

## ***MEDICAL HERITAGE AND MEMORY: INSTITUTIONS, INFRASTRUCTURES, ARTIFACTS***

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### **Re-Ottomanizing Modernity: Domesticating Balneology in Early to Mid-20th-Century Bulgaria<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract:** *The decades after Bulgaria’s liberation from Ottoman rule (a continuous process beginning in 1878) were marked by the construction of a new national identity across multiple terrains: the state apparatus, political alliances, the social and cultural realms, and most visibly – the built environment. Bulgaria’s transformation during this period is described as simultaneously de-Ottomanization and Europeanisation (Lory, 2015), connoting the erasure or replacement of one system of governance by another. By looking at two important instruments of the modernizing state – healthcare and hygiene, I demonstrate that rather than abrupt replacement of the “Oriental” by the “Western”, a gradual adaptation took place, with resilient cultural practices often persisting in less visible ways. I focus on several case studies of Ottoman public baths and the tensions emerging around the control over thermal waters. While this natural resource was seen by authorities and citizens as a catalyst for urban renewal, such aspirations often clashed with the perceived symbolic dissonance of existing infrastructures dating from the Ottoman period. I argue that the heterogeneous solutions produced by this friction blur the modern/archaic, hygienic/unclean, Western/Oriental binaries and illustrate how Bulgaria’s modernization was a non-linear process of adaptation and absorption of*

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*preceding cultural practices, which aligned modern technology along the contours of pre-existing ecologies of care and healing.*

**Keywords:** *architecture; Balkan nationalisms; Balkans; balneology; de-Ottomanization; Europeanization; healthcare; hygiene; modernization; public baths; water.*

## Introduction

Public baths, one of the most remarkable accomplishments of the Ottoman architectural legacy, were erected in the vicinity of dozens of thermal springs<sup>2</sup> and freshwater sources across the territory of present-day Bulgaria between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. These complex infrastructures mediated public access to a valuable natural resource and defined the boundaries of its uses. After Bulgaria's liberation from Ottoman rule in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>3</sup> the country embarked on a course of modernization that saw the rapid elimination of many of these buildings. The architecture and urban planning policies implemented by national and regional governments became a cartography of tensions between the country's Ottoman past and its European aspirations. The changes to the physical environment in early to mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century Bulgaria form the backbone of this inquiry. It focuses on the public bath as a building typology of primary civic importance, which resides at the crossing between healthcare policy, natural resource exploitation, and architecture and urban planning visions.

Engineers, medical practitioners, and municipal representatives commonly attached comparisons such as archaic vs. modern or unclean vs. hygienic to the Oriental/Western dichotomy in various documents concerning the fate of Ottoman-era buildings. The experts' evaluations of Ottoman baths prior to their demolition reflected identical political-ideological binaries. Yet, the everyday utilitarian functions of these centuries-old structures depended on quite the opposite: elaborate engineering of water flows and air currents, documented in the field sketches of Bulgarian architects and engineers – often the only record produced before their razing.

Balneology is a medical discipline which gained prominence in mid-19th-century Western Europe by promoting the medicinal and therapeutic use of thermal waters. Its introduction in Bulgaria involved

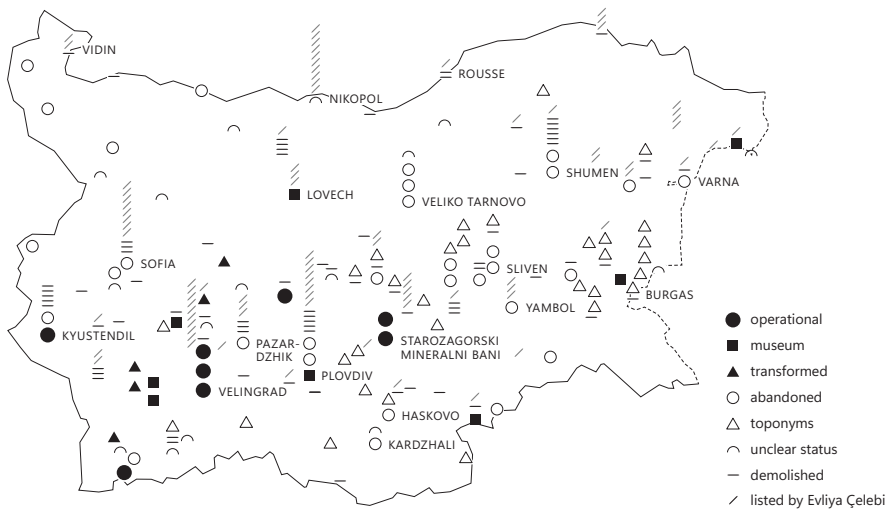
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<sup>2</sup> “Thermal” and “mineral” will be used interchangeably. While these qualities do not coexist in certain cases, thermal baths are called mineral in Bulgaria. They are always supplied by thermal springs with mineral content.

<sup>3</sup> A continuous process starting in 1878 and formally concluding in 1908. See Lory (2015).

the taming of the country's hydrothermal resources, or in other words, embedding them within an institutional and legal framework. This process extended into the practices of healing and bathing in public baths, which were to be "Europeanized" by means of infrastructural iterations intended to better reflect the healing methods of Western balneology.

"Re-ottomanizing modernity" refers to the uneven results produced by these parallel and mutually constitutive processes. While the Ottoman architectural legacy was visibly and largely obliterated across most of the country, I argue that the resilient customs of utilizing thermal waters for healing and hygiene were carried from the Ottoman period into the post-liberation decades and foregrounded the planning of Bulgaria's "modern" balneotherapeutic facilities. The public baths became an unlikely contested terrain between government policies and demographic realities and underlined the important civic function these infrastructures continued to perform.



**Fig. 1. Diagram of Ottoman public baths on the territory of present-day Bulgaria.<sup>4</sup>**

<sup>4</sup> A short list of referenced resources: Boykov (2012, 2015, 2018); Boykov, Kirpovska (2020); Çelebi (2014); Gyuleva (2019); Dundarov (1958); Mikov (2012); Yalamov (2010); Yanchev, Kirpovska (2019); Vakif.bg (last visited 2022); in addition to articles in local periodicals, online resources, cadastral data and fieldwork conducted

## Literature

While the period of Ottoman rule remains outside the scope of this article, a number of studies were essential for understanding the architectural and social legacy inherited by the Bulgarian state in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Harbova's research (1991) on architecture and urban planning in the Ottoman Empire (15<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> century) in the former and present-day territories of Bulgaria provides a detailed overview of the elements comprising the Ottoman urban fabric. The catalogue of several dozen diagrammatic floor plans and sections of steam and thermal baths (*hamam* and *kaplica*) illustrates the technological complexity and functional diversity within the typology and serves as an important comparative tool. Mikov (2012) offers a more versatile overview of Bulgaria's Ottoman baths, including a brief discussion of their social function. Case studies by Boykov (2008, 2015, 2018, 2021), Boykov and Kiprovska (2020), Dimitrova (2017), Gradeva (2023), Tabakov (1986), Yanchev and Kiprovska (2019) provide an informative reference for the history of individual buildings and development of towns under Ottoman rule. The above, in addition to primary sources such as Azmanov (1940), Çelebi (2014), Dimitrov (1939), Dundarov (1958), Klisarov (1969), Monedzhikova (1946) and fieldwork conducted across more than twenty sites, became the foundation of a map of Ottoman public baths across the territory of present-day Bulgaria. This reference tool supports my argument that Bulgaria's extensive network of 20<sup>th</sup>-century balneotherapeutic facilities rests upon a pre-existing network of Ottoman public baths.

Kiel's seminal research on the Ottoman legacy in Bulgaria and the Balkans (1985, 1990, 2013) addresses multiple domains – art and architecture, settlement and demography, the economy and administrative structures. Most importantly, he offers a critical perspective on Bulgaria's 20<sup>th</sup>-century “vehemently anti-Turkish [historiographic] current”, and challenges persistent mythological narratives embedded in the national historical canon. Kiel locates the negative perception of the Ottoman legacy in the context of Balkan nationalisms, a theme I explore in conjunction with the construction of the Muslim as the “other” (Ar-etov, 2011; Todorova, 2011). In a similar vein, Hartmuth's illuminating essay (2008) is a concise overview of major inconsistencies in Balkan historiography of art and architecture. Through a series of examples, he outlines future research trajectories to address the center-periphery

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between December 2020 and August 2024. On diagram making, see Burrows et al. (2025).

power imbalance in the assessment of monuments, the “nostrification”<sup>5</sup> of heritage, and crucially for this article – understanding architecture as a significantly richer source of evidence and an “expression of legacy”, as opposed to the prevalent descriptive and stylistic approach which tends to de-contextualize buildings.

The relegation of the Ottoman to the ambiguous categories of the “backward” and the “unclean” was formalized through state-sanctioned policies designed to liberate the country from traces of its Oriental past. The concept of *de-Ottomanization* was first introduced by Lory (2015) as the process of “[e]radicating the markers of an Ottoman memory,” which unfolds in parallel to a process of *Europeanization*. Stanoeva (2013) examines the modernization of Bulgaria’s capital, pointing to the erasure not only of the physical traces of the “Oriental,” but also of places seen as a “symbolic arena of urban life in the Ottoman town”, such as outdoor markets. This process was not unique to Bulgaria and affected multiple domains, as demonstrated in the edited volume by Keridis and Kiesling (2020) on Hellenization and the exodus of the Muslim community in Thessaloniki (Vogli, 2020; Tsitselikis, 2020; Bastéa and Hastaoglou-Martinidis, 2020, see also Lagopolous, 2005). These studies illustrate the misalignment between formal pledges for protection of the rights of ethnic minorities and the structural challenges which led to the ethnic homogenization of the city (Zarakol, 2020). The links between nationalism and urban transformation across several locations in Greece are further explored by Koumaridis (2006), who describes identical patterns of urban “regeneration” through de-Ottomanization that employed ‘Turkish’ as a synonym for “backward”.

The Europeanization projects of the young Balkan nation states were subject to internal criticism and tensions, emerging from the adoption of Western institutional models and cultural and social practices perceived as alien and “modernization from above,” as examined by Mishkova and Daskalov (2013). Todorova (1994) categorizes different spheres of Ottoman legacy in the Balkans and analyzes their lasting presence or abrupt disappearance, placing the built environment in the latter category. In this article, through a series of microhistories, I examine what appears to be an exception – a gradual departure from what was perceived as “Oriental” architecture within a specific building ty-

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<sup>5</sup> “Nostrification” as the appropriation of an “otherwise externalised heritage” and its embedding into a historical narrative portraying it as part of a different national tradition (Hartmuth, 2008).

pology. Following Hartmuth's methodology (2008), I approach architecture as a convergence of resources, policies and institutional and civic actors – *a process*, rather than a fixed material entity.

Finally, these diverse fields of scholarship are contextualized within Bulgaria's healthcare policies and demographics to better understand why one architectural typology proved significantly more resilient than others originating from the same period (Sudár, 2004). I propose a hypothesis based on studies by Angelova (2008), Baloutzova (2011), Dimitrova (2018) and Popov (2009), which examine the urban-rural divide, levels of access to healthcare and health insurance, and importantly, sanitation policies enacted through architecture and urban planning initiatives (see also Stoilova et al., 2014; 2016) framing the Ottoman buildings as sources of disease to be removed. Whether the objectives of "Europeanization" were achieved, I examine by looking at the history of two balneoresorts in Germany, often mentioned in early to mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century periodicals in Bulgaria – Bad Nauheim and Baden-Baden (Coenen, 2008; Hamm and Kübler, 2007).

The analytical lens suggested in this article, while seemingly drawing on versatile spheres of knowledge, has its limitations given the complexity of histories woven into the body of a building. At its current stage, this research explores the potential of material traces to unveil neglected continuities.

### **Methodology and Sources**

This article proceeds from the premise that architecture and its social history are mutually constitutive and should be examined in parallel as two elements of a single unit. It comprises a series of case studies and examples falling into three categories: preserved, transformed and demolished (or rebuilt) public thermal baths. Central to this study are the transformed buildings, exemplified by the extended case study of the Ottoman bath in Yambol, which I chose for the relatively well-preserved records of its adaptation. The documents at the regional archives in Yambol contain evidence of the struggles over the control of a newly discovered natural resource (a thermal spring), the different agency permitted to different ethnic and religious groups, the structural discrimination and the volatility of the de-Ottomanization and Europeanisation claims.

An interdisciplinary approach foregrounds this research, amplifying a polyvocal historical narrative based on diverse material traces.

The main body of primary sources consists of municipal archives, examined alongside popular local periodicals reporting on the same events.

Visual ethnography and the young field of digital humanities are important components of this research, providing both original investigative tools and uncovering valuable data inaccessible through textual documents alone. In addition, various digital tools were deployed in synthesizing otherwise voluminous data in simple diagrams. Mapping the network of Ottoman public baths across the territory of present-day Bulgaria provided an important layer of information on the significance and density of these infrastructures. 3D modelling and isometric diagrams proved to be effective tools for comparative analysis. The exploration of architectural morphologies, while not central to this research, also benefits from the above methods.

A key challenge of this ongoing research is the expanding scope of disciplines that could potentially be drawn in “reading” the processes under discussion, as the newly uncovered data open new discursive and disciplinary perspectives. In this context, the article aims less to offer firm conclusions than to invite further debate about possible avenues for inquiry.

### **De-Ottomanizing Hygiene. The Case of Yambol Mineral Bath**

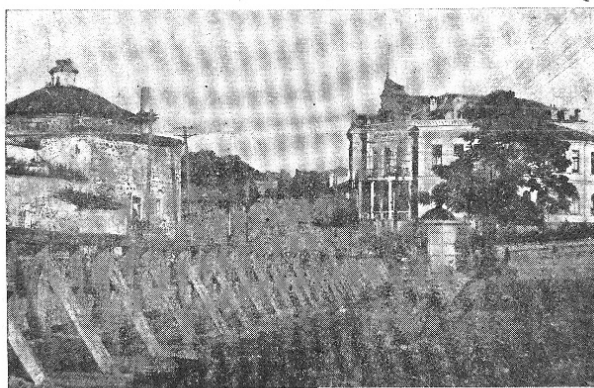
In 1933, Müniver Rasimova Sadıkova, a woman from the Muslim minority in the town of Yambol, rented a water drill from the town’s municipality in order to excavate a well in the yard of her property. She owned a functioning Ottoman public bath,<sup>6</sup> inherited from her late husband, and hoped its operational costs would be reduced if a water source were found. The drill reached an aquifer, which unexpectedly produced hot water. In the following months, she corresponded with experts in the capital, trying to determine whether the water source was mineral, whether she could claim ownership, and if she could obtain rights over its exploitation (DA-Yambol, F. 47K, op. 2, a.e. 1, 2).

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<sup>6</sup> In his 17<sup>th</sup>-century travelogue, Evliya Çelebi mentions three public baths in Yambol near the river Tundzha, the largest built in the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Çelebi, 2014), likely the one still preserved today. The location of another is recorded in a cadastral drawing from 1947 (DA-Yambol, F. 47K, op. 2, a.e. 6), marked as the “Roman bath” or “Karanazh kurna” (DA-Yambol, F. 47K, op. 2, a.e. 2). Its remains are currently buried under a road. The author was unable to find data about the third building by the time this article was completed.

News of the discovery, leaked by her assistant, spread across the town. A citizens committee was established shortly after, with the generous aim of assisting the Municipality in planning the construction of modern infrastructure to facilitate public access to the newly discovered “natural treasure.” By that time, Bulgarian law had declared hot and cold mineral waters state property (*Durzhaven vestnik*, January 13, 1891), subject to exploitation rules designed to protect the public interest while limiting the possibility for private use. The progress of the ensuing construction campaign was reported in nearly every issue of the local newspaper “*Trakiets*”, usually on the front page, often in more than one article per issue, and covered in meticulous technical detail.

## ТУРСКАТА БАНЯ и околностите ѝ



Мѣстото, кждето се правятъ проучванията и издирванията за минерална вода въ града ни. Пробити сж вече въ квартала около банята 12 сонди и една шахта. Гражданството спонтанно проявява своето единопдушие и самодейностъ, за прѣвъ пжтъ следъ толкова години на бездействие и разруха следъ войната.

Това може само да радва всѣки ратуващъ за напредъка на Ямболъ.

*Fig. 2. The public bath owned by Müniver Rasimova Sadıkova (behind the bridge, on the left) (Trakiets, January 28, 1934). The text reads “The Turkish Bath and its surroundings. The place where surveys and probes of the thermal water of our town are being carried out. 12 boreholes and one shaft have been drilled in the neighborhood near the bath. The citizens spontaneously expressed their unity and self-initiative for the first time after so many years of inertness and ruination after the war. This could only cheer up those who long for the progress of Yambol.”*

Dozens of articles covered the endeavors of the municipality and the citizens' committee as they embarked on erecting the new city landmark – a modern public mineral bath. Yet despite this regular flow of information amplifying the voices of municipal officials, experts, and prominent citizens (in both disagreement and collaboration), an important development was omitted from the official storytelling. The name of Ms. Sadikova, the legal owner of the property where the water source was found, was mentioned only once in the reporting (Trakiets, January 27, 1935). Her participation in the construction of Yambol's modern urban identity, if an involuntary one, remained invisible. How “past” was woven into “future” could be recovered from a small number of entries in the municipal archival records consisting of letters of complaint, fines, a report on the legal proceedings that eventually led to the expropriation of her property, and a set of architectural drawings.

“The progress of Yambol” (see caption of Fig. 2), as Ms. Sadikova's complaints make clear, was constructed upon repeated infringements of her private property and obstructions of its operations – actions initiated by the citizens committee and Yambol municipality. Shortly after the aquifer's discovery, they organized the drilling of a second well close to the one she was already using, lowering the flow rate of her supply. Following her complaint, her own well was sealed off by the municipal doctor, citing potential health hazards from the older infrastructure. A modernist drinking pavilion was then erected in front of the bath's entrance, obstructing access from the street. In order to authorize this encroachment, the town's cadaster was amended and a new land plot demarcated, infringing on the original boundaries of her property. In a municipal session, her bath was proposed for demolition as a preventive measure against the possibility of grey water leaking from the “old Turkish bath” into the spring. When Ms. Sadikova refused to allow municipal employees to enter her property for further investigations, the Municipality issued a series of fines for obstruction. As a widow with two underage children, she could not pay. The fines, compounded by late-payment interest, eventually forced the sale of her property at a public auction to cover her growing debt to the Municipality (DA-Yambol, F. 47K, op. 2, a.e. 1). While mentions of her name gradually disappear from the official documents as her agency diminishes, a substantially different narrative emerges on the pages of Trakiets (January 27, 1935). The bath was described as having been purchased by the Municipality after successful negotiations with the own-

ers, thanks to the diplomatic skills of Yambol's mayor, while all lawsuits filed by them at the administrative courts in Plovdiv and Burgas were framed as a stubborn attempt to retain their ownership of the natural resource and portrayed as voluntarily settled.

A year earlier, five members of the citizens' committee pursued the obtaining of exclusive rights for the exploitation of the hot spring by secretly registering a new legal entity in Yambol's regional court (DA-Yambol, F. 47K, op. 2, a.e. 2). Their scheme was uncovered to major public outrage but led only to minor consequences. A public apology and a promise to continue their campaign with the best public interest at heart sufficed to defuse tensions (Trakiets, February 20, 1934).<sup>7</sup>



Дали една МИНЕРАЛНА вода е годна за пиене, решава само МТНТ. Това министерство ръководи по свои специални планове каптирането на минералната вода във Ямбол за пиене. Маса народ от цялата страна продължава да се стича и взема от водата.

**Fig. 3.** “Whether a MINERAL water is drinkable can be decided only by the Ministry of Trade, Industries and Labor. This ministry manages, according to special plans, the capturing of Yambol’s mineral water for drinking. Masses of people from the entire country continue to arrive and take from the water.” (Trakiets, March 18, 1934)

In the meantime, the newly discovered thermal water was already proving its miraculous qualities – everyone who drank or bathed in it

<sup>7</sup> Three articles on the topic were published in a single issue. At that time the newspaper consisted of only four pages.

experienced improved health (January 28, 31, 1934) while weekly visits to the springs reached more than 35,000 people (Trakiets, September 25, 1935).

The unexpected emergence of a valuable resource produced a major rupture. A new set of civic relations formed and disrupted the existential order of one actor, leading to substantial material loss and possibly the loss of livelihood, in what could be described as a restructuring of the town's hydrosocial territories (Boelens, 2016). In the internal discussions of Yambol's municipality, Müniver Sadikova's attempts to retain access to the spring were energetically derided. There was a clear preoccupation among the municipal representatives with her ethnic/religious background and her gender. In official documents, Ms. Sadikova is rarely mentioned by name, while others – who appear to be Bulgarian Christian men – are formally addressed. Despite being the legal owner of one of the most prominent buildings in Yambol's town center, she was repeatedly and pejoratively referred to as “*kadına*”, derived from the Turkish word *kadın*, meaning a woman.

Yambol's urban regeneration campaign, built around a newly found “natural treasure”, was preceded by a similar development near the neighboring town of Sliven, though in a rural setting. Thirty kilometers north of Yambol, dozens of properties had been expropriated about three decades earlier for the creation of the balneoresort<sup>8</sup> of Slivenski Mineralni Bani. Sliven Municipality set out to transform an area consisting of arable land, pastures, and marshes into a public park surrounding a modern thermal bath and hotels. Municipal records indicate prolonged negotiations with landowners, some of whom hesitated to sell their land, disputed the buying prices, or, in some cases, proved difficult to reach if living abroad. Yet, unlike Yambol, no records of forceful expropriations were found in the reviewed sets of documents.<sup>9</sup> On the very contrary, minutes from municipal sessions indicate patience on the part of the Municipality and willingness to accept delays caused by difficult communication with some of the owners. The list of property owners indicates they were ethnic Bulgarians and Christians (DA-Sliven, F. 46K, op. 1, a.e. 352; F. 46K, op. 2, a.e. 13) and their properties contained no infrastructure remaining from the Ottoman period.

<sup>8</sup> A resort providing treatment and leisure with mineral water facilities.

<sup>9</sup> The communication is split between several archival units, and it is possible that documents contradicting these findings exist elsewhere.



— Нуждаещи се отъ всички страни, присъединявайте се,  
но не се натискайте — има за всички!

*Fig. 4.* “People in need from all countries, come join in, but don’t crowd – there is enough for everybody!” The flag on the drinking pavilion reads “Drink and say – thank you” (Trakiets, March 18, 1934). Symbols of modernity – aircraft, cars and a streamlined public bath.

The “de-Ottomanization” of Yambol’s town center appears as a two-fold process, firstly targeting the individual who carried the “Oriental” past into the present, and then the physical infrastructure which contained it. The laying of new wastewater collection system around the old bath was described as “healing” of the neighborhood (Trakiets, July 4, 1934), the drinking pavilion under construction in front of the

old bath's entrance was satirically described as "surpassing the Americans" (March 25, 1934), and once completed was celebrated for its "European appearance" (June 10, 1934). In the debates over the future of the thermal spring, the existing bath was mostly absent outside internal administrative correspondence. The so-called "Turkish bath" or "hamam" appears sporadically in periodicals, mostly depicted as a potential source of pollution and disease (Trakiets, December 31, 1933), threatening the health of the entire town. Only a single article (Trakiets, August 19, 1934) by Yambol-born member of parliament Nikolay Savov criticised the plans for renovation of the old bath, describing it as a mistake and calling for the building to be preserved and restored. The ensuing reports indicate this proposal provoked no further debates.

This well-preserved snapshot of Bulgaria's post-liberation urban renewal endeavor illustrates how architecture and urban planning were mobilized as sanitation tools, both literally and metaphorically, in response to seemingly apolitical considerations. While the campaign led by Yambol municipality and the citizens committee aligned with Bulgaria's modernization policies which pursued the removal of Ottoman era infrastructures for practical hygienic reasons (Dimitrova, 2018), it took place in a context of nationalist ethnopolitical urban regeneration aspirations which imagined the path towards the new nation state through erasing the physical remnants of the "Oriental" past and symbolically replacing it with Western architecture (Kiel, 2013; Koumaridis, 2006; Lewis, 2010; Stanoeva, 2013).

### Transitioning Infrastructures

The events preceding the construction of Yambol's new city landmark – the modern public bath – suggest that the old hamam<sup>10</sup> would inevitably be demolished. It was considered a major obstruction to progress, a health hazard, and a symbol of cultural backwardness, prompting several proposals for its removal and replacement with a public park (DA-Yambol, F. 47K, op.2, a.e. 2).

The structure, however, was preserved and carefully "de-Ottomanized" externally. Based on the limited archival documents related

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<sup>10</sup> While the building later came to perform the function of a *kaphica*, in the official documents it is referred to as "hamam". From the documents reviewed for this article, it is unclear if a pool existed previously or if it replaced a hypocaust, typical for the steam baths (hamams). A pre-existing pool would mean a thermal water source was accessible in the past. Thermal springs can suddenly emerge or vanish due to geological and seismic processes.

to the construction process,<sup>11</sup> consisting primarily of the final architectural drawing set (*Ibid.*, F. 218K, op. 2, a.e. 17) and product catalogues, I would speculate that the decision to retain the old building was made for pragmatic reasons – cost reduction, reuse of valuable resources, and resumption of operations within a shorter timeframe. The existing bath was reassigned as the women’s section, and a new men’s compartment was added where a changing room previously stood. The main space of the old bath, which still exists, has a simple internal layout consisting of a central pool and stone benches lining the perimeter of the space with wash basins embedded in them.<sup>12</sup> The ornamental geometry of the interior has been sanitized beneath neatly clad white tiles. No hint of the enclosed inheritance is visible from the outside. The exterior of the building, with its streamlined modernist openings, wraps around the old hamam, concealing it completely behind a curved façade.

The example in Yambol is one of many microhistories woven into the uneven process of modernization in the Balkans, described in detail by Mishkova and Daskalov (2013). It spanned political, social, cultural, and economic realms of the young nation-states in the region, creating frictions across multiple spheres – from administrative structure to the planning of the physical environment. Across Bulgaria, a number of re-utilization initiatives reveal the different fates of the building typologies inherited from the Ottoman period. They indicate that the de-Ottomanization of infrastructure was not a linear process but was often adjusted according to perceived utility. The public baths performed essential social and utilitarian functions, directly contributing to the health and wellbeing of local communities<sup>13</sup> regardless of their confessional affiliation. Dozens of baths were preserved, unlike caravanserais or khans, which disappeared entirely, or mosques, which were almost completely erased in most larger cities.<sup>14</sup> The Ottoman public baths, and especially those in the vicinity of thermal springs, underwent varying degrees of adaptation and “Europeanization,” which concealed the visible features of their “Ottoman-ness” while retaining their internal functionality.

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<sup>11</sup> Available at the regional branch of the State Archives in Yambol.

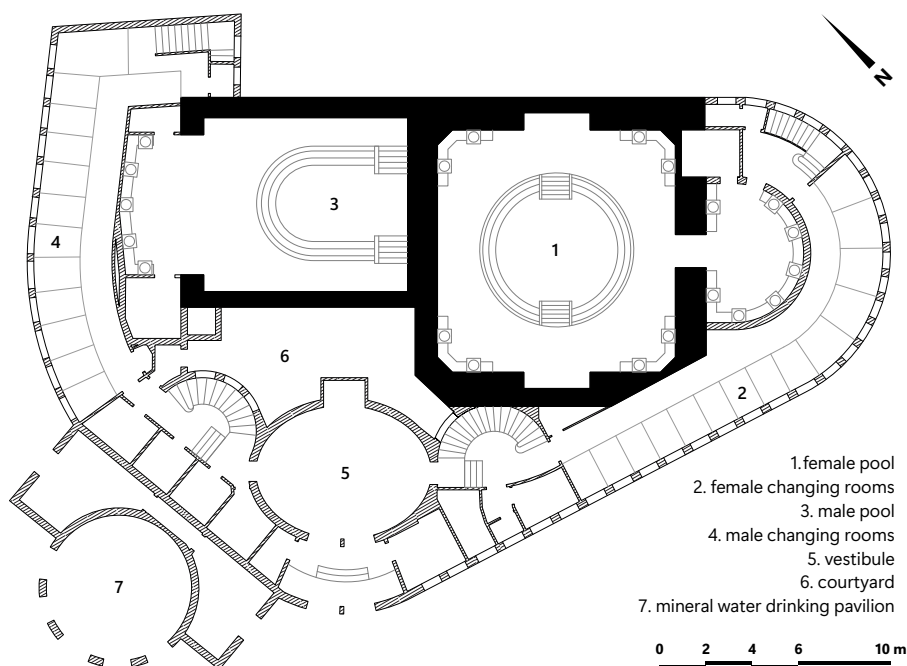
<sup>12</sup> These appear to be modern replacements of an element which most certainly existed in the old bath. The wash basins with adjacent seating are a mandatory component.

<sup>13</sup> Similarly to Hungary. See Sudár (2004).

<sup>14</sup> The list of surviving mosques in Bulgaria may seem numerous but it is a fraction compared to the demolished buildings. According to Kiel (2013) 98% of the Ottoman urban fabric in Bulgaria was decimated.



**Fig. 5 and 6.** Interior and exterior of the Yambol Mineral Bath. Above: the Ottoman bath, transformed into the modern bath's women's compartment. December 2020. Below: the exterior of the new bath, northeast façade. Behind it is the old Ottoman bath. January 2021. Images courtesy of the author.



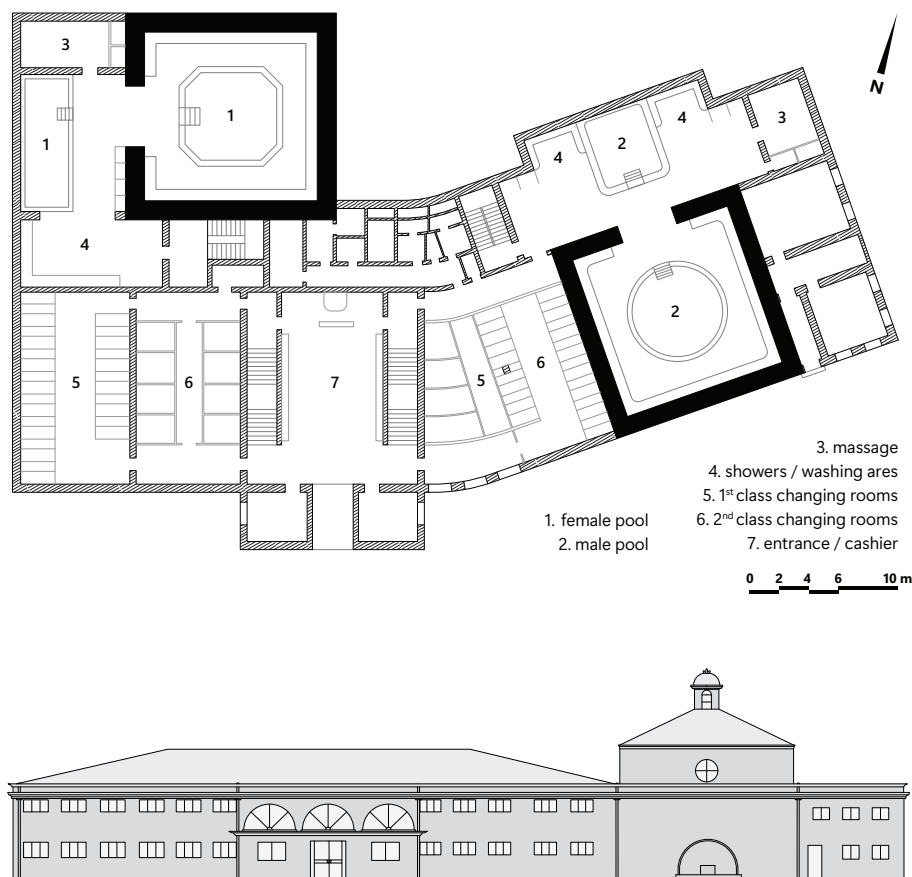
**Fig. 7.** Ground floor plan of Yambol mineral bath, designed by architect Alexander Kurtev and completed in 1936. The preserved structure of Ms. Sadikova's property is highlighted in black. Diagram based on the original drawing (DA-Yambol, F. 47K, op. 2, a.e. 6). The author added minor iterations based on the complete project, e.g. the chamfered corners of the women's compartment are not reflected in the drawing set.

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a hydrogeological pre-condition of exceptionally abundant hydrothermal resources across Bulgaria nurtured the ambitions of successive national and local governments and professional communities to adopt western balneology and establish balneoresorts.<sup>15</sup> Building initiatives unfolded across many towns and villages, providing opportunities for extensive Europeanization campaigns.<sup>16</sup> But beyond the celebrated novel projects such as the Central Mineral Bath in Sofia, the thermal baths in Bankya, Ovcha Kupel, or Varshets, there was a gradient of adaptation, of working with different scales and resources in places perceived as less important. There, continuity took the shape of infrastructural modification, and I would call

<sup>15</sup> See the periodical *Kurortno delo*.

<sup>16</sup> In Gorna Banya, Sliven, Varshets, Banya Karlovska, Kyustendil, Velingrad, Yagoda and other places.

the result of this process “transitioning” typologies, such as in Alay Banya in Kyustendil (NINKN, KN-103-56-IV), Radonovi Bani in Velingrad (Ibid, Pz-513-464-51), or Starozagorski mineralni bani (DA-Varna, F. 1317, op. 1, a.e. 143; DA-Stara Zagora, Op. 7, f. 261, a.e. 65), all of which comprising an Ottoman thermal bath embedded into a 20<sup>th</sup>-century enclosure.

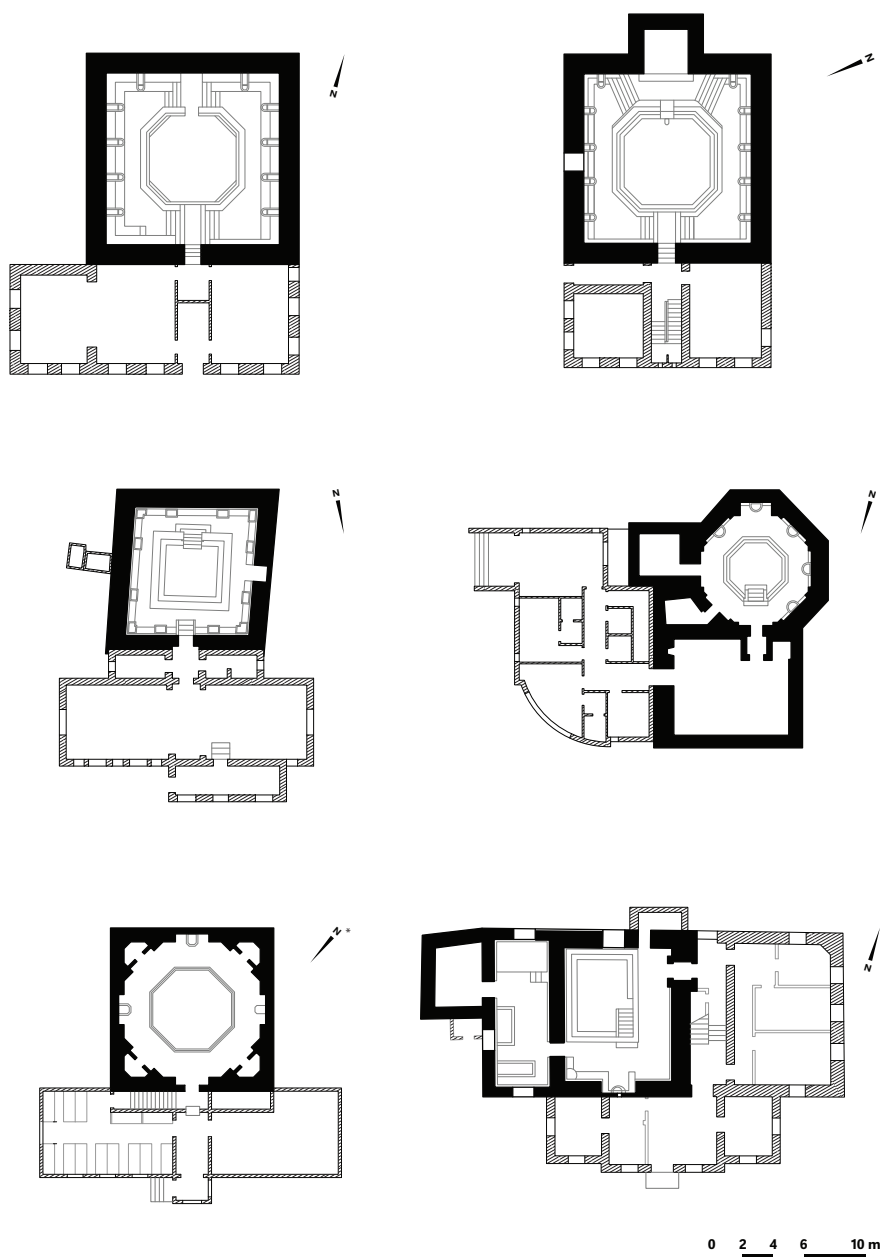


**Fig. 8 and 9.** Competition entry for the thermal baths in Starozagorski mineralni bani by Petar Karasimeonov (1937, unbuilt). Ground level and south elevation. According to the competition brief, the existing detached Ottoman baths (highlighted in black) were to be preserved and inscribed within a single volume. In this project proposal, the south façade of the male Ottoman bath remains visible, while the rest of it is incorporated into a modernist building. The dome of the female bath should be visible on the left behind the extension but was not drafted in the original drawing set. Diagrams based on DA-Varna, F. 1317, op. 1, a.e. 143. A similar concept was realized in the mid-1970s and is still standing today.

Beyond the structural and stylistic curiosity which the “transitioning” typology presents to the architect, these buildings are a conceptual paradox. The ornamental, neo-classical façades of “modern” public baths, or the streamlined modernist ones for that matter (as in Yambol and Stara Zagora), hardly delivered the desired distancing from the “Oriental” past, but promoted continuity along two lines: utility and spatial arrangement. Travel notes by two German scientists compare bathing practices and the interiors of public thermal baths in Bulgaria to balneotherapy as practiced in their home country. In a brief report from his resort excursions across Bulgaria, climatologist Prof. Linke remarks that unlike in Central Europe “not only the affluent and the middle strata uses the baths, but precisely the poorest, who are pressing themselves onto the nearest mineral baths, which is why according to a German measure, they reach an unusually high number of visitors, which comes in parallel to the great abundance of thermal waters across the country”<sup>17</sup> (Kurortno delo, 7(3), 1942). During his visit a year earlier, the balneologist Prof. Vogt described the differences between German and Bulgarian balneotherapeutic infrastructures, noting that it would be appropriate to preserve the “local bathing culture” of taking baths in a common pool, but the use of bathtubs should also be administered in accordance with contemporary balneology. He continues, “it is not only unaesthetic, but also unhygienic [...] for wash basins to be in the same space, or immediately next to it, not entirely separated from the healing pools and bathtubs” (Ibid., 6(4) 1940). These accounts offer two important observations. Firstly, public thermal baths were widely used and were essential in a country with more than 80% rural population at the time (Baloutzova, 2011; Angelova, 2008). Secondly, the floor plan of the public bath described by Prof. Vogt resembles the interior of an Ottoman thermal bath. It could be the contested building in Yambol, or the baths at Starozagorski mineralni bani (DA-Varna, F. 1317, op. 1, a.e. 143; DA-Stara Zagora, Op. 7, F. 261, a.e. 65), the demolished kaplıca next to Banya Bashı in Sofia<sup>18</sup> (CDA, F. 1638K, op. 1, a.e. 207), Alay Banya (NINKN, Kn-103-1616-175) and Dervish Banya (NINKN, Kn-103-2115-219) in Kyustendil, Radonovi Bani in Velingrad (NINKN, Pz-513-464-51), or the bath in Vetren, now Burgaski mineralni bani.

<sup>17</sup> Translation by the author of this article.

<sup>18</sup> This list could be easily extended by several dozen examples. The bath near Banya Bashı in Sofia was demolished about 30 years before their visit.



**Fig. 10-15.** Floor plan diagrams. **10, 11.** The thermal baths of Starozagorski mineralni bani. Based on measured drawings from 1937, part of the competition brief for the renovation of the baths (DA-Varna, F. 1317, op. 1, a.e. 143). The internal layout is carefully drafted, indicating the shape of the pools, the position of the benches and the wash basins. **12.** The former women's (now men's) bath

in Radonovi bani, Velingrad. Based on a renovation project from 2012 by architect Boris Borisov (NINKN, Pz-513-464-51). 13. Dervish banya, Kyustendil. Based on a concept proposal for renovation from 2006 by architect Margarita Zhivkova (NINKN, Kn-109-502). The proposed extension corresponds to the outlines of a structure which had previously occupied the same space. 14. One of the Ottoman thermal baths in the vicinity of Banya Bashı mosque in Sofia. Possibly the one that used to be located immediately behind the mosque to the east (DA-Sofia F. 1423K, op. 1 a.e. 8), demolished after the completion of the Central Mineral Bath (1912-13). Based on a sketch from the personal archives of hydrogeologist Pavel Petrov (CDA, F. 1638K, op. 1, a.e. 207). 15. Alay Banya, Kyustendil. Based on measured drawings by architects Y. Farkov, S. Goshev, and K. Krondeva from the 1990s (NINKN, Kn-103-2115-219) as part of a renovation project proposal. With the exception of the last example, all floor plans consist of a central octagonal or square pool surrounded by benches and wash basins. In all six examples, washing areas share the same space as the pool. The majority of the extensions (highlighted in grey) were built or modernized in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and possibly replaced lightweight structures used as changing rooms. Extensions were added at different times, also during the Ottoman period, as reported for Srednata banya in Sliven (NINKN, Sl-896-1975-214), where such was added in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (now demolished).

Bathing infrastructures, while substantially more important for the Muslim community during the Ottoman period (Ianeva, 2014; Kotseva, 2012), were also used by other ethnic and religious communities, including Bulgarian Christians, who later formed the population majority of the contemporary Bulgarian state. In Ottoman Sofia, a cluster of thermal springs supplied several public baths. Hygiene and healing were accessible for different religious communities in separate buildings – Muslim, Christian and Jewish (DA-Sofia, F. 1423K, op. 1 a.e. 8; Stoilova et al., 2014). The so-called “Bath neighborhood” was an important node in the center of the town and a crossroad, populated by religious buildings, markets, and khans (Gradeva, 2023; Monedzhikova, 1946;<sup>19</sup> Stoilova et al., 2016). While the “Europeanization” of the neighborhood radically transformed its street layout and architectural vocabulary, the program of the spaces or the functions they performed within the urban fabric were largely preserved.

The continuity between the extensive Ottoman network of thermal public baths across Bulgaria and their “modern” replacements is also bound by the fixity of the resource itself. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when large-scale construction initiatives began transforming the built environment, proximity to the water source was still difficult

<sup>19</sup> Monedzhikova’s volume provides valuable visual data from the heritage of Ottoman Sofia and its demolition.

to circumvent, and new balneotherapeutic facilities were erected either directly upon the sites of former Ottoman public baths or very close to them. Increasing the distance would have meant higher costs for underground infrastructure and the risk of heat loss during the transfer of hot water. While the enclosures of public baths changed their geometric parameters, completely or partially, pre-existing bathing and healing practices remained anchored to the same locations and this is where gradual adaptation occurred.

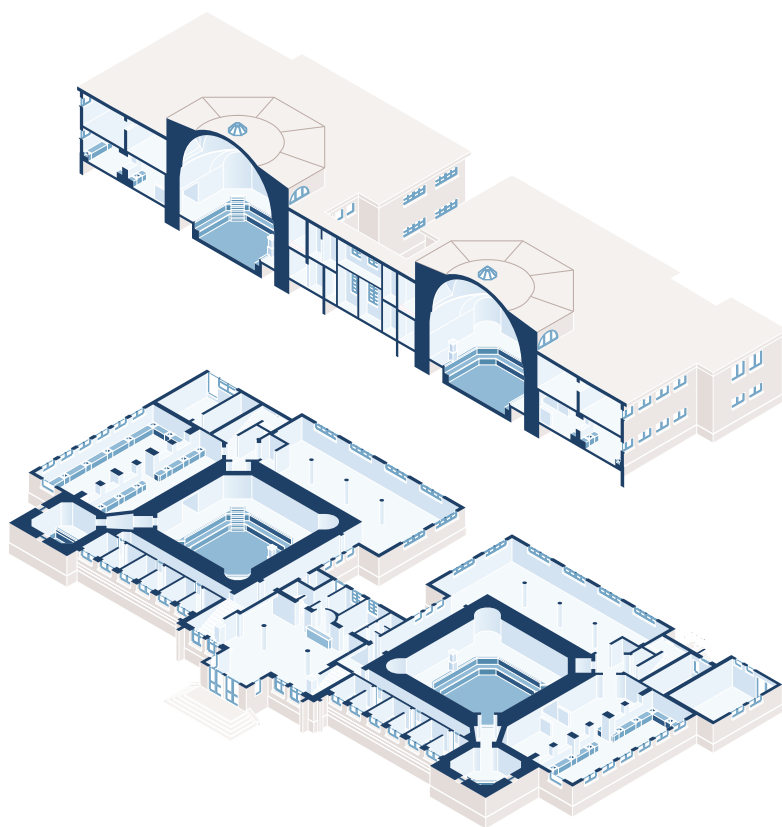
### **Domesticating Balneology**

The public baths mentioned by the two German researchers are difficult to identify as they could easily be describing an authentic Ottoman thermal bath, a “modernized” one, or a completely new 20th-century infrastructure. The similarities in their architectural layouts and uses are so significant that even a more detailed description would make them hard to tell apart.

The thermal bath in Slivenski mineralni bani, the first “modern” balneotherapeutic facility in Bulgaria, was erected in 1902<sup>20</sup> and extended in 1941. It consists of two symmetrical areas for female and male visitors, where the main bathing halls are designed as spacious domed structures, surrounded by several niches for hygienic bathing. The project resembles the spatiality of earlier bathing practices contained within a neo-classical enclosure, with the modest addition of several individual bathtubs and a small therapeutic pool in each compartment. Architecture and planning initiatives across the country attempted to draw from leading examples in the field of balneology in Western Europe, particularly Germany (*Izvestiya na Balneolozhkoto Druzhestvo v Bulgaria*, 1(5,6) 1932; *Kurortno delo*, 3(2) 1934; 4(4) 1936; 5(1) 1938). The realized projects, however, differed substantially from their intended precedents. The project for the Central Mineral Bath in Sofia underwent a dramatic transformation that clearly illustrates this trajectory. After winning the commission, French architect Antoine-Eugène Bertaud submitted a fully developed set of concept drawings, which were then revised several times and eventually rejected by the local government. His project proposal prioritized medical treatment over hygiene, whereas the latter was considered a priority by the municipal representatives (Stoilova et al., 2014). In Sofia, private baths and running water in individual homes were a luxury at the time.

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<sup>20</sup> Designed by Jacob Henri Meyer and Petko Momchilov.



*Fig. 16. The modern thermal bath in the balneoresort of Slivenski mineralni bani, built in 1902<sup>21</sup> and extended in 1941. Isometric diagram courtesy of the author (2021) based on measured drawings by Petar Cherninkov / Sliven Municipality (2015).*

While a small hydrotherapeutic wing was eventually included in the plans of the Central Mineral Bathhouse in Sofia (DA-Sofia, F. 1K, op. 3, a.e. 208), most modern thermal baths in the country reflected the limited resources available for healthcare initiatives. By the late 1930s, 3,500 doctors provided treatment for approximately 6,500,000 people (Popov, 2009). A culture of comfort and leisure at the balneoresorts existed for a small part of Bulgaria's urban elite (Azmanova-Rudarska, 2016). For the majority, affordable access to the hot springs meant basic means of maintaining hygiene and offered alternative treatment for ailments, given for the lack of easily accessible medical care.

<sup>21</sup> Spisanie na Bulgarskoto inzhenerno-arhitekturno druzhestvo v Sofia, (7-9) 1902.



**Fig. 17.** Capturing of the thermal springs in Starozagorski mineralni bani in the 1950s. In the foreground are the remains of the Roman *thermae*; behind them, to the left, are two Ottoman public baths. The concrete columns in the center of the image are the shafts of the captured springs, drilled right into the marble pools of the ancient *thermae* (NINKN, St. Z.-64-37-IVA).

The architecture of Bulgaria's modern baths was "domesticated" by complex factors – the country's demographic structure, its healthcare policies (or the absence of such), and the persistent vernacular bathing and healing practices that had flourished for centuries.<sup>22</sup> What appeared architecturally to be a step forward was adapted to existing bathing practices, leaving architectural gestures largely ornamental while the new buildings performed familiar functions. In this context, the typology of the thermal baths of Bad Nauheim,<sup>23</sup> consisting of more than two hundred private bathtubs (Hamm & Kübler, 2007), or the Roman-Irish bath at Friedrichsbad in Baden-Baden with its sequence of hydrotherapeutic pools, steam baths, and medical showers (Coenen, 2008), remained unattainable aspirations. The construction,

<sup>22</sup> A fascinating historical account of an annual visit to Starozagorski mineralni bani in Dimitrova (2017).

<sup>23</sup> Visited by Tzar Ferdinand in 1918. Similar is the building typology of Apolo and Neptune baths in Băile Herculane, although they have several rather small common pools.

maintenance, and operational costs of such projects would have made them completely inaccessible for the majority of Bulgaria's population.

### **Instead of Conclusion**

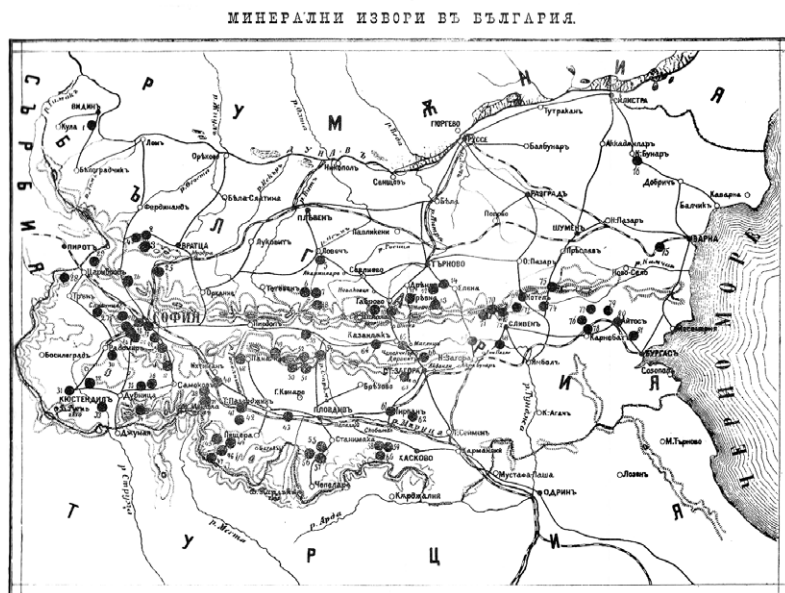
The development of Western balneology in Bulgaria involved surveying the natural and built environment and mapping the resource distribution across the country. From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onward, hydrogeologists, mining engineers and architects inspected the thermal springs and produced reports that contained ethnographic notes about Ottoman infrastructures and their uses at the time (CDA, F. 1638K, op. 1; *Izvestiya na Balneolozhkoto Druzhestvo v Bulgaria*, 1(2) 1930; *Kurortno delo*, 6(1) 1940; *Spisanie na Bulgarskoto inzhenerno-arhitekturno druzhestvo*, 28(14) 1928). The recording of Ottoman baths often preceded their demolition and replacement by "modern" infrastructures; however, the loss of historical strata extended to earlier periods, with instances of Roman infrastructures removed or damaged during the capturing of thermal springs (*Kurortno delo*, 5(1) 1938).<sup>24</sup>

Both the advances in hydrogeology and the development of transportation infrastructure across Bulgaria contributed to the mapping of a countrywide network of "healing places". A series of maps and travel guides provided information on accessibility from major Bulgarian towns (Azmanov, 1940; Dimitrov, 1939). Yet, these maps were novel only to a limited extent. They traced over springs already known and utilized throughout the Ottoman period (and possibly earlier), which were frequented despite the long journeys their visitors had to take before the advent of vehicular and railroad transportation (Dimitrova, 2017). Public baths and thermal springs were thought of as culturally and socially significant nodes in the past (Çelebi, 2014) and formed the foundation for modern balneology in Bulgaria. The dissemination of Western technological expertise at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century solidified the perceived incompatibility between the Ottoman architectural legacy and the modernization aspirations of Bulgaria's experts. Yet, the surveying of thermal springs and the quantification of their properties rep-

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<sup>24</sup> Mining engineer and hydrogeologist Pavel Petrov sketched himself or commissioned draftsmen to draw Ottoman baths before their demolition (CDA, F. 1638K, op. 1, a.e. 207). His and Bogomil Radoslavov's hydrogeological surveys (see *Kurortno delo*) produced an unlikely source of ethnographic observations that offer a glimpse, if a biased one, into the cultural and social uses of old thermal baths and springs across the country.

resented another continuity, built upon existing knowledge of channeled springs already flowing through infrastructures from a disputed past.



*Fig. 18. A map of Bulgaria's thermal springs and its transportation network (Vatev, 1904).*

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- DA-Sofia, F. 1423K op. 1, a.e. 8.
- DA-Stara Zagora, F. 261, op. 7, a.e. 65
- DA-Varna, F. 1317, op. 1, a.e. 143
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