

Books

Memory of the Bulgarian lover Ruben Markham

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The Markham family, Bern, Switzerland, 1916.

A conversation with Stuart Van Dyke Jr. about the personality and work of Reuben Markham (1887–1949) – an American missionary, teacher and journalist who lived and worked in Bulgaria for most of the time from 1912 to 1933 and wrote the book “Get to Know Bulgaria”. Today (December 29) marks the 75th anniversary of Markham’s death

Stuart "Ted" Van Dyke Jr. (b. 1948) holds a BA in history from Yale University, an MA in history from Boston University, and a PhD in European history from the University of Chicago. From 1999 to 2014, he served as Director of Public Affairs for the Association of Directors of Public Housing Agencies in Washington, D.C., where he still lives. Now retired, he continues to research the life and legacy of Reuben Markham, his maternal grandfather. [1]

The occasion for our conversation with Stuart Van Dyke Jr. is the recent appearance of the book *Meet Bulgaria* (1931) by Ruben Markham in Bulgarian with the title "Meet Bulgaria" (2024).

How do you think we can explain Reuben Markham's strong attachment to Bulgaria? What aspects of Bulgarian reality captivated your grandfather so soon after his arrival in the country in 1912?

Markham graduated from Kansas City College in 1908 and continued his education at *Union Theological Seminary*, a popular, somewhat liberal Christian seminary in New York City that was guided by the belief that the most important thing for Christians should not be strict observance of rituals, but adherence to Christian teachings and helping others. In 1909, he married a girl who had studied at the same college in Kansas. He later applied to the American Board of Foreign Missions of the Congregational Church, a Protestant denomination. Their missionary movement founded Robert College in Constantinople (Istanbul) in 1863 and the American University of Beirut in 1866, as well as two schools in Bulgaria, one for boys and one for girls. [2]



Reuben and Mary Markham, New Jersey, 1912.

Markham was sent to Bulgaria as a missionary and teacher in the two schools in Samokov in 1912, teaching religion and mathematics. My grandmother, his wife, who was also a missionary, taught mathematics. Markham mastered the Bulgarian language perfectly and years later wrote articles and books [3] and worked as an editor for periodicals in Bulgarian. I am not entirely sure what aspect of the environment and life in Bulgaria was so special to him. However, he grew up on a farm in Kansas and for this reason had a sympathy for the peasants and farmers who made up 80–90% of the population of Bulgaria when he arrived in the country. In his eyes, Bulgaria was a beautiful country with an egalitarian culture, one of the few countries where there was no aristocracy – in this respect it was somewhat similar to the United States. There were no huge inequalities in the distribution of wealth: there were not a large number of very wealthy people, but there were not so many poor people either; many owned their own land and were able to make a living from it. Markham admired the Bulgarians for winning their independence from the Ottoman Turks and for the courage they

showed in achieving this goal. He also believed that the Bulgarians sought to build a democratic state, because, although they did not have special skills and experience in this regard, they adopted a very progressive constitution. He admired the freedom of speech in the country - there were many newspapers, political parties were free. And in my opinion, he simply liked the people he interacted with. Ultimately, to love a country means to love its people.

After starting to work as a journalist in the 1920s, Markham was often criticized for his positions on various political and social issues, but apparently his love for Bulgaria was stronger than the criticism, because he did not give up on the country. Can we put it this way?



Stuart Van Dyke Jr.

I think that says a lot about his integrity. He accepted critical opinions about himself, he allowed people to express their views openly. The mission he undertook as Bulgaria's representative to the United States in 1918 to try to persuade the American Congress not to declare war on Bulgaria during World War I was controversial in the United States, because Bulgaria was an ally of Germany, and our country was at war with Germany. He withstood considerable opposition. Markham faced strong opposition throughout his life for his views on various issues. He was an advocate of Bulgarian claims to Macedonia – another unpopular position in the West at the time, because after World War I Bulgaria had not been given the lands it believed were its own. This is one of the most important traits of Markham's character: he was willing to stand up for his views and make an effort to get others to embrace his beliefs, despite the considerable resistance he encountered. In the 1920s, he opposed a government that came to power after a coup and killed people without trial.

How do you explain Markham's acquittal in 1927, after he was put on trial precisely for his claims that the government had executed people without trial?

I have no way of knowing the answer to this question, but Velichkov [4] mentions, for example, that when Markham undertook his mission to the United States in 1918, he met with Andrey Lyapchev, who by 1927 was already the Prime Minister of Bulgaria. I believe that Lyapchev and many other high-ranking government officials appreciated what Markham had done for Bulgaria. I do not know how the Bulgarian justice system functioned in 1927, but I suspect that there may have been some pressure from Lyapchev and others to acquit Markham, even though other members of the state apparatus were responsible for his arrest, but I cannot say for sure because I have no evidence. I suspect that the Tsar was also an important factor. Markham seems to have had good relations with the Tsar. There are reports that Markham interceded for a communist sentenced to death directly to Tsar Boris III, and on the basis of his request, Boris III commuted the sentence. The palace followed Markham's articles and in 1939 he was awarded the Order of Civil Merit by the king, so it is possible that the king also contributed to his acquittal.

How do you think your grandfather viewed the communist regime established in Bulgaria after 1944, especially the mass repressions and the camps to which thousands of Bulgarians were sent?

Markham was a staunch opponent of the communist takeover of Bulgaria after World War II. In one of my recent articles, I examine his time in Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania in 1945–1946. He also wrote a book called *Communists Crush Churches in Eastern Europe* [5]. There is a section on Bulgaria in which he writes about the torture methods the Communist Party used to extract confessions from people. He opposed the communist regime while he was alive, and I am sure he would have continued to oppose it until the fall of the regime in 1989.

Your mother Eleonora was born in Bulgaria. Could you tell us a little more about her?



At the Rila Monastery, Ruben Markham is second from the left

My mother was born in Samokov in 1913. The family returned to the United States in 1918 and returned to Bulgaria in 1920. This was my mother's only trip to the United States as a child. Raised in Bulgaria, as a student she was sent to the International School in Geneva. In a letter, my grandfather says that he should have sent her there because otherwise she would have become more Slavic than American. She was extremely attached to Bulgaria. Another curious fact [related to the Markham family – author's note] is that Maggie Markham, Ruben's mother, traveled to Bulgaria in 1928 to visit the family, as they had not seen each other since 1920. Ruben met her at the port of Piraeus and the two boarded the train to Sofia, but at Dragoman she had a heart attack and died. Ruben still managed to transport the body to Sofia, where she was buried.

Did your mother return to Bulgaria after your grandfather's death in 1949? And have you visited the country?

My father worked for the American Foreign Assistance Program, serving as director in Turkey from 1959 to 1964. We visited Bulgaria while we were living in Turkey. My grandmother lived until 1973. She had a hard time keeping in touch with many of the people in Bulgaria she knew; in those days, keeping in touch with an American citizen was a sensitive subject, but some people managed to correspond with her. We visited them in my teenage years. Later, in 1982, my parents and Helen, who, as my mother's twin sister, was also born in Samokov in 1913, traveled together to Bulgaria.

Do you have any specific memories from your trips to Bulgaria in the 1960s?

I remember the tension in the air. My mother was very worried that the family we were seeing would get into trouble because of our visits. It was planned how and where we would meet. When we arrived in Sofia and checked into the hotel, my parents went around the room, looking for hidden microphones to eavesdrop on. There was tension and anxiety, but nothing bad happened to us or our friendly family.

How has the original edition of *Meet Bulgaria* been received *since its publication in 1931*? Has the book had any impact on the knowledge and perception of Bulgaria among people in the English-speaking world?

Markham self-published the book in Sofia. Since it was not published by an American publisher, it was not particularly popular in the United States. The Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has given copies of the book to Bulgarian visitors . [6] It has been described as the best book on Bulgaria in English by Cyril Black, a historian at Princeton University whose father, Floyd Black, was the director of the American College in Sofia from 1926 to 1942 and whose mother, Zarafinka Kirova Black, was Bulgarian.

Is there a particular part of “*Get to Know Bulgaria*” that you found particularly interesting or insightful when you first read the book?

The book has many nice segments. Some of the ethnographic descriptions are quite interesting – for example, the descriptions of peasant life.

Definitely, especially the description of the reapers singing in the fields.

Yes, and the living conditions in the village homes. Overall, I think Markham has described Bulgaria in the 1920s very well. There is also a great section where he describes the pleasant encounters between Boris III and the people he met on his travels around the country [7] .

What is Markham's legacy in Bulgaria and the United States? I am inclined to assume that a very small proportion of Bulgarians have even heard of him.

Markham was expelled from Eastern Europe by the Russians in 1946. [8] In communist Bulgaria, it was probably impossible to give him any recognition. I am very glad that "Get to Know Bulgaria" is now available in Bulgarian. I had hoped that the book would be published so that Bulgarians could read it, because it is a wonderful and very accessible read. As far as I understand from you, the translation is good, and the cover is great. I hope that the book will find its readers in Bulgaria and that its reading will bring pleasure to anyone interested in Bulgarian history and culture. Little is known about Markham in the United States, and therefore I hope that his contribution and texts will gain greater popularity here as well [9] .

[1] His two most recent articles on Markham are 'Russia's 1946 Expulsion of Journalist Reuben Markham from Eastern Europe', published in the academic journal *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 35(4), 658–703, and 'Balkan Expert Reuben Markham's 1944 Resignation Protesting US Support for Tito over Mihailovich', published in the academic journal *Serbian Studies* 35, 125–168 (available for reading [here](#)).

[2] The boys' school opened in Plovdiv in 1860, and the girls' school in Stara Zagora three years later. In 1871, the schools were moved to Samokov. In the 1920s, they were merged to become the American College of Sofia, and students were gradually transferred to the school's new campus.

[3] In addition to *Meet Bulgaria* (1931) , Markham was the author of several other books, including *Bulgaria , Today and Tomorrow* (1931), *The Wave of the Past* (1941), *Tito 's Imperial Communism* (1947), *Romania under the Soviet Yoke* (1949), and *Communists Crush Churches in Eastern Europe* (1950), as well as two books in Bulgarian – "Poor Pilgrim" (1924) and "The Cradle of Humanity: Then and Now" (1937). [4] Stuart Van Dyke Jr. is referring to the article "Rubin Henry Markham and Bulgaria" (2001) by Alexander Velichkov, published in "Historical Review" 1-2, 129–162 (available for reading [here](#)). [5] The book was published posthumously in 1950. [6] In his article "Rubin Henry Markham and Bulgaria", Velichkov wrote: "Although it is in English, the book quickly gained universal recognition and the Foreign Ministry immediately included it in the list of propaganda literature supplied to Bulgarian diplomatic services abroad. Only a month after its publication, the Bulgarian legation in London received a request for an additional hundred copies of it to be sent to them from Sofia. In mid-June, the Bulgarian Minister Plenipotentiary in Washington, S. Radev, also convinced the ministry that the book would be very well received in the United States, and that its author had proven to be a "great and energetic friend of Bulgaria". Therefore, he made a request for three times as many copies to be distributed to people preparing to visit Bulgaria. Over the next two years, the ministry registered an increase in the number of American journalists visiting Sofia, who wished to personally meet Markham as a source of valuable information."

[7] The following excerpt is meant: “Equally pleasant were the contacts between Boris and his subjects during the Tsar’s trips around the country in the Tsar’s car. There were many pedestrians whom the Tsar took in his car to “drive” them. It was not at all uncommon for him to stop to help a driver. On at least one snowy day he helped to dig out a completely unknown car stuck in a snowdrift; more than one driver, who met the Tsar precisely under such circumstances, was later startled by His Majesty’s greeting: “Hello, colleague.” One dark night, an American teacher, driving his Ford somewhere around Sofia, changed a tire under the headlights of His Majesty’s car, who, coming across the stranded person on the road, ordered his driver to stop and shine his headlights on the stationary steering wheel of the car.” (From “Get to Know Bulgaria,” 258).

[8] In response to Markham’s expulsion from Eastern Europe, the American journalist Dorothy Thompson, who was expelled from Nazi Germany in 1934 and later established herself as one of the most influential journalists in American history, wrote in her column *On the Record* in the American newspaper *Evening Star* on July 1, 1946: “In my opinion, Mr. Markham is the author of the most impartial and objective reports from any territory under Russian occupation. He is meticulous in details, numbers, and locations, sometimes to the point of risking boring the average reader. It is clear to anyone who has followed him closely that whenever he could find something good to report, or in the name of truth to refute rumors damaging the reputation of the Russians, he made a special effort to do so. Therefore, if Mr. Markham and *The Christian Science Monitor* [the newspaper for which Markham worked first in the 1920s and 1930s and then again in the 1940s – ed.] cannot operate on Russian territory and in territories under Russian occupation, then it is up to Russia to prove that any impartial newspaper or reporter can operate [in the country and in the territories occupied by it].

[9] After Markham's death in 1949, *The Christian Science Monitor* honored his memory with an article entitled 'Friend of Humanity'.

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