

Men, Mines and Mosques:

Gender and Islamic Revivalism on the Edge of Europe

Kristen Ghodsee

The Occasional Papers of the School of Social Science are versions of talks given at the School's weekly Thursday Seminar. At these seminars, Members present work-in-progress and then take questions. There is often lively conversation and debate, some of which will be included with the papers. We have chosen papers we thought would be of interest to a broad audience. Our aim is to capture some part of the cross-disciplinary conversations that are the mark of the School's programs. While Members are drawn from specific disciplines of the social sciences—anthropology, economics, sociology and political science—as well as history, philosophy, literature and law, the School encourages new approaches that arise from exposure to different forms of interpretation. The papers in this series differ widely in their topics, methods, and disciplines. Yet they concur in a broadly humanistic attempt to understand how, and under what conditions, the concepts that order experience in different cultures and societies are produced, and how they change.

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Men, Mines and Mosques: Gender and Islamic Revivalism on the Edge of Europe¹

Madan lies deep in the heart of the central Rhodopi Mountains where the Greek-Bulgarian border cuts through the most southeasterly corner of the European continent. (See Appendix for map.) In a majority Christian Orthodox country with a historically secular Muslim minority, the tall white minaret of the new mosque that towers over the center of town is a striking anomaly, as are the four women in full *hijab* sitting at the bus stop across from it. Some of the restaurants nearby have recently stopped serving pork though it has long been a staple of the local diet. And the once bustling city, the heart of Bulgaria's lead-zinc mining industry, is now empty except on Fridays when hundreds of men congregate for the prayers, social contacts and opportunities for employment at the new mosque. The small town of 6,000 even publishes its own monthly Islamic magazine that argues for a return to the "true faith": a stricter interpretation of the religion than that to which most of Madan's *Pomaks* (ethnically Slavic Muslims) have ever been exposed, one which is at odds with the relatively liberal Hanafi Sunni Islam traditionally practiced in Bulgaria.

Most of these changes have been supported by an infusion of aid from Muslim countries that found its way into Bulgaria after the collapse of communism in 1989. Although no more than 20 percent of the population is Muslim,² Turkey, Iran and, in particular, the Gulf Arab States have poured resources into the country throughout the 1990s to help Bulgarian Muslims rediscover and reinvigorate their Islamic faith and practice. This "Eastern Aid" has gone into many different Muslim communities--in rural and urban settings--but it is in the two primarily Pomak municipalities of Madan and Rudozem where its effects have been most dramatic. In this paper, I will explore why the Islamic "revival" fueled by outside funds has been so marked in these cities, and in doing so try to tackle the larger theoretical question of why stricter interpretations of Islam may take root in some communities but not in others.

Bulgaria is a fascinating location to study the dynamism of Islam today because it is a place where the "West" has historically met the "East." Although it has been recently embraced as a member of NATO and the European Union, it has been a crossroads between the "Occident" and the "Orient" for over a millennium. As part of the Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman empires, Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity and Islam have all left their legacies in this modern nation of fewer than eight million. As a close Soviet ally, Bulgaria also lived through over four decades of the official state atheism that came with Marxist-Leninism and scientific socialism. During the 1990s, when inter-religious violence tore apart Yugoslavia, neighboring Bulgaria remained stable and peaceful despite similar religious divides, severe economic hardships, and the massive social and political changes that followed the arrival of democracy and free markets. Today, Bulgaria is the only European Union

country with a historically indigenous Muslim minority. Unlike elsewhere in Europe, the ethnic Slavs (Pomaks), Turks and Roma have lived in Bulgaria and professed Islam for centuries. Furthermore, it is quite ironic that as the Americans move their European military bases into the country to bolster strategic positions for future forays into the Middle East, the Middle East is strengthening its presence in Bulgaria through its religious aid to Muslims.

Perhaps the most compelling reason to study Islam and Islamic aid in Bulgaria, however, is the fact that no one is really paying attention to it. When I did my fieldwork between 2004-2006, Islam was not as politically-loaded a topic there as it was in other parts of the world where there had been recent conflicts between Christians and Muslims, or where there were suspected “terrorist” networks. Outside of the Muslim heartlands, but also far from the great metropolises of Europe, Muslims in Bulgaria were more or less isolated from the major events of the first half of the 2000s that made inter-religious relations around the world more precarious: among them the attacks of September 11th, 2001 in New York and Washington, the bombings in Madrid and London, the invasion and occupation of Iraq, the Danish cartoon scandal/riots, and the Lebanese-Israeli conflict. In fact, few people outside of Europe know where Bulgaria is, let alone the ethnic and religious make-up of its population. It is this relative geopolitical obscurity that made it easier (though still not easy) for an American ethnologist to explore the local effects of a phenomenon that some scholars have called “Arab cultural imperialism.”³

Although I lived in Bulgaria for over two years, specific research for this article is based on eight months of fieldwork, of which four months were spent living in the central Rhodopi region in 2005 and 2006. In addition to ethnographic interviews, participant observation and archival research, I have collected and analyzed a wide variety of Islamic publications produced by and for Bulgarian Muslims: books, pamphlets, magazines, and websites. These publications allowed me to pursue a project of “forensic accounting,” trying to trace the acknowledged sponsors of the materials in order to make more transparent the opaque network of Islamic foundations and associations operating throughout the country. I also examined articles published in the three regional newspapers between January 2001 and July 2006. Finally, I conducted formal interviews with members of parliament, government officials, representatives from relevant nongovernmental organizations and leaders of the Muslim community in Sofia. This paper is a condensed version of a book project that is still a work in progress.

Theories of the Islamic Revival

There are a variety of explanations for the Islamic “revival” in places such as Madan and Rudozem. In the Bulgarian context, the first one that is usually employed is the classical Marxist position on faith: “Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness.”⁴

For those raised under communism, this is a familiar and compelling analysis of the resurgence of religiosity among Bulgaria's Muslims. On the surface, the structural argument has plenty of evidence to support it. As the local economies of remote areas have collapsed, the rural educational infrastructure has crumbled, populations have declined, teachers have left and schools have closed. There was an empirically significant regression in the material conditions of people's lives after the end of communism.⁵ Marxists believe that people are more susceptible to religion when they are poor and uneducated, particularly if the religious authorities have power and/or resources at their disposal. It is a simple and mechanical explanation for a more complex phenomenon, but it sits comfortably with the common observation that destitute, rural populations have usually tended to be more religious.

A second explanation, often seen in the literature of missionaries and evangelists of every denomination, asserts that communist-imposed atheism created a mass of godless souls in need of salvation following the fall of the Berlin Wall: "Capitalism alone is not able to fill the 'spiritual vacuum' left by Marxism's collapse."⁶ This argument asserts that Marxist-Leninism was an ideology that artificially filled in for the more spiritual needs of the people, and that the collapse of that ideology left a great existential void in the hearts and minds of former communist citizens which religion could then rush in to fill.⁷ Indeed, these sentiments underlay the mad rush of Mormons, Moonies, Hare Krishnas, Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Wahhabis, Ahmadis, Sufis, Baha'is and evangelical Protestants of every kind into the former socialist countries in the immediate aftermath of 1989.⁸ The spiritual free-for-all in Bulgaria led the evangelical magazine *Christianity Today* to claim that the country had become a "fertile ground for false teaching" in 1992.⁹ In fact, the words "spiritual vacuum" permeate the literature on not only Eastern Europe, but also religious writings on Cuba, China and North Korea, the few remaining state atheist strongholds in the world.

A third argument comes from the local religious leaders within Bulgaria. In the interviews that I conducted with the officials from the Chief Mufti's office, it was argued that religious activity among Muslims in Bulgaria after 1989 was merely an unbroken link to the religious activity that had flourished in the country before communism. They argue that the heavy handed oppression of both the Church and the Mosque for forty-five years forced many otherwise devout Bulgarians to abandon their traditions, lose touch with their faith and, most importantly, forfeit connections that they would otherwise have had to the Muslim world. From this perspective the current religious revival is a sort of spiritual restitution.

Some Bulgarian intellectuals,¹⁰ and the Deputy Chief Mufti in Bulgaria,¹¹ believe that the Islamic revival in the country is being driven by the Pomaks who are having something of an identity crisis. Because most (though not all) Pomaks believe that they are ethnic Bulgarians and religiously Muslim, they have always had problems with classifying who they are and how to express or represent their own political interests in the Bulgarian cultural mosaic. The Muslims in Bulgaria are ethnically Turkish, Slavic and Roma, with the Turks the vast majority. Some Pomaks actually claim that they are Turks, while others argue that they are ethnically Arab or at least a different ethnicity from Bulgarians (this will be discussed in greater detail below).¹² This argument claims that the hybridity and fluidity of Pomak identity and the concomitant political powerlessness that has accompanied it has caused some

Pomaks to embrace forms of Islam that diverge significantly from those practiced by the Turks. Pomaks do this to demonstrate that they are distinct enough to make the claim that the Turks should not represent them politically (which had been the case for the last fifteen years). By establishing closer links (even through an imagined ethnicity) to the Arabs and practicing a stricter form of Islam, the new Pomak religious leaders also strategically position themselves to take greater advantage of the generous resources available from international Islamic charities.

These various explanations do not work well for my case study of the Pomak populations in Madan and Rudozem and they do not explain fully why this was happening in these two municipalities but not elsewhere in similar communities. They neglect what seems to me to be a crucial factor: the relationship between lead and zinc mining and gender in this region. Because miners, and especially lead and zinc miners, were among the most respected and best paid workers in the entire Bulgarian economy, the dominance of this industry shaped the construction of masculine identities in Madan and Rudozem more than perhaps any other external factor. With the collapse of mining came a crisis for gender identities. In these two cities the uncertainty about appropriate gender roles in a time of political and economic instability may be an important factor for explaining why orthodox religions are embraced in some communities and not others.

Miners Without Mines

It is a Tuesday in April and although the snow has melted a winter chill still hangs in the thin mountain air. When Vesela shows up at 9:23 in the morning, there are already three of her regulars huddled together near the door waiting for her to open the bar. “*Dubro Outro*,” she says, fumbling with her keys. The men mumble their good mornings under the steamy clouds of their breath. As “Vesi” (what they call her for short) opens the door to The Establishment a wave of heat floods out. The three customers scurry inside and sit down in their usual chairs. Without even having to be asked, Vesi goes behind the bar and pours the men each a large *rakiya* (strong Bulgarian brandy) and a glass of plain mineral water. Dealing with alcoholics for a living is not an easy job. Vesi does not care; as a high school dropout and one of the few Christians in a town of over ninety percent Muslims and forty percent unemployment, she is just happy to have work.

Although she is usually quite open with her colorful expressions of disgust for the drunk--booting them out if they get violent, belligerent or too close to unconsciousness--today Vesi is in a sympathetic mood. “They have nothing else,” she tells me. “They used to have so much money, and everyone respected them. Now, they drink all day while their wives go out to work. It is hard for a man to be without work. There is nothing for them to do. What can miners do without mines?”

At that moment, Lyubomir, a brawny man of fifty-seven with the habit of biting his lower lip when he thinks, walks in with two of his friends and joins a table with four other men. He was a miner for over thirty years; he still wears his heavy miner’s boots in the winter.

“Lyubo!” Vesela calls, “You should not be here. Your wife needs her medicine, and your grandchildren need food!”

Lyubo smiles, not at all ashamed, and runs a heavy hand through his longish gray hair. “And I need a drink. And drinks for my friends. *Seven rakiyas!*”

Vesela does not reply, but instead goes behind the bar to pour Lyubomir’s drinks. I know that she will not argue with him, even if his wife has gone around to many of the bars in Madan to implore the owners and waitresses not to serve him. Few people will listen to her; Lyubo is a good customer and a happy drunk. He pays all of his bills in cash unlike the other men who often drink on credit. Vesela does feel sorry for his wife; alcoholism is a common problem in Madan. But it is not her job to settle family disputes. She brings the men their drinks, clunking each glass down on the wooden table in front of them.

I have met Lyubo several times before, and he is always friendly to me and willing to answer questions. I take the opportunity to greet him and ask if I can interview him. Feeling important in front of his friends, he pushes his shoulders back and says, “Of course.” The other men listen intently. I start by asking, “What was Madan was like before democracy?”

The men around the table all lean in to hear Lyubo’s reply. This is something they talk about everyday—lead-zinc mining enterprise, GORUBSO, and how much better their lives were before the 1990s. I know that they are all eager to share their recollections, but will allow Lyubo to go first. He draws a breath, bites his lower lip, then begins.

“During communism we used to say that there were two seas in Bulgaria: the Black Sea and GORUBSO because GORUBSO could feed a thousand families. The city was full of people. There used to be two families for each apartment. At the worker’s cafeteria (you used to have vouchers for meals) you always had to wait for a place. And there was always work. If a policeman saw a man sitting in a café or around on the street on a work day, he would ask him ‘why aren’t you at work?’ If you had no job, he would find you one, and send you there immediately.”

The other men sip their rakiyas and nod in agreement, the faraway look of nostalgia directing their eyes. Petyo, a man from Rudozem in a gray and white polyester jogging suit adds, “People came from all over Bulgaria to find work here. And from China and Vietnam.”

“At the end of each shift, the streets were full of miners--from one side to the other,” Lyubo continues, “The bus for the first shift left at eight, for the second shift at four, and the night shift started at twelve. There was a twenty-four hour sweet shop upstairs so that we could always go and have coffee and cakes before and after our shifts.”

A third man interjects, “They had the best strawberry ice cream.”

Petyo says, “And it didn’t matter if we were dirty in our boots and helmets.”

“And we had so much money,” Lyubo sighs as his stares down into his drink. “There was one time in the *mehana* [tavern] downstairs where one of the tables was wobbling. A miner pulled a wad of bills out of his pocket and shoved it under the table leg. A police officer came over and questioned him about why he had so much money. The man pulled out his pay slip and showed the policeman. And the police could not do anything, because he was a miner, and he had earned the money. We had real work and we earned good salaries. The town was full of people. Not like now. Not empty like now. All the young people leave.

Vsichko e prazno. (Everything is empty...)"

At that, Lyubo drinks down the rest of his rakiya, and puts the glass down on the table. "Empty like my glass. Vesi! Another one!"

As Vesela begins to measure out another drink, I look out through the window on to the main square of the city. Although the center is still well maintained by a cadre of unemployed women doing public service to earn a small amount of financial assistance from the municipality, a short walk away from the center reveals the rampant decay of the once vibrant city as time and gravity swallow up the infrastructure so proudly developed in Madan through the now defeated communist ideals of progress and modernization. Indeed, the "living blocks" that once housed two families in each apartment are now empty and crumbling in on themselves. In many places the old GORUBSO buildings have already fallen down; the neighborhoods on the outskirts of Madan and nearby Rudozem are pockmarked with the ruins of



Figure 1: Madan in 2005



Figure 2: Madan in 2005

the failed enterprise (Figures 1 & 2). The worker's cafeteria was closed many years earlier, as was the twenty-four hour sweet shop, the movie theatre, the tavern, several schools, recreation facilities and numerous other factories, businesses and social services that were once attached

to or supported by the GORUBSO enterprise. In their place, there are only a handful of foreign and domestically owned garment factories that hire local women as seamstresses. Employment opportunities are few; many men are forced to leave Madan and Rudozem to seek employment as construction workers in Bulgaria's larger cities or in Western Europe. Those who stay behind often turn to alcohol or are increasingly being drawn to the massive white mosque that now looms across the street from the GORUBSO building in the town center. Built throughout the 1990s with extensive foreign funding, the mosques in Madan and Rudozem are the largest of the over 200 new mosques built in Bulgaria since 1989 and are fast becoming the social, cultural and spiritual centers of these faltering postsocialist cities. But in order to fully understand the effect that the demise of the lead-zinc industry had on both men and women this region and how its collapse may have pushed some local inhabitants toward a more conservative form of Islam, it is probably best to pause and briefly explore the history of the region and the way gender relations were shaped by the dual communist projects of modernization and women's emancipation.

The Rise and Fall of GORUBSO

Modern mining in the Madan and Rudozem region began in the 1920s with Russian support, followed by heavy investment by the Nazis during the 1930s and early 1940s. After Germany's defeat the country became an official People's Republic in 1946, embracing centralized communist party rule and command economics. As a relatively backward peasant economy, the new Bulgarian communists were eager to follow in the Soviet Union's footsteps and begin a project of rapid industrialization. The extraction of raw materials to feed the engines of rapid economic growth was a top priority from even the earliest days of Bulgaria's socialist experiment. GORUBSO was formed on May 3, 1950 through an agreement between the Bulgarian government and the government of the Soviet Union (USSR).¹³ In addition to the lead and zinc mines in Madan, the enterprise included a flotation factory and ore processing plants in Rudozem just twelve kilometers away, as well as other support industries in the two cities.

Non-ferrous ore extraction increased exponentially between 1955 and 1966, and the resultant metallurgical production in Bulgaria increased twenty-three times in eleven years.¹⁴ In 1963, GORUBSO - Madan alone employed approximately 20,500 workers and employees.¹⁵ Between 1950 and 1962, GORUBSO's yield of concentrated lead grew from 27,333 tons to 105,973 tons (a 288 percent increase). The yield of zinc increased from 19,077 tons to 112,192 tons in the same period (a 488 percent increase). By 1963, the Bulgarian communists claimed that GORUBSO yielded the second largest amount of lead and zinc ore in the world after the Soviet Union.¹⁶

The wealth generated by GORUBSO was largely funneled back into the enterprise with particular attention to the betterment of the miners' living standards. Madan illustrates the rapid economic development that the communists were able to achieve in a relatively short period of time. In 1960, the old mosque in the center of the village was bulldozed. In its place, a shining new nine-storey "skyscraper" was built to house the executive offices of the lead-zinc enterprise.¹⁷ Between 1950 and 1978, GORUBSO built and owned 6300

apartments and 65 residence halls in Madan, which housed 5,400 families.¹⁸ In 1956, the communists began construction on the city hotel “Ural,” a branch of the Bulgarian People’s Bank, a local office for the Ministry of Interior, and a four-storey school building that would house the secondary school. Between 1957 and 1962, the communists also built a technical high school, a city library, and a “culture house” (*kulturen dom*) that included a cinema and a large auditorium (Figures 3 and 4).



Figure 3: Madan in the late 1940s



Figure 4: Madan in the 1960s

In terms of social development, the medical facilities in 1952 consisted of a wooden barracks with 20 beds and four examination rooms. In 1953, the communists began construction on a new hospital and by the twenty-fifth anniversary of the city in 1978, there were 320 beds in the hospital which employed 328 personnel.¹⁹ In 1963, there were 25 schools throughout the municipality of Madan including the secondary school, and primary schools in all of the larger villages around the city.²⁰ The secondary school employed 240 teachers in 1978 and had more than 2,700 students.

All of these developments drastically changed the demographics of the small city and created a seemingly endless number of jobs. As male labor was concentrated in the mines, the metallurgical factories and in the various support industries associated with mining, it was women’s labor that was largely pulled in to the administrative and social service sectors of the rapidly expanding micro-economy. This push for women’s labor in Madan mirrored a

national trend that sought to liberate women from patriarchal oppression by including them in the labor force. It also solved the potential labor shortages that threatened to slow down the Soviet-style command economic industrialization.

Between 1961 and 1988, the number of women in the Bulgarian labor force as a whole increased from 33.5 percent²¹ to 49.9 percent²². In order to facilitate women's formal employment, child care was made widely available. The number of full-day child care facilities grew from 289 in 1948/49²³ to 3,619 in 1985.²⁴ The number of teachers increased from 5,560 in the late 1940s to 28,864 in the mid-eighties.²⁵ Women were also given generous maternity leaves and fully-paid days off when looking after sick children. In 1985, the Bulgarian government claimed that its women received six months of paid leave for their first child, seven months for their second, and eight months for their third. During these months women received their full salaries.²⁶ They also had the option of extending their maternity leave up to two years, and the additional time was paid at the current minimum wage for the country.²⁷ In Madan alone, there were two half-day and nine full-day kindergartens by 1963, of which one was a weekly kindergarten where mothers could drop off their children on Monday and pick them up on Friday. This was in addition to another five boarding houses for older children attending school in the city away from their villages.²⁸

The economic necessity of having women in the labor force was bolstered by strident political campaigns to sway Pomak women to the communist cause, believing that they were the ultimate proletariat.²⁹ A lesson plan from 1961 from the state archives in the city of Blagoevgrad demonstrates the extensive educational programs to help incorporate women into the state socialist project.³⁰ The outline for "forty-five day courses for Bulgarian Muslim women activists of the Fatherland Front," includes a variety of lectures from four hours on Bulgarian and world geography to four hours dedicated to personal hygiene for women and how proper socialist women should dress (without headscarves, of course). There were also two hours each to be dedicated to the "unscientific and reactionary essence of religion," "religion and the woman" and "the harm of observing religious holidays and traditions." These lectures would be followed by eight hours of lectures on the "morals of the socialist family," the work of the Fatherland Front among women and the responsibilities of women activists within the Front, as well as the role of women in building socialism more generally. The propaganda lectures would then be mixed in with more science lectures, including short primers on physics and chemistry.³¹ Thus, in addition to making them more educated and productive workers, these courses were aimed at convincing women to renounce their allegiance to Islam and to embrace scientific socialism in their personal as well as public lives.

But the propaganda sessions were often not enough to break through the rigid traditional patriarchy of the Slavic Muslim population, which was historically rural and isolated from the modernizing influence of the larger cities. As a result, the Bulgarian state resorted to force in its assimilation campaigns against the Muslims. There were laws passed against the wearing of Muslim clothing including the *fez*, *shalwari* (baggy Turkish trousers) and headscarves.³² In addition, Pomaks were forced to change their Turko-Arabic names to Bulgarian ones in the 1970s. These policies were heavy handed and met with stiff resistance. In her book, *The Orient Within*, Mary Neuberger claims that several people in Madan and Rudozem

were killed resisting the name changes in the mid-1970s.³³

In my own interviews, I found that although many residents of Madan and Rudozem did look back with bitterness at the repressiveness of the communist state, for the most part those old enough to recall the socialist period remembered it as a time of unprecedented economic prosperity, social stability and positive change. In reference to the changing of her name from Fatima to Angela, one woman explained to me: “Don’t remind me of Fatima. I hated my life when I was Fatima. All day stringing tobacco, living like an animal. When I became Angela, I went to school. I had my own job and moved to the city. I became a person (*Stana chovek*).”

Another woman confided, “They took our names, but they gave our children education.” Indeed, the communists combined force with an aggressive form of affirmative action: Pomak children, especially girls, were given preferential treatment in admissions to prestigious secondary schools and universities in the hopes that access to higher education would more quickly integrate them into Bulgarian society.³⁴ Transcripts from early communist hearings on the question of the “Bulgarian Mohammedans” demonstrate that education was the weapon of choice against “religious fanaticism”; extensive efforts were made to train a local intelligentsia that could then take responsibility in the further integration of the Bulgarian Muslim population.³⁵

For better or worse, the communists were successful in suppressing the influence of Islam. One study conducted in the early 1990s found that 31 percent of the Pomak population claimed that they were atheists, and another 4.5 percent said they were Christians.³⁶ The communists were also relatively successful with their emancipation project for Pomak women. The anthropologist Katherine Verdery has argued that the communists in Eastern Europe lessened women’s dependence on men by making men and women equally dependent on a paternalistic state,³⁷ and certainly this was true in the Rhodopi region. With formal employment in Madan and Rudozem, women earned their own salaries and pensions and had access to generous social services provided by the state. For the first time, Pomak women were able to exist outside of the patriarchal structures of Islam. But this would all begin to change in the late 1990s and early 2000s, after the disastrous privatization and liquidation of GORUBSO and the decimation of the lead-zinc mining industry in Madan and Rudozem.

In 1989, GORUBSO was still a vibrant (if heavily subsidized) enterprise. In 1990, there were 46,301 workers in the non-ferrous metals mining and processing sector,³⁸ the majority of whom worked for GORUBSO. These workers were among the highest paid workers in the Bulgarian economy, even among other heavily masculinized industrial professions (See Table One). Despite the high wages, however, productivity in the mines had begun to drop. Between 1985 and 1992, lead production decreased by 46 percent while zinc output declined by 37 percent.³⁹ In 1992, there were approximately 85,000 miners employed throughout the mining sector in Bulgaria; by 2002, there were only 23,000.⁴⁰ When GORUBSO was finally liquidated in 1999, 2,800 of the 3,000 remaining GORUBSO employees lost their jobs and registered for unemployment in the municipality of Madan alone, a 72.7 percent increase from the previous year.⁴¹ In a municipality with a population of about 15,000 at the time, this meant that one in every five people was directly affected by the liquidation of the mines, not

including the miners who had already been laid off or quit due to unpaid wages.

The collapse of GORUBSO coincided with an erosion of the political commitment to support the economic development of Bulgarian Muslims. After democracy, Bulgarian Muslims had all of their rights restored: they could practice their religion openly, change their names back to the Turkish/Arabic ones, and set up religious schools and organizations to support the development of Islam in their communities. The laws banning circumcision, Muslim burials and forbidding certain articles of clothing were repealed. If the communists once considered the strategic development of rural, Muslim areas a priority in order to modernize them, the post-1989 governments had few incentives to support economically failing enterprises, especially when the international price for lead and zinc decreased and the miners' productivity faltered. Granting religious freedoms was much cheaper. Finally, the profession of mining was drastically devalued after 1989 as the creation of new capitalist labor markets favored those with education and foreign language skills.⁴² Once the masculine embodiment of the idealized proletarian worker, miners became just another group of unemployed men with few useful skills to enable them compete for jobs in the growing private sector.

The story of the break-up, privatization and eventual semi-liquidation of GORUBSO is a long tale that I will not recount here. For this paper it is enough to say that by the late 1990s there was little left of the lead-zinc behemoth. In the years that followed, thousands of men lost their jobs, and those that remained employed did not receive their wages from the new private owners. As employment opportunities disappeared, young people fled the cities to look for better prospects elsewhere. Many men were forced to become migrant workers, seeking odd jobs in Bulgaria and abroad. The residents in Madan and Rudozem experienced a sudden and marked decline in their living standards. Schools, stores, kindergartens, restaurants and cultural facilities closed down one by one, throwing even more people out of work. "It was like there was a war here," Lyubomir once explained. "Only there were no bombs."

And it was into these dire circumstances that the first fingers of charitable aid from the Middle East were inserted into Madan and Rudozem.⁴³

Islamic Revivalism

Hasan is a soft-spoken retired miner who worked his way up through the ranks of GORUBSO from being an ordinary laborer to the boss of the one of the mines. He now works in the café of the new mosque, serving tea, juice and snacks and selling Islamic literature. He is a handsome man with a full head of thick, salt and pepper hair and a carefully groomed beard. There is an air of confidence about him, something almost benevolently patriarchal. Even though he has little in the way of formal education and has spent the majority of his life underground, he oozes the wisdom and spiritual clarity of a sage. He is also a *hadj*, one of the thirty or so local men and women who were sponsored by international Islamic charities to make the pilgrimage to Mecca. He tells me that they made the trip by bus through Turkey, Syria and Jordan and for the first time it strikes me just how close Bulgaria actually is to the Middle East. He calls himself a "*tochen myusyulman*" or an "exact Muslim" in order to

differentiate himself from the other Pomaks in Madan like the men in The Establishment who drink all morning, go to the mosque for Friday prayers in the early afternoon, and then return to Vesi and their rakiyas for the rest of the day. He does not drink alcohol, refrains from eating pork, observes the fast for Ramadan, and believes that his first duty is to God and his second duty to his wife and family. When I meet with Hasan in the café, our conversations are often interrupted because he locks up and goes upstairs to be ready for the *azan*, or call to prayer, which he observes five times a day. When I ask him why other Muslims in Madan are not “exact Muslims” like himself, he explains: “They have lost their traditions. The communists wanted to take our belief away from us. They made it difficult to live our life as Allah wishes us to live. The old people hid their belief in their homes. The young people did not learn or were embarrassed by their parents for being fanatics. Only now, after democracy, can we find the straight path.”

Hasan was at the center of a growing Islamic revival that was emerging in both Madan and Rudozem in 2005-2006. Although Islam in its traditional form had always been present in these cities (even during communism), it was only beginning in the late 1990s that its character began to change from a moderate and quite syncretistic form of Hanafi Sunnism to a much more conservative, doctrinal version of the faith, particularly with regard to the dress and behavior of women. In the course of my fieldwork, I observed an increase in what the anthropologist Saba Mahmood has called “religious sociability”⁴⁴ among a small but growing number of men and women in the two GORUBSO cities.

Most of this activity began in the mid-1990s after the outbreak of the Bosnian war in nearby Yugoslavia. The wider Muslim *ummah* suddenly seemed to remember that there were Muslims in Eastern Europe who were in need of aid and assistance following the often brutal suppression of their faith during communism.⁴⁵ It was during this time that the Muslim leadership in Bulgaria began to forge wider contacts with international Islamic organizations as well as with sympathetic governments in the Muslim world. Local branches of several international Islamic charitable organizations from Saudi Arabia were founded in Bulgaria, and the religious directorate of the Turkish government began directly funding Islamic education and the construction/reconstruction of mosques. There were also individual missionaries from the Muslim world who reportedly brought suitcases full of cash into the Rhodopi Mountains to support the re-Islamization of the Pomaks, mostly likely through the *hawala* system.⁴⁶ Throughout the region, the 1990s were a time that saw the sudden availability of scholarships to send local Muslims for Islamic education to Turkey, Iran, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait or other Arab countries. There were also sponsored trips to Mecca such as the one Hasan joined, generous donations of ritually sacrificed meat for the *kurban bayryam* (feast of the sacrifice), and food for the fast-breaking meals (*iftar*) during the month of Ramadan.

In 2000 and 2001, new mosques in Madan and Rudozem were opened, both having received substantial external support from unnamed “sponsors.” Men and women I interviewed in both cities remember seeing what they called “sheiks” (*sheikove*) in town around the time of the openings, referring to visiting Arab men who wore long white *dishdashah* robes and *gutrah* head coverings. The prayer hall portion of the Madan mosque is said to be the largest in Bulgaria, and the niche (*mihrab*) and pulpit (*minbar*) are significantly more elaborate than

those found in most Bulgarian mosques (Figures 5 & 6). In fact, the architecture of the two mosques differs substantially from the style of mosque typical for the region (Figures 7, 8, 9, & 10). In addition, both mosques have sleeping quarters for male and female guests, cafés and classrooms for teaching Koranic lessons. The young Pomak *Imams* in Madan and Rudozem organize and teach special lessons for children during the summer months, and in both cities there are children who live permanently in the mosque. The Madan mosque hosts a special school for the instruction of *hafuzi*, or men who can recite the entire Koran from memory. According to the deputy chief Mufti in Sofia in 2006, Madan had the highest concentration of *hafuzi* in all of Bulgaria.⁴⁷



Figure 5: *Mihrab* and *Minbar* in Sofia Mosque

Figure 6: *Mihrab* and *Minbar* in Madan Mosque





Figure 7: Elhovetz Mosque (Oldest mosque in the region - 300-400 years old)



Figure 8: Ardino Mosque (Typical architectural style for mosques in this region)



Figure 9: Madan mosque



Figure 10: Rudozem Mosque

The striking thing about the mosques is that, despite their atypically large size, they are usually full on Fridays.⁴⁸ Men from all of the villages surrounding the two cities come into town to follow the *Imans* in prayer and to hear the *Hatibs* speak on social and spiritual issues. There are almost no women who attend the prayers; it is a mass of male bodies that overruns the mosques sometime between 1:00 p.m. and 2:00 p.m. each Friday. In Madan, all of the major Muslim businessmen and the mayor attend the prayers. After prayers, there is much socializing between men as they reemerge into the city, whose streets are full in much the same way they must have been at the end of a mining shift during the heydays of GORUBSO. Much business is conducted in the mosque, and the bulletin board in the entranceway announces everything from job offers for truck drivers in Kuwait to advertisements for cows.

In addition to the official activities of the mosques, there are also many newly founded Islamic nongovernmental organizations carrying out cultural activities with funding provided from abroad.⁴⁹ In Madan, the foundation “*Mostove*” (Bridges) was registered in 2006 and the association “*Ikra*” was founded in 2005. *Ikra* has links both to the mosque in Madan and to the football club that organizes matches for young boys. They also have their own monthly magazine, the first issue of which was published in January 2005. The content is a mixture of articles downloaded from the internet and original texts written by local Muslim men and women. It is sold in the mosque café and in a store that sells headscarves and long Islamic clothing for women. All of the editors are young men from Madan and its surrounding villages. The magazine is only published in Bulgarian, and is therefore specifically targeted to the Pomak population.⁵⁰ All of the articles in the magazine promote a very traditional interpretation of Islam, one where pork, alcohol and cigarettes are forbidden and where prayer, fasting for Ramadan, and strict gender roles are mandatory.⁵¹ Hanafi Sunni Islam, the form traditionally practiced in Bulgaria and in many countries outside of the Muslim heartlands, is quite liberal and distinguished by its relative laxity regarding certain ritual processes deemed mandatory in the Koran. Therefore, these categorical imperatives to the Pomaks to practice Islam in the “proper” way are significant deviations from both the practices common in Bulgaria today and from the form of Islam practiced by their grandparents.

Both organizations “*Ikra*” and “*Mostove*” have been involved in organizing Islamic lectures and seminars in Madan, Rudozem and neighboring Smolyan. In April 2006, *Ikra* organized a public lecture to celebrate the birthday of the Prophet in the very auditorium of the cultural house in Madan where the communists used to organize party meetings.⁵² In August 2006, the foundation *Mostove* organized a lecture in Smolyan by a Macedonian academician who had written a book on the history of the Pomaks. This book was not available in any book stores, but could be purchased in the mosques. It argued that the Pomaks were not Slavs, but a separate ethnicity closer to the Arabs. A similar argument was earlier put forward by Mehmed Dorsunski, a member of the Board of Directors of the *Ikra* association and a local businessman. His book, called *The History of the Pomaks*, was also published without a date or place of publication and could not be purchased in book stores or found in libraries. The newspaper *Democracy* carried a story about the book in 1999, claiming that it had been published in Saudi Arabia where Dorsunski had lived and studied.⁵³ In 2006, there were a series of three articles published in the newspaper *Rhodopi Vesti* pointing out the many

historical errors contained in the book, to which Dorsunski published a “right of reply” where he claimed once again that the Pomaks were not of Slavic descent. In both cases, the new religious associations wanted to establish closer ethnic links to the Arab world, a more orthodox form of Islam, and subsequently a new form of gender relations between men and women.

But perhaps the most active organization in the Madan and Rudozem area is the Union for Islamic Development and Culture (UIDC). The organization was founded in 2004 in the regional capital of Smolyan by Pomaks who received their Islamic education in Jordan, and who were very well organized and funded. They regularly held lectures on Islamic themes throughout the central Rhodopi region, with a concentration on Madan and Rudozem. Lectures such as “health and belief” featured a medical doctor discussing the scientific evidence against eating pork and drinking alcohol. The UIDC also had a separate women’s section which organized lectures and “women’s parties” for Muslim women where stricter Islamic dress codes and more traditional Islamic gender roles were promoted. In July 2006, the women’s section of the UIDC also held a forum in the Culture House in Rudozem entitled: “The Islamic Family between the Influence of Society and the Principles of Islam,” where it was argued that Bulgarian culture is often incompatible with true Islamic practices.

The UIDC would become the focus of national attention in the summer of 2006 through two key events that started a very public debate about the growth of what many Bulgarians perceived to be “Islamic fundamentalism” in the Rhodopi. In the first case, the UIDC decided to lodge a complaint on behalf of two high school girls from Rudozem who were forbidden to attend their school in Smolyan wearing headscarves.⁵⁴ The UIDC directed this complaint against the Ministry of Education, claiming that headscarves are mandatory for Muslim women and that the human rights of the two students were being violated.⁵⁵ The Minister forcefully replied that Bulgarian education was secular and that religious symbols had no place in the classroom.⁵⁶ The case then moved to the national antidiscrimination commission.⁵⁷ The ultra-nationalist party, Ataka, seized upon the issue and created a media frenzy about Islam in Bulgaria.⁵⁸ The Turkish-led commission not only ruled against the two girls, but also fined the UIDC 250 *leva* for “inciting discrimination” by filing the complaint in the first place. A few months later, the UIDC would be involved in another scandal, this time involving the local boy’s soccer team in Rudozem sponsored by the Islamic organization. The Bulgarian Football Association filed a complaint against the team “Rudozem 2005” because they wanted to wear uniforms with the crescent moon as their symbol. Once again, the UIDC wanted to defend the rights of the boys to wear symbols of their faith, but official opinion in Bulgaria turned against them, and they backed down.⁵⁹

If the UIDC is more public than Ikra and Mostove, it is only because it has made a conscious effort. The organization has a well developed website (www.oirk.org), and a bi-monthly glossy color magazine, *Myusyulmansko Obshtestvo* (*Muslim Society*), which regularly runs articles on the correct behavior of women and the role of the Muslim woman in promoting Islamic values. The UIDC has an office in the Old Center of Smolyan where it holds regular classes and distributes books and other literature about Islam. Indeed, all of the lectures are recorded and sold on CDs and cassettes from the offices as well as in the mosques.

The purpose of the organization, according to their own website, is “to show the true essence of the Islamic religion,” “give financial help in the region for religious education,” “help the socially weak” and “protect the rights of Muslims and struggle against discrimination.”⁶⁰ The activities of the women’s section are particularly interesting. They claim that their aims are to “present the true face of the Muslim woman” by issuing literature that supports the intellectual development of women while at the same time preserving “the morality and identity of the Muslim woman.”⁶¹

These strict local interpretations of the dictates of the Koran have begun to reshape local gender relations in Madan and Rudozem. During communism, Pomak femininity could be expressed in the workplace, but now the rise of Islamic discourses have started to create an ideal of femininity that is circumscribed by the home and subordinate to men. Based on my own fieldwork in this region and analysis of Muslim publications, it is clear that some men and women, particularly of the younger generation, are beginning to believe that Islam *requires* a “good” woman to stay home and obey her husband. One young woman from the village of Mitovska in the mountains above Madan confided that it was very hard for her to be a “good” Muslim. As a secondary school graduate, she once had many friends and enjoyed the company of both men and women. She also told me that she had very long, curly hair and that she did not like to hide it under her headscarf. But after she married and had a child, she came to believe that it was her duty to stay at home and wear the hijab. Although she would have liked to have gone to university to become a schoolteacher, she felt she would be punished if she disobeyed the will of Allah.

Another young woman from Rudozem told me that women are the moral leaders (*vodachi*) of their families. Their responsibility is to raise their children to be good Muslims. She felt that formal employment was incompatible with her ability to be a good Muslim, as she would not be able to pray five times a day if she had a job. Furthermore, she believed that it was a Muslim man’s responsibility to look after his family. She was one of a group of young women in Rudozem that included two girls who had studied Islam in Saudi Arabia and who covered their faces with the *niqab* (a veil that covers the entire face) so that only their eyes were visible in public. When I asked her why these women would dress in a way so foreign to Bulgaria, she replied simply, “To please Allah.”

In fact, many young women wear their Islamic clothing in a fashion that is not traditional for Bulgarian Muslim women. Older Pomak women typically wear a long colorful printed dress (*fustan*) with an apron (*mendil*) and a colorful headscarf (*kurpa*) tied loosely under the hair or beneath the chin. There is usually some hair above the forehead that is visible (like the scarves worn by the stereotypical “*babushka*” (Figure 11). The younger women and some older women embracing the stricter version of Islam tend to wear a monochrome gown, long over-dress (*manto* or *shamia*), or simply modest “regular clothing” with a single-colored, larger headscarf (*zabradka*) that completely covers the hair and neck (Figure 12). This new way of Muslim dressing is often called the “Arab style” (*arabski stil*) by women who prefer traditional Pomak clothing (Figure 13).

Examples from the *Ikra* magazine published in Madan also demonstrate changing gender roles under the influence of more traditional Islam. In the December 2005 issue, an



Figure 11: Traditional Pomak dress for women (*fustan*, *mendil* and *kurpa*)



Figure 12: The "Arab" Style



Figure 13: Traditionally dressed Muslim women eye three girls in the "Arab" style

article written by a Pomak woman entitled “Code of Conduct for the Muslim Woman” gave some examples of “the women’s conduct that lead[s] to sin” including “leaving the house without permission from the husband.”⁶² If a woman must go to work to support her family, then the new form of Islam insists that she be fully covered with a headscarf showing nothing but her face and hands. Another article called “The Veil: an Imperative” lays out a strict Islamic dress code for Muslim women and claims that there will be divine punishment for those who do not obey: “The over-garment averts bad rumor and consequence in this world and will protect against the Fire in the World Beyond. It should be known that when the Almighty asks the question, ‘Why didn’t you cover your body in your earthly existence?’ it will be very difficult for a woman to give an answer.”⁶³

Ikra, Mostove and the UIDC have been extremely successful in mobilizing a growing number of Pomaks in Madan and Rudozem to embrace a more orthodox position on religious matters, particularly with regard to the proper role for women in society. One of the results of the UIDC’s decision to bring the complaint about the headscarves before the anti-discrimination commission was that it forced the Chief Mufti of all Muslims in Bulgaria to publicly issue a statement that the covering of the head is mandatory for Muslim women, something that had never been made explicit by religious authorities in Bulgaria before the summer of 2006. Finally, the Chief Mufti was forced by the furor created by the UIDC headscarf case to issue a public statement from the mosque in Madan calling for ethnic tolerance in Bulgaria on the very day that the commission’s decision forbidding headscarves in schools was announced. In the eyes of the nation, Madan, Rudozem and Smolyan were the new locus of Islamic “fundamentalism” in the country. More importantly, local gender roles were being redefined so that the ideal family had a husband who worked to support a pious stay-at-home wife, a radical departure from the communist past.

It is not my intention, however, to paint Bulgarian women as passive victims of these changes--indeed in many ways they actively embraced them. When I asked why women wore the “Arab” style of *hijab* in Madan and Rudozem, there were a wide variety of explanations. The women themselves said it was because the headscarf was mandatory for Muslim women. Secular Pomaks or older women who wore their headscarves (*kurpi*) in the old style offered other reasons. The reason that I heard most often was that the women were paid by the Imams to wear them. So common was this perception among the more secular Pomaks in the region that in two published interviews in the local newspaper (one with the head of the women’s section of the UIDC and the other with the two girls who brought the complaint against their school) all three were asked point blank whether or not they were paid to cover their heads. Of course, they categorically denied this, but few people I interviewed believed their protestations. It was rumored that some women received as much as \$100 a month for wearing the headscarf and attending religious lectures, a very large sum for this region.

Another common reason given to explain the behavior of the younger “fanatics” was that they were trying to attract rich Arab men as husbands. For older married women, the locals were more sympathetic. It was often explained to me that accepting a stricter form of Islam could help a woman deal with an unemployed and alcoholic husband (Figure 14). In Columbia, the anthropologist Elizabeth Brusco has argued that women convert to evangelical Protestantism as a way of reigning in the macho tendencies of their husbands: alcoholism,

womanizing and domestic violence.⁶⁴ Similarly, if a man in Madan or Rudozem embraced Islam and stopped drinking, this was generally looked upon as a good thing for the wife, and the other women in the community accepted her decision to wear the headscarf despite their distaste for the “new ways.” While the individual reasons for accepting stricter gender roles varied, the general climate of gender relations was definitely moving away from the old communist ideals of egalitarianism.



Figure 14: Drinking *rakiya* in Rudozem

Why Here and Why Now?

Although the majority of Pomaks in Madan and Rudozem are still quite secular, the growing number of those following the “new ways” and their very visible presence in public spaces make these cities quite anomalous in Bulgaria. When I show pictures of these places to Bulgarian friends and colleagues, they rarely believe that the photos were taken in their country. With almost a million Muslims in Bulgaria, the relative concentration of these events in these two cities provokes the question, why here and not elsewhere? Why not in the Turkish regions, the Roma neighborhoods or in other Pomak areas? Certainly, there are other cities and villages where Muslims were more heavily oppressed under communism--in many Turkish regions people were both imprisoned and killed when the communists forced them to change their names in the mid-1980s. In the Pomak village of Ribnovo, the army was called out against the residents when they staged a massive protest against the name changes in the 1970s.⁶⁵ But the level of Islamic activity in Madan and Rudozem is exceptional, and external funding supported the construction of their huge mosques that have become the heart of reconstituted Muslim communities.

The problem with the Marxist and functionalist explanations I referred to at the beginning of this paper is that they can be applied to many places in Bulgaria (indeed throughout Eastern Europe), both Christian and Muslim. Most rural areas throughout the country have experienced a severe decline in their living standards. Rural industries have been

decimated, populations have fled, and access to education has been severely crippled by the shrinking of the social welfare apparatus in all of Bulgaria. Religious missionaries with financial resources travel throughout the country trying to entice potential believers with promises of food, financial aid and religious education alongside spiritual salvation. In this respect, the central Rhodopi are certainly not unique. This can also be said of the ideological vacuum left by communism; all Bulgarians were encouraged to become atheists, and social mobility before 1989 was linked to joining the communist party and rejecting religion. There may be something to the argument that there is continuity with the past, but not all Pomak populations that were oppressed by the communists are reaching back to reclaim their religious identities, or if they are, they are re-embracing Hanafism and not the stricter Arab form of Islam. Finally, there are Pomaks spread throughout the Rhodopi, and while it is true that they are becoming more religious than the Bulgarian Turks, why are the two biggest of the new mosques built in Bulgaria since 1989 in Madan and Rudozem and not in other parts of the Rhodopi where Pomaks live? Why is the Islamic revival so strong in the central Rhodopi region and why does it seem to be concentrated in these two cities? None of the theories discussed above take account of the *gender* landscape of the “re-Islamicized” population. To answer this question, an explanation that incorporates gender relations must be considered.

The Gender Cataclysm

Men are the maintainers of women because Allah has made some of them to excel others and because they spend out of their property; the good women are therefore obedient, guarding the unseen as Allah has guarded; and (as to) those on whose part you fear desertion, admonish them, and leave them alone in the sleeping-places and beat them; then if they obey you, do not seek a way against them; surely Allah is High, Great. (Koran 4:34)⁶⁶

Vesela’s older sister, Snezhana, had been a seamstress in the Austrian-owned Sporthalm factory for almost six years, and relayed to me a story told by the women from Madan and Rudozem who work there. Snezhana told me that when Sporthalm first bought Rhodopi-91 (the largest garment enterprise in Madan under communism), they had decided that the piece rate would be set at a level so that the average seamstress could earn approximately 300 *leva* a month. She said that when this fact became public, the mayor of Madan went to the manager of Sporthalm and complained that seamstresses could not be allowed to make more than the miners in the town. The wage rate was subsequently cut so that seamstresses would earn between 150-200 *leva* a month, below the wages of the remaining GORUBSO miners in the town. This story was both ironic and strange to hear since many women who worked in the Sporthalm factory had unemployed husbands. Despite the outrage of the women themselves at having been cheated out of what the owners were willing to pay them, most people in Madan (both men and women) felt that there was something inherently wrong in paying seamstresses higher wages than miners, even if most of the mines were now closed and women were the sole supporters of their families. It was this story that

made me go back and think about gender relations in Madan and Rudozem, and what might underlie the sudden flowering of “Arab” Islam.

What makes the cities of Madan and Rudozem different from other Muslim cities in Bulgaria is that both have experienced what I am calling a “gender cataclysm” in the last decade. By gender cataclysm, I mean a sudden and violent upheaval in an existing system of gender relations that is both unexpected and seemingly irreversible. Gender cataclysms can happen because of wars,⁶⁷ mass migrations, or radical shifts in political and economic structures. The gender cataclysm in this case was the “demasculinization” of Pomak men as they lost their economic status as breadwinners and their social status as wealthy miners within less than five years.

In both cities, the performance of masculine identities was inextricably tied to work in the mining enterprise. By Bulgarian communist standards Pomak men in Madan and Rudozem were the most “manly” men in the entire country and their masculinity was never challenged, even when women began leaving their homes and the tobacco fields in order to get an education and take up formal employment as seamstresses, administrators, teachers, nurses, civil servants and other types of “service” personnel. More importantly, the state actively encouraged and supported women’s labor force participation; the ideal communist family had a wife who worked outside the home in a “modern” profession. Yet because miners were paid well above the average wage that most women earned, men were still imagined to be the providers for the family, even if women’s wages were sufficient enough to make them economically independent of men.

Over the course of four decades, the once rigidly patriarchal gender system in Madan and Rudozem was transformed by the wealth generated by the GORUBSO enterprise. As the standard of living increased and religion was suppressed, women experienced a measure of real emancipation from male control. Women’s dual roles as mothers and workers became normalized, and eventually there were even women who became engineers and technical specialists in GORUBSO. Furthermore, sexual freedom for women increased and women were more active in choosing their future husbands without parental interference, even to the extent that some Muslim women in these cities intermarried with Christian men, something expressly forbidden among Muslims in Bulgaria. On the surface, Pomak women in Madan and Rudozem were no different from Bulgarian women anywhere else in the country before 1989.

When communism unexpectedly ended in 1989 and the Bulgarian economy began to falter, the early postsocialist governments maintained their commitments to GORUBSO and the mines continued to function. A series of high profile miners strikes centered in Madan throughout the early 1990s were a period of even greater glory for the Pomak men. They were successfully challenging the government for higher wages and safer working conditions while at the same time regaining their religious freedoms. But in the span of a few short years, the situation was drastically reversed and the GORUBSO enterprise imploded. The miners went from being the ultimate embodiment of communist masculinity and the wealthiest workers in their communities to a group of relatively unskilled men lacking the appropriate education to compete in the new national and international labor markets.

Initially, the shopkeepers and restaurateurs in Madan and Rudozem were sympathetic with their plight, but as the debit slips added up and it became clear that the mines were not going to reopen, more and more doors were closed to the miners who had lived and worked in these communities for their entire lives. Few of them had savings, because they had never considered that the mines could close let alone that communism as an economic and political system would collapse.⁶⁸ To be a miner came to mean being a debtor and a burden to one's family and friends. One young woman remembered, "It was a horrible time then for the men in Madan. Before they had so much, and then suddenly they had nothing. You could see it in their faces. It was terrible" (Figure 15).



Figure 15: The miner as the embodiment of communist masculinity

Although there were women who worked for GORUBSO, it was largely men who were negatively affected by the privatization and liquidation of the enterprise. More importantly, femininity during the communist era was defined for women both through their formal employment and their work in the home, whereas masculinity was primarily tied to work in the mines. Furthermore, the only significant industrial employment available in Madan after the closing of the mines was for seamstresses—women's work. Although the

wages were low, they were better than most other jobs in the local economy. This created an unacceptable situation in many families where wives, mothers or daughters worked and supported husbands, fathers and sons who stayed home. It was thus the women who enjoyed access to continued social capital through their relationships at the factories, and men who were isolated in the household. In one example, a woman named Tsonka worked as a seamstress during the day and as an Avon distributor in her free time to support her husband and two teenage sons. On each payday, she told me she was embarrassed for her husband who would have to ask her for money to pay his debts in town.

In Madan and Rudozem, unlike other parts of Bulgaria, it was men who were most negatively affected by the collapse of communism, both economically and psychologically. In other regions in Bulgaria, both Christian and Muslim, it was more often women who bore the economic brunt of privatization and the creation of labor markets.⁶⁹ As the state retreated from the market, social supports that once helped women combine work and family disappeared at the very moment that employment discrimination against them became more common. In other places, men and women were equally harmed by the end of the socialist state as whole villages and smaller cities collapsed following the break up of collective farms or the privatization of rural industries that employed them. In the few sectors where women were markedly better off than men after 1989 (such as tourism), this could thus be “justified” as not a favorable circumstance that would benefit all women (at the expense of men), but rather one reserved for those few lucky enough to have the right education and training.⁷⁰ In Madan and Rudozem, however, women were not better off because they were succeeding relative to men, they were “better off” merely because the men were much worse off than they had been before.

The implosion of Bulgarian communism and the shock waves it sent throughout the country was surely a cataclysmic event, but it was only a “gender cataclysm” in cities such as Madan and Rudozem because the entire livelihood of these places depended heavily on one industry. The unique pattern of relationships between men and women here was intimately tied to the history and development of GORUBSO, with women’s initial forays into the formal labor force predicated on the fact that the Muslim men were unthreatened by women’s employment because no job a woman could hold would be better paid or more respected than work in the mines.⁷¹ When men lost their jobs in the mines, employed women became a direct challenge to the local construction of masculinity. As men shifted into less prestigious, less well-paid, and less stable jobs, women’s ideal role became re-linked exclusively with the household, which the re-emergence of Islamic discourses in these communities perfectly justified.

This gender cataclysm coincided with the arrival of Islamic Aid from abroad, supporting a version of a religion that reifies men’s superiority over women. It is then understandable that many men left unemployed by the closure of the mines would be attracted to the ideals endorsed by the new mosques and Muslim NGOs in the region. In many ways, the site for the performance of successful masculinity in these two communities has moved from the mines into the mosques. The former miners can enjoy a familiar male camaraderie and social respect when they attend Friday prayers and mix with their old friends and neighbors.

More importantly, the mosque has become the key place for making connections with wealthier and more powerful people, who are better able to offer help in times of need. Finally, the humiliation many men may feel at having to depend on their wives can be assuaged by convincing their wives to adopt proper Islamic dress and behaviors in order to reaffirm male authority in the household (Figure 16). Thus, in a rural culture with a strong history of patriarchal traditions, it should not be surprising that men would begin to embrace a system more in tune with their own ideals of what appropriate gender relations should look like.



Figure 16: Man and woman in Madan (Summer 2005)

While there are clearly male motivations, why would women embrace these new religious practices, as many of them seem to be doing? It is difficult to understand why women who had been “emancipated” under communism (or their daughters who have some vicarious memories and still enjoy many of the benefits of this emancipation) would so willingly abandon the ideology of gender equality in favor of a model of gender relations that requires women’s deference to and economic dependence on men. After all, these Bulgarian women are not the non-liberal, non-Western subjects of Saba Mahmood’s urban women’s mosque movement in Cairo for whom “morality, divinity and virtue”⁷² are goals in and of themselves. Rather, most of them are thoroughly modern subjects “encumbered” with a complete Marxist toolkit for thinking about resistance to structural (particularly capitalist and patriarchal) oppression.

The sociologist Olivier Roy’s work is useful for understanding these questions in the Bulgarian context.⁷³ Roy argues that for young immigrant children in Western Europe, Islam has become the anti-establishment ideology of choice, replacing the role of Marxist politics

and socialist internationalism in the popular critique of modern capitalism. Furthermore, Roy argues that in its most recent incarnations, Islam has become de-nationalized and de-ethnicized in a way that is a striking mirror of Marxism. Roy's analysis of "globalized Islam" focuses on Western Europe, where the Muslims are mostly immigrant minorities in Christian countries in which there was no direct experience of communism. But his ideas can illuminate why Islamic ideologies have been disproportionately embraced by both men and women in the region of Bulgaria I have studied.

Most adult Bulgarians living through the decade of the 1990s had first-hand experience of both communism and capitalism and were often politically committed to one system or the other due to their own perceptions of how an equitable or efficient society should look, with political freedoms outweighing social and economic security in the many arguments leveled at discrediting the pre-1989 totalitarian government. For the Pomaks in Madan and Rudozem, these costs and benefits of communism were more acute than for most of the Bulgarian population: the rapid state-driven economic development raised living standards dramatically in just a few decades but was coupled with severe religious oppression. The post-socialist period brought religious freedoms but with drastic declines in living standards and economic possibilities. For those trying to promote Islam among the Pomaks, therefore, the claim that religion can provide an ideological third way, a system that can grant spiritual fulfillment and prosperity, may be particularly appealing, particularly if it is also a conduit for new economic opportunities. For those who have lived (and suffered) under both capitalism and communism, Islam may be the successor to Marxism, filling both the "spiritual" and political vacuums communism's collapse left behind.

As different as Islam and Marxism might appear, there are some interesting continuities between the ideal versions of communism and the more orthodox forms of Islam now gaining ground in the Rhodopi. Both are motivated by claims of social justice and are imbued with a self-perception of their own historical inevitability as a global political/spiritual force. Both subsume national and ethnic differences under dream of an international proletariat or global *ummah*. Both are overtly proscriptive in their dictates about how people should live their lives on a daily basis, and offer a total ideological package that clearly outlines the proper moral codes and appropriate behaviors for defining "success" within the system. Perhaps most importantly, both are more communally oriented than the atomistic, individual subjects of free market capitalism, valuing social relations and community cooperation above crass competition, so that both provide some form of social safety net.

Of course there are many differences, the biggest clearly being their disagreement on the necessity or existence of God. And while there are substantive material similarities, there is no doubt that communism and Islam have very different gender paradigms. But what they do share in common is the idea that gender relations between men and women should be organized in such a way as to serve the greater common good and are not just about guaranteeing individual rights. Under communism, Pomak women's "emancipation" was justified as necessary not only to provide labor for rapid economic development but also for modernization of the rural Muslim populations and assimilation of the Pomaks into the Bulgarian national fold. All of this was rationalized by the communists as part of becoming

a modern society and building the bright socialist future, which required sacrifices from both men and women for the higher cause. Similarly, Islamic publications and the newly devout women with whom I spoke emphasized that society had been harmed by women's abandonment of the home and that social harmony and Allah's will could only be served if men and women returned to their appropriate roles. Thus, although the actual gender arrangements are diametrically opposed, the justification for these arrangements are similar enough to warrant further consideration.

Thus, if we agree with Roy that Islam today is one form of resistance against global capitalism, then the Pomak women who embrace these new beliefs may be finding an oppositional space that demonstrates their ambivalence to communism as well. By accepting the reassertion of patriarchal authority in their communities and retreating into the home, Pomak women may gain respect and power in their communities by rejecting the gender legacies of communism but rationalizing their decision to do so by claiming that this move is necessary for the common good, a way of also rejecting the perceived selfishness and consumer materialism of the capitalist period.

While there are many confounding factors, the spread of orthodox Islam in this area is linked to the rapidly shifting gender relationships, or "gender cataclysms," a phenomenon which has been woefully understudied by those trying to grapple with questions of religious revival. Ultimately, it is essential that we consider gender and the structure and history of gender relationships when we examine the acceptance or rejection of more orthodox forms of Islam throughout the world today.

APPENDIX

Table One

Average Annual Wages for Workers in Selected Masculinized and Feminized Industrial Professions

(in Bulgarian levs)

	1985	1989	1990	1991*	1992	1993	1994
Male Professions							
Electricity and Thermal Energy Production	3135	3984	5540	17016	43925	68393	98960
Coal Industry	3888	4740	6417	17625	42338	67257	93624
Ferrous Metallurgy (incl. mining)	3435	4474	5520	15154	40133	61937	100465
Non-ferrous Metallurgy (incl. mining)	3704	4737	5741	15185	35840	60101	86808
Logging and wood Product manufacturing	2635	3362	3982	10888	21816	31962	49003
Production of Construction materials	2841	3582	4436	12362	26467	41021	65867
Female Professions							
Textile and Knitwear Manufacturing	2456	3718	3748	9293	20806	28928	44439
Apparel Manufacturing	2047	2680	3332	8139	19399	24405	39424
Leather and Footwear	2305	3124	3690	9915	21211	27091	43705

Source: NSI, *Statistical Yearbook* 1993, pg. 100; NSI 1995, *Statistical Yearbook*, pg. 155.

* Hyperinflation begins after the resignation of Todor Zhivkov



Map of Bulgaria

ENDNOTES

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