

**The Subversive Folklore
of Bai Gania**

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Summer 2015

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Bai Ganio: The Incredible Tales of a Modern Bulgarian (Бай Ганьо: невероятни разкази на един съвременен българин) was published as a series of feuilletons between 1894 and 1895 by the Bulgarian writer Aleko Konstantinov and was collected in book form shortly thereafter.¹ The title character of the work, Bai Ganio, is a crude, uncultured Bulgarian man who engages in a series of (mis-)adventures. In Part I, “Bai Ganio Leaves for Europe,” various young Bulgarians have gathered to share stories about their encounters with the character. The narrators, who have presumably been studying in Western Europe, all meet Bai Ganio, who attempts to connect with them as a fellow Bulgarian but ends up embarrassing them with his uncultured behavior. In short, Bai Ganio represents the pre-modern, unaware Bulgarian finding himself entirely out of place in modernity. Part II of the work, “Bai Ganio Came Back from Europe,” features Bai Ganio in late nineteenth-century Bulgaria, engaging in unscrupulous business and political schemes. Konstantinov’s work is regarded as wildly humorous and is a favorite of many Bulgarians. Needless to say, Bai Ganio calls into question Bulgarian national identity; as such, many different interpretations of the literary character have been proposed since the work’s publication.

Significantly less scholarly attention has been paid, however, to Bai Ganio’s travels outside of Konstantinov’s text. As I intend to show, the character has moved beyond the written page and has entered the Bulgarian national consciousness as a hero of folklore. Images of Bai Ganio appear in folk art, political cartoons, advertisements, and, perhaps most significantly, in contemporary jokes. Curiously, however, while Bai Ganio appears in print as a primarily negative character, he has been reinterpreted by many Bulgarians as a culture hero. In the popular imagination, Bai Ganio is generally seen as harmless and sympathetic, and even, at times, as a celebrated underdog.

My view is that this transformation is a result of the “folk” of Bulgaria seeing familiar traits in Bai Ganio and adopting him as one of their own. For the dominant Bulgarian social class, Bai

¹ *Bai* (Бай) is “an old-fashioned term of respect used to address older men” (Friedman 2010a:3), and *Ganio* (Ганьо) is a (now old-fashioned) Bulgarian first name. Although this name was spelled as *Ganiu* (Ганю) prior to the Bulgarian orthographic reform of 1945, I have normalized the spelling of this word and of all following Bulgarian-language quotations. All translations are my own.

Ganio has served as a negative model for instruction. Literary critics from Konstantinov's time through 1989 fiercely denounce Bai Ganio as an uncultured philistine, an orientalized manifestation of Balkan backwardness, or, especially in the views of socialist theorists, a bloodthirsty capitalist. For the intelligentsia, Bai Ganio is always the "other." In non-canonical lore, however, Bai Ganio is a subversive hero, one who doesn't trust authorities, attempts to get things done expediently (if illegally), and whose lack of concern for social decorum is a manifestation of lightheartedness rather than innate vulgarity. In this light, Bai Ganio becomes a positive figure, and Konstantinov's Bulgarian anti-hero serves to upset the hegemonic structures that have projected alterity upon him. In this paper, I hope to show how a positive reading of Bai Ganio in popular culture can be understood as a subversive reaction to social dominance.

The reader of Konstantinov's work first encounters Bai Ganio in the epigraph-like opening sentence: "They helped Bai Ganio strip off his hooded Turkish cloak, and he threw on a Belgian frock coat. And everyone said that Bai Ganio was now a real European" ("Помогнаха на бай Ганя да смъкне от плещите си агарянския ямурлук, наметна си той една белгийска мантия — и всички рекоха, че бай Ганьо е вече цял европеец") (Konstantinov 2002:127). Such an image sets the tone for the work as a whole: just as Bai Ganio has donned Western attire but continues to wear traditional undergarments and accessories (Neuburger 441), he attempts to mix with and become part of European society but remains a true Bulgarian on the inside. In Europe, Bai Ganio embarrasses the Bulgarians he encounters by yelling and splashing around in a calm German bathhouse, crumbling his bread into and then proceeding to spill the soup given to him by his hosts in Prague, and talking and blowing his nose at the opera in Vienna. He speaks loudly and bluntly and finds little common ground with the locals on his travels, having no use for what he perceives of as their impractical customs, and assuming that they will try to swindle him. Bai Ganio's Bulgarian identity is also represented by the sweet-smelling rose oil (a major export of Bulgaria) that he has brought along to sell, which is contrasted with his dirty, torn clothes and pervasive body odor. In the second half of the book, he is back in Bulgaria, where he engages in suspect business and political undertakings and yellow journalism. Bai Ganio often tries to imply

that he is a modern European, such as when he remarks that he now eats more “soup” (“*супа*,” a borrowed Western-European word) than “*chorba*” (“*чорба*,” an etymologically Turkish word acquired during Bulgaria’s five-century subordination under the Ottoman yoke). Nonetheless, Bai Ganio fails over and over again in his superficial attempts to behave as should a modern European.

Contemporary criticism generally takes a nuanced view on the question of Bai Ganio and the way in which he is intended to be read. In investigating this problem, most scholars proceed by examining Aleko Konstantinov’s own standing in Bulgarian society. It is indisputable that Konstantinov was a member of the national intelligentsia, as even his peers and admirers (e.g. Derzhavin 82) note. Educated abroad, Konstantinov returned to Bulgaria to work as a public prosecutor before turning to literature. He was directly involved in the modernization of Bulgarian society in the early years of Bulgaria’s independence from the Ottoman Empire (Friedman 2010a:6), and enjoyed “consuming modernity” (Neuburger 432) at the various world fairs that were held in the late 1800s. It is also clear that the narrators of *Bai Ganio*, who laugh about their experiences with the absurd title character, are based on Konstantinov and his friends (Friedman 2010a:7). In this sense, we can see that Konstantinov viewed himself as a modern subject, placing Bai Ganio squarely in the role of the “other.” The narrator exclaims at the end of “Bai Ganio the Journalist,” “We’re Europeans, but we’re not quite there yet!” (“Европейци сме ний, ама все не сме дотам!”) (Konstantinov 2002:271), and this appears to be the assessment the author had of most of his fellow countrymen.

Nonetheless, post-socialist scholars have pointed out that Konstantinov’s understanding of Bulgarians and their place in the world was by no means black and white, and that the character of Bai Ganio leaves room for a complex interpretation. Konstantinov was a great patriot, and he was directly involved in the founding of the Bulgarian domestic tourism movement. Although he clearly admired many elements of western culture, his view of the West was “guarded and at times even profoundly skeptical” (Neuburger 429). If Bai Ganio is to represent Bulgaria, then, it would seem imprecise to say that Konstantinov was using Bai Ganio solely to illustrate the backwardness of Bulgarian society. Daskalov remarks that Bai Ganio can be seen as “both negative and positive”

(530) and that, as a “symbol,” he is “complex and ambiguous in nature” (ibid). Ivanov adds, “Bai Ganio perhaps most strongly confounds the idea of a ‘closed’ reading” (“Бай Ганьо е може би най-силното опровержение на ‘затвореното’ четене”) (11). Indeed, Bai Ganio can be seen in the book to have many arguably positive characteristics—he is resourceful, confident, and strong-willed—and there is no reason to believe that Konstantinov would not have also had a more complex understanding of his character. In fact, his friend Boncho Boev describes in his memoirs an encounter on a train Konstantinov had with a man who, given his close resemblance to Bai Ganio in “Bai Ganio Travels,” must be seen as a prototype for the character. Boev writes:

Той нямаше никакво образование, обладаваше, обаче, природен ум и представляваше тип от старата генерация еснаф – човек с голям стремеж да се държи на нивото на новия интелегент. Вследствие на това, той изпадаше често в леко комично положение, което даваше повод на Алеко да си прави удоволствието да наблюдава отблизо тая своеобразна балканска природа: малко грубичка, малко лукавичка, малко добродушничка. Затова Алеко цял ден се въртеше около неговото отделение в вагона [...] Тоя добродушен българин даде не малко, може би, част от духовния материал за обрисувание на престорено наивния Бай Ганя. (qtd. in Tsanev 8-9)²

He had no education whatsoever, but possessed, however, a natural wit, and could be characterized as a common craftsman of the older generation - a person with a great desire to carry himself as a modern intellectual. Consequently, he would often slip into a somewhat comic state, which gave occasion to Aleko to take delight in observing this peculiar Balkan character up close: a little rough, a little cunning, a little good-natured. Because of this, Aleko hung out all day in his section of the car [...] This good-hearted Bulgarian gave no small part of the spiritual material for the depiction of the affectedly naive Bai Ganio.

While this description does not come from Konstantinov himself, it characterizes the view that Konstantinov’s social circle would have had toward such a man. While this passenger is seen as being old-fashioned and of the lower class, there are still positive sides to his character. Nonetheless, as stated above, Bai Ganio does represent elements of Bulgarian society that Konstantinov saw as being outmoded and corrupt. As the narrator of “Bai Ganio in Russia” states:

[...] злото не се таи в него самия, а във влиянието на околната среда. Бай Ганьо е деятелен, разсъдлив, възприемчив – главно възприемчив! Постава го под влиянието на добър ръководител и ти ще видиш какви подвиги е той в състояние да направи. Бай Ганьо е проявявал досега само животната си енергия, но в него се таи голям запас от потенциална духовна сила... (Konstantinov 2002:208)

[...] the evil does not reside in him himself, but in the influence of his surroundings. Bai Ganio is energetic, judicious, quick-minded - especially quick-minded. Put him under the direction of a good

2 Original citation: Проф. Б. Боев. „Весела България”. Алеко като другар. (Вестник „Алеко Константинов”. Единствен брой. Издава Съюзът на българските писатели. [1927]).

leader and you will see what feats he is capable of accomplishing. Bai Ganio has until now shown only his animal energy, but in him resides a great reserve of potential spiritual strength, which awaits only a moral impulse to be turned into living strength.

While the characterization in this passage of Bai Ganio as a subhuman being is striking, it is clear that Konstantinov did not wish to depict Bai Ganio as an innately negative character. Instead, I see *Bai Ganio* as Konstantinov's exploration of the social and political characteristics of Bulgarians in post-Ottoman society, of which there were both good and bad elements.

I emphasize this point in order to contrast it with the view that almost all socialist and pre-socialist critics of *Bai Ganio* have expressed. Neuburger remarks that Bai Ganio's character has been interpreted for the most part as a negative "national" type (i.e. that of the common Bulgarian) prior to socialism, and then, under socialism, as a negative "social" type (i.e., representing only a particular segment of Bulgarian society) (431). Literary scholars from both of these periods have been fierce in their condemnation of Bai Ganio, and the language they use to describe his character serves to cast him as a negative "other." Bai Ganio is a member of the uncultured class and an outdated "oriental" character, who should be contrasted with the good "European" type; then, under socialism, Bai Ganio is denounced as a "capitalist" as well. All of these critiques come from members of the power elite at the time, and they serve to denigrate the subordinate classes of Bulgarian society.

Many early literary critics were unable or unwilling to see Bai Ganio as a criticism of Bulgarian culture in its entirety, so they rail against Bai Ganio as the representative of a specific negative "social" type. Tsanev explains, for example, "Those things for which Bai Ganio truly deserves scorn are his vulgarity, his ignorant vaingloriousness, and his lack of moral principles. But these are only spiritual dispositions, which there is no reason to consider solely Bulgarian" ("Коего наистина заслужава осмиване у Бай Ганя, то е – простацината, глупавото самохвалство, липсата на морални устои. Но това са душевни разположения, които няма защо да бъдат само български") (24). In comparison with Konstantinov and, presumably, themselves, such critics describe Bai Ganio as lacking or not understanding "culture." Derzhavin calls Bai Ganio "filthy" ("чумазый") (105), and Teodorov calls him a "disgusting guy" ("гнусник") (377) and

a “disgusting person” (“гнусливец”) (ibid). Penev claims that, “Above all, only negative traits have been instilled in this character, only defects and vices” (“Преди всичко в тоя образ са вложени само отрицателни черти, само недостатъци и пороци”) (9) and says that, for a true representation of a Bulgarian, one should look to those characters that appear “in folk poetry, and, after that, in the creations of the first Bulgarian artists” (“в народната поезия, и след това в творенията на първите наши художници”) (10). These critics see Bai Ganio as wholly negative, and they cast him to the lowest stratum of Bulgarian society or even imply that he is not a “true” Bulgarian.

Some critics even go so far as to describe Bai Ganio in animalistic terms. Meshekov, for example, calls Bai Ganio “the all-enduring vulgarity, a social pig, educated or half-educated to his satisfaction, who has never been and never will become a person” (“всепобедната пошлост, самодоволната образована и полуобразована обществена свиня, която никога не е била и няма да стане човек”) (26), and also describes him as “monkeyish” (“маймунски”) (28). Similarly, Derzhavin describes the dangers of Bai Ganio’s “predatory paw” (“хищнической лапой”) (105) and writes how the assemblage of such negative features in one individual make Bai Ganio a psychological “*monstrum*” (113); Teodorov also calls Bai Ganio a “monster” (“чудовище”) (377). The depiction of Bai Ganio as nonhuman is a common trope of literary critics seeking to demonstrate the evils of a coarse Bai Ganio social type.

On the other hand, scholars who see Bai Ganio as Konstantinov’s criticism of the Bulgarian folk as a whole despair of the way Bulgarians (presumably other than themselves and their peers) need to evolve to become more like western Europe. Bulgaria gained independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1878, less than twenty years before Konstantinov published *Bai Ganio*, and Bulgarian society, which had been deeply influenced by Turkish culture, was in a state of social and economic transition. While Konstantinov is clearly urging Bulgarians to adapt to the expectations of European society, he seems to do so with caution, and still recognizes the positive characteristics of Bai Ganio in all his Bulgarianness. Most critics, however, speak of Bai Ganio’s “Balkanness” in strikingly exotic and orientalizing terms, claiming that his backwardness is a result of the

negative influence of the Ottomans. Such scholars write of Bai Ganio's "oriental cunningness" ("ориенталска хитрина") (Angelov 119), his "Arabic soul" ("арабска душа") (Meshekov 28), and claim that he represents "Bulgarian baseness in the face of European upbringing" ("българската низост пред европейското възпитание" (Teodorov 377). Penev speaks of Bai Ganio's "general oriental unculturedness" ("обща ориенталска некултурност") (114) and states that he could just as easily be a Serb, a Vlach, an Armenian, or a Greek (ibid). Angelov also writes that Bai Ganio is the "general manifestation of culturally undeveloped nations in an epoch in which semicultural elements emerge on the surface of life" ("общее явление культурно невыросших народов в эпохи [sic], когда полукультурные элементы всплывают на поверхности жизни") (qtd. in Bakalov 19).³ These critics, who themselves identify more with western European culture, treat Bai Ganio as an artifact of the Ottoman yoke. Although many "justify" Bai Ganio's behavior by attributing it to the political circumstances in which he emerged, he is clearly depicted as a Balkan, non-European "other."⁴

Under socialism, Bai Ganio is also characterized with a particular kind of alterity. During this period, which lasted in Bulgaria from 1946 to 1989, almost all scholars are quick to describe *Bai Ganio* as a critique of capitalism, with Bai Ganio representing the evils that emerge in such a system. Necessary for this argument, of course, is the depiction of Aleko Konstantinov as an early socialist; some (e.g. Bakalov 20) make this claim directly, although Konstantinov never professed such an affiliation. In that Konstantinov died in 1897 after being shot by an assassin, he is typically treated as a political martyr.⁵ In his article "A Faithful and Unforgettable Son of the People" ("Верен и незабравим син на народа"), Veselinov states, "For Aleko Konstantinov, his love for his homeland is inseparable from his love for the people, expressed in his prominently

3 Original citation: Б. Ангелов. 1923. Българска литература, т. II. 339.

4 In *Imagining the Balkans*, Todorova applies Said's concept of orientalism to describe how the Balkans have often been cast as the "other" in the western European imagination. Most succinctly put, "As in the case of the Orient, the Balkans have served as a repository of negative characteristics against which a positive and self-congratulatory image of the 'European' and the 'West' has been constructed" (188). This concept would apply neatly to the way in which the critics of Bai Ganio perceived the ostensibly Balkan elements of his character.

5 It is generally accepted that the bullet was intended for a politician with whom he was traveling, although these facts have recently come to be disputed. Friedman (2010b:61-62) provides more information on this question.

displayed desire for them to be helped. He criticizes capitalism in all its forms and fights with its supporters, whoever they may be” (“За Алеко Константинов, любовта към родината е неделима от любовта към народа, изразена в активно проявено желание да му се помогне. Той критикува капитализма във всички негови прояви, бори се с крепителите му, които и да са те”) (6). Socialist critics state that Konstantinov wrote in order to show the people who their “enemies” (“врагове”) (ibid 31) were,⁶ and proclaim that it was Konstantinov’s “calling” (“призванием”) to fight the “foxes and jackals of the impending capitalism” (“лисицами и шакалами капиталистического пришествия”) (Bakalov 16).

No socialist critic is more explicit in this view than Dimitŭr Blagoev, the founder of the Bulgarian Socialist Party. In his two articles written shortly after the publication of *Bai Ganio*, Blagoev employs fiery political rhetoric to paint Bai Ganio as unambiguously evil. He calls the character:

...тая смес от старата простотия и еснафската наивност с нахалството на новите рицари, които чрез лихварство, чрез пладнешки грабеж, под защитата на законите и на властта, чрез дребни и едри гешефти и спекули усетиха в кесите си силата на “капиталеца”, — тоя предвестник на оформените днес херои на капитала и спекулацията у нас... (Blagoev 1897a:25)

...this combination of the old ignorance and mercantile naiveté, with the impudence of the modern-day cavaliers, who, through usury, through robberies in full daylight, under the protection of the laws and of the government, through both small- and large-scale transactions and speculations, became aware of the strength in their purses of the “capitalist,” — this precursor to the men of capital and speculation that have arisen today in Bulgaria...

He also writes that Konstantinov’s death “deeply moved the hearts of all thinking Bulgarians” (“покърти сърцата на всички мислещи българи”) (Blagoev 1897b:27) and that it was a great loss for all of socialist Bulgaria. In that Blagoev came to be hailed as a national hero following Bulgaria’s adoption of socialism in 1946, it is unsurprising that his words came to be cited in almost all Bulgarian criticism of *Bai Ganio* produced during the socialist period. In socialist collections of articles written on *Bai Ganio*, Blagoev’s appears first, and it is even in literary readers for students (e.g. Spasova 136-140). Any interpretation that appears to take a different view is refuted; for example, other critics state that Blagoev “gives the correct interpretation first” (“[п]ръв дава

6 The word “враг,” ‘enemy,’ had particular force in socialist Bulgaria, as an “enemy of the people” (“враг на народа”) was a phrase used for denouncing those who were accused of being anti-socialist.

правилно тълкувание”) (Ivanova 101), or remark that a view somewhat different from Blagoev’s cannot be correct, because his is a proven “fact” (“факт”) (Ianev 152). Pavlov writes that one cannot be a “serious socialist-realist critic and historian of our literature” (“сериозен социалистическо-реалистичен критик и историк на литературата ни”) (69) if he does not proceed from Blagoev’s interpretation. The only acceptable view throughout the socialist period in Bulgaria, and the one with which every student was indoctrinated, was that Bai Ganio represented a dangerous social element. He is cast as a highly negative character, one to be both feared and despised.

Under socialism, this position was made manifest in virtually all references to Bai Ganio. Several words using “*Bai Ganio*” as a root entered Bulgarian in the twentieth century, including *байганьовец*, ‘a Bai-Ganio-like person,’ *байганьовски*, ‘related to Bai Ganio,’ and *байганьовщина*, ‘the quality of being like Bai Ganio.’⁷ The definitions given for all of these words in the dictionary of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences published under socialism indicate that something related to Bai Ganio can only be bad. The entry for *Bai Ganio* reads: “a vulgar, unpolished, crafty and distrustful person: a boor, a cad... a type of philistine craftsman-speculator, and a representative of the bourgeois class that emerged in Bulgaria in the second half of the twentieth century” (“Прост, недодялан, хитър и недоверчив човек; дебелак, простак... тип на еснаф-спекулант, представител на зараждащата се буржоазна класа у нас през втората половина на XIX в.”) (Cholakova 379). Furthermore, the canonical visual imagery that was associated with Bai Ganio painted an equally dark portrait of the character. Indeed, the same set of drawings can be found in all of the illustrated editions of *Bai Ganio* published under Bulgarian socialism. These images (see Appendix A), created by Boris Angelushev, are rough, black and white sketches often containing a line from the text. They include little detail, but it is clear that Bai Ganio is a person with whom one would not want to associate. His face is usually glaring and, except for when lazily reclined, his posture appears threatening. His face is characterized by dark strokes, and the image depicting

⁷ It should be noted that the *-щина* nominalizing suffix is a Russianism, and could be compared to the Russian word *обломовщина*, which describes the quality of Oblomov, the lazy hero of Ivan Goncharov’s novel *Oblomov*. Although *байганьовщина* and related words do not appear in any Bulgarian etymological dictionary, the morphology of this word would indicate that it was likely coined by intellectuals who spoke Russian and were influenced by trends in Russian literary criticism.

his hairy body in the changing rooms at the German baths (Konstantinov 1966:17) gives him an ape-like appearance. Given the censorship and regulation of literature in socialist Bulgaria, these images were likely the only ones seen by several generations of readers. Clearly, the literary authorities in Bulgaria wanted their readers to understand Bai Ganio as a highly negative character.

Overall, critics since the inception of *Bai Ganio* through the end of socialism put forth very negative interpretations of Bai Ganio, denouncing him as an uncultured or oriental character and as a dangerous capitalist, the complete opposite of what a good, modern Bulgarian should be. Of importance is the fact that pre-socialist critics were part of the formally educated intelligentsia, and socialist critics were essentially espousing official doctrines of the Socialist party. Thus, the official reaction to Bai Ganio as negative has always come from the socially dominant segment of society.

However, the popular reaction to Bai Ganio is often markedly different. Although he is still depicted as unconcerned with social decorum, unwilling to engage in difficult labor, and determined to get the best for himself out of any given situation, these traits often manifest themselves as positive in the collective imagination. The reason for such a transformation appears to lie in the ways in which different individuals have related to the Bai Ganio character. For literary critics, Bai Ganio is a bad “other” to whom they cannot relate. For many people, however, Bai Ganio appears very familiar: as an ordinary, happy-go-lucky Bulgarian. For this reason, the character is embraced by many creators of non-canonical visual and verbal art.⁸

Contemporary visual representations of Bai Ganio (see Appendix B) are completely different from the dark socialist drawings of Angelushev. That which would have been seen in the socialist Bai Ganio as aggressive and boorish behavior is reinterpreted in the popular imagination

⁸ *Bai Ganio* is, in fact, linked quite closely with the oral storytelling tradition. Some of the stories about him have their origins in anecdotes about lower-class Bulgarians told to Konstantinov in his youth by his father (Derzhavin 81). Furthermore, Konstantinov’s stories circulated throughout Bulgaria quickly following the publication of *Bai Ganio*; at the time of Bakalov’s 1931 introduction to the Russian translation of the work, he claims that Bai Ganio is familiar to many “completely illiterate people, for whom the ‘adventures’ of Bai Ganio are known through oral narratives” (“совсем неграмотные люди, которым «приключения» бая Ганю известны по устным рассказам”) (Bakalov 3). The premise of *Bai Ganio* is that several individuals—the narrators—have gathered to share stories with each other, and Angelov (117) points out that the feuilletons sound at times almost as if Konstantinov had simply overheard them and passively written them down. The stories are all relatively separable from each other, so it is clear to see how they could be easily learned and retold on their own to others.

as unpretentious and carefree. He is often seen with a jolly smile and, clad in nineteenth-century Ottoman clothing or Bulgarian folk costumes, he appears as a traditional, peasant-like figure with whom many Bulgarians might be more willing to associate themselves. Interestingly, while in Konstantinov's work Bai Ganio is described as a "broad-shouldered" ("широкоплещ") young man, "at the most, thirty years old" ("да има най-много тридесет години") (Konstantinov 2002:135), he is typically presented in contemporary artistic creations as somewhat older and, often, fairly stout; most commonly, he looks like a rustically jolly peasant. He appears this way in the 1991 Bulgarian film version of the book, "Bai Ganio Leaves for Europe," ("Бай Ганьо тръгна по Европа") (Nichev & Stoichev), in which Georgi Kaloianchev—in his sixties at the time—plays the character as a hearty, laughable man who is contrasted with the stern Bulgarian students and ghostly pale, reserved western Europeans (Examples 1 & 2). An image from this film appears as the profile picture for a Facebook page that a fan has created for Bai Ganio (Example 3), and seems to have inspired the handmade dolls created by a Bulgarian artist (Example 4). This image of Bai Ganio as a benign peasant-like figure also appears in political cartoons (Example 5), where he represents Bulgaria, and in illustrations for other post-socialist texts that analyze Bai Ganio (Example 6). While I certainly do not wish to imply that all of these artists have exactly the same understanding and opinion of Bai Ganio's multidimensional character, he has, on the whole, been appropriated often as a positive character since the fall of socialism.

Bai Ganio has also been employed in the promotion of various institutions and products; in such cases, the image of Bai Ganio carries the idea that something is authentically Bulgarian. This can be seen, for example, in the packaging for "Bai Ganio" ground coffee (Example 7), which bills itself, using mock pre-socialist orthography, as "our [Bulgarian] coffee" ("нашето кафе"). The image of Bai Ganio reclining on a carpet in Ottoman clothes also embraces the Turkish associations with Bai Ganio and extends them to the product itself. Moreover, Bulgarian restaurants and bars across the world have named themselves after Bai Ganio. The sign for the "Bai Ganio" restaurant in Majorca, Spain, for example, features a smiling Bai Ganio sitting on top of a wine barrel (Example 8), and the restaurant is decorated with folk costumes, traditional

woven tablecloths, and signs proclaiming the virtues of alcohol, such as “When wine goes in, the problem goes out,” (“Когато виното влиза, проблемът излиза”) and “The world is a tavern – let’s all sit down at one table” (“Светът е кръчма – да седнем на една маса”) (Example 9). Here, Bai Ganio not only gives credibility to the restaurant as authentically Bulgarian, but adds to it the idea of “*kef*” (“кеф,” “sensuous pleasure”), a word that Bai Ganio enthusiastically exclaims in Konstantinov’s stories. In these contemporary representations, Bai Ganio carries positive appeal and indexes the relaxed Bulgarianness of whatever he promotes.

Many of these traits appear in contemporary jokes about Bai Ganio as well. In such jokes, the narrators appear to be laughing at Bai Ganio while at the same time showing appreciation for his approach to life. There is large body of these jokes in circulation today; the major Bulgarian joke websites “vic.bg” and “vic-bg.com” both list “Bai Ganio jokes” as a separate category. These jokes highlight Bai Ganio’s laidback nature and stubbornness, also instilling him with sexual prowess and portraying him as an underdog national character who bests representatives of other nations.

The image of Bai Ganio in these jokes is often one of a simple man who likes above all to have a good time. This is displayed in one joke where Bai Ganio wants to continue playing cards rather than to be rescued:⁹

Бай Ганьо, американеца и французина попаднали на един остров. Почнали да играят покер след малко намерили вълшебна лампа. Потъркали я и излезнал дух. Казал им че ще им изпълни по едно желание. Французина казал:

- Искам да се върна в Франция.

Американеца казал:

Искам да се върна в Америка.

А Бай Ганьо:

- Я ги върни тези тук, защото имам тройка асо. (Vic-bg.com)

Bai Ganio, the American, and the Frenchman ended up on an island. They started playing poker. After a while they found a magic lamp. They rubbed it and a spirit came out. He told them that he would grant them one wish each. The Frenchman said:

- I want to go back to France.

- The American said:

I want to go back to America.

And Bai Ganio:

Hey, send those guys back here, because I have three aces.

9 The orthography and grammar of these jokes is often somewhat non-standard. I have normalized the syntax and spelling somewhat in the English translations.

There is a subversive side of this joke in that Bai Ganio, the Bulgarian, manages to undo the wishes of the American and the Frenchman. Furthermore, such a joke portrays Bulgarians as, if impractical, at least able to enjoy the simple pleasures in life.

Bai Ganio is also admired in such jokes for his stubbornness. In Konstantinov's text he ignores the advice of others and does what he wants, always attempting to have the last laugh; the same pattern appears in contemporary humor:

Триглавият змей хванал американеца, французина и Бай Ганьо и им рекъл:

- Ще ви изпълня по две желания и след това ще ви изям!

Янкито поискал шише уиски и хубаво маце. На другия ден змеят го хапнал. Франсето поискал каса шампанско и хубаво маце. Същата съдба на другия ден. Нашият специалист поискал кашон презервативи и празна стая. Заключил се вътре. Змеят ще умре от любопитство. На следващия ден чука на вратата, нашият не отваря. Забил той един shut на вратата и кво да види - Ганьо с голям зор гълта последния презерватив:

- Защо така бе Ганьо?

- Тъй и тъй ще ме ядеш, интересно ми е как ще ме дъвчеш куче триглаво. . . (Vic-bg.com)

A three-headed dragon caught an American, a Frenchman, and Bai Ganio and told them:

- I will grant two wishes each and after that I will eat you up!

The Yankee asked for a bottle of whiskey and a hot chick. The next day the dragon ate him. The Français asked for a bottle of champagne and a hot chick. The same fate the next day. Our genius asked for a case of condoms and an empty room. He locked himself inside. The dragon was about to die of curiosity. The next day he knocks on the door, and our guy doesn't open it. He rammed it open and what should he see – Ganio, straining hard to swallow the last condom:

- But why, Ganio?

- Either way you're going to eat me, but I'm wondering how you'll manage to chew me, you three-headed dog.

The American and the Frenchman, referred to with humorous ethnonyms, immediately make what might seem to be the most natural choices in such a situation, and they quickly meet their death. Although the Bulgarian Bai Ganio ("our guy") realizes that he cannot win, he is determined and clever enough at least to bring some harm on his enemies too. Here, we can again see the way Bai Ganio attempts to grasp what little power he can have over others as, even if he must lose, he comes out having inflicted some damage on his opponent.

Sometimes, Bai Ganio does emerge as the victor, even in spite of his flaws:

Бай Ганьо и германеца се състезавали кой ще направи по-хубавф кенеф. Германеца направил хубав кенеф с мебели, а Бай Ганьо - схлупена барака. Отишъл Бай Ганьо в кенефа на германеца, а германеца в кенефа на Бай Ганьо. В кенефа на германеца всичко минало без проблем, а в кенефа на Бай Ганьо станали някои неща: германеца почнал да сере след като свършил работата си духнал малко ветрец и паднала една хартийка.

- Автоматично - казал си германеца.

След като излязъл духнало малко ветрец и се затворила вратата.

- Автоматично - казал си пак германеца.

Повървял малко, духнал силен вятър и бараката понеже била схлупена паднала. Германеца си казал:

- Тоя кенеф бил сгъваем бе! (fun.doom.bg)

Bai Ganio and the German had a competition for who could make a nicer outhouse. The German made a nice outhouse with furniture, and Bai Ganio – a shabby little hut. Bai Ganio went into the German's outhouse, and the German into Bai Ganio's outhouse. In the German's outhouse everything went without a problem, but in the outhouse of Bai Ganio some stuff happened: The German started shitting, and after he finished up a little wind blew and a piece of toilet paper fell down.

- Automatic – the German said to himself.

After he went out a little wind blew and the door closed.

- Automatic – the German said to himself again.

He walked on for a bit, and a strong wind blew and, since it was shabby, the shed fell over.

The German said to himself:

- Wow, this outhouse is even collapsible!

Of course, the listener's expectations are that the German will build the better outhouse and, by traditional standards, he does. However, Bai Ganio still comes out the winner in this anecdote, despite all odds. Bulgaria is often seen today by some as a second-rate post-socialist country, especially since it has entered the European Union but remains one of its poorest members. Still, in the face of the presumably superior western European work ethic and resources, the Bulgarian bests the German.

This is the pattern in the bulk of Bai Ganio jokes. Often, Bai Ganio is the victor not only in terms of social or economic success, but also sexual prowess:

Имало състезание кой ще носи най-много дини наведнъж.

Американеца:

- Аз мога две дини - под едната мишница една и под другата една.

Турчина:

- Аз мога три - две под мишниците и една на хуя.

Бай Ганьо:

- Аз мога пет - две под мишниците и турчина на хуя си! (vic-bg.com)

There was a competition for who could carry the most watermelons at once.

The American:

- I can carry two watermelons – one under one arm and one under the other.

The Turk:

- I can carry three - two under my arms and one on my dick.

Bai Ganio:

- I can carry five – two under my arms and the Turk on my dick!¹⁰

10 Interestingly enough, this joke incorporates the elements of a proverb that appears in both Bulgarian and Turkish: “Two watermelons can’t be carried under one arm” (“Две дини под една мишница се не носят” and “Bir koltukta iki karpuz sigmaz”) (in Shubert 85).

The absurdity of such a feat is what gives this joke its humor, and one could interpret it as a criticism of the implied tendency of Balkan people to engage in nationalist rhetoric to the point of nonsense. However, Bai Ganio has won the argument, even though it is only his unrealistic Balkan stubbornness that allows him to do so. Sometimes, however, a joke will remove much of this ironic absurdity, imparting a more direct message that Bulgarians can be dominant despite their socio-economic disadvantages:

Руснак, американец, турчин, швейцарец и Бай Ганьо се надхвалват за държавите си.
Американецът казал:
-Ние имаме-най мощната армия в света.
Руснакът казал:
-Ние имаме-най хубавите жени в света.
Турчинът казал:
-Ние правим-най хубавите килими в света.
Швейцарецът казал:
-Ние сме най-точната държава в света.
А Бай Ганьо няма да се хваля и Гениалната Идея му дошла:
-Ние ебем рускини на турски килими с швейцарска точност и американска мощност. (vic-bg.com)

A Russian, an American, a Turk, a Swiss and Bai Ganio were boasting about their countries. The American said:
- We have the most mighty army in the world.
The Russian said:
- We have the most beautiful women in the world.
The Turk said:
- We make the most beautiful carpets in the world.
The Swiss said:
- We are the most precise country in the world.
And Bai Ganio didn't have anything to brag about, but a Great Idea came to him:
- We fuck Russian women on Turkish carpets with Swiss precision and American might!

I see this as exemplifying the theme of most jokes about Bai Ganio.¹¹ In some ways, the joke admits to what are perceived of as flaws or disadvantages in the capabilities of Bulgaria or its people. Representatives of other nations appear at first to be stronger or better suited to emerge as the winner in a certain situation. Nonetheless, Bai Ganio comes out on top. This is not, however, due to traditional skills or strengths; instead, he gets the last laugh—along with the Bulgarian people—precisely as a result of his crude, raw Bulgarianness.¹²

11 Note that there are also jokes about Bai Ganio's analogue, "Engineer Ganev" ("Инженер Ганев"), that emerged during the socialist period (Daskalov 535); they appear to have more or less the same themes as today's Bai Ganio jokes.

12 It must be pointed out that the Bai Ganio in all of these jokes is markedly masculine, and the only places for women in these jokes are positions of subjugation. To a very large extent, Bai Ganio jokes express only the social

Clearly, such jokes, along with other appearances of Bai Ganio in popular culture, are not based on the canonical stories of Konstantinov. Instead, it would seem that Bai Ganio has come to serve as a symbol for the ordinary Bulgarian citizen and Bulgaria as a whole. The establishment of such a link appears to have occurred not long after the initial publication of the work. Tsanev, writing in 1936, notes that “the name of Bai Ganio has become a synonym for ‘Bulgarian’” (“името на Бай Ганьо стана синоним на българин”) (20), and Penev claims that stories were even told by Bulgarian soldiers in World War I about the feats of a soldier named Bai Ganio (19). Not surprisingly, this is troubling to those critics who feel that Bulgarians need to come to be more like their western neighbors. Penev insists that the “simple masses” (“простата маса”) (19) who identify with Bai Ganio do not know how to interpret Konstantinov’s stories and are laughing at themselves without knowing it (ibid). He states, “I do not know in any other literature of a more tragic misunderstanding between author and audience” (“Аз не познавам в друга някоя литература по-печално недоразумение между автор и публика”) (20). Despite protests like these on the part of the intelligentsia, in the minds of many, Bai Ganio’s role as a symbol for Bulgarians as a whole has become deeply fixed.

One might question why a literary character, especially one derided so vehemently by critics, would come to be embraced by so many people; however, I feel that such a process is most natural. As has been mentioned above, many of the personal qualities of Bai Ganio that critics have found so negative have very positive sides to them as well. Bai Ganio’s unwillingness to work hard can be seen as only the negative realization of his appreciation for food, drink, and leisure, and his imposing, sweaty body can be seen not as grotesquely animalistic but as masculine and virile. Moreover, Bai Ganio is fiercely patriotic. In the German bathhouse, he leaps into the pool and shouts, “Here he is, do you see him, a Bulgarian! [...] Until now, you’ve only heard of him, the hero of Sliven [the site of a Bulgarian military victory], the Balkan genius! Here he is now before you, in his entirety, from head to toe, *au naturel*!” (“Ето го, видите ли го, българина! [...] Вий сте го чували само, сливнишкия герой, балканския гений! Ето го сега пред вас,

dominance of Bulgarian *men* within the wider social or international context.

цял-целиничък, от глава до пети, в натура!) (Konstantinov 2002:141). In a small country with widespread insecurities about its international standing, a patriotic, highly nationalized character would be readily adopted as a hero. The critic Penev is upset and shocked that Bulgarians “wanted to see in [Bai Ganio] not the negative, but the attractive features of their folk” (“поискаха да видят в него не отрицателните, а привлекателните качества на своя народ”) (19). It seems only natural, however, that a people would be uninclined to denounce a literary character that they felt resembled themselves.¹³

The popular appropriation of Bai Ganio would also seem to be particularly understandable as a reaction to the various hegemonic structures that have characterized Bulgarian society in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Before socialism, most Bulgarians had little access to social or economic resources, then, under socialism, their chances for personal growth were limited, and in the post-socialist period, many Bulgarians have felt helpless in the face of widespread corruption and economic struggles tied to the emergence of neoliberalism. Bai Ganio is also depicted as a lesser individual, but he skirts around society’s rules, doing whatever he pleases in order to advance his situation. This is something that the everyday Bulgarian could generally not afford to do, and it would have been particularly dangerous under the strict laws of the socialist regime. In the first story, for example, Bai Ganio sneaks into the first-class car of the train in order to take some of the other passengers’ alcohol. Surely, such an action could represent the desires of many Bulgarian citizens under socialism, and, indeed, afterwards, who have resented the disparity in wealth and social standing between the dominant class and themselves. For them, Bai Ganio could be seen as a folkloric hero.¹⁴

As such, it might be appropriate to think of Bai Ganio, especially as he appears in

13 I also suspect that many contemporary Bulgarians are more likely to identify linguistically with Bai Ganio than with his western-educated counterparts. The student narrators preserve an older system of object marking for masculine persons, which has now disappeared entirely from the standard language, and they use more Slavonicisms and Europeanisms, which often sound stilted. The speech of Bai Ganio, which employs a more colloquial grammatical system and is filled with familiar, colloquial Turkishisms, is probably more likely to resound with many contemporary Bulgarians. Friedman (2010a:7-9) comments at length on the role of Turkish in *Bai Ganio*.

14 One could, in this aspect, compare Bai Ganio to the Soviet literary character of Il’f and Petrov, Ostap Bender. As the cunning opposite of the New Soviet Man (Nicholas 35), an image circulated by Soviet authorities of an obedient, industrious citizen working to better the state, Ostap Bender cons various citizens to better his own circumstances. This character enjoyed great popularity in the Soviet Union.

contemporary folklore, as a trickster figure. Roberts writes that, for African slaves in America, the telling of trickster tales was “a tradition in which the central figure’s actions were motivated primarily by the socio-political oppression of those who celebrated his action as those of a folk hero” (185), and there is no reason to expect that we could not extend this analysis outside of the African-American tradition. Readers enjoy Bai Ganio precisely because he bypasses social norms, deceiving other people and doing his best to get what he wants. One socialist critic writes that the problem with Bai Ganio is that he does not adapt to the new “conditions” (“условия”) of “order” (“ред”), “lawfulness” (“законност”), and “culture” (“култура”) that followed the Ottoman liberation (Meshekov 25), but, of course, major restrictions on personal freedoms were put into place under socialism as well. A socialist audience, therefore, would be able to identify closely with Bai Ganio’s plight. In a similar vein, Tsanev condemns Bai Ganio for his “lack of recognition of any kind of authority” (“непризнаването на никакъв авторитет”) (25). Even if common Bulgarians could not realistically fight against the authority enjoyed by the socialist government or by wealthy oligarchs after socialism, they could enjoy stories of someone who does.¹⁵

Bakhtin’s concepts of the carnivalesque and the grotesque would also be well-suited to explain the adoption by many Bulgarians of Bai Ganio and his delightfully subversive deeds, especially with regard to contemporary jokes. Limón has applied Bakhtin’s theories of the carnivalesque to show how Mexican-American jokes about various ordinarily taboo topics can be used subversively against the dominant class (138-139), and I believe the situation here is similar. Bai Ganio appears to be an unsophisticated Bulgarian who is unlikely to succeed when pitted against his ostensibly superior western neighbors, but, in fact, he often does, due largely to his mental shortcomings and crude behavior. These jokes challenge the prevailing social hierarchies, often with somewhat taboo or obscene imagery. Bakhtin describes the place of “degradation” in grotesque humor as it serves to bring higher subjects down to earth; he specifically mentions the

¹⁵ In fact, an online cartoon (Stanchev et al) even compares, in trading-card style, the “statistics” of Bai Ganio with those of Hitŭr Petŭr, a trickster character from Bulgarian oral folklore. This demonstrates that the two characters are seen quite similarly by many people.

place of “acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth” (21) in such humor.¹⁶ Bai Ganio proves himself against the German by building not a tool shed but an outhouse, and he bests the Turk not with the size of his brain but of his penis. Key to this carnivalesque inversion of power is that it is specifically used by the oppressed or socially weak. Bakhtin writes that folk humor “means the defeat of power, of earthly kings, of the earthly upper classes, of all that oppresses and restricts” (92). Bai Ganio jokes are used to assert, with various levels of subtlety, the strength of Bulgaria and the average Bulgarian in the context of modern Europe.

The title of a short article by the critic Iliya Beshkov, “Bai Ganio Killed Aleko” (“Бай Ганьо уби Алеко”), became a common sentiment in socialist literary criticism. Beshkov’s piece eulogizes Konstantinov as an enlightened social reformer and implies that the author must have been shot by an evil, uncultured individual like Bai Ganio himself. If we extend this statement to the realm of folklore, however, we can see that, in fact, Bai Ganio has killed Konstantinov and continues to do so. Bulgaria and the everyday Bulgarian citizen have long been treated by dominant classes as a kind of “other.” This has been the case within Bulgaria, as ordinary citizens are told by a social elite that they need to shed their outdated, Balkan ways to become modern subjects. Bulgaria is also treated as the loser in the international context, as a poor, backwards nation that needs to catch up with the rest of the European community. However, it seems that many Bulgarians are unwilling to see themselves and their nation in such a light. They embrace Bai Ganio as their own, use him to represent the positive aspects of the Bulgarian people, and, in doing so, call into question the true hierarchy of social power.

Needless to say, popular representations of Bai Ganio are by no means uniform, and I do not mean to suggest that the character is viewed the same way by all who embrace him as a symbol of national identity. Nor do I see individuals as being of the opinion that Bai Ganio is either entirely

16 There are occasional Bai Ganio jokes to be found on the internet that contain highly descriptive imagery of this sort. In one, for example, Bai Ganio lives at the top of a skyscraper, and, on his way up the stairs, expels a different bodily waste product on each floor, only to arrive at the top, turn on the news, and see reports of the havoc he has wreaked (vic.bg). These jokes are much less common than the nationally oriented ones described above, and it is not clear who Bai Ganio is rebelling against or trying to beat in these jokes, other than, perhaps, society as a whole. Nonetheless, it is clear that themes of degradation are often tightly connected with Bai Ganio.

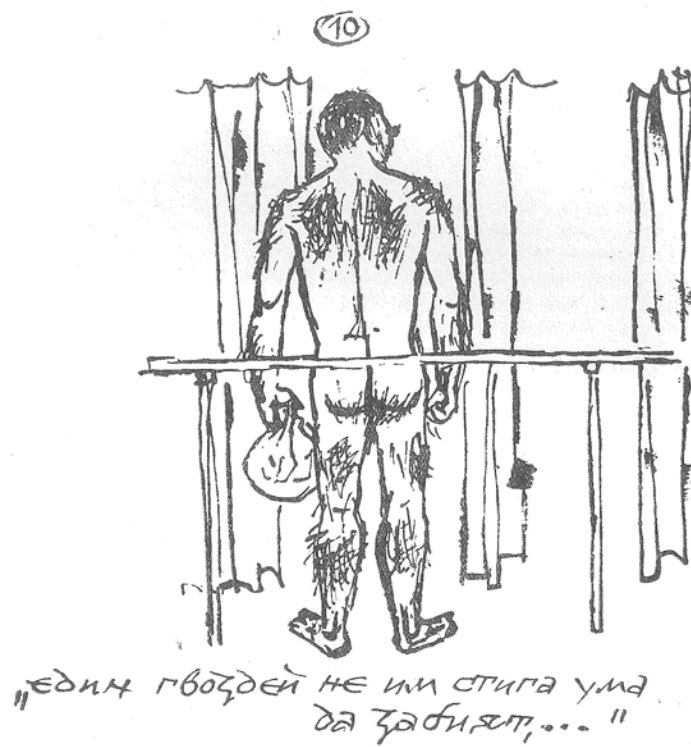
negative or positive; in fact, most contemporary Bulgarians would admit that they perceive in him both flaws and strengths. However, it does seem that the more positive characterizations of Bai Ganio have emerged specifically from the “folk.” While, as discussed above, Konstantinov made Bai Ganio out to be a lower individual, he painted the character with enough ambiguity that readers could seize on his positive traits. When Bai Ganio became identified as the common Bulgarian, these traits became those for which he gained fame, and they resound in many popular visual and verbal depictions of the character.

As such, Bai Ganio’s transformation serves as an example of a cultural backlash against those who would have cast him as a creature of alterity. Rather than taking seriously the views of the dominant cultural elite, many Bulgarians have embraced Bai Ganio and restored his reputation as an authentic Bulgarian in whom they can take pride. In popular representations of Konstantinov’s character, it is precisely Bai Ganio who gets the last laugh.

Appendix A - "Canonical" Illustrations for Socialist Editions of *Bai Ganio*



(Konstantinov 1966:12)



(Konstantinov 1966:17)



(Konstantinov 1966:29)



(Konstantinov 1966:38)



(Konstantinov 1966:70)



(Konstantinov 1966:109)

Appendix B - Post-Socialist Representations of Bai Ganio



Example 1 - *Bai Ganio slurps his soup while his Czech host attempts to maintain his patience* (Nichev & Stoianov)



Example 2 - *Bai Ganio happily engages his reluctant Bulgarian roommate in a folk dance* (Nichev & Stoianov)



Example 3 - *Bai Ganyo's Facebook profile* (Facebook)



Example 4 - *handmade Bai Ganyo doll* (Krūsteva)



Example 5 - *political cartoon with Bai Ganio joining Uncle Sam and NATO* (Tsonev 137)



Example 6 - *illustration by Boris Dimovski accompanying book of literary criticism* (Benbesat 20)



Example 7 - “Bai Ganio coffee - our coffee” (Viva AiM)



Example 8 - “Bai Ganio” restaurant in Majorca, Spain (Dimitrov)



Example 9 - "Bai Ganio" restaurant in Majorca, Spain (Dimitrov)

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