

May 2009

## Book Review: Diplomats and Dreamers: The Stancioff Family in Bulgarian History

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### Recommended Citation

Mathur, Nameeta (2009). Book Review: Diplomats and Dreamers: The Stancioff Family in Bulgarian History. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 10(4), 311-314.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol10/iss4/22>

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***Diplomats and Dreamers: The Stancioff Family in Bulgarian History.*** 2008. Mari A. Firkatian. Lanham, MD: University Press of America. 362 pp. Includes Map and Index. \$45.00 (Paperback).

Reviewed by Nameeta Mathur<sup>1</sup>

*Diplomats and Dreamers* is a biography of the Stancioff family that begins with the careers of the parents Dimitri and Anna in 1887 and ends with the death of Nadejda, their eldest child, in 1957. Based primarily on material available in the Private Archive of the Stancioff family, the book analyzes the work, views, and importance of this prominent Bulgarian family of diplomats. Understanding the accomplishments and characteristics of diplomats necessitates contextual detail on Bulgaria and its foreign relations. The author informs us of Bulgaria as a hybrid European state with an oriental ambience, beset with many problems such as the lack of basic education, grinding poverty, heavy taxation, and corrupt politics. We learn of Bulgaria's troubled relations with the Great Powers. While the Bulgarians took pride in their patriotism and righteousness in the Balkan Wars, the concomitant economic tribulations and political isolation brought grief, which in turn was aggravated by the country's eventual alliance with the Central Powers during the First World War. Defeat saw riots at home, the abdication of King Ferdinand in favor of his son Boris, and the signing of what the Bulgarians perceived as a punitive, humiliating, and unforgiving Treaty of Neuilly. The Bulgarian delegation at Neuilly lived under claustrophobic surveillance. But symptomatic of the political malaise, the delegates returned home with large suitcases and boxes filled with top quality stuff. Interwar Bulgaria suffered repeated violence, coups, and assassinations, all of which kept the country backward. The government's reluctance to foreswear territorial revanchism left the country isolated. And once again, Bulgaria joined the Axis powers in the Second World War, ending with defeat and economic distress.

Within this larger context of Bulgarian history, the characteristics of prominent leaders are detailed. The twice married, pro-war, and pro-German Prince and then King Ferdinand was megalomaniac, imperious, and cruel. Noted for his exceptional vanity, effeminate posturing and dalliances with lovers of both genders, and guided by a sense of inferiority and pessimism, he was also undiplomatic and hard with family members and guests alike. By contrast, his son and future King Boris was thoughtful, compassionate, and humble. Among other important leaders, Prime Ministers Stambolov and Stamboliiski were both assassinated. Bulgaria under the former was dictatorial but stable and onto the path of modernity, while the latter failed to create unity and solid support for his policies.

Mari Firkatian characterizes the Stancioff family as a modern, mixed bourgeoisie family, part of the *haute bourgeoisie*, with Dimitri's Bulgarian Orthodox merchant status and Anna's French Catholic noble lineage. This close knit Bulgarian-French family of wealth, privilege, and blended religion supported the monarchical institution, celebrated pageantry and court life, and abhorred the idea of rights for workers. The family was conservative, tradition-bound, and obsessed with all things Oriental, but they also valued practicality and adaptability, and worked in harmony to project images of sophistication,

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urbanity, and cosmopolitanism. Comfortable in varied languages and cultures, the family prided education, international travel, and general awareness of global events. The family's diplomatic status took them to major European capitals, where they lived an elite lifestyle typified by relentless rounds of soirees, teas, and matinees, and relished their many opportunities for intellectual and cultural enrichment. Duty, fun, and chores describe their activities, and they combined private life with public engagements effortlessly. During times of war and crisis, they served as an extended national family to the expatriates.

In professional terms, Dimitri, a diplomat, gained international recognition for his professionalism and careful diplomatic manner. He also served as Bulgaria's Prime Minister for a short duration and Minister of Foreign Affairs. Anna served at the Bulgarian court, including as *Grande Maitresse* of Princess Marie Louise's court. Daughter Feo followed in her mother's footsteps as lady-in-waiting to a queen, while son Ivan followed in his father's footsteps, becoming a diplomat himself. Particularly impressive of the Stancioff family was their close friendship, both professional and personal, with the Bulgarian royalty. While King Ferdinand's pro-German (and hence anti-France) stance created small moments of stress, the Stancioff children, even of the second generation, remained playmates to the royal children. Indeed, Dimitri and Anna found themselves cast in the role of grandparents to the royal offspring and their own.

At the heart of the book is Nadejda Stancioff, Bulgaria's first female diplomatic representative. Her work experience included her service as her father's secretary, her mother's primary assistant, a lady-in-waiting to a queen, a member (along with her father) of the Bulgarian peace delegation at Neuilly, and First Secretary-interpreter and nurse to Prime Minister Stamboliiski. A Bulgarian nationalist, patriot, and monarchist, Nadejda was also a friend to King Boris, an intriguing subject of journalists' writing, a prolific writer herself, and one gifted in several languages. She was erudite, tactful, and family-oriented, with talented wit and classic beauty and physical grace. Her celebrity grew rapidly because of her professional status, gender, youth, and family background. Even after the assassination of Stamboliiski and her resignation from formal diplomatic service, Nadejda's sense of obligation, duty, and friendship remained strong. Upon her marriage to Lord Kay Muir, Nadejda used her position as the wife of a Scottish baronet to conduct a campaign to win over British official and public opinion in favor of Bulgaria. She wrote newspaper articles, broadcasted for the BBC, delivered public addresses, hosted King Boris and other distinguished guests, and remained tireless in her pursuit of serving as an unofficial representative of Bulgarian interests abroad. Her sympathetic narration of Bulgaria and its royal family earned her the gratitude of King Boris.

Firkatian has chronicled the Stancioff family well, explaining their status, views, occupations, lifestyles, relationships, charitable endeavors, and their importance to Bulgaria. However, it is critical to remember that this was an elite family that had servants to help with housework and governesses to assist with children. The children had ample opportunities to visit museums and monuments, study foreign languages, and to have as their friends the Bulgarian royal family and other foreign diplomats' children. Their artfully decorated estate in Bulgaria was also a rendezvous for various foreign and domestic dignitaries. When abroad on diplomatic missions, such as in Russia, they were accepted into the lavish and glittering lifestyles of the nobility. Because of the family's ties to the Pope, they even received an invitation to the Pope's mass at the Vatican. With

their foreign travels and diplomatic charges, Western Europe came to represent the pinnacle of superiority for them. Thus when in Bulgaria, the Stancioffs resented the dull, backward, and unsophisticated ways of their homeland, seeking to un-choke themselves of the banality by leaving for more “civilized” places. And even during the few times of financial hardship, their diplomatic postings such as in London and economic help from family members in America and Great Britain during the Second World War, eased their monetary pain. The family was also privileged to have had the opportunity to emigrate from Bulgaria all together, thus remaining distant thereafter from a communist Bulgaria in which they were critiqued as “palace people.”

The views cherished by the Stancioff family similarly remained elitist and conservative. For example, they derided the Russian Revolution for having attacked the monarchical establishment, and maintained that Soviet Communism was more dangerous than fascism. Nadejda, in particular, was pleased that Italian fascism was well balanced with the two bulwarks of civilization for her, that is, the crown and religion. When Nadejda was once forced to sleep on a bench on one of her travels, she lamented the “communal future that is in store for Europe.” Nadejda’s praise of King Boris when he died in 1943 was naturally considered unpatriotic in Allied Britain.

Moreover, Nadejda herself lived in great comfort, especially after her marriage to a husband who had enriched himself with colonial profits. She spent her time supervising her large staff and property that was often visited by her siblings, nieces, and nephews. As an influential and important government functionary, Nadejda could also advantage the professional future of her family and friends. The Muirs traveled extensively, all in luxury, and commented on their travels, such as when they found New York City detestable at first, or how they found the population of Egypt dusty and destitute. It is ironic that the Stancioffs-Muirs could fume over the European disregard for Bulgaria, yet find it just as convenient to enrich themselves from colonial wealth at the expense of the colonized peoples of Africa and Asia.

Another marked contradiction, particularly in the character of Nadejda, was her changing position on women and their professional advancement. Typical of expectations of women in that time period, Firkatian reminds us that the role of Bulgarian women remained traditional and conservative. Certainly, the blurring of gender roles was evident in Dimitri’s marriage to Anna that remained egalitarian, in which both partners were devoted to each other, and in which they both performed patriarchal and matriarchal functions. Stancioff women worked as nurses and health professionals during times of warfare, and the Stancioff sisters performed many duties, including translations and writing ciphers and reports for Sophia. Defying convention, Nadejda was even allowed to ride the bicycle surreptitiously from the polite society. When in 1921 Prime Minister Stamboliiski appointed Nadejda as First Secretary of the Bulgarian Legation in Washington D.C., her appointment and its notoriety permitted her to expound on the role of women in diplomacy while giving a favorable impression of a progressive Bulgaria that prided equality of sexes. A lone female diplomat, Nadejda came to believe that that any talented woman could advance professionally. However, and quite surprisingly, Nadejda’s endorsement of women in traditionally male professional realms such as diplomacy underwent a reverse course in 1935 when she cited reasons of liability, marriage, overabundance of male candidates, difficult work, small salaries, dull routine, and uncongenial colleagues to reject the presence of female diplomats. Moreover,

modern attitudes regarding the equalization of the sexes, and especially sexuality, continuously revolted her. Personally, she always preferred the company of older, intelligent men.

It is difficult to laud a family whose vignette is one of contradiction and elitism. At the same time, the family's volunteer work and high status in Bulgaria cannot be ignored. Scholars of women's history and Bulgarian history will find parts of the book useful. But its overall appeal is limited because of its tendency to glorify more and critique less the views and lifestyles of the members of the Stancioff family. Moreover, some sections of the book are oddly positioned. It seems as if the author wanted to relay all the information gathered, even if it resembled a kitchen sink. Case in point is the section on "Maman's Memoirs" whose content and geographic placement in the book's chronology escapes logic. In some other places, detail and explanation are lacking, such as in the section on "A Change of Course." There are also editorial inconsistencies that include spelling errors and irregular font and type style.