

REVIEW

By Prof. DSc. Ivan Ilchev on the fulfillment of the ACDA requirements by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Alexander Mihaylov Sivilov for participation in the competition for Professor in 2.2. History and Archaeology (Contemporary History – History of the USA and Latin America), announced in State Gazette No. 99, dated November 22, 2024, for the needs of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski".

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Alexander Mihaylov Sivilov is participating in the announced competition with a substantial body of scholarly work, extensive teaching experience, and an impressive number of research projects. He won a competition for an Assistant Professor position at the Faculty of History of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" in 2010, was promoted to Senior Assistant Professor in 2011, and attained the rank of Associate Professor in 2017. He defended his doctoral dissertation in 2009. For his participation in the competition, Assoc. Prof. Sivilov has submitted two monographs and eleven articles published after his habilitation as an Associate Professor. In addition to these, his bibliography includes two other monographs and twenty-three articles, which will not be considered in this review.

Even a cursory glance at the scholarly work of the candidate reveals broad thinking and diverse research interests—a trait that should be, but is not always, characteristic of a modern researcher who does not myopically focus on a single issue. The tendency of some scholars to delve into overly narrow topics was once mocked by Alexandre Dumas (father), who ironically remarked: "Above all, there is a scholar... who discovered a species of lizard near Rome that has one extra vertebra compared to other species. He came to announce his discovery to the institute... The vertebra caused a great stir among scholars; the tall, thin gentleman was only a chevalier of the Legion of Honor, but now he became an officer." Fortunately, this does not apply to Alexander Sivilov.

For many years, it was common among scholars of contemporary history in our country to justify their limited research scope by claiming a lack of access to foreign archives. As a result, they focused on topics such as "Bulgaria and...". As the candidate rightly notes, in recent years, hundreds of thousands of documents have been made available online, providing unprecedented opportunities for diligent researchers. (For me, this wealth of sources is a matter of envy, as the Balkan history has not been that well-documented online).

The potential of this new – at least for us - wealth of sources is evident in the monograph "The Gangsters of Prohibition and the Great Depression in the Social History of the USA,

1919-1936." The topic, while not entirely new in American historiography, has been partially explored. For the USA and Americans, the Great Depression was a traumatic event that left a deep imprint on the national psyche, reflected in hundreds of literary and artistic works. In our country, there are no literary works comparable to John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* or paintings like Grant Wood's *American Gothic*. The memory of the crisis is rather fragmented and does not significantly stand out in the general recollection of the interwar years. Additionally, there is a lack of a comprehensive, source-based, and politically neutral study on the Great Depression in our historiography.

Assoc. Prof. Sivilov has transformed his analysis of the crisis into a kind of socio-economic and cultural history of the United States for the period under review. In my opinion, he convincingly argues his view that the crisis began long before the traditional starting point of 1929. Moreover, it emerged at different times in different sectors—in some cases, as early as the beginning of the 1920s. In any case, the author's analysis highlights the remarkable flexibility of the American economy, which, despite significant challenges, ultimately managed to overcome the crisis.

The depiction of social conflicts is particularly striking, as it challenges the traditional image of the prosperous post-1920s decade. For years, I have asked my students which major country experienced the most intense social conflicts at the end of the 19th and in the first decades of the 20th century. Conditioned by a certain narrative, 99% of them answer, "Russia." I am still waiting for the one percent who will mention the United States.

Overall, the book presents a compelling and comprehensive picture of the economic development of the United States, tracing its trajectory across various sectors. Assoc. Prof. Sivilov has long demonstrated a keen interest in the history of leftist movements, and I found the substantial sections dedicated to the diverse leftist movement in the U.S. particularly engaging.

I agree with the author that significant tensions existed between first-generation immigrants and those who arrived after them. Particularly telling are the prejudices against certain immigrant groups, such as the Irish and Italians. In this regard, I would have been interested to see to what extent—if at all—Chinese workers participated in the labor movement, or whether they faced even greater prejudice, even from the left. The same applies to African Americans, who are mentioned only briefly in the text. From both my reading and personal observations, I have formed the impression that workers and, in general, the lower, less-educated social strata—who constituted the main labor force—were often even more racist than the so-called "Southerners." It is evident—though the author does not emphasize it—that

labor unions had internal segregation and hierarchies, making it difficult to claim that they were significantly more democratic than the forces they opposed. Not to mention their later history, when unions not only became involved in business but also did not shy away from contacts and collaboration with organized crime.

I found it particularly interesting to read about how labor migrations in general—and especially those of African Americans and so-called hillbillies—undermined the influence of leftist ideas. Among African Americans, as far as I know, such ideas began to take hold more noticeably, though still tentatively and as a mix of different ideological influences, only around the 1950s.

The monograph also testifies to the success of well-planned and consistent propaganda. As the author points out, many striking workers were effectively discredited in the public consciousness through accusations of having "*ties to communist movements.*" In other words, anti-Bolshevik and anti-communist propaganda proved to be highly effective. I believe this success should have been explored in greater detail in a few additional paragraphs. It is worth considering whether this effectiveness was due to propaganda aligning with the anti-communist attitudes prevalent in both Protestantism and Catholicism at the time.

This hypothetical question leads me to another point. The fragmentation of social conflicts and the lack of external cooperation between different organizations are striking. Could this be, at least in part, a result of the individualistic ethos deeply embedded in American culture?

The author's tone in describing social conflicts is measured, clearly aiming for objectivity. However, I believe that a more critical perspective on the labor movement would have been beneficial. For instance, it is evident that not only capitalists but also labor unions often acted in self-interest, disregarding broader societal needs in their pursuit of their goals. A case in point is the coal miners' strike on November 1, 1919—declared on the eve of winter when the issue of heating for impoverished families was most urgent.

The brief but well-crafted portraits of American presidents from the era are a strong aspect of the monograph. The author makes a commendable effort to dispel certain misconceptions, and in my view, he succeeds. I was somewhat surprised to realize how many initiatives traditionally attributed to Roosevelt's "New Deal" were actually initiated under the Hoover administration. In this context, I would like to note that the sections on Hoover and Roosevelt provide valuable reading for politicians—though, of course, one would have to be quite naive to expect politicians to engage with such readings. These chapters illustrate a fundamental truth: even the most well-intentioned macro-level initiatives, designed to benefit

society from the top down, cannot compete in the minds of voters with direct financial handouts. The former promises long-term strategic benefits, while the latter offers immediate relief—hence the enduring narrative of "bad" Hoover versus "good" Roosevelt. I fully support the author's relatively uncommon approach of integrating cultural transformations as an inseparable part of social history.

The monograph is built on a solid bibliographical foundation, demonstrating a deep familiarity with the subject. However, if I were to take a more skeptical stance, I would echo Kozma Prutkov's famous saying: "No one can embrace the boundless." What we have here, then, is a well-considered selection of sources.

Of course, the work is not without its flaws—and thankfully so. I would like to offer some constructive remarks that may be useful for the author in his future research. Unfortunately, the text contains a fair number of repetitions that could have been avoided with a more meticulous editorial process—for example, in the sections on cultural life, the analysis of African American migration causes, margin stock purchases, the Dow Jones Index, and the prices of copper, oil, and other commodities. Some of these repetitions stem from the structural choices made in the monograph. Additionally, the text includes a considerable number of Russian loanwords, which would be best avoided—Bulgarian has a sufficiently rich vocabulary to express these ideas without them.

The chapter on gangsters differs in style—it lacks a clear social analysis. Instead, it merely states, and repeatedly emphasizes, that for most—though not all—the only path to social promotion is crime. I believe the analysis would have been strengthened by including a few pages on the origins and development of the Mafia in Italy, allowing for a comparison of its similarities and differences with the American Mafia. Here, the author attributes the rise of organized crime in the U.S. to Prohibition. While this is certainly one of the most logical explanations, I believe other factors can also be considered. One is the economic crisis itself, which the author analyzes—particularly its impact on major cities. Another possible explanation is the significant increase in Italian immigration. Between 1900 and 1914, when many of the gangsters discussed in the book were born, more than three million Italians arrived in the United States. Their close-knit networks, combined with the social restrictions imposed on them by their environment, created conditions conducive to criminal activity. I did not encounter—though perhaps I may have missed it—any discussion of whether and how American mafiosi maintained connections with Italy. Additionally, the emergence of a genuine interest among gangsters in the drug trade remains unclear. From what I can gather in the text,

only Lucky Luciano was involved in this business during the period in question, and even for him, it was not a primary activity.

My impression is that a rational person, placed in such circumstances, would not necessarily choose crime as a path to the top of the social ladder. As the examples in the book illustrate, even the most successful crime bosses—except for Meyer Lansky, not to mention bank robbers—had extremely short-lived careers, rarely lasting more than a few successful years.

In conclusion, I believe that the monograph submitted for the competition is a significant achievement not only for the Bulgarian historical scholarship. Some aspects of Assoc. Prof. Sivilov's analysis introduce new perspectives even in global historiography.

The second monograph submitted for the competition is "Leaders, Authoritarianism, and Transitions: The Cases of Russia and Chile." The title is deliberately provocative. What could possibly connect Russia and Chile, separated by more than 15,000 kilometers? It reminds me of the childhood question: Which do you like more—bean stew or opera?

In fact, the author's exposition demonstrates and proves many common features in the establishment of an authoritarian system and the often uncertain success of dismantling it—sometimes leading not to democracy, but to a new, albeit different, form of authoritarianism.

The first chapter attempts to summarize various theories that define key terms used in the study—totalitarianism, authoritarianism, and democracy. It is evident that Assoc. Prof. Sivilov is well-versed in the vast theoretical literature and the dense forest of sometimes contradictory definitions. He correctly points out that in theoretical discourse, concepts such as totalitarianism and authoritarianism often overlap, at least partially—not to mention the different interpretations of democracy. Although he begins his analysis with ancient thinkers, the focus of the chapter is on contemporary philosophers and political scientists who have attempted to conceptualize and model the events of the last quarter of the 19th century. He seeks to adapt the theory of transitions—wherever it even exists—to the aims of his research. However, I fear that the numerous definitions of other scholars, he purposefully cites, sometimes overshadow his own well-formed opinion on these contentious issues. Of course, a work of this type cannot cover all aspects of these complex and often seemingly disparate processes. Sivilov rightly emphasizes the role of external factors, particularly the disarmament processes in the final decades of the 20th century, which contributed to instability. He uses the term "controlled transition" to describe the processes unfolding in the USSR—an accurate and widely recognized concept—but does not mention the role of the ethnic factor, which also plays a significant role in our era.

Overall, the theoretical section of the monograph is an achievement for Bulgarian historical scholarship. In my opinion, in the concrete analysis of factual material, the author carefully incorporates the achievements of theorists without allowing them to overshadow the narrative, which is entirely appropriate. A novelty in our historiography is the use of the term "authoritarian enclaves," which function like crystals in a saturated solution—under suitable conditions, the entire system develops around them. Importantly, the author emphasizes that there is no single model of transition, as each system has its own dynamics.

Despite his best efforts, Associate Professor Sivilov cannot say much new about the situation in Russia, given that this issue has been extensively examined by hundreds, if not thousands, of political scientists, historians, and researchers in social psychology and economics, etc.

The model Assoc. prof. Sivilov uses is to describe a historical event—whether in Russia or Chile—and then assess whether it aligns with theoretical postulates. If it does not, he explores why and what insights can be drawn from it for further theoretical development. This is, of course, a valid and justified approach, particularly for Russia, where ample research exists. However, for Bulgaria, it seems more valuable to analyze the situation in Chile, given the few experts on Latin America in our country.

The author also employs a method extensively used as early as Plutarch but not widely developed in our historiography. He seeks and finds convincing evidence that transition processes are heavily dependent on the personalities at the helm. From this emerges an unexpected conclusion—both Yeltsin and Pinochet are products of systems that do not necessarily represent society as a whole but are characterized by a strong leader-centric principle and hierarchical subordination. For Pinochet, this was the military; for Yeltsin, the party. In both cases, it becomes apparent that leading the processes of change does not necessarily require broad intellectual culture but rather an almost primal hunger for power—preferably unchecked by laws or public will—along with the ability to exploit the peculiarities of the system in which one operates.

As it turns out, having a deep understanding of global affairs is not an absolute necessity—Yeltsin, as it turns out, did not know a foreign language, while Pinochet only learned English after becoming president. What matters more is having a keen sense of the political pulse in one's own country and building a broad base of supporters. Neither of them appears to have been burdened by a heavy ideological framework, too—they were pragmatists. In fact, as Associate Professor Sivilov emphasizes in his main conclusion: "Transitions to

democracy are not an irreversible process. Moreover, they are often guided by authoritarian rulers... A key element... is leadership and the personalities in power."

Finally, let us fulfill the requirements introduced—or rather conjured up—by certain bureaucrats in academia, for whom diversity is heresy and who prefer everything in a competition to fit into a neat mold.

So, let us note that, in addition to the monographs presented so far, Associate Professor Sivilov has published numerous articles in both Bulgarian and English. These articles vary in nature—some serve as part of the preparation for his monographs, which is a common and natural aspect of historical research. Others, however, go beyond these frameworks—such as his studies on the September Uprising, the emergence of a multipolar geopolitical order and other.

Assoc. Prof. Sivilov has led two and participated in other three research projects funded by the Bulgarian Science Fund. He supervises five doctoral students and since 2017 has presented nine conference papers, eight of which were plenary talks. According to the academic point-based evaluation system, he has accumulated 630 points, surpassing the required minimum. Based on the reference list—which, as a rule, is never entirely complete—his work has been cited 14 times, including three citations in international publications. The candidate for professorship has also diligently completed the self-assessment report on his academic contributions—one of the most absurd and pointless requirements of academic bureaucracy, in my opinion.

Associate Professor Sivilov maintains an active civic stance, which is always a positive quality for a university professor tasked with educating the younger generation. He has hosted historical radio and television segments and is one of the managers of a publishing house specializing in the humanities. At the Faculty of History of Sofia University, he has been teaching for years, offering numerous lecture courses in both Bulgarian and English to undergraduate, master degree and doctoral students. Like many other professors, his teaching load exceeds the standard limits. The diversity of his courses is commendable, as they effectively complement his professional specialization in world history. Furthermore, he has organized international academic conferences in collaboration with European universities. He also has administrative and managerial experience, currently serving as the head of the Department of Modern and Contemporary History.

To sum up, I believe that Associate Professor Sivilov has met all the requirements for the academic rank in question. I will confidently vote in favor of his appointment as professor and encourage the other members of the academic committee to do the same.

13.02.2025

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