

THE BULGARIAN QUASHING OF ITS MINORITIES*

Professor Dr. Türkkaya ATAÖV

With the mass exodus of about 3.000 ethnic Turks every day, a human drama is presently taking place on the Bulgarian-Turkish border. By mistreating its ethnic Turkish minority, the Socialist Republic of Bulgaria has been violating human rights in the most deplorable fashion since 1984. For the last five years, Bulgaria pursued against the Moslem Turks a cruel assimilation campaign that included compulsory name-changing, prohibition of age-old customs, elimination of everything Turkish and finally the shedding of Turkish blood.

Bulgaria conducted a new census in 1985, at the conclusion of which it announced that there were no ethnic Turks in the country. Turkish, which belongs to the Oghuz division of the Turkic branch of the Uralo-Altaic language family, is now forbidden in public. Those Turks unable to present an identity card bearing a Bulgarian name are subject to restrictions such as the following: (a) authorities do not issue a birth certificate to newly-born Turkish babies unless they are given a Bulgarian name; (a) the state refuses to pay money (including salaries, wages and pensions) to Turks unless they apply with Bulgarian names; (c) Turkish workers are refused access to their places of work without their new identity cards; (d) they cannot withdraw or deposit money in any bank unless they produce an identity card bearing a Bulgarian name; and (e) no marriage is registered unless the parties apply with Bulgarian names. These measures are only part of a general oppression of a people who believe themselves to be Turks ethnically and Moslems religiously. The Turks also face arrest, imprisonment, torture and death.

The latest chapter of a series of coercive and often brutal steps is mass deportation of Turks who make up more than 10 percent of Bulgaria's total population or about a million and a half. Measures for persuading

* The original of this article was prepared for an international conference on "Minorities in Eastern Europe", Pecs, Hungary, July 22 - August 1, 1989.

Bulgaria to desist from such crimes, to observe international law and to engage in negotiations with Turkey are on the agenda.

Although the acceleration of Bulgarian oppression of the ethnic Turks is a relatively recent phenomenon, other groups, peoples or nations had been previously victimized in similar fashions. The Pomaks, the Gagauz, the Rom (Gypsies), the Tatars (Tartars), the Alawis and the Macedonians preceded the Turks in a systematic policy of Bulgarization. The Bulgarian Government divided the Turkish-Moslem community into several units and proceeded to register them one after the other, not only as Bulgarian citizens, which they are, but also as ethnic Bulgarians, which they are not. With each conversion, it also classified groups of Turks as "Gypsies" or "Tatars" and declared those groups as "Bulgarians", along with the communities involved. In the meantime, the authorities proclaimed the Macedonians to be "Bulgarians".

The Pomaks, now believed to be around 250.000, are generally referred to as Slavic Moslems, who feel closer to the Moslem Turks on account of religious affiliation and norms. The scriptures, rites, worship and the general way of life approximate them to the Turks, the Tatars, the Rom and the Alawis — all Islamic peoples in Bulgaria. There were earlier reports that the Moslem Pomaks were subjected to pressure to renounce their religious identity and exchange their Islamic names for Bulgarian ones. Between 1972 and 1974, their identities were changed by force. The Western Rhodopes region, where the Pomaks were living, was invaded by Bulgarian soldiers as if it were enemy territory. There was occasional fighting between the Pomaks and the Bulgarians. Some Pomaks were thrown into prison and tortured; some villages were set on fire, and some mosques were demolished. This discrimination and coercion went unnoticed. Throughout history, many Pomaks fled or were expelled to Turkey, where they mingled easily with the local Turks on the basis of common religion and cultural values. In Bulgaria, they are recorded as Bulgarians with no separate rights. They are not shown as "Pomaks" in any list.

The Gagauz, on the other hand, are Christianized (Eastern Orthodox) Turks. They presently live in Bulgaria, Rumania, the southern part of the Moldavian S.S.R. and the adjacent areas in the south-western Ukrainian S.S.R. Turkish is the mother tongue of the Gagauz, who (like the Pomaks) were subjected to a policy of assimilation and designation as "Bulgarians". The Bulgarian statistics do not indicate the existence of the Gagauz as ethnic Turks, who happen to be Orthodox Christians.

Turkish is also the mother tongue of the Tatars, who are, as descendants from the Mongol Tatars of the Golden Horde, a Moslem Turkic

people. They have also mingled with other Turkic tribes who reached Eastern Europe before the Mongols. Those groups that maintained dialects of Kypchak Turkish (closer to Uzbek Turks) and who adopted Sunni Islam became known as Tatars. The term is also applied to the Crimean Tatars, who migrated southward to Rumania, Bulgaria and Turkey. When Catherine the Great proclaimed Crimea "Russian" in 1783, the Tatars began to take refuge in Ottoman lands, including Bulgaria. Turkey's formal recognition of Tsarist Russia's annexation of the Crimea in 1792 deprived the Crimean Tatars of their last hope of regaining their independence. This event sparked off the first major migration, to be followed by others in the 1860s, 1870s and 1890s. They have come mostly to Turkey because the Tatars belong to the Kypchak division of the Turkic branch of the Uralo-Altai language family. They have had a literary language since the 11th Century. In the Summer of 1984, the Tatar names were also changed to Bulgarian ones. Another small community, the Alawis, a Moslem Shiite sect, was likewise inscribed as "Bulgarians".

"Rom" is the correct though less familiar name in preference to "Gypsy", the European equivalents of which are "sigan", "gitan" or "Zigeuner". Since migrating from India (probably from Punjab), they have been rejected in almost every part of Europe. Beginning with the 5th Century, the Rom entered Persia and later on other parts of the Middle East and through Anatolia passed into Europe. Throughout the globe there are more than 10 million Rom, half of whom live in Europe, and of these almost two-thirds are in Eastern Europe:

Wherever they were, they became attached to established religions, whether Hinduism, Islam or Christianity. To the non-Romani (gadjo) Medieval mind, Rom, coming from the Turkish portion of Europe, were suspected people. They became the first "blacks" of the Continent. Opposed by the Medieval society, they were forced to become nomads and turned to be useless for purposes of exploitation. They stayed outside feudal, later capitalist, and to some extent, socialist society. The abuse, cruelty and the general maltreatment aimed at them had their roots in ingrained prejudice. In the past, they became neither serfs, nor wage-earners. Whatever legislation was framed for them, they generally aimed to put them within the sphere of economic exploitation. Nazi Germany massacred perhaps about half a million of them.

Although the largest Rom communities are in eastern and south-eastern Europe, the severest intolerance is within the Council of Europe. The discrimination that they suffer in some of these countries contradicts

the European Convention on Human Rights as well as the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights. The recommendations adopted in Strasbourg were endorsed by the World Romani Congress (1972). These proposals did not lead to fresh initiatives. Only England in Western Europe regularly consults and cooperates with the Gypsy Council.

There are, nevertheless, a few countries that should be exempted from condemnation. Yugoslavia assists its own Rom people. The Netherlands provided caravan sites for a good portion of its 35,000 nomads, a practice imitated by England. Sweden has shown willingness to house a 1000 Rom. In 1974, Hungary reestablished its Gypsy Council.

It is no exaggeration to state that the Rom have the possibility in Yugoslavia to emerge as a flourishing group and with participation in social, economic and cultural life on equal terms with others. The reason is that Yugoslavia since the war has given every nationality and every group the opportunity to develop its resources, as a pre-condition both of its advance and of the advance of the community as a whole. There are several large urban Rom concentrations in and around Belgrade, at Nis and in the new town of Suto Orizari (near Skopje). Former divisions between the Moslem Rom (of Macedonia and Bosnia) and the Christian groups (in Serbia and Croatia) are less distinct. The word *sigan* is no longer used in the media. Romanes grammar book is published in Macedonia. There are a few hundred Rom doctors, engineers, lawyers and other professionals. In Kosovo they gained seats on the Skopje city council as early as 1948. The Romani town of Suto Orizari (40,000) has its own elected council and M.P. The broadcasts in Romanes from two transmitters at Nis and Tetevo carry a message of liberation across the border to Bulgaria. The celebrated poet from Yugoslavia, Svabodan Berberskiy, became the President of the World Romani Congress.

On the other hand, the Rom in Bulgaria, Moslems by religious faith, are subject to forced assimilation. Some of them are settled for generations and some still nomadic across northern and eastern Bulgaria. There are large communities in Plovdiv, Varna and Sofia. Some of the Rom children attend special primary schools, where they are separated from parents and receive an education of assimilation. About forty of them reach university level each year. This proportion is very low when one considers that there are about half a million Rom in Bulgaria. Although the child speaks either Romanes or Turkish at home, education in the schools is through Bulgarian. The "Bulgarization" of the Rom is an official policy. Between 1981 and 1983, their names were also forcefully changed to Bulgarian ones. In this process, some Turks were also treated

just like the Rom. In Bulgaria, there is a popular prejudice that labels them as **sigani**. Several acts of discrimination against them may be perceived in daily life.

The Bulgarian Government carried out a systematic denationalization of the Macedonian national minority and in the process, negated the existence of the Macedonian nation altogether. Located in the central portion of the Balkan Peninsula, Macedonia is bounded to the north by the Shar Mountains, the Osogovo Massif and the Rila Massif and to the south by the Bistritsa River and the shore of the Aegean Sea. As a matter of fact, Bulgaria maintains that the Macedonians are "Macedonianized Bulgarians" and Greece upholds that they are "Slavized Greeks".

The attitude of the Greek Government may not surprise the Eastern Europeans but the Bulgarian position, aspiring to socialist principles, is startling. During the life-time of Georgi Dimitrov, the founder of socialist Bulgaria, the Socialist Republic of Macedonia, which is one of the six republics of the Yugoslav Federation, was recognized by the Bulgarians as the national state of the Macedonians. Moreover, Dimitrov acknowledged the nationality of the Macedonians in Pirin Macedonia itself (in Bulgaria).

What is surprising is that the present Bulgarian Government considers Dimitrov's recognition of the national rights of the Macedonians as a "mistake". Dimitrov had underlined the same fact in a number of occasions. In a letter that he had written to the Central Committee of the Macedonian People's Union in Detroit (Michigan, U.S.A.), dated May 13, 1934, he stated that the most dangerous internal enemy of the Macedonian movement was "Bulgarian imperialism". In the Comintern, he advocated the view that the Macedonian nation be given a separate national status in the Balkans. In a letter to the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Workers' Party (Communist), printed in the **Rabotnichesko Delo** of Sofia on October 2, 1944, Dimitrov called the idea of Great Bulgaria a cancer on the body of the new country.

After 1945, his policy may be summarized as follows: (a) the recognition of the Macedonian nation as a separate Slav entity and the Socialist Republic of Macedonia as the national state of the Macedonians; (b) the recognition of the national right of the Macedonians in Pirin Macedonia; (c) the establishment of good relations between Bulgaria and Yugoslavia.

It was during Dimitrov's life-time that the majority of the population of Pirin Macedonia declared itself as Macedonians, as recorded in the 1946 Bulgarian census. Instruction in the Pirin schools were in the Macedonian mother tongue; books in Macedonian were printed; Macedonian

libraries were opened; a Macedonian national theatre in Gorna Djumaya (Blagoevgrad) put on stage plays in the local language; and a directive was issued for a project of territorial autonomy for Pirin Macedonia.

Georgi Dimitrov's recognition of the Macedonian nation was not a "mistake", but the admission of the sober reality of the Macedonians themselves. Earlier, prominent Bulgarian Social Democrats, no less than the noted Dimitar Blagoev and Hristo Kabakchiev, had defended the same concept against the onslaughts of Bulgarian chauvinism, even before Georgi Dimitrov.

On December 10, 1917, Blagoev, as a representative of the Social Democratic Party in the Bulgarian **Sobranie**, criticized the Great Bulgarian nationalistic policies and stated that the so-called "unification" of the Bulgarians was in fact Bulgarian hegemony over areas which the government considered essential for access to the Aegean Sea.

Similarly, a year later, Kabakchiev said that the Bulgarian ruling circles aspired to form a large state in the Balkans through conquests of foreign territories and foreign peoples. Referring to a remark of Bulgaria's Prime Minister (Dr. Radoslavov) that where Bulgarians have set foot remained Bulgarian, Kabakchiev maintained that such a policy was not a desire to unify the Bulgarian people, but to serve commercial interests and secure trade routes via Salonica to the Aegean and the Mediterranean Seas.

Georgi Dimitrov had declared that it would not be possible to build a "new Bulgaria" without annihilating the phenomenon of "Great Bulgaria", the embodiment of the San Stefano fiction (1878), which aspired to include non-Bulgarian lands such as Thrace and the south-eastern portion of Yugoslavia, including Macedonia. After the Ottoman-Russian War of 1877-78, the Tsarist Government had forced a concession on the Ottoman Empire, as expressed in the San Stefano Treaty, Article 6 of which hoped to create an over-sized Bulgaria extending from the Danube to the Aegean Sea and from the Black Sea to the Albanian mountains. In addition to the present-day Bulgaria, it encompassed all of Thrace, Macedonia, a large part of Serbia and portions of Kossovo, thus including non-Bulgarian lands and peoples. Blagoev had described the spectre of San Stefano as "fiction". Dimitrov was vehemently against it.

With Dimitrov's death in 1949, Bulgarian attitude changed. The government drove Macedonian teachers out of Pirin Macedonia and suggested that the Socialist Republic of Macedonia (from Yugoslavia) be joined to Pirin Macedonia (in Bulgaria).

Stalin's demise and the normalization of Soviet-Yugoslav relations after the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (1956) led to further turns in the official Bulgarian attitudes. Bulgaria dropped insistence on the union of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia and also openly declared the outcome of the 1956 census which recorded 178,861 Macedonians in Bulgaria. The new census, which declared that 63,7 percent of the inhabitants were Macedonians, basically repeated the findings of the 1946 census.

With the cooling of Soviet-Yugoslav relations in 1957, Bulgarian policies underwent another modification. Bulgaria announced for the first time that the Macedonian nation did not exist. It officially took the whole concept of a Macedonian republic as an "artificial" entity designed to snatch away "Bulgarian" territory together with a part of south-eastern Serbia from Bulgaria. This was a negation of Dimitrov's stand and the official line of his time. After 1957, however, Bulgaria also ushered the view that no Bulgarian Government that recognized Macedonian nationality could resist falling from power. Dimitrov's government, which had done so, nevertheless enjoyed considerable authority.

A booklet, entitled **Historico-Political Information on the Macedonian Problem** and printed in 1968 by the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, repeated the Great Bulgarian concept, drawing on the old historiography. It stated (a) that the Macedonian nation did not exist and that it was part of the Bulgarian nation for over a thousand years; (b) that the term "Macedonian" was a geographical concept, not an ethnographic one; (c) that the San Stefano Treaty was unfortunately replaced by the Berlin Treaty, which put Macedonia outside the borders of the "parent" state, that is, Bulgaria; and (d) that the Bulgarian Communist Party, after the April 1956 Plenum, overcame its "weakness" on the Macedonian question, which had permitted the "compulsory" declaration of the Pirin Bulgarians as "Macedonians" in 1946.

In reference to the fourth point enumerated above, one may ask the following question: If the Pirin Macedonians were indeed "forced" by the Bulgarian Communist Party in 1946 to declare themselves "Macedonians", why did they repeat the same in December 1956, that is, eight years after the April 1956 Plenum, when apparently they were no longer being "pressured" to declare themselves as such?

Macedonian nationality is an actuality which, not only the powers of the last century had to seriously consider, but also Bulgaria and Greece have to acknowledge today. What the Macedonians from the Vardar part

of Macedonia succeeded in accomplishing by common struggle with the other peoples of Yugoslavia, the Macedonians inhabiting the remaining two parts of Macedonia, Pirin and Aegean, did not attain.

The reason for the failure in Pirin Macedonia was the official Bulgarian attitude of ethnocentrism, except the reasonable stand of the Dimitrov era. In Bulgaria, there may now be about 300,000 Macedonians — in spite of the successive Bulgarian census which reduced their number eventually to nil.

The Moslem Turks constitute the largest minority in Bulgaria. A new and a great human tragedy is now taking place on the Bulgarian-Turkish border. The Turks of Bulgaria continue to cross the frontier and enter Turkey at the rate of 3,000 per day, coming generally without money and possessions. It appears that Bulgaria is getting rid of, at least, the elderly, the children and the unqualified young men and women among its former Turkish-speaking Moslem citizens.

What the sizable Turkish minority in Bulgaria has encountered since the Berlin Treaty of 1878 is a tragic experience. Bulgarian coercion of the Turkish minority intensified in spite of a number of agreements relating to their status. Consequently, over the years, about half of the ethnic Turks emigrated to Turkey. The rest who stayed in Bulgaria now constitute about a million and a half.

Some time between 1984 and 1985, Bulgarian oppression reached its climax. The Bulgarian Government asserted that its Moslem population "voluntarily and collectively" chose to change its Turkish names to Bulgarian ones and that it has likewise decided to abandon a number of national customs and rituals. According to the official Bulgarian explanation, the reason for this turn of events was the "rebirth of the Bulgarian self-consciousness of Moslems".

The history of the Balkans during the Ottoman period as well as several bilateral and international treaties indicate that there have always been Moslem Turks in Bulgaria since the 14th Century. Some of these documents that clearly refer to the Moslem Turks also bear the signature of Bulgaria. Further, overwhelming evidence shows that the Bulgarian authorities have forced the Turks to change their names to Bulgarian ones, discouraged ethnic and religious customs and prevented the use of the Turkish language. It is reported in the international media that since 1984 the Turks suffered inhuman treatment, arbitrary arrest and death. Now, they are being sent to Turkey, the number having reached 150,000 at the time of this writing.

Evidence suggests that the ultimate objective of the Bulgarian authorities is to eradicate the identity of the Turks, who constitute the most numerous minority in that country. This approach complements earlier "Bulgarization" of other minorities — the Pomaks, the Gagauz, the Tatars, the Rom, the Alawis and the Macedonians. The Bulgarization drive of the Turks was conducted at gun point. Reports from various credible sources and eye-witnesses have corroborated the harshness of the assimilation campaign. It is reported that, starting on December 23, 1984, the Bulgarian tanks, military, police force, fire vehicles and dogs surrounded the Turkish towns, soldiers going from door to door with the mission to ensure that each one of the large Turkish minority agreed to change his or her name. Speaking Turkish in public attracts a penalty. Even Turkish names on tombstones are erased. Turkish schools are closed down. Several practices such as circumcision, fasting, pilgrimage, daily prayers and religious burials are reported as prohibited. Publications in Turkish have ceased altogether. The last issue of the last paper in Turkish, namely *Yeni Işık* (New Light), was printed on January 29, 1985. Since then, nothing in Turkish has been printed.

The official Bulgarian explanation for this unusual phenomenon is that "the Moslems have instantaneously realized their Bulgarian identity". But this assertion is contradicted even by Bulgarian scholarly publications and official statements prior to 1984. Even official Bulgarian history and geography books admit that the Turks came over from Asia. Several statements by Todor Zhivkov, the President of the State Council of Bulgaria, made prior to 1984, acknowledge the existence of Turks.

The Turks can trace back even the earliest Turkish settlements in the whole of the Balkans. The Ottoman archives are bound with law codes, tax registers and various other documents and records, all of which prove the separate ethnic identity of the Turks. These records indicate in detail the places and the membership of each settlement in Bulgaria and each sub-division within it. The names of the individual Turks derive from the original Turkish, or after nature, fauna, religious attributes, derivatives of Turkish adjectives or verbs or from the original names of Turkish villages or towns in Anatolia.

The history of the Turkish minority press is another assuring evidence of the existence of the Turkish-speaking people. After the initial *Tuna* (Danube in Turkish), published in Russe in 1865, 67 Turkish newspapers and 13 journals appeared in Bulgaria. Turkish minority literature is another premise indicating the reality of the Turkish entity in that country. Poetry, short stories and novels of fifty-one Turkish authors

were printed within the short span of twelve years between 1957 and 1969, after which Turkish literature is simply discontinued.

How can a minority disappear completely within a year? The incredible official explanation that there never was a Turkish minority in Bulgaria has been greeted by an international chorus of ridicule. Even the Bulgarian report, dated August 15, 1984, and submitted to the United Nations, accepts the fact that there are citizens of Turkish origin in Bulgaria. This statement disappeared from the 1986 Bulgarian report, issued seventeen months later. In the meantime, Bulgaria conducted a new census in 1985, at the conclusion of which it announced that there were no ethnic Turks in the country.

Under international law, however, the Turks of Bulgaria have a national ethnic minority status. That legal standing was established on the day Bulgaria was founded. Articles 4, 5 and 12 of the Berlin Treaty (1878), the Istanbul Protocol (1909), the Peace Treaty between Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire (1913), the Neuilly Treaty (1919), the Treaty of Friendship and the Turkish-Bulgarian Convention (both in 1925), the Bulgarian Peace Treaty (1947) and the Migration Agreement (1968) between Bulgaria and Turkey introduced provisions to protect the rights of the Turkish minority.

The other international documents which bind Bulgaria to the principle of the protection of minorities are the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1947), the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966) and the Helsinki Accords (1975).

In conclusion, the Turks of Bulgaria are citizens of that country, but of Turkish descent, whose mother tongue is Turkish and religion Islam, with cultural characteristics peculiar to themselves. The fact that Bulgaria is now sending some of them to Turkey is enough proof that they are Turks. Bulgaria is under contractual obligation to protect their rights.