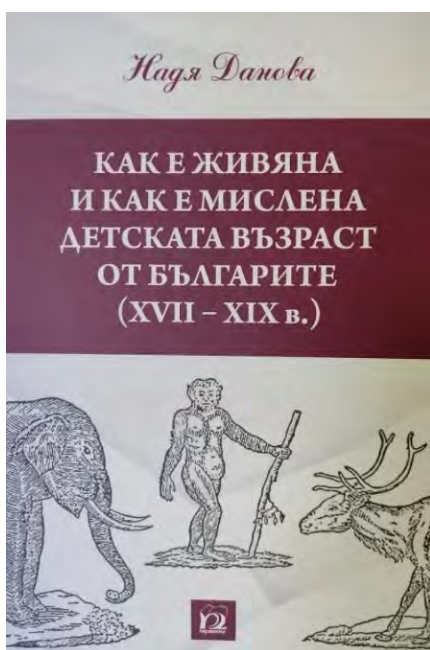


BOOK REVIEW

Kristina Popova, PhD
Associate Professor,
„Medical Anthropology” Unit,
Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic
Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences
[kristina.popova@iefem.bas.bg], ORCID: 0000-0002-2825-7938

The Age of “Tender Nails”: How Bulgarians Discovered Childhood in the 17th-19th Centuries¹



Abstract: *The book How Childhood Was Lived and Thought about by Bulgarians presents ideas on childhood in Bulgarian discourse of the 17th-19th centuries through an analysis of texts by the most prominent Enlightenment figures.*

Keywords: *childhood; Ottoman rule; 17th-19th centuries; Enlightenment.*

Danova. N. (2023). How Childhood Was Lived and Thought by Bulgarians (17th – 19th Centuries), Sofia: “Paradigma”, ISBN: 978-954-326-509-1, 690 p. [in Bulgarian].

<https://paradigma.bg/book/1531-kak-e-jivjana-i-kak-e-mislana-detska>
Copyrights: © Paradigma

¹ The research is within the ERC Project "Taming the European Leviathan: The Legacy of Post-War Medicine and the Common Good". The project has received funding from the European Research Council under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant agreement No. 854503).

The Balkan Enlightenment has not yet been studied through the lens of the history of childhood. In her book *How Childhood Was Lived and Thought by Bulgarians (17th – 19th Centuries)*,² Nadya Danova highlights the child as a central figure of the Balkan Enlightenment. Under the conditions of Ottoman rule at that time, Bulgarian society “discovered” childhood. It entered public discourse, and questions of upbringing and education became key themes in the writings of Enlightenment thinkers.

The topic of childhood during this period of Ottoman rule in the Balkans has been of interest to Nadya Danova for many years. The book is the result of her extensive research into both the history of childhood and the processes of Balkan and Bulgarian modernization. Yet her motivation is not purely academic. She is also driven by contemporary concerns, noting that many present-day attitudes toward children bear traces of earlier centuries. With this book, she seeks to raise awareness of these enduring legacies while also dismantling the romantic attitude and “elevated tone toward the past.”

For her research, Danova examines inscriptions in church books, manuscripts, calendars, school regulations, periodicals, and unpublished documents. She reinterprets numerous well-known texts “through the prism of the history of childhood.” Danova situates her work within a broader scholarly tradition, recalling that the history of childhood as a discipline began with Philippe Ariès’s seminal *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*. Ariès argued that in the medieval past, children were regarded much like other dependent groups in society. The rise of the nuclear family and the spread of schooling from the 14th – 15th centuries onward gradually established childhood as a distinct, protected phase of life. These changes created new emotional bonds but also introduced techniques of discipline and control. From this perspective, the history of childhood emerges as a branch of social history that has revitalized historical scholarship by bridging diverse fields: demography, medicine, linguistics, art history, women’s and gender history, and more. The debates sparked by Ariès’s book helped refine understandings of childhood and led to richer, more nuanced reconstructions of children’s lives in the past. For the first time in Bulgarian historical literature, Danova provides a detailed historiographic survey of this field, demonstrating that significant expertise has already accumulated in both Bulgaria and the wider Balkans.

² Данова, Н. (2023). *Как е живяна и как е мислена детската възраст от българите (XVII - XIX в.)*. София: Парадигма.

She also examines how European Enlightenment conceptions of childhood interacted with those of Balkan and Bulgarian writers – often emerging in a context of suspicion toward, yet gradual acceptance of, Western ideas. What unfolds is a dynamic network of exchanges that shaped new attitudes toward children, while modern norms spread into the Balkans unevenly and at a slow pace, yet always in dialogue with European models. For the author’s large-scale project, it was necessary to present the interrelationships between the European Enlightenment, the Greek, Serbian and Bulgarian processes of modernization. As one of the leading experts on cultural transfer during the Balkan Enlightenment, she maps the multitude of connections – translations, borrowings, adaptations. The result is a rich and coherent picture of children’s place in society, at the crossroads of Orthodox religious traditions, foreign educational influences (French, Italian, German, English, American), national aspirations, and everyday attitudes towards children. At the core of Nadya Danova’s book lies a detailed study of the Bulgarian case, which situates it within the broader framework of the European Enlightenment and its educational views on childhood. Bulgarian authors did not yet know how to characterize and distinguish childhood, often designating it as “tender nails.” This bodily metaphor was adopted from Byzantine literature and some modern Greek authors, and persisted into the first half of the 19th century. Gradually, however, the notion of childhood acquired greater depth and complexity. From the early 1800s, the powerful drive to adopt European models brought a constant influx of new attitudes toward children and their upbringing, though these were accompanied by deep anxieties. Many writers feared that European ideas might erode traditional values, provoke social disorder, or destabilize families. Danova demonstrates that such cultural transformations did not unfold linearly. Decades passed before the ideas of Erasmus of Rotterdam, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Johann Pestalozzi, François Fénelon, Thomas Hobbes, Benjamin Franklin, and later Friedrich Froebel reached Bulgaria. Their works were often translated only in fragments, modified, or left unpublished for long periods. For example, Rousseau’s *Émile, or On Education* (1762) – a cornerstone of European Enlightenment thought – was translated into Greek by the Bulgarian Nikola Piccolo as early as 1811, but the manuscript remained unpublished. Although Balkan intellectuals knew and cited the work, it only appeared in print in Greek in 1880, in Serbian in 1872 (after circu-

lating as a manuscript from 1864), in Romanian in 1913, and in Bulgarian in 1906. Translations of Pestalozzi and other authors followed similarly delayed trajectories.

Tracing the evolution of the ideas on childhood, Danova analyzes texts of some twenty Bulgarian writers from the 18th and 19th centuries – figures who laid the foundations for modern attitudes toward children and schooling. By reconstructing their biographies and intellectual environments, Danova highlights the formative influence of their education, personal libraries, and cultural contacts. These individuals – priests, doctors, merchants, writers, and publishers – shared a deep commitment to questions of childhood and education. Among them were pioneering figures: Nikola Piccolo, translator of *Émile* (1811); Petar Beron, author of the first Bulgarian primer (1824); Neofit Rilski, compiler of the first Bulgarian grammar (1835); Ivan Bogorov, founder of the first Bulgarian newspaper (1846); Konstantin Fotinov, publisher of the first magazine (1844); Rashko Blaskov, editor of the first pedagogical periodical (1872); Petko Slaveykov, editor of the first children's magazine (1871); Sava Dobroplodni, who published the first book on children's health (1846); Hristo Danov, founder of the first Bulgarian publishing house (1857) and others. Their biographies show the crucial mediating role of Greek education and literature in transmitting Enlightenment ideas to the Balkans, bridging Western European thought and Balkan intellectual life. The analysis reveals the intersection of the different cultural influences that resulted in ambivalent views on childhood. Most Bulgarian Enlighteners perceived the child as marked by 'original sin', but also as a "white book" or "clean slate" in the Aristotle sense, transmitted through European Enlightenment translations. They shared penal practices and tirelessly recommended beating and other punishments as tools for education and morality, justifying them with biblical texts and presenting the rod as a plant "emerging from paradise." At the same time, all these authors emphasized the importance of childhood as a period in a person's life, the need for special care and activities for children, and expressed modern views on the role of the secular school over religious instruction. In the 19th century, the discourse on children expanded significantly, especially in periodicals. Issues such as upbringing, children's health, vaccination, high mortality rates, the importance of children plays, and toys entered public debate. Alongside textbooks, children's literature – translations, adaptations, and original texts – appeared. Yet, children continued to be treated pri-

marily as objects of influence rather than equal participants, and corporal punishment remained closely tied to notions of upbringing. Most Enlightenment-era Bulgarian authors, influenced by Fénelon, Condorcet, Pestalozzi, and others, recognized the importance of girls' education, but still confined women's roles to home and family. An exception was Lyuben Karavelov, the revolutionary writer and publicist, who argued that women and men share the same intellectual capacities and should receive equal education. He advocated raising boys and girls alike to be lively, intelligent, and enterprising – rather than subdued through punishment.

The history of childhood is usually seen in close relation to the history of women. Nadya Danova's book gives us the opportunity to read the 'birth' of childhood in Bulgarian society as a male project, part of the history of the male writers who shaped attitudes toward children in early Bulgarian modernity.

How Childhood Was Lived and Thought by Bulgarians (17th – 19th Centuries) reveals the value of a deep historical perspective on the study of the history of childhood. It contributes to awareness of both historical change and the continuity of the experience of childhood experience, as well as to public sensitivity and responsibility toward children. The book also shows how the history of childhood, as a scientific field, can not only offer comparative approaches beyond the divided terrain of national histories in the Balkans and Europe, but also show the close interconnections and exchanges of ideas and attitudes toward family, childhood and children.