**KAPKA KASSABOVA INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION**

Theodora Dragostinova

Hello everyone. My name is Theodora Dragostinova, and I'm a professor of history at Ohio State University. And it is my pleasure to be having this conversation with Kapka Kassabova, who is a native of Bulgaria currently residing in the Scottish Highlands. And who is the author of an award-winning book, *Border: A Journey to the Edge of Europe,* a book that was the winner of the British Academy's Prize for Global Cultural Understanding and shortlisted for the National Circle of Critics Award in this country [the USA]. I am joined in this conversation by Chris Kinley, who is a PhD student in the Department of History at Ohio State University and who is also a scholar of the Balkans, and we will talk about borders and beyond. Hello, everyone.

Kapka Kassabova

Hello

Theodora Dragostinova

So, Kapka, I want to ask you, why did you decide to write [about] the border, and specifically this is the border between Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey?

Kapka Kassabova

Well, this is a border with a lot of unfinished business and a lot of untold histories. Like most hard borders in the world, this particular one was very, very personal to me, because I grew up in the last 15 years of this totalitarian regime in Bulgaria, as did our whole generation of Eastern Europeans. So, in a sense, this is my border. That is, I grew up behind this border. And it is not well written, it is not well understood. It's stories secret Lies Legion. And I was always fascinated by this kind of hidden realm, almost the realm of the collective unconscious. And it was just a matter of time when I would go back and confront this border. It's now militarized of course. It's accessible if you have the right passport. So, this was what launched me on this journey.

Theodora Dragostinova

So, you traveled there in 2013. You returned in 2015 as the so-called migrant crisis in Europe unfolded. Can you give us a taste of what the border felt like when you traveled there?

Kapka Kassabova

Yeah, I primarily went with the idea of writing about the Cold War and the legacy of the Cold War and the survivors of the Cold War who inhabit the border zone. And I went with my own memories and my own emotions. But, of course, as with all real, all true journeys, you end up encountering the unexpected. And some of what I had not factored in, was the enormous kind of tragedy of the wave of refugees who were just beginning to kind of trickle into Europe because this is actually, that part of the border cuts across the territory, that is really the only land route of migration between Asia and Europe. There is no other way to access Europe from Turkey by land. In 2013, when I started the journey, if you were driving or walking the militarized zone on the Bulgarian side, these sort of broken roads, and they're really broken-down infrastructure — very beautiful otherwise, various wild and somewhat pristine in the natural realm — you would encounter small numbers of mostly men, but there were also beginning to be some families of refugees. It was very distressing sight. And at the time, the border guards were still sensitive about it. They were empathetic. By the end of 2015, they were not. And the numbers had grown considerably. So, the whole kind of psychology had changed on the ground.

Theodora Dragostinova

There are these multiple layers of contemporary predicaments, but also the historical elements of that story that you masterfully put — and you are such a fine judge of character, I wonder whether you can just give us one example of one person who stands out in this narrative for you?

Kapka Kassabova

Well, the border is full of people and stories that stand out. It is that kind of place. It's an extreme place, and every ordinary person has an extraordinary story. So, it's very hard. That's why this felt like a journey without an end, even though the book had to have an end. But just to give an example of a very sort of archetypal figure of the border. This is almost like one person with two voices. They are actually two border guards of different generations who spoke, really monologued parallel to each other, each telling the story of his own experience. One was stuck in the past. So, it was Cold War stories. And the other who is in his 30s, you know, generation younger, who was telling of his experience finding refugees in the forest in desperate states, pregnant women, you know, this was in 2013, 2014. Mostly Syrians. And he was quite stoic. So, I was interested in the psychology of these guys and what it was like to be a gatekeeper along this border, across generations, because it's an ongoing thing, you know. I was interested in deep time rather than the sort of cut and dried history. This double monologue of the border guards was particularly revealing of the nature of the border and seen from their perspective. And I was very keen to capture different perspectives, different experiences of the border.

Theodora Dragostinova

Yes, you did.

Chris Knley

I wanted to ask a question. There's one theme that seems constant throughout the book, and that is superstition. Even though humans in general tend to be superstitious, there seems to be something about the border, regardless of the timeframe or the period that you're writing about in the book, where people are just very superstitious. They cling to these superstitions. It's almost as if the border magnifies that. I was wanting to know if you think there's a reason for that, or if you even noticed that or felt that or, you know, that's something that you definitely saw and wanted to expand upon.

Kapka Kassabova

Absolutely, it's because I'm a writer of place. I wanted to both experience and capture the true character of this place, of this border realm, and it is a realm. Actually, doubly a realm, because it's mountainous and relatively wild and remote in geographic terms, and because of border culture. And what you call superstition? Yes, there seems to be a lot of occurrences and sightings of what we might call supernatural or inexplicable phenomena as well as this continued practice of rituals which have been lost elsewhere in Europe and even in the Balkans, like fire worship. So, there is, for example, this ball of fire, that's what local people call it, the ball of fire. So, there is the annual seasonal summertime sighting of the bowl of fire. Which depending on how you approach it, might be described as superstitious. Or we might simply say that we cannot explain it, that it is an expression of the collective imagination, which in a place like the border, so extreme in terms of political harshness, and also so kind of isolated and cut off from the mainstream, is also a form of survival. It's a form of collective therapy. I think such things are observable in liminal places. And the border is where the fabric is thin. So, the ball of fire only appears along a particular border river. And I think this is no coincidence. So, I'm fascinated by the psychology of liminality, really. And I wanted to be fair to the truth of the experience of this. Mot to judge it, but to honor it. And that's the spirit in which I have described these phenomena in the book.

Theodora Dragostinova

You're also writing a story, essentially, from the margins. Writing about the periphery from the periphery, but also making the periphery the center. And I'm wondering when we decenter the narrative this way, how do we see Europe? How do we see Europe from the edge? And what does Europe mean when we see it from the margins?

Kapka Kassabova

I think this is a kind of query that is gathering speed almost daily, you know, as the center proves itself to, you know, not to hold. The center cannot hold, the center is cracking up and so the periphery in a way becomes ever more relevant because the periphery is also the forefront. It is - the periphery bears the brunt of the center's decisions, often carelessly taken decisions. And if you spend enough time on the periphery, you realize it's a center in itself. So, it kind of turns that mainstream narrative, that official narrative of what's important and unimportant, what central, what's marginal, on its head. I prefer the periphery. The periphery doesn't lie.

Theodora Dragostinova

And there are some powerful people there. With really sound judgment and immense wisdom, which is so striking when some of your characters say, Europe is a prison. This is such a condemnation, but also so crystal clear when you hear it from there.

Kapka Kassabova

Yeah, this was a woman from Iraqi Kurdistan, just after ISIS had invaded her home region, and she said, We came to Europe because we thought Europe was freedom. But this is a prison. And they were effectively living in an open-air prison, as are many in their position. And I think this is a true indictment of Europe. And we can no longer talk about European value with a straight face. I think that term no longer holds. I would say that the border shows us that if we can talk about European culture, it is in deep denial. It is yet to embark on the process of self-knowledge and self-understanding. And I think the other is only a version of ourselves. And we can no longer pretend that another suffering has nothing to do with us. I think Europeans have pretended that long enough. Now it's catching up with them.

Theodora Dragostinova

I think you're right.

Chris Kinley

So, with the success of this book, what's next, what's the next project?

Kapka Kassabova

*To the Lake*, which is another journey. It's another Balkan journey whose central metaphor this time is a lake, rather than a border. However, it turned out that the lake, or rather the twin lakes, that I circumnavigated for this book, are the side of another triple border. So, it's a kind of continuation of some of the themes of border, but in a slightly different context. It's the Western Balkans, these lakes as straddled by three countries, it's just as problematic, just as interesting. And just as concentrated a space in terms of narratives and natural wonders as border. So that's the lakes of Ohrid and Prespa, shared by the three countries of Albania, North Macedonia, and Greece. And we are all smiling here in the studio.

Theodora Dragostinova

Thank you so much for having this conversation with us. We look forward to reading your new book.

Kapka Kassabova

Pleasure

Chris Kinley

Thank you