while in Romania by, for instance, Romanian court photographer Carol Popp de Szathmari (in Hungarian, Károly Szathmáry Papp), Franz Duschek, and Babet Engels.

Following the mass emigration to Romania, the former Bulgarian legionnaires of Belgrade founded a revolutionary organization dedicated to Bulgarian national liberation based on the Italian and Polish political coalitions for national independence. Vasil Levski and Lyuben Karavelov (1834–1879) were both prominent leaders in the foundation of the Bulgarian Revolutionary Central Committee (BRCC). The goal of the committee, which functioned in

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6 Perhaps the first pictures of a band of Bulgarian insurrectionaries were done by the Polish lithographer Henryk Dembitzky in 1869. They depict “The Oath of the Band of Hadzhi Dimitar and Stefan Karadzha by the Danube River” and “The Second Battle of the Band of Hadzhi Dimitar and Stefan Karadzha in Karapanovo on 8 July, 1868”. They are two of the most frequently reproduced pictures, first and foremost in school textbooks on Bulgarian history.

the Romanian capital from 1869 to 1876, was to create a network of secret revolutionary committees in territories of the Ottoman Empire that would prepare the people for a mass uprising against the Ottoman government. After the arrest by the Ottoman police in 1872 of Vasil Levski and other prominent members of the committee, who were identified not least by the photographic portraits that had been taken of them, the organization soon was disbanded.8 (Levski was hanged on 18 February, 1873.)

The Bucharest committee was reorganized under the leadership of Hristo Botev in 1875. In the autumn of that year a small-scale uprising against the Ottomans was rapidly crushed. A second uprising in the spring of 1876, referred to in Bulgarian historiography as the April Uprising, was brutally suppressed by irregular Ottoman troops. This reaction of the Ottomans was precisely the “overreaction” that had been hoped for. The “Turkish atrocities” met with public outcry all over the world and led to one of the biggest diplomatic crises of the nineteenth century. The massacre of civilians, which was widely reported in the Western press, was a welcome pretext for Russia to declare war on the Ottoman Empire. At the end of the conflict not only Bulgaria, but also Serbia and Romania were to achieve national independence.

The photographic portraits of “Bulgarian national heroes” that were taken in Belgrade in 1867 had just been published in the press reports on the Bulgarian uprising of 1876. They were first circulated as wood engravings in Illustrirte Zeitung, which used the images prominently on the title pages of two issues published in immediate succession. The portraits are of Ilyo Markov und Panayot Hitov, and both were taken in the Belgrade studio of Anastas Stojanović at the time of the Second Bulgarian Legion of 1867. Since the techniques with which images were reproduced did not enable the direct printing of photographs in newspapers at the time, the portraits of both leaders were recreated using wood engravings which were remarkably lifelike. But details of the area around the two figures, such as the carpet and the painted coulisse of the photography studio, were left out and replaced with an imaginary “Balkan” coulisse nature.9

8 Photography was used by the Ottoman police from the very beginning of portrait photography. The arrests of national activists like Angel Kanchev and Dimitar Obshti, for instance, make this clear. They were all identified in part on the basis of their photographic portraits. For more on this aspect of the use of photographic portraits see Stoyan Zaimov, Vasil Levski Dyakonat. Kratka biografia, napisana po povod otkrivanie pametnika (Sofia: Hr. Olchevata Knizharnica, 1895), 145, 172 passim.

9 Details on this form of photographic reproduction in the illustrated press of the nineteenth century and on each of these two portraits in Martina Baleva, Bulgarien im Bild. Die Erfindung von Nationen auf dem Balkan in der Kunst des 19. Jahrhunderts (Vienna: Böhlau, 2012), 84 passim., and Figs. 31–34.
**Portrait Photography in Historiography**

The use of photographic portraits in historiography can be traced back to the beginning of the twentieth century. The photographic portraits that a century later were characterized by Adrian-Silvan Ionescu as representations of “Bulgarian national heroes” were among the first photographs (half-tone prints, so-called autotypes) that were reproduced in histories of Bulgaria. Dimitar Strashimirov’s 1907 *Istoriya na Aprilskoto vastanie* (History of the April Uprising), one of the first history books in Bulgarian, which used a rich selection of illustrations, is a good example. The three-volume work contains a total of 59 portraits of figures (all of whom are male) of the national movement. They were reproduced using lithographs, wood engravings, and autotypes. The captions contain only the names of the people depicted. The text contains nothing concerning the images themselves. Only in the appendix to the third volume does one find an index of the “artists who made some of the published portraits (on the basis of the photographs).” This index of artists is a rarity in the historiography, as is the remark according to which the images were selected by a jury (the names of the members of which are given). At the same time, the index contains no information regarding the photographic portraits, the places where they were taken, or the dates on which they were taken. In this regard, little has changed since.

**Illustrated Histories and the Use of Portrait Photography in Historiography**

Since the 1950s, illustrated history albums have become an established genre in Bulgarian historiography. They offer excellent examples of the ways in which photographs came to be used in historiography in general. Full-body portraits and group pictures are found alongside portraits of people’s faces, depictions of various historical sites, pictures of significant buildings, facsimiles of handwritten and printed documents, and images of military items, such as flags, flags,

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10 I am specifically not referring to the reproduction of photographic materials with the use of wood engravings, which became the most popular form of reproduction of photographs soon after it was patented in the 1840s, but rather to the reproduction of photographs using the autotype, the first process of reproduction, which as of the 1880s made possible the direct printing of photographs for journals and letterpress printing.


12 Ibid., vol. 3, p. XII of the register in the appendix to the book.
weapons, and similar objects. These pictures were taken in very different periods of time and their quality is also very uneven. They include photographs from the second half of the nineteenth century as well as photographs that were taken more recently. Usually the older photographs are studio portraits, while the newer ones are images of important lieux de mémoire, such as the homes in which significant figures of history were born, architectural monuments, and landscapes. The formats of the pictures are as mixed as the motifs and the dates of their creation. Photographs that took up an entire page, half of a page, or quarter of a page are found alongside photographic portraits the size of a stamp or photographs of landscapes that take up two adjacent pages. Sometimes the same photograph is put to several uses in a single volume, for instance first as a full-body image and later as a detail of the person’s face. However, the photographic portrait remained the dominant genre, and most of the images were full-figure images of men.

In the second half of the 1970s the use of photographs in historiography reached a kind of momentary high point, not so much from the perspective of any qualitative assessment as simply in the quantitative accumulation of visual materials. A few dozen illustrated scholarly works were published, including a series of lavishly designed picture albums published on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the April Uprising of 1876 against the Ottomans and the foundation of the Bulgarian state in 1878. The jubilee album Aprilskoto vastanie 1876 (The April-Uprising 1876), an elaborately designed work which included a preface by Todor Zhivkov, the First Secretary of the Bulgarian Communist Party, is an excellent example of the insatiable interest of historians for historical photographs. The album, which is a bit more than 260 pages long, includes 359 photographs, among them the whole spectrum of the photographs of “Bulgarian national heroes”.

The textual commentary of the book, which spans some 30 pages, concerns not so much the pictures themselves as it does the events of history. However, the narrative does contain some general reflections on historical photography that give some insight into the perceived function of images in historiography:

The task of this album is to provide the reader with a different kind of documentation and record of this extraordinary national event [the April Uprising]–the documentary photographs of the leaders and the insurgents. [...] The documentary photographic material [...]
although limited as a vessel of scholarly information in comparison with archival documents, has its own scholarly significance and value. The photographs record certain aspects of the conditions, they show the place and time of a deed or a sojourn, they give an impression of attire, weaponry, etc. Their emotional value, however, is far more important. They reveal the physical characteristics of our forebears and in doing so complement their psychological characteristics and allow us to return to the atmosphere of the epoch, bringing us into more direct and real communication with the historical facts.14

Texts First

From the perspective of historiography, photography has a more “limited” scholarly worth than text, but it nonetheless possesses a documentary-like character and quality. This has a kind of authenticity that is different from the authenticity of the archival document. Namely, it is “pure” recording, since the photograph captures the moment, detached from the flow of events, and in doing so records only external circumstances, such as place, clothing and physiognomy. The advantage of the photographic document over text, however, lies in its power to prompt an emotional response, due to the immediacy of the image and its closeness to the “reality” of the past. Indeed photography makes it possible for one to return or immerse oneself in historical reality. While a textual narrative is, according to this view, a matter-of-fact document, the photograph is an emotional testimony that gives the rational, scholarly narrative a sensual quality and thereby also greater authenticity.

This conception of the role of photography in historiography is evident in the handling of images in illustrated publications. The structure of visual material always follows the chronology of the historical events, with no consideration of the history of the individual pictures themselves. Photographs that were taken at completely different times and under completely different circumstances, or for completely different purposes are presented alongside one another, creating a “relationship between representational objects that otherwise were very distant.”15 Images are always organized according to the historical narrative, and this in turn creates groupings according to chronological periods. This division of images according to historical episodes not only generates a specific structure

14 Ibid., 8.
15 André Malraux, Das imaginäre Museum (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 1987), 16.
for the heterogeneous images themselves, but also gives them a chronological and therefore historical coherence. This organization of photographs according to episodes of history created groupings through which a particular historical genealogy was fashioned. A glance at several of illustrated works of history, encyclopedias, school books or even publicly exhibited portraits suffices to reveal that the arrangements and sequences of photographs according to the chronology of historical events created a rigid “image order,” with its own iconography, visual hierarchy, and system of interrelationships.

The portraits of Hadzhi Dimitar and Stefan Karadzha, in which both men are heavily armed, constitute one such rigid, unquestionable iconographical unity. The portraits are always reproduced as a pair, although from the perspective of the circumstances of their creation they have nothing to do with each other, since the one of Hadzhi Dimitar was taken in Bucharest in 1866 and the one of Karadzha in Belgrade in 1868. In the jubilee album published in commemoration of the April Uprising the portraits are included as black-and-white, full-page images on two facing pages and the captions indicate only the names of the men. One finds the images set in the same way in every historiographical publication, including the fourteen-volume Istoriya na Balgariya (History of Bulgaria), which is richly illustrated with images in color. The famous photographs of the Bulgarian insurgents, however, were deliberately reproduced in black and white and, as always, placed on two facing pages.

In the maintenance of the iconographical hierarchy of the ensembles of historical photographs, the reproduction techniques and, more specifically, the use of black and white continues even today to play an important role. The use of black and white lends the images a historicity in order to cast a homogenizing veil over photographs of very different provenance and also in a very different state of conservation, thereby concealing any visible differences. Thanks to the

16 The studio portrait of Hadzhi Dimitar is incorrectly attributed to Carol Popp de Szathmari. My own inquiry has showed, that the portrait was taken by Franz Duschek, Full-body portrait of Hadzhi Dimitar, Bucharest, around 1866, carte-de-visite (10.5 × 6 cm), Photo Archives of the National Library “Kiril i Metodij,” Sofia, signed НБКМ-БИА С 1151; Pante Ristich: Full-body portrait of Stefan Karadzha, Belgrad, around 1868, Carte-de-visite (10.5 × 6 cm), Photo Archives of the National Library “Kiril i Metodij,” Sofia, signed НБКМ-БИА C 41.
17 Doynov and Yonkov, Aprilskoto vastanie, Fig. 19 und 20.
18 Krumka Sharova et al., ed., Balgarsko vazrazhdane 1856–1878, vol. 6 of Istoriya na Balgariya (Sofia: Balgarska Akademiya na Naukite, 1987), 256–57. It is noteworthy that the captions contain, in addition to the names and functions of each of the two men depicted (who held the title of “voivode,” or warlord), the technique, the place, the date of creation, and the place where both portraits are held.
monochrome nature of the black-and-white images, the gaze of the reader glides over the images from page to page with no surprises and without ever stumbling across any irregularities. Differences in date of creation, aesthetics, motifs, color, format, size and the state of original image are all concealed with the use of black and white and transformed into a homogenous, generalized photographic ensemble. The images thereby seem all to have come from the same cast. Any specific qualities, such as distinctive aesthetic features, stylistic differences, or the varying states of preservation of the images are rendered indiscernible in order to create a visual impression of the forward flow of history, merging through the use of shades of black and white the many visual differences into a harmonious, “authentic” historical whole.

Transcendent Images

In spite of or perhaps precisely because of the avid thirst of historiography for photography, regarding the titles of photographic images the historiography is sparse. When portrait photography in the historiography is accompanied by title, it usually contains only the name of the person depicted. Sometimes it includes brief descriptions of the historical role and concrete mission of the person or explanatory or suggestive formulas, such as “Kaiser Napoleon III with his family” or “Hajduk Todor and his sons, who fought heroically in the uprising.” Brief narrative elements underline the documentary quality of the photographs and emphasize the historical objectivity and objectifying force of a photographic image. It is therefore hardly surprising that the captions only rarely include information regarding the date or the place of creation, and even more rarely include the name of the photographer, the dimensions of the picture, the technique, or the place where the original is held. This is why, in general, illustrated works of Bulgarian history have no picture credits.

The absence of information on the origins or the sources of images that are used alongside the textual narratives turns historical photographs into almost transcendent images, regardless of their alleged documentary value and historical accuracy. The people and objects depicted in historical photographs seem to have been captured only because of the natural laws of chemistry on which photography is based. Photographs are presented as pure technical images, which exist independent of time and place. Nor does the historical narrative, which usually lends the visual material its temporal structure, change this abstract character of photographs as timeless images. And the lack of information on
the photographers implies that photographic portraits are not the works of individual artists, but rather merely the products of a purely mechanical process involving only the technical apparatus and the lantern slide. Thus the impression is created that historical photographs were taken without any intervention at all, with a natural delayed release and according to a natural and entirely self-evident approach to portrayal, i.e. purely natural images. The almost incessant reproduction of the same photographic portraits with the same titles helps the apparently “natural” image acquire an incontestable status. Thus the reader of an illustrated historical narrative usually does not put any question regarding the actual circumstances of the creation of the image. One thus has the impression that the historical photographs were intended specifically for later generations, and that they were taken with no other purpose than later to become part of the eventual picture gallery of historical narrative.

**Historiography of Portrait Photography**

Let us invert this logic, and let the pictures determine the historical narrative, which does not only change the historiographical understanding of historical photographic portraits as natural pictures, but also the conception of historical “truth”. Thus we should analyze the frequently reproduced portraits of “Bulgarian national heroes” from the perspective of the history of images. One important question is whether and how knowledge of the pictures structured historical “truth.” Any reorganization or critical reordering of the material is beset with preconditions, so this critical inquiry is done on two levels. The first involves the creation of the photographic portraits, in other words the conditions under which they were produced. The second examines the circulation of the images and their social use, as well as the communicative potential of historical photographic portraits. Thus I consider two aspects of the “fabrication” of historical “truth” that historiography usually overlooks, namely the technology involved in the creation of the images and the social functions of historical photographic portraits.

**Carte-de-visite: Early History of Portrait Photography**

The photographs of “Bulgarian national heroes” are all so-called carte-de-visite photographs. The original images all have the same modest dimensions, on average 9 × 5.5 centimeters, mounted on cardboards that are 10 × 6.5 centimeters.
Usually underneath the portrait the name of the photographer and the site of the studio are written on the cardboard, but this is almost always omitted from the reproductions. The spread of the use of carte-de-visite photographs began in the late 1850s and constituted a worldwide phenomenon. An inexpensive method of creating series of photographic portraits, the carte-de-visit made it possible for the first time in history for simple men and women to have portraits made of themselves. Photographic André Adolphe Eugène Disdéri, who patented the carte-de-visite in Paris in 1854, found a way of taking eight images on a single plate, thereby drastically reducing the cost. From then on painting, drawing, sculpture, and the daguerreotype, the techniques with which the social elites had had their likenesses immortalized, competed with a new, more widely available method of creating portraits. We have this photographic technique to thank for the rise in the visibility of the common man and the common woman. As Helmut Gernsheim comments, the carte-de-visite photographs created the first “picture gallery of the small man.”

This invention, even if referred to pejoratively as the “proletarian form of portraiture,” triggered a momentous mass phenomenon known as “cardomania,” which spread throughout Europe and then America and the world. The influence of cardomania crossed social, cultural, and linguistic borders. Napoleon III, African American slaves in the United States, and Hajduks in the Balkans all found their way, sooner or later, into the ateliers of the photographers and thereby became part of a massive and entirely new business in photographs of human subjects. This historically novel method of “seeing oneself” in pictures had far-reaching consequences for culture and a decisive influence on our concept of historical images.

20 Gernsheim, Geschichte, 366.
21 McCauley, Disdéri, 30.
22 Gernsheim writes of a “carte-de-visite fever” and a “carte-mania,” Geschichte, 358, 360.
23 In the larger photograph ateliers of European cities the average number of carte-de-visite that were produced over the course of six months added up to half a million. See the statistical data in Gernsheim, Geschichte, 361.
The standardized format of the carte-de-visite photograph, which made possible the rationalized and optimized production of portraits, and the standardized poses and accoutrements of the photographic portrait had a homogenizing effect on the social circles in which they circulated. The portraits, which were passed down innumerable times, articulated a unified formula of depiction that was rapidly institutionalized, regardless of place. This is why carte-de-visite photographs from all over the world are so strikingly similar that they can be easily confused. Apart from minor dissimilarities in national motifs, clothing, or symbols, carte-de-visite portraits from even the most far-flung regions of the world hardly differ from one another. It is hardly by chance that the invention of the carte-de-visite photograph and its rapid spread coincided with the rise of national movements. Deborah Poole draws parallels between the market in carte-de-visite portraits as a part of visual capitalism and the role of “print capitalism,” as it is referred to by Benedict Anderson, who characterizes the print media as the motor of national ideology.25 According to Poole, the market in carte-de-visite images strengthened the sense of community among the middle classes and their identity (“sameness”) all over the world, from the bourgeoisie of large urban centers to the ambitious merchants of the provinces and the upper and middle classes of the colonies.26 She writes, “[t]he worldwide rush to purchase carte-de-visite photographs […] reflects the extent to which these small, circulating images of self answered the shared desires and sentiments of what was rapidly emerging as a global class.”27

Images on the March

Within a short period of time, the carte-de-visite photograph had become a constitutive part and expression of the modern lifestyle, progressive thinking, and social prestige. Anyone who regarded himself or herself as part of modern life and “with the times” could not do without the obligatory dozen carte-de-visite with his or her likeness. The possession of one’s own portrait was “a legitimization of identity and proof of a certain social standing.”28 Portraits of family members,

26 Poole, Vision, 112.
27 Ibid.
28 McCauley, Disdéri, 30.
relatives, acquaintances, and friends were hung on the wall or placed on chests of drawers or in albums, becoming objects of private devotion. Portraits of family members, friends, or influential visitors were not only dutifully kept, but were also shown to guests as evidence of the prestige of the family and its social contacts.29

The ideal of earlier photography had been “vérité,”30 in other words truth. The truth of the carte-de-visite photograph was closely intertwined with self-showmanship, theater, and the fashion plate,31 in other words with all the areas of life that involved spectacles and staging, and had little to do with the everyday. It is hardly coincidental that Roland Barthes derives a constitutive part of photographic practice, which he designates with the term *spectrum*, from “spectacles.”32 Like the fashion plate, the carte-de-visite was made “to sell a figure’s good looks and publicly display him to an anonymous viewer.”33 Finally, this was the epoch in which Gottfried Keller wrote his story “Kleider machen Leute”34 (“Clothes Make the Man”), an epoch “in which clothes were the man, and character was evaluated on the basis of external appearances.”35 This display of the self and the act of posing prompted Barthes to characterize photographic portraits as “imposture.”36

*Staged Images*

Early photographic portraiture was an important part of everyday life, but the actual act of having oneself photographed was an unusual and even bothersome, wearying experience. In the nineteenth century, the photographer’s atelier was more than a mere commercial undertaking. In many respects it was comparable to the theater. The place where the subject posed resembled a stage, the photographer was the director, and the act of taking the photograph was momentous, almost something of a ritual. In a studio in which carte-de-visite photographs were taken, one found all the accoutrements of the theater,

29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., 25.
31 Ibid., 23 and 36.
32 Barthes distinguishes three roles in the creation and consumption of a photograph, that of the operator (the photographer who discerns and fashions the image), the spectrum (the object or referent of the photograph), and the spectator (the viewer). Barthes, *Die helle Kammer*, passim.
including coulisses and various accessories for a wide array of tastes, such as rugs, consoles, balustrades, furniture, rocks made of papier mâché, painted backgrounds, bookshelves, musical instruments, weapons, and so on. These were not actual furnishings, but rather elements of décor made specifically for the photographic portrait industry. They had to be light and easy to use, so that the photographer would be able to rearrange them quickly if necessary. The studios also had a wide array of costumes to choose from in order to suit the tastes of their customers.\footnote{On the architecture and the technical and theatrical furnishings of a photograph studio for carte-de-visite portraits see Hermann Wilhelm Vogel, \textit{Lehrbuch der Photographie. Theorie, Praxis und Kunst der Photographie} (Berlin: Oppenheim, 1870), 238 passim. Otto Buehler, \textit{Atelier und Apparat des Photographen} (Weimar: Voigt, 1869).}

From the technical perspective the photographic studio resembled a torture chamber, to borrow a comparison made by Honoré Daumier in his caricature of contemporary photographic portraiture.\footnote{Barthes, \textit{Die helle Kammer}, 21.} The many problems of early photography included long exposure times and the lower sensitivity of the photographic plates to light. The ateliers were therefore vitreous for the most part, like green houses, and photographs could only be taken when the sun was shining, which meant that, as Barthes notes, “the subject had to assume long poses under a glass roof in bright sunlight.” In order to provide some assistance for the person posing, who sometimes had to remain completely motionless for several seconds to a minute, so called head or body rests were invented.\footnote{Barthes, \textit{Die helle Kammer}, 21.} These photographic “prosthetic”\footnote{There were various models of head rests. The best-known was an invention by the British photographer Olivier Sarony. His brother, Napoleon Sarony, who by the late 1860s had become one of the most famous photographers of New York, had a portrait of himself made in the style of the “Bulgarian national heroes” but with a fairly uncommon Ottoman fez. It was to become his most famous self-portrait. An autographed print of this self-portrait was recently auctioned on liveauctioneers.com. The image can be seen here: http://www.liveauctioneers.com/item/17996160_napoleon-sarony-autographed-self-portrait, accessed March 18, 2014. Different models of head clamps are depicted in Vogel, \textit{Lehrbuch}, 242.} was a stand with movable poles that could be adjusted with the use of screws and clamps for the waist and neck. The customer was placed into these clamps and adjustments were made for size and pose. Although the clamps were not supposed to be visible in the photograph, in most of them (and in particular in the depictions of men) the lower poles and the heavy base of the head rest can almost always be seen between the legs of the person posing. But this is merely one, if perhaps the most amusing, of many of the visible signs of the historical “truth” of the photographic portrait of the nineteenth century.
Revolution in the Darkroom

The depictions of “Bulgarian national heroes” provide examples of visible signs of the circumstances of the actual creation of the carte-de-visite portraits. Their notorious passion for striking “heroic” poses in front of the camera was brought into connection with theatrical practice only on the margins, but was therefore understood all the more as a national drive. According to historian Christo Yonkov, author and photo editor of most of the Bulgarian-language historical picture albums, “the apostles of Bulgarian freedom,” in their “heroic poses, garbed in the most unusual, ‘insurrectionary’ uniforms of the theatrical props in studios [...], their theatrical poses and attired with an array of weapons,” merit our sincerest adoration, as most of them would have given “their heads without hesitation for the liberation” of the country. A critical glance at the portraits, however, suffices to reveal that the often extolled national revolution of the Bulgarian nation that we know from the picture albums had little to do with the realities of everyday life. The revolution presented in pictures took place primarily in the darkrooms of the photographers’ studios.

Disguise

Lyuben Karavelov and Vasil Levski, intellectual leaders of the Bulgarian revolutionary movement who were clearly happy to be photographed in “European” suits and not as “military men,” did on occasion pose in those military-style and “national hero” costumes. Karavelov, a publicist and the initiator of the Bulgarian Revolutionary Central Committee, had his picture taken by Belgrade court photographer Anastas Stojanović wearing an otherwise indefinable uniform of caftan, boots, and white Ottoman fez. Levski, who was indisputably the first and greatest national hero of the Bulgarians, was also the first and greatest poser for the camera. A wider array of photographic portraits was taken of him than of any other “Bulgarian national hero.” In works of

43 Anastas Stoyanović, Full-body portrait of Lyuben Karavelov, Belgrade, 1876 (?), Carte-de-visite (10.5 × 6.5 cm), Photo Archives of the National Library “Kiril i Metodij”, Sofia, signed HBKM-BHA C 668.
44 For a new and in-depth account of Vasil Levski as a Bulgarian national hero see Maria Todorova, Bones of Contention: The Living Archive of Vasil Levski and the Making of Bulgaria’s National Hero (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2009).
Bulgarian history, the caption next to his best-known portrait usually says, “Vasil Levski in the uniform of the First Bulgarian Legion in Belgrade, 1862.”

In the photograph, Levski is wearing a uniform that has come to be seen, both in the historiography and in popular imagination, as the uniform of the First Bulgarian legion in Belgrade (Fig. 1). Levski had his photograph taken not in the Serbian capital, but rather in Bucharest in the studio of the most famous photographer in Romania at the time, Carol Popp de Szathmari. Thus the photograph could have been taken at the earliest in 1868, six years after the First Bulgarian Legion in Belgrade. The white uniform, with dark linings on the collar and the sleeves and lace fastenings on the chest, sleeves, and pants, is an imitation of Hungarian alterations to the uniforms of the Hussars of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Complete with leather boots and the Hussar’s fur cap, to which a feather has been added, on the balustrade against which leans a rifle, it looks deceptively authentic.

Other, less well-known men, for instance Branislav Veleshki (1934–1919), had photographs taken of themselves wearing the same uniform as the one seen in the photograph of Levski, though they used different attributes and coulisses and were ultimately less convincing. Veleshki had himself photographed in the same “Hussar’s” uniform, but as an infantryman with all the accoutrements, including a knapsack and of course the obligatory opanci (traditional peasant shoes commonly worn at the time in southeastern Europe), with a painted landscape in the background and a seemingly misplaced balustrade (Fig. 2). Dimitar Nikolov (1833–1868) also had himself photographed by Szathmari, but he chose a more “Ottoman” uniform, though with a painting of a somber landscape (a park) in the background, identical with the one in the portrait of Veleshki, and the same saber and rifle that figure in the depiction of Levski as a “Legionnaire.”

45 The original is not accessible to the public and is held in the National Archives in Sofia.
46 Krumka Sharova, one of the most prominent scholars on Levski, entitled the picture “Vasil Levski in the so-called uniform of the First Bulgarian Legion, Bucharest, 1868–1869” (my italics). In a footnote to this title, however, she makes the following remark: “Actually the uniform is a Hungarian type and probably one of the props in Szathmari’s studio.” See Krumka Sharova et al., Vasil Levski. Dokumenti, avtografi, diktuvani tekstove i dokumenti, sastaveni s uchastieto na Levski, prepisi, fotokopiya, publikatsii i snimki, 2 vols. (Sofia: Obshnobulgarski komitet “Vasil Levski”/Narodna Biblioteka “Sv. Sv. Kiril i Metodij”, 2000–2009), vol. 1, 658, document number 250.
47 According to the Photo Archives of the National Library “Kiril i Metodij”, Sofia the photograph dates to 1862, but this is highly unlikely.
48 Carol Pop de Szathmari, Full-body portrait of Dimitar Nikolov, Bucharest, undated, Carte-de-visite (10.5 × 6 cm), Photo Archives of the National Library “Kiril i Metodij”, Sofia, Signed НБКМ-БИА С 51.
Along with garb and various props, pose was another crucial element of the staging of the subject for the camera. The poses were determined to a large extent by the head rest, which was used in order to enable the subject to remain still for the exposure, and the subject had to adjust himself to it. This explains why, from the perspective of the poses, there is hardly any difference between the various carte-de-visite portraits. The only surviving portrait of Nikola Vojvodov (1842–1867) depicts the young man (who was killed by the Ottoman police) in a Hussar uniform in front of a painted coulisse and grandiose draperies (Fig. 3). Vojvodov is facing the camera, his gaze is somber and earnest, his right arm is leaning on a console over which a heavy curtain has been thrown. He ostentatiously shows the rings on the fingers of his right hand, in which he is
holding a telescope, while in his left hand he is holding a saber. The cockade on his cap is disproportionately large, and the boots are not real, rather spats have been put over the shoes in order to make them resemble riding boots. The lush ornamentation of the curtain, with the two heavy tassels, clashes a bit with the painted landscape in the background, but at the same time harmonizes aesthetically with the richly decorated hussar uniform, which is also adorned with tassels. The bare wooden floor and the stiff pose stand in sharp contrast to the landscape, the draperies, and the fancy clothing. The picture seems to strive to take its place in the tradition of depictions of the ruling class as a portrayal of a great commander, but given the theatricalness of the image the composition leans towards the kitschy and the trivial.
Karadzha also had himself photographed in the same pose and wearing the same uniform (Fig. 4). Unlike Voyvodov, however, Karadzha dispensed with the gaudy drapery, the telescope, the rings, and the additional ornamental clothing and spats. The other details of the portrayal, however, are identical, including the console, the landscape-coulisse, and the wooden floor, not to mention the uniform and the pose. Karadzha faces the camera, his right hand is placed on the console, and his fist is clenched. In his left hand he is holding the same ceremonial saber as that of his compatriot, and his left leg (like Voyvodov’s left leg) is placed a little bit in front and to the side of his right leg in order to hide the apparatus that is helping him maintain his pose for the duration of the exposure. Only the differing states of the two photographs prompt one to discern the differences, instead of the similarities, between them. They were made in the atelier of photographer Franz Duschek in Bucharest. On the basis of the clothing and the fact that both men died in 1868, they must have been taken either in 1867 or 1868. Both men must have gone to the atelier in preparation for the armed acts of resistance in order to have themselves immortalized in their future role as commanders.

Uniform Series

Thus entire uniform series came into being. These portrayal series offer insights not only into the theatrical modes of portrait photography, but also into the preferences and the self-conceptions, ambitions, and agenda of an entire social group. If one thinks of Pierre Bourdieu’s thesis regarding the social uses of photography, the series of photographs of the Bulgarian national heroes garbed in uniforms constitutes a “veritable sociogram” of an entire milieu, together with the visual culture that created it. A glance at the carte-de-visite portraits of some of the more popular “Bulgarian national heroes” who all had themselves photographed in the same uniform in the atelier of Theodorovits & Hitrow in Bucharest suffices to give one an impression of the “revolutionary” tastes of the Bulgarians of the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century (Fig. 5). In the 1970s, Christo Yonkov identified a highly pertinent problem, “The April revolutionaries listed here had themselves photographed in the same uniform, which looks different on each of

them depending on the sizes of their bodies. […]” 50 The three portraits of figures wearing an officer’s uniform are convincing because of the cavalry boots, which give the staging a touch of elegance, even if the embellishments on the pant-legs were added later as drawings by hand. In contrast, the three men who are posing in opanci are a bit comic, since the jackets and pants are visibly too big for them. Also, in almost all of the photographs in this series the foot of the apparatus used to hold the body motionless is clearly visible. 51

The observation that a group of “Bulgarian national heroes” had photographs taken of themselves wearing the same uniform and in the same

51 The whole series is published ibid.
pose should prompt even the most patriotic historian to question the “truth” of historical photographic portraits. In this case, the series of portrayals of “heroes” wearing the same uniform makes it clear that the military garb of the Romanian border soldiers was particularly popular among the men who belonged to the clientele of Theodorovits & Hitrow in Bucharest in the 1870s, as were the weapons. At least this is indicated by a remark written on the back of one of the photographs.52 Whether or not they went on their own or as a

Figure 4: Franz Duschek: Full-body portrait of Stefan Karadzha, Bucharest, before 1868, Carte-de-viste (10.5 × 6.5 cm), later colorized, Photo Archives of the National Library “Kiril i Metodij”, Sofia, Signature НБКМ-БИА С 657.

52 See the reverse side of the portrait of Nikola Obretenov (1849–1939) by Theodorovits & Hitrow, Bucharest, 1875–76 (?), Carte-de-viste (10.5 × 6.5 cm), Photo Archive of the National Library “Kiril i Metodij”, Sofia, Signed НБКМ-БИА С 84. As in the case of the furnishings, the costumes, and first and foremost the military uniforms, were not real garments, but rather costumes made for a photographer’s studio.
group to have themselves immortalized in the role of a Romanian border soldier remains an open question.

We do know, however, that the carte-de-visite portraits should be understood as a pictorial expression and indeed assertion of a certain social prestige that the person depicted had achieved, or at least so the portrayal would suggest. The most visible sign of this prestige in the petty bourgeois circles of the cities in the European territories of the Ottoman Empire was the military uniform. “Sabers, epaulette, and feather caps”\(^53\) were among the signs of modern statehood, a rational social system, and discipline and order. The “foreign” uniforms gave

the figures in the portraits, who were subjects of the Ottoman Empire, an
air of importance, and they ensured that the people wearing them would be
admired, attracting the gaze of the viewer with their shimmer. Zahari Stoyanov,
the first chronicler of the April Uprising, offers a lovely description of the
enchanting charm of even the simplest school uniform: “The heroes of the
day were the people who returned from the school of medicine in Bucharest or
Constantinople, or the School of Commerce in Vienna, or any kind of school
that had a uniform, two or three gold buttons, a cap with flourishes.”54 A uniform
was a clear sign of success and social advancement. The uniform filled the person
who wore it with pride and won him the respect of others. It was a symbol of
power and a forward-looking attitude, a sign of a “new era [and a new] time, in
which even a Bulgarian carries a saber.”55 The carte-de-visite portrait was the
perfect representation of the vision of a subject of the Ottoman Empire who
sought to portray himself as a modern man. It provided a visual delineation of
this masculine fantasy and, because of the apparent reliability of the photograph
as a documentary image, invested it with authenticity.

The Facebook of Nineteenth Century or an Attempt at a Conclusion

The carte-de-visite portraits represented an important implement in modern
communication and social networking. The relatively inexpensive photographs
were referred to as carte-de-visite for a reason. They served as useful tools when
people sought to present themselves and establish their places in various social
contexts and hierarchies. In addition to this practical use, they also had what
could be referred to as an exchange value. As they fit easily into someone’s pocket,
carte-de-visite portraits were predestined to be traded, and they thereby acquired
an important social function and an equally important role in the expression
and communication of status. The portraits circulated through a wide array of
channels. They were sent by mail, exchanged, given as gifts, and even collected.
People used them to introduce themselves or to court a beloved, or they simply
dedicated them to friends. The circulation of a portrait guaranteed recognition
and membership in certain social circles and groups. The carte-de-visite rapidly
became a meaningful social medium, without which one could hardly hope
to participate in the social life of the time. It was the precursor to the social
networking tool of our time, a kind of Facebook of the nineteenth century.

54 Ibid.
55 Ibid., 9.
In addition to their function as representations of uniformed masculinity, the portraits of the “Bulgarian national heroes” had significance as a medium of communication that must not be underestimated. This is indicated by the dedications on the backs of the portraits, elegant calligraphy written in ink with a quill. Like many of his contemporaries, Toma Kardzhiev (1850–1887), a teacher and the organizer of a local revolutionary committee, wrote a dedication on his portrait to Dimitar Gorov, a Bulgarian entrepreneur in Romania and a patron of radical Bulgarian national circles: “To my friend D. Gorov as a sign of truthfulness.”

From the perspective of elegance and imagination, Kardzhiev’s portrait could hardly have been outdone. He is garbed in a hussar’s uniform, with saber and gun, and is standing on a checkered rug in front of a neutral background. The dedication is dated 14 May, 1876, just after the bloody suppression of the April Uprising, in which Kardzhiev participated only indirectly. He was photographed in Bucharest by Babet Engels.

The function of the portraits of “Bulgarian national heroes” was certainly by no means limited to their role as a mediator to the social network of radical nationalistic circles or a tool in the maintenance of ties to people who shared their ideas. The portraits were clearly also central components of the logistics of insurgency. The circulation of the portraits went far beyond the private sphere or the narrow social network. As Poole observes, “As a form of social currency […] the carte de visite circulated through channels much broader than the immediate network of friends and acquaintances […]”. The photographs of “Bulgarian national heroes” were intended to saturate all the layers of society with the ideology that they embodied in a manner that, at the time, was entirely new. Vasil Levski, who had considerable experience in the art of self-invention through photography, recognized the potential of the carte-de-visite portrait, which could be easily and inexpensively reproduced, in the efforts to kindle agitation. He put the carte-de-visite portrait to use in order to attract and recruit comrades-in-arms. In his letters he often instructed his fellow-fighters to have portraits of him wearing “legionnaire” uniform circulated among the people.

56 See the back of the portrait of Toma Kardzhiev by Babet Engels, Bucharest, 1876 (?), Carte-de-visite (10.5 × 6.5 cm), Photo Archive of the National Library “Kiril i Metodij”, Sofia, Signed НБКМ-БИА С 99. My italics.
57 Poole, *Vision*, 112.
the depictions of “Bulgarian national heroes.” Finally, the carte-de-visite enabled the national revolutionaries to widen their spheres of influence and extend the revolutionary network beyond cultural, social and linguistic borders.

Once set in motion, the circulation of the portraits of the “Bulgarian national heroes” did not necessarily prompt the observer to take action, but it did prompt many observers to follow suit. This explains the striking rise in the number of photographic portraits that were done in the widest array of military uniforms, photographs that are stored by the hundreds in the Bulgarian archives. Paraphrasing Roland Barthes, the photograph invests the subject, depicted in a military uniform, with at least a metaphorical existence as a “national hero.” And it was the uniform that allowed the historical portraits to become part of historiography, and through historiography they became part of culture, immortalized one more time in photograph albums, this time as “genuine” national heroes. In the end, the iconographic and aesthetic similarities of the portraits, for instance the ubiquitous uniform, created a welcome occasion for historiography to craft a homogenous collective image in order to create the impression today of a self-contained, unified military movement for national liberation. The pictures were dislodged from their original “authentic” context in order to ascribe a different “truth” to them, and thereby also a different interpretation that in the end integrated these innumerable uniform portraits in a homogenous image of history as the embodiments of an “authentic” national body.

**Bibliography**


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59 Compare with Barthes, who regards any picture that has been included in an album as having passed through the filter of culture. *Die belle Kammer*, 25.


Sharova, Krumka, and Kirila Vazvazova-Karateodorova, ed. *Vasil Levski. Dokumenti, avtografi, diktuvani tekstove i dokumenti, sastaveni s ucbasteto na Levski, prepisi, fotokopiya, publikatsii i snimki* [Vasil Levski. Documents, Autographs, Texts and Documents

List of Illustrations
Sharova et al., Levski, 658, document number 250   Figure 1
Sofia, Photo Archives of the National Library “Kiril i Metodij”   Figure 2–5

Translated from German by Thomas Cooper