

The Treatment of Ethnic Turks by the Bulgarian Communist

Party and their Status Quo

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The five-century Ottoman exploitation of Bulgaria must give way to people's rule, to brotherhood, and to equality among all Bulgarians, Turks, and Jews.

- Bulgarian Liberation Hero Vassil Levski

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I. Introduction and Thesis

More than a hundred Turks in Bulgaria were killed and others were arrested or forcibly resettled in a campaign by the communist government to change their Islamic names. Amnesty International said it had the names of a hundred people...killed by government troops during the assimilation campaign from December 1984 to March 1985.

Since the early 1970s, the [communist] government has consistently cracked down on the Turkish minority.

Teaching...Turkish...is banned, letters to Turks with Islamic names are returned to the sender stamped 'unknown'. Phone calls between ethnic Turks are interrupted with warnings not to speak Turkish. Fines are imposed without a trial for speaking Turkish. Male circumcision is also banned.

During the campaign, troops surround the villages. On occasions, [they] open fire at peaceful demonstrations.

Most often the police come with dogs aided by troops with tanks. Together they surround the villages while the communist officials from those villages visit every home to issue the identity cards with the new names.”¹

Although Bulgaria has long taken pride in being a safe haven for different ethnicities and for providing a model for ethnic tolerance, the human rights violations against ethnic Turks in

¹ The Associated Press.

Bulgaria's communist government consistently challenged the validity of this and any other report concerning human rights violations in the country. For example, in 1985 the Bulgarian Embassy in London denounced Amnesty International's bulletin, which contained information about human rights violations against ethnic Turks. The Embassy said such allegations were "untrue...and an attempt to convert historical truth". In another reaction from April 3, 1986 the head of the Bulgarian Press Agency *BTA* said that such incidents "never took place" and that the name-changing campaign was "a benevolent, spontaneous, and sincere process".

The People's Republic of Bulgaria during communism (1944-1989) reveal the extremism inherent in politicizing ethnic identity. The same country that rescued all of its Jews during World War II as a Nazi ally² victimized its ethnic Turkish minority forty years later as part of a communist-conceived assimilation campaign that came during a period of declining national economic prowess, impending deep structural and political reforms from the Kremlin, and an advantage of ethnic Turkish demographic growth over ethnic Bulgarians that contradicted the Party's desired state of one party, one people. These circumstances convinced the Bulgarian Communist Party to initiate a series of mass human rights violations against ethnic Turks in the country that began in late 1984 and did not end until the fall of the communist regime in November 1989.

Basing its arguments on fear, the communist regime warned Bulgarians that the party had to take immediate steps in order to stop what it presented as a wave of extremist religious, pro-Turkish and anti-Bulgarian sentiment among ethnic Turks. The state propaganda insisted that the assimilation campaign was justified because it would prevent the repetition of history and a second Ottoman yoke after the first one kept Bulgaria occupied for nearly five centuries. Having exhausted all available options to minimize the ethnic Turkish presence in the country in the years after World War II and increasingly needing a scapegoat for the crisis of the Soviet bloc that was especially obvious in the late 1970s, the Bulgarian communist authorities resigned to completely assault the rights and freedoms of this minority. In December 1984, the state began replacing ethnic Turkish names with Slavic ones. Ethnic Turks were now required to abandon

² A page of Bulgarian history long hidden by communists who could not use it for their own political agenda, the salvation of Bulgarian Jews is now a universally acclaimed fact. Michael Bar Zohar, a Bulgarian Jew whose family joined the mass exodus to Israel after World War II and later became a member of the Knesset and Ben Gurion's official biographer, has written a detailed account of this salvation of Bulgaria's Jews in his book Beyond Hitler's Grasp.

their traditional lifestyle and their religious rites, to stop speaking Turkish and use only Bulgarian, and to take a more active part in the nation's "path to socialism."³

The failure of the state campaign became evident even to its supporters when a quarter of a million ethnic Turks crossed the border with Turkey in search of a second home. Ironically, the return of most of those immigrants to Bulgarian at the wake of democracy in the early 1990s further strengthened the popular opposition to the communist government and led to its dissolution after decades of popular withdrawal from all political life.⁴ By 1989, ethnic Turkish human rights "became the umbrella under which all Bulgarian anti-communist movements united."⁵ The present paper traces the ethnic Turkish controversy from its very beginning when the Communist Party gained control of the country until the fall of totalitarianism and the resulting liberalization of the rights, freedoms, and hopes of the ethnic minority and its country itself.

³ Amnesty International. April, 1986. P. 7.

⁴ In 1960, a decade after communism had taken root in Bulgaria, Radio Free Europe studied the general attitude towards the communist government with a particular emphasis on the extent to which people were interested in becoming involved in their new government. 41% of respondents answered that they were most afraid of "restrictions to their personal freedom". Such fears materialized in an enormous civic isolation from all political life, which is evident in the fact that 73% of respondents praised the West for "its general freedom, for its democratic and political liberties, and for its freedom of the press". Georgi Dimitrov (1946-1949) consolidated communism in the years after World War II while Todor Zhivkov's 35-year rule from 1954 until the fall of communism in 1989 continued the alienation of popular opinion from all political and social life.

⁵ Hupchick, 151

II. History of the Islamic Presence in Bulgaria

Any discussion of the assimilation campaign against ethnic Turks would be incomplete without an understanding of the roots of the Islamic presence in Bulgaria. The communist regime exploited eloquently the different theories of the arrival and means to spread Islam in order to incite ethnic Bulgarians against ethnic Turks. The interpretation of history thus became a powerful tool in the hands of the government, which did not tire to use it incessantly as justification for the assimilation campaign.

It is disputable whether Islam reached Bulgarian territory before the Ottoman conquest of the country that was completed in 1396. Few historians claim that the Turkic tribes of the Cumans and the Pecenegs arrived in Bulgaria as early as the 11th century. According to this theory, the Pecenegs were assimilated into the local population, but most of the Cumans kept their scattered communities in the Rhodope and the Pirin Mountains. There they came into contact with Muslim missionaries from North Africa and the Middle East and converted to Islam.⁶ Thus, the ancestors of Bulgaria's present-day ethnic Turks belong to no other ethnic group but those Islamized Cumans.

Other historians do not accept the hypothesis that Muslims of various Islamic denominations lived on Bulgarian lands before the 14th century. They argue that Byzantine historians, the major source of Balkan history from that time, do not mention Islam anywhere in their writing. To those historians the only explanation for this is that the Ottoman invaders found Turkic-speaking people in Bulgaria, but not Muslims.⁷ Islam did not come to Bulgaria until the Ottoman conquest and the traditional Ottoman *millet* system, which divided the subjects according to religion, rather than ethnicity. Thus, the Ottoman Empire had four millets: the

⁶ Eminov, 25

⁷ Mutafchieva, 8

Umma (the Muslims), the Rum (Eastern Orthodox), the Armenian millet, and the Jewish millet. All millets were given relative freedom to manage their internal affairs, which is why many historians claim that while the Reformation in Europe was taking thousands of lives, the Ottoman Empire was quite tolerant towards the different religions on its territory.

Although there is hardly any agreement among scholars when Islam first came to Bulgaria, three major theses attempt to explain the process. According to the first, the Ottoman conquest was followed by genocide over the indigenous populations and by an intensive colonization led by Anadolan Turks. This thesis also insists that the surviving native peoples were forced to accept Islam.⁸ The second thesis on Islamization denies the existence of Anadolan colonization but maintains that the indigenous population of Bulgaria was subject to forcible assimilation. The Communist Party subscribed to and defended this viewpoint quite zealously during the name-changing campaign of the mid-1980s because it hoped to awaken those who were Islamized by force and to bring them back to the ethnic and religious consciousness of their ancestors.⁹ The third thesis supports the idea that Islamization was voluntary.

According to the ‘forceful Islamization’ thesis at the beginning of the Ottoman conquest, conversion to Islam came through slavery. The Ottomans kidnapped people from the indigenous population and turned them into slaves. They were either forced to convert, or were “attracted” to the new faith when their masters promoted them to the status of “free people”. If they accepted Islam, slaves were given land and relative freedom.¹⁰ This theory views most ethnic Turks in Bulgaria as remnants of the centuries-long Ottoman occupation, as the product of the Sultan’s deliberate relocation of whole villages from Asia to the Balkans, and as the Islamized Slavs of Bulgaria. During communism this theory became prominent and gave rise to the belief that those

⁸ Zhelyazkova, 14

⁹ One of the popular names of the name-changing campaign was ‘the rebirth project’ because of the association with the theory that defended the assimilation as a historically and ethnically just policy.

¹⁰ Mutafchieva, 10

who accepted Islam during the Ottoman yoke had betrayed their *bulgarianness*. The Communist Party rationalized the campaign against ethnic Turks as the only available means to correct the ills of history and return Muslims in Bulgaria to their forefathers' original faith.¹¹ This attitude in the highest communist echelons came despite the great ethnic tolerance in the country during the reign of Bulgaria's last ruling czar Boris III (1918-1943).¹²

The military recruitment of Christian boys to the Ottoman *janissary*¹³ corps was another means of forceful Islamization. Some maintain that during Sultan Murad I's reign between 1360 and 1389 the new *janissary* recruits were taken merely as slaves. Some segments of the population were exempted from that levy.¹⁴ Ottoman law banned taking the only son of a widow, married men or more than 1% of the village's young boys. Impoverished Christian parents understood the material gains of *janissary* corps membership and sometimes volunteered their sons for it.¹⁵

As far as the 'voluntary assimilation' thesis is concerned, most historians agree that poverty and the desire for higher social status convinced Bulgaria's Eastern Orthodox Christians to convert to Islam. Muslims had quite a few financial advantages in comparison to the rest of the Sultan's subjects. They were exempt from *jizya*, the high "tax...levied on all non-Muslim subjects...that provided a third to a half of the state budget."¹⁶ Because the dervish order was extremely active in the Balkans and because "its folk-Islam shared many elements with folk-Christianity", voluntary conversion to Islam was easier for Christians. This strong appeal of

¹¹ Buchsenschutz, 67

¹² Buchsenschutz, 61

¹³ *Janissaries* were members of the elite corps in the standing army of the Ottoman Empire from the late 14th century to 1826. They were forcefully recruited from Christian families in a process that became known as "blood taxation". *Janissaries* were highly respected for their military prowess and were a powerful political force within the Empire.

¹⁴ Eminov, 44

¹⁵ Eminov, 43

¹⁶ Eminov, 37

dervish Islam allowed some “Sufi orders to survive in Bulgaria until 1930.”¹⁷ The proponents of the voluntary conversion thesis further argue that the legacy of the janissary recruitment is exaggerated. For example, because “townsfolk were seen as ‘soft’ and were exempted from janissary recruitment, the total number of Bulgarian janissary recruits could not exceed 8,000 men.”¹⁸

The identity and the history of Bulgaria’s ethnic Turks also differ according to national sources. Firstly, some Bulgarian nationalistic historians suggest that during the 16th century Islam was imposed on all communities in Bulgaria. This claim is based mainly on the extremely emotional Bulgarian folklore and on three Bulgarian sources from the 17th century. The Song of Balkandzhi Yovo, for example, offers one hyperbolic rendition of this motif in folklore. The protagonist of the song laments his sister’s forced conversion to Islam and “prefers to die rather than live with her dishonor.”¹⁹ Another story that received much attention is the massacre of the German and the French Consuls when they tried to save a girl that was “dragged by Muslims to be converted.”²⁰

Turkish historians provide yet another explanation for Bulgaria’s Islamization. They claim that Muslims in the country are of Turko-Cuman origin and that they settled in Western Thrace, in the Rhodope and the Pirin Mountains after the collapse of a Turkic Cumano-Peceneg Union in the 11th century.²¹

Greek historians also contribute to the controversy by arguing that ethnic Turks in Bulgaria are descendants of the Thracians and the Ancient Greeks. This theory claims that they

¹⁷ Eminov, 74

¹⁸ Eminov, 44

¹⁹ Mutafchieva, 19

²⁰ Hristov, 44

²¹ Zhelyazkova, 37

were first Hellenized, then Latinized, Slavicized, Christianized, and finally Islamized. Those of them who stayed in the mountains are ‘pure’ descendants of these ancient tribes.²²

Realizing the appeal of the theory that insisted on large-scale forced Islamization, at the wake of the campaign against ethnic Turks the communist government’s propaganda focused on the past and sought for historic evidence to support the mass Ottoman violations of human rights on Bulgarian territory. One of the embodiments of this effort was the film *Vreme Razdelno*, which focused on an Ottoman military campaign against Bulgarians in the seventeenth century that baptized many villages and turned those that resisted Islamization into ashes. Images like those sought to incite ethnic Bulgarians against ethnic Turks, who were expected to listen to that theory and believe that those whom the communist party is trying to assimilate are no different from them and should be brought back to Christianity, to the Bulgarian language, and to being Bulgarian.

²² Zhelyazkova, 37

III. The Pre-Communist Treatment of Ethnic Turks in Bulgaria

The traumatic experience of ethnic Turks and *pomaks*²³ in Bulgaria during the mid-1980s was the product of the Bulgarian Communist Party's futile resistance to the deepening economic and ideological crisis of the whole communist bloc, which necessitated the creation and the exaggeration of an ethnic problem that could keep the focus away from the real problems. The Party's assimilation policy was designed to homogenize the population of the whole country by *bulgarizing* those whose ethnic, religious, and cultural heritage differed from the Christian, Eastern Orthodox, Slavic stereotype that constituted the country's majority.²⁴ Stalin had administered similar campaigns across the Soviet Union in pursuit of making society uniform and therefore more susceptible to indoctrination across ethnic and religious lines.

In 1982, when the *nomenklatura*²⁵ began deliberating behind closed doors what would later materialize in the bloody, forced homogenization of the ethnic Turkish population, the People's Republic of Bulgaria had a total population of 8,917,457. Ethnic Turks constituted the most numerous minority by numbering 900,000, or roughly 10% of the whole population in the country.²⁶

²³ *Pomak* is the name used for a number of Bulgarian citizens whose Slavic ancestors converted to Islam during the country's five-century long Ottoman occupation. Two linguistic explanations of this term reveal the main opposing views about pomak identity. The first claims that the term pomak originates from the Bulgarian word for torture *mucha/pomucha* and maintains that pomaks were forced into Islam. The other theory claims that the roots of pomak are found in the Bulgarian noun for helper *pomagach* because pomaks abandoned their Christian beliefs voluntarily in order to help themselves financially and socially and to conspire for the Ottomans by extending their influence over the Bulgarian territories.

²⁴ BBC Summary of World Broadcasts. March 6, 1992.

²⁵ *Nomenklatura* is the term used to describe the system of patronage to senior positions in the bureaucracy of the Soviet Union and other communist states, such as Bulgaria. Positions in that system were controlled by and limited to membership in the country's Communist Party and various committees overseeing all legislative and economic activity.

²⁶ Amnesty International. April, 1986.

A century earlier in 1880 the census indicated that there were some 850,000 ethnic Turks in Bulgaria at a time when the country's population was barely three million.²⁷ Various agreements between Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire facilitated the voluntary movement of members of that minority into what would later become the Republic of Turkey, which is why "by 1910 there were only 465,000 ethnic Turks in Bulgaria."²⁸ Many Turks who decided to stay in Christian Bulgaria abandoned Islam and became followers of Eastern Orthodoxy. By the spring of 1913, for example, almost all 150,000 Turks in the Pirin area had converted to Christianity.²⁹ The government's *Rodina* Cultural Centers became another success story for ethnic Turks' integration into Bulgarian society. Those centers sponsored debates and lectures about religion, history, and ideology and were quite effective in providing an environment where both ethnic Bulgarians and ethnic Turks could engage in a discussion of the problems and challenges their common country was facing. One report from a local *Rodina* Center attests to the success of that program when one of its ethnic Turkish attendees declared that after months of visiting the Center "he accepted secular teaching for his young children...and eventually stopped believing in jihad."³⁰ Unfortunately, within a few years of coming to power the communist government branded those centers fascist and dismantled them. It was afraid that such remnants of the royal policies would undermine their ideology and would be a future threat to the Party.³¹

The treatment of Bulgarian ethnic Turks prior to the communist era could be described as benevolent, especially in comparison to what came later. Before 1944, when the Communist Party took control of Bulgaria, ethnic Turks enjoyed relative religious autonomy and had religious education. Although at first the Communist Party published ethnic Turkish newspapers,

²⁷ Asenov, 10

²⁸ Asenov, 11

²⁹ Asenov, 12

³⁰ Asenov, 13

³¹ Kanev, 84

such as *Yushuk*, and gave over 45,000 landless ethnic Turks land for personal use, Prime Minister Georgi Dimitrov³² was inspired by Joseph Stalin's relocation of whole minority groups from their original compact territory, and incessantly spoke of Muslims in Bulgaria as the country's 'eternal ulcer'.³³

Forced collectivization brought all liberal policies of the communist regime towards ethnic Turks to a complete halt. Thus, between August 1950 and September 1951 the communist government was happy to see over 155,000 ethnic Turks receive visas for Turkey and leave Bulgaria.³⁴ This rapid exodus decreased significantly the number of Muslim spiritual leaders and their ratio to the Muslim population fell from 1:170 in 1956 to 1:1,397 five years later.³⁵ To the satisfaction of the atheist communist government this trend led to a drastic decrease in the number of daily Muslim prayers. In 1956, 56.3% of ethnic Turks attended daily prayers and 73% attended Friday prayers. By 1967, those figures had dropped to 15.8% and 31.6%, respectively.³⁶

Between 1960 and 1964 over 380,000 more ethnic Turks applied for visas but few gained access to Turkey. On March 22, 1968, Communist Party Secretary Todor Zhivkov³⁷ signed an agreement with Turkey to allow for the unification of families separated by emigration in the early 1950s. The agreement was valid for the next ten years and 130,000 ethnic Turks took advantage of its provisions.³⁸

³² Before becoming Bulgaria's first Prime Minister, Georgi Dimitrov was a member of the executive committee of the Comintern. He is most famous for defending himself successfully against the Nazi accusations for a communist conspiracy that led to the burning of the Reichstag.

³³ Buchsenshultz, 127

³⁴ Buchsenshultz, 130

³⁵ Eminov, 54

³⁶ Eminov, 57

³⁷ Todor Zhivkov was the First Secretary of the Bulgarian Communist Party Central Committee (1954-89) and the President of the People's Republic of Bulgaria (1971-89). Although he is certainly not fully responsible for the assimilation campaign against ethnic Turks in the 1980s, he is largely credited for the brutality and the irresoluteness with which it was implemented. Earlier than him Prime Minister Georgi Dimitrov (1936-1939) called for the dispersal of ethnic Turks across the country, but he did not live long enough to implement that idea.

³⁸ Buchsenshultz, 173

The new Bulgarian Constitution provided the communist authorities with another weapon against ethnic Turks. While the Constitution of 1947 declared ethnic Turks as a distinct national minority, the Constitution of 1971 defined ethnic Turks as ‘citizens of non-Bulgarian origin’. This reform took away ethnic Turks’ status as members of a distinct ethnic minority and any possible attempts for their defense by foreign interests could not be countered by the communist government by saying that such a national minority simply did not exist. This status had previously given them some protection because Bulgaria was a signatory to several human rights treaties, which obliged it to maintain certain standards in its treatment of those minorities. The 1947 Constitution had a provision stating that “national minorities have a right to be educated in their vernacular and to develop their national culture.”³⁹ This right was taken away under the pretext that it would undermine the ethnic and linguistic coherence of the nation. The authorities also did not disclose Turkish ethnic identity on any personal identity cards, so that eventually this administrative fiat would lead to their homogenization into the Christian Slavic majority.

By 1960, Turkey had already closed the border while the Bulgarian Communists were becoming increasingly apprehensive that the 500,000 ethnic Turks who were still in Bulgaria would become Turkey’s *fifth column*⁴⁰ and would attempt to disrupt the nation’s path to socialism.⁴¹ The pan-Turkic ideology that advocated the union of all 110 million Turks across borders in Turkey was embodied in the Turkish Constitution of 1961. This Constitution further increased the Bulgarian government’s fifth column fears by defining everyone with a Turkish father as a pure Turk regardless of his geographic location. The compactness of the ethnic Turkish minority in Bulgaria and later the increased Turkish presence in Cyprus only hardened

³⁹ Amnesty International. April, 1986. P. 4.

⁴⁰ The term *fifth column* is credited to Emilio Mola Vidal, a Nationalist General during the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), who coined it during his campaign to take over Madrid. As four of his army columns moved on Madrid, the General referred to his militant supporters in the capital as the fifth column of his army, which was expected to undermine the present loyalist government from within. Since then, the term fifth column refers to any clandestine group of subversive agents who attempt to undermine a nation’s solidarity.

⁴¹ Zagorov, 47

the policies of the communist authorities towards ethnic Turks. Certain Communist Party members loudly proclaimed that “ethnic Turks were conspiring for autonomy...and they would be eradicated...by changing their names.”⁴² That explains why after the names of young ethnic Turks were changed, they were drafted into the regular army units, which was unthinkable prior to the campaign. The conspiracy theory was further strengthened by the dutiful operation of the Bulgarian secret services, which “revealed 23 agents of the Turkish intelligence between 1970 and 1982 in the Shoumen region alone.”⁴³

By 1969 the Communist Party had forced 114,000 more immigrants into Turkey.⁴⁴ At the same time, great measures were taken in Bulgaria to prevent the spread of all that was Turkish. By the early 1970s the Department of Turkish at Sofia University had stopped accepting any new students and was later closed down. An article in the influential magazine *Filosofska Misul* supported the campaigns against all that was Turkish as a defense against Islamic fanaticism and as a preservation of all Bulgarian:

The struggle against Islamic fanaticism in the Rhodope Mountains and its tendency of alienation from what is Bulgarian is not a subjective requirement but an objective form of our class and ideological struggle...
The struggle for atheism...is not deployed only against Islam ...but is linked with the struggle for Bulgarian nationhood...which presumes removing accumulated Islamic-Turkish influence. This is... a necessary prerequisite for ethnic Turks’ consolidation within the Bulgarian socialist nation and for their more active inclusion in building a developed socialist society.⁴⁵

This philosophical justification clearly reveals the communist government’s fear of the demographic surge of the ethnic Turkish minority and the uneasiness with the supposed Turkish geopolitical expansion that many saw in the reviving Islamism in Turkey.

Ethnic Turks’ high demographic growth additionally disturbed the communist leadership. Since the 1980s the natural growth rate for Bulgaria was constantly decreasing. In 1980, it was

⁴² Krasztev, 3

⁴³ Asenov, 56

⁴⁴ Asenov, 27

⁴⁵ Amnesty International. April, 1986. P. 6.

2.8. By 1984 it had come down to 2.4. While the average national growth rate was steadily declining, the growth rate for ethnic Turks was steadily increasing. In 1979, for example, in the cities of Kardzhali and Smolyan, where the most numerous ethnic Turkish communities reside, the respective population growth rates were +9.9 and +17.9.⁴⁶ By comparison, two years later in the predominantly ethnically Bulgarian cities of Lovech and Mihailovgrad the growth rates were -4.7 and -4.8.

Another reason why the communist government was becoming increasingly concerned with ethnic Turks was the national census, which was scheduled for December 1985. The only way the communist authorities could maintain the administrative fiction that no ethnic Turkish minority existed was to *bulgarize* the names of the members of this minority.⁴⁷

By the early 1980s all immigration and deportation initiatives of the Communist Party proved ineffective in dealing once and forever with the country's ethnic Turks, which is why the authorities began looking for more extreme measures. Thus, Todor Zhivkov's proposed *rebirth project*⁴⁸ quickly gained momentum. The project planned the replacement of Muslim names with traditional ethnic Bulgarian names, the resettlement of ethnic Turks with force if that becomes necessary, and the arrest or imprisonment of those ethnic Turks who refused to cooperate. It also included restricting people from speaking Turkish in public, closing mosques, banning traditional Muslim clothing, and forbidding the teaching of Turkish.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Amnesty International. April, 1986. P. 24.

⁴⁷ Eminov, 95

⁴⁸ The name of the project came from the ideological line that inspired it, which insisted that ethnic Turks were in fact ethnic Bulgarians who were forcibly converted to Islam during the Ottoman occupation of Bulgaria. In this way, the planned campaign would help them re-discover their real Slavic, Christian identity.

⁴⁹ Amnesty International. April, 1986. P. 7.

IV. The Communist Assimilation Campaign of the 1980s

The campaign to change the Muslim names of ethnic Turks began in December 1984. One of the initial goals of the assimilation campaign was to change the names of ethnic Turks, which often necessitated overt military presence in ethnic Turkish towns and villages in Bulgaria so that the Party officials in those villages could issue the new identity cards without any public disturbance. The Party affirmed its determination to change the names of all ethnic Turks by mandating that a failure to present a new card would be treated as a crime. The absence of an identity card with the new name prevented ethnic Turks from receiving their salaries, pensions, and they could not withdraw money from the state-owned bank. As part of the assimilation campaign, the communist government issued birth and marriage certificates only using traditional Bulgarian names.⁵⁰

The authorities encouraged voluntary name-changing through salary increases. Thus, for example, once Islamic clerics changed their names voluntarily they had 50 leva (\$50) added to their salaries, which usually amounted to no more 200 leva. After changing their names, such Muslim leaders were asked to sign a public statement supporting the name-changing campaign.⁵¹

The communist authorities also banned circumcision, although they claimed to ban only surgeries that were performed by self-trained specialists. In the city of Kurdzhali, where ethnic Turks form the majority, the Party Secretary Georgi Tanev asked for “energetic measures against all those involved in circumcision. All those who carry out or assist circumcision should be held strongly responsible.”⁵² Circumcision was one of the most venerated Muslim rites of passage and the communist regime realized that eliminating this tradition would help the assimilation

⁵⁰ “An Apparent 20th-Century Bulgarian Atrocity Shows How Dark the Other Half of Europe Remains”, 16.

⁵¹ Amnesty International. April, 1986. P. 16.

⁵² Amnesty International. April, 1986. P. 17.

campaign significantly. Speaking Turkish in public was also fined. On certain occasions those who dared speak Turkish in public were fined five leva (\$5).⁵³ The same applied to those who wore traditional Muslim clothing.

When public protests began spreading in 1985, Zhivkov's regime responded by sealing off entire ethnic Turkish villages from outsiders to prevent the leaking of any politically harmful information. The police secured those villages so that the state officials could change the names of ethnic Turks and distribute their new identification documents undisturbed. Because there were no alternative sources of information, the party propaganda continuously affirmed that the name-change program was "a unanimous, spontaneous, and voluntary decision undertaken by the country's Muslim minority".⁵⁴

Foreign journalists were not given access to the sealed off areas. The few that were allowed to go there were always accompanied by a Party representative. In several cases foreign journalists managed to interview ethnic Turks. However, the Bulgarian authorities immediately released new interviews with those people that denied partially or completely what the foreign journalist had just published.⁵⁵

On May 8, 1985, for example, Bulgarian wrestler Binyamin Machev took part in an international tournament in Budapest. There he told foreign journalists about the human rights violations perpetrated by the Communist Party without realizing that he was constantly filmed by the Bulgarian security services. Two weeks later the official Bulgarian news agency *BTA* "released a statement alleging that the interview with Machev had been faked...and reported that he only spoke about rumors he had heard from Radio Free Europe."⁵⁶ Similarly, the Bulgarian Press Office in London sent a memorandum to Amnesty International after the human rights

⁵³ Amnesty International. April, 1986. P. 18.

⁵⁴ Amnesty International. April, 1986. P. 16.

⁵⁵ Amnesty International. April, 1986. P. 21.

⁵⁶ Amnesty International. April, 1986. P. 17.

organization published a report with details about the assimilation campaign. The Press Office denied all allegations of forced name-changing and insisted that the communist government protected the rights of all citizens, regardless of their minority status. In addition, the memorandum claimed that all information about human rights violations in Bulgaria was “a continuation of failed attempts...by circles hostile to socialist Bulgaria...and to the improved political climate on the Balkans.”⁵⁷

The authorities raised another information blockade by closely monitoring phone calls between ethnic Turks in Bulgaria and their relatives in Turkey. Thus, “on occasions an unknown third voice interrupted and warned the speakers not to speak in Turkish...while on other occasions the calls were disconnected if Turkish was spoken or if the name-changing campaign was mentioned.”⁵⁸ Many protest notes were sent to the Bulgarian Assembly, including a petition signed by more than a hundred well-known Bulgarian intellectuals.⁵⁹ All petitions, however, came to no avail and the tension in the country only continued to grow.

On May 29, 1989 Bulgarian Head of State Todor Zhivkov announced on TV that the border with Turkey would be open and Bulgarians would have world-class passports. Zhivkov did this in order to challenge Turkey to open its borders for the ethnic Turks in Bulgaria who were becoming increasingly troublesome for the Communist Party’s name-changing campaign. On June 3, the border with Turkey was officially opened and ethnic Turks began rushing into Turkey. When the number of immigrants reached 310,000, the United States recalled Ambassador Sol Polansky because of “the general worsening of repression against ethnic Turks.”⁶⁰ In addition, the US government provided \$10 million in refugee assistance to Turkey.

⁵⁷ Amnesty International. April, 1986. P. 34.

⁵⁸ Amnesty International. April, 1986. P. 23.

⁵⁹ Human Rights Watch

⁶⁰ Human Rights Watch

⁶¹ Between June 3 and August 21, 1989, when Turkey suddenly closed the border, “as many as 311,862 ethnic Turks managed to leave.”⁶²

With the introduction of Gorbachev’s *glasnost*⁶³ in the Soviet Union by the beginning of 1988 six Bulgarian dissidents had set up the Independent Association for the Defense of Human Rights in Bulgaria, which “took the issue of the repression of the ethnic Turks.”⁶⁴ By the beginning of 1989 Bulgarians from different ethnicities had already established two more human rights organizations. These were the Democratic League for the Defense of Human Rights and the Association for the Support of Vienna. The last one sought for the world’s attention to the plight of the ethnic Turkish minority before the Human Rights Conference of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe⁶⁵ (OSCE) in Vienna in June 1989. In April 1989, a Muslim Committee was formed in the town of Kazanluk. A month later other ethnic Turks launched hunger strikes and many large-scale anti-assimilation demonstrations started spreading across the whole nation. Although these demonstrations were peaceful, many of them ended with violence and “reportedly up to 60 demonstrators were killed.”⁶⁶

The growing tension in Bulgaria only increased the immigration of ethnic Turks to Turkey. One of the most influential ethnic Turks to leave the country as a result of the name-changing campaign was Halil Ahmedov Ibishev, the former communist member of the National

⁶¹ Human Rights Watch

⁶² Dimitrova, 3

⁶³ *Glasnost*, whose literal English translation means *openness*, refers to one of the cornerstones of Mikhail Gorbachev’s reform platform that aimed at opening the past to scholastic and social examination so that its ills could be exposed and better understood. In 1989, Gorbachev shared in an interview that he hated lies, which inspired him to demolish the conservatism and stigma of communist ideology and to guarantee people more comfortable lives once they knew many of the secrets of their state. Glasnost quickly led to many dark revelations about Stalin’s, Khrushchev’s, and Brezhnev’s bloody policies. Dissidents from Bulgaria hoped that their country’s close relationship with the Soviet Union would manifest itself in the implementation of glasnost and in the relative political liberalization that the Soviet leader had initiated.

⁶⁴ Poulton, 158

⁶⁵ OSCE is the largest regional security organization in the world with 55 participating states from Europe, Central Asia, and North America. It is active in early warning, conflict prevention, crisis management, and post-conflict rehabilitation. Its headquarters are in Vienna, Austria.

⁶⁶ Poulton, 156

Assembly who became one of the symbols of the anti-assimilation protest.⁶⁷ During the name-changing campaign in 1985 Ibishev had to accept the new Bulgarian name Lubomir Aleksandrov Aleksiev. As one of the most prominent ethnic Turkish leaders, he was also pressured to endorse an open letter to Turkish Prime Minister Turgut Ozal that protested his government's interference into Bulgaria's internal affairs. Once he had left Bulgaria, Ibishev spoke openly about the violence that made the assimilation campaign possible. His account of the name changing campaign vividly re-creates the perpetrated injustice and violence:

In December 1984 rumors were spreading that Turkish names had been changed. My constituents asked me what was going on...and I conveyed their concerns to the Communist Party Committee. The Party Secretary informed me that the campaign applies only to those who were married to ethnic Bulgarians. Later on I learned the horrifying facts: the police and soldiers were raiding villages and assaulting the women. Some ethnic Turks had escaped to the mountains...

In Kardzhali the main assault began in late December 1984. All of the villages were besieged...and ethnic Turks were forbidden to move in or out of the region. Anyone who dared violate that rule would be killed. Many houses were searched at night and a number of people were tortured. Tanks and military trucks blockaded the town so that the assimilation campaign could be implemented as planned. The police interrupted telephone conversations and it became impossible to call. The men who could resist the campaign were sent to labor camps...and their whereabouts were unknown for 40-50 days.

The schools were used as military headquarters. Anyone who asked questions or objected was taken away and tortured.

The repression came to our village in January 1985 with the state police and the soldiers. I was called to the party office where I was asked to explain to the people that anyone who resisted would be killed like a dog.

On January 24, 1985 the police and the security forces began changing people's names by issuing new passports with traditional ethnic Bulgarian names. The authorities banned speaking Turkish and stopped all Turkish radio broadcasts. Even Turkish tombstones were taken down.

A month or two later they banned circumcision.

When I asked where the orders came from, I was told they came directly from Comrade Todor Zhivkov. I was then reminded that I was a young man with a wife and young children whom I may never see again if I did something rash.⁶⁸

Naim Suleymanov is another well-known ethnic Turk who left Bulgaria during the height of the name-changing campaign. The world weightlifting champion defected on December 12, 1986 during a competition in Australia. On the following day the Bulgarian information agency

⁶⁷ Amnesty International. February, 1989. P. 11.

⁶⁸ Amnesty International. February, 1989. P. 12-13

BTA announced that the Bulgarian authorities suspected that he was kidnapped by “the Turkish secret services.”⁶⁹ Within a week, however, the Agency admitted that Suleymanov had defected.

On December 29, 1989 the name-changing campaign was repealed following Todor Zhivkov’s ousting from power the month before. That same day Politburo Member Alexander Lilov read a report in the National Assembly that put all the blame for the name-changing campaign on Todor Zhivkov.⁷⁰ Within a year of the official rescission of the campaign over half of the immigrants who had fled Bulgaria returned home.

Of the ten immigrant waves from Bulgaria to Turkey since Bulgaria’s independence in 1878, the one in 1989 was the only one that was provoked by an outright governmental discrimination policy. Most immigrants claimed that they left Bulgaria because of the name-changing campaign while others entered Turkey hoping to witness the *bolluk* (abundance) that they had heard about.⁷¹

Most people who left Bulgaria in 1989 were between the ages of 26 and 35. In fact, the immigrants under 35 were almost twice as many as those over that age.⁷² The “big excursion” as the mass movement of people across Bulgarian and Turkish territory later became known initiated an era of seasonal employment migration that still continues today.⁷³ About a third of the immigrants in 1989 were workers, 10% were professional workers, and only 4.4% were pensioners. Most people went to Bursa, Istanbul, Izmir, Tekirdg, and Eski Sehir because those were the cities where other ethnic Turks from Bulgaria had settled during the previous immigration waves.

Many ethnic Turks from Bulgaria expected better social conditions in Turkey, but quickly realized that their expectations were too high. Witness accounts confirm the negative

⁶⁹ Amnesty International. February, 1989. P. 13.

⁷⁰ Buchsenschultz, 156

⁷¹ Gheorgieva, 5

⁷² Dimitrova, 4

⁷³ Gheorgieva, 1

attitude of local Turks towards the newcomers who “were often seen as inferior even by Bulgarian Turks who had immigrated several years before them.”⁷⁴ In effect, this sense of class distinction convinced many ethnic Turks to return to their birthplace. H.’s experience is rather telling. When he invited his neighbor to join him for drinks, the neighbor refused calling him a *giaour*⁷⁵. H. was on his way back to Bulgaria within a month.⁷⁶

The lack of employment provided another reason why nearly half of those who immigrated returned within a year and a half. In May 1990, for example, nine months after immigration stopped, only 67,292 immigrants of the total 126,069 had managed to find work.⁷⁷ Other difficulties included the poor knowledge of Turkish, and the sense of social and cultural isolation that became evident soon upon arrival.

Religiousness proved to be another barrier for ethnic Turks from Bulgaria who were trying to start new lives in Turkey. Atheist Bulgaria had made ethnic Turks far less faithful than their fellow Muslims in Turkey. Georgi Dimitrov’s and Todor Zhivkov’s socialist-inspired forceful secularization had had a much more harmful impact on religion in Bulgarian than Kemal Ataturk’s secularization in the newly-established Republic of Turkey. While in Bulgaria religion had ceased to play a central role under Ottoman occupation, in Turkey it remained a stronghold and a source of Turkish identity, which is why the gap between ethnic Turks immigrating to Turkey and the local Turkish population proved quite insurmountable. Many ethnic Turks from Bulgaria did not attend mosques regularly while others put their jobs before their faith. Drastic differences in social behavior, such as bargaining, which Bulgarians see as rather vulgar and Turks revere, also separated Bulgaria’s ethnic Turks from locals in Turkey. Different gender and

⁷⁴ Dimitrova, 6

⁷⁵ *Giaour* is a derogatory term from the days of the Ottoman occupation of Bulgaria that was used by Turks to refer to all impure, non-Turkish subjects in the Empire. The name is comparable to infidel and signifies racial and religious inferiority.

⁷⁶ Dimitrova, 7

⁷⁷ Dimitrova, 8

family roles further distanced Bulgaria's ethnic Turks from locals when it came to women's employment and child-rearing. In Bulgaria women were expected to work and to have their children taken care of at various social programs while Turkish women were expected to stay and home and take care of their children themselves. Also, because most ethnic Turks who immigrated were from the Bulgarian countryside, they found it nearly impossible to adapt to life in megalopolises like Istanbul, Izmir, and Bursa. All of these and many other differences made it clear to Bulgarian ethnic Turks that the image of Mother Turkey they had brought with them across the border was rather illusionary.⁷⁸

Despite the Bulgarian Communist Party's enormous efforts to prevent the spread of sensitive information about the name-changing campaign, much information concerning human rights crimes from the mid-1980s left the country with those against whom those crimes were committed. In 1989 Amnesty International alone confirmed dozens of cases that showed the great lengths to which the communist state had abrogated such universally-recognized, vital human rights as the freedom to non-violent expression and association, the freedom to movement, religion, and conscience.

The sentences given to ethnic Turks during the assimilation campaign fall under three main categories: sentences on charges of anti-social behavior, on charges of terrorism, and finally on charges of espionage. Beyhan Yusufova, whom the communist government renamed Bilyana Davidova, was a teacher from Momchilgrad. She was arrested and charged with anti-social behavior after participating in ethnic Turkish protests in her hometown in late December 1984.⁷⁹ In a response to Amnesty International the Bulgarian Ministry of Justice stated that she was sentenced to four and a half years of prison time under Article 325 (2) (1) of the Criminal

⁷⁸ Gheorgieva, 1

⁷⁹ Amnesty International. July 1987. 4.

Code for “impudent actions...which were a gross violation of law and order...and for expressing disrespect for society.”⁸⁰

Burhan Hayrulov, who was re-named Boyan Harakov, was arrested on December 22, 1984 together with his brother and his father. While the other two were held at the Belene detainment camp for eight months and were then released without trial, Burhan was sentenced to ten years of prison time at the Stara Zagora penitentiary with an indictment that was identical to Beyhan’s. Ivan Mishev presents another case where the communist government used Article 325 (2) to sentence protesters. Ivan had taken part in a three-day defense of his native Yablanovo against the security forces that had besieged the village to issue ethnic Turks the documents with their new names.

In addition to charging people with impudent behavior in public, the communist authorities further sentenced ethnic Turkish protesters as terrorists. In June 1986 Ibrahim Arifov and Ahmet Ahmedov, for example, printed and spread thousands of leaflets around the cities of Varna, Tolbukhin, and Silistra. The leaflets “called for the local population to show its opposition to the assimilation campaign by boycotting the forthcoming elections.”⁸¹ Others who were charged with and sentenced for terrorism were Medi Doganov, a philosopher at Sofia University who refused to change his name and received 12 years of prison, and Avni Veliev, who received 7 years for distributing leaflets that were against the ongoing assimilation campaign.

The charge of espionage provided the Communist Party with yet another means to put protesters behind bars. In such cases most people were brought to court because they “attempted to supply details of the forced assimilation campaign to the Turkish consular officials.”⁸² Alaatin

⁸⁰ Amnesty International. July 1987. 5.

⁸¹ Amnesty International. July 1987. 6.

⁸² Amnesty International. July 1987. 9.

Osmanov was thus arrested in September 1987 for allegedly passing military information to Turkish officials. As the manager of a restaurant in Asenovgrad he was frequented by Turkish officials who learned details about the campaign. Like him, Article 104 (1) of the Criminal Code put Tahir Tahirov in prison for “transmitting and collecting...information and acts which constitute state secrets.”⁸³

In addition to the aforementioned security measures against protesters, the communist government also banished internally many ethnic Turks whose ardent opposition to the name-changing campaign threatened to cause further dissent. Article 39 (1) of the People’s Militia Law provides for “internal banishment for up to three years...administratively, that is without trial, for...people who carry out anti-social activities affecting the security of the country.”⁸⁴ The Law allows for such measures to be continued indefinitely. When Ismail Hyuseinov refused to accept his new name and started discussing publicly his reasons for this decision, the authorities exiled him at the Belene labor camp. For the first year of the campaign this labor camp would house 500 more ethnic Turks from Ismail’s native Blagoevgrad alone.⁸⁵ After Belene Ismail was sent to the village of Pleshets near Vidin where he was “forbidden to leave the village and had to report to the police twice daily.”⁸⁶

⁸³ Amnesty International. July 1987 P. 8.

⁸⁴ Amnesty International. July. 1987P. 10.

⁸⁵ Buchenschutz, 104

⁸⁶ Amnesty International. July, 1987. P. 10.

V. Contemporary Dimensions of the ‘Ethnic Turkish Question’

In December 1992 Bulgaria’s national census included questions about people’s ethnic group, religion, and mother tongue. The final census data was officially published by the National Institute of Statistics in 1994 and indicated the following figures:⁸⁷

<u>Ethnic Group</u>		<u>Religion</u>		<u>Mother Tongue</u>	
Bulgarian	7 271 185	E. Orthodox	7 274 592	Bulgarian	7 275 717
Turkish	800 052	Catholic	53 074	Turkish	813 639
Roma	313 396	Protestant	21 878	Romanes	310 425
Tatar	4 515	Sunni Muslims	1 026 758	Tatar	7 833
Jewish	3 461	Shi’a Muslims	58 060	Ladino	780
Armenian	13 677	Israelites	2 580	Armenians	9 996

According to this census, the total population of Bulgaria in 1992 was 8,487,317 and the greatest concentrations of ethnic Turks were in the regions of Kurdzhali, Smolyan, Blagoevgrad, Pazardzhik, and Plovdiv.

Bulgaria is a signatory to a number of international human rights treaties that strive for the prevention of discrimination against minorities. In addition to the framework Geneva Convention, those include The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights plus its First Optional Protocol, The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, The Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNESCO’s Convention against Discrimination in Education, ILO Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, and the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. Bulgaria also joined the mechanisms for individual complaints under the Civil and Political Rights Covenant, Racial Discrimination Convention and the European Convention on Human Rights.

⁸⁷ Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, 3

The relative security in the protection of civil rights for ethnic Turks is indicated by the decreasing immigration to Turkey by members of this minority group. While in 1989 “ethnic Turks were leaving collectively...as time went by...immigration became a matter of personal choice.”⁸⁸ Most often, that choice has been dictated by economics more than anything else.⁸⁹ What is more, in their search for employment abroad today most ethnic Turks look towards Western Europe and the United States, rather than Turkey.

In 1998, the Prime Ministers of Bulgaria and Turkey Ivan Kostov and Mesut Yilmaz signed an agreement, which allows “the Bulgarian Turks who emigrated after 1989 to receive their pensions in Turkey.”⁹⁰ Currently the two countries are working on proposals that would provide visa-free entry to Bulgaria for those Turks.

The Law on National Education provides for the right of students whose mother tongue⁹¹ is not Bulgarian “to study their mother tongue in the municipal schools”. Article 12 (2) of the Radio and Television Act permits radio and TV operators to air programs in languages other than Bulgarian when they are “for Bulgarian citizens whose mother tongue is not Bulgarian”. The Regulations for Applying the National Education Act contain other policies sensitive to the needs of the ethnic Turkish minority, which did not exist during communism. The Act’s Article 4 clarifies that students whose mother tongue is not Bulgarian can study their mother tongue in municipal schools and the cost for their textbooks will be covered by the municipal budget. They could continue studying Bulgarian should their parents find this necessary, which is the case in virtually all cases.⁹²

⁸⁸ Gheorgieva, Tsvetana. P. 10.

⁸⁹ Gheorgieva, Tsvetana. P. 10.

⁹⁰ “Bulgarian Premier Meets Bulgarian Emigrants in Turkey”

⁹¹ Bulgarian legislature defines mother tongue as the “language a child uses to communicate with his family”

⁹² Gheorgieva, Tsvetana. P. 10.

The Bulgarian Constitution and the Protection of the Ethnic Turkish Minority

The Constitution of 1991 is another source of confidence that the communist disregard for minority rights would not embarrass Bulgaria once again. Article 54 of the new Constitution provides for the right of *everyone* to develop his/her own culture “in accordance with his/her ethnic belonging”. Article 6 (2) guarantees equality before the law and discrimination on the grounds of “race, nationality, ethnic self-identity, origin, religion, education, opinion, political affiliation, personal or social status” is prohibited. In November 1992 the Constitutional Court interpreted the provisions of this Act and affirmed the constitutionality of the list it contained.

The National Council on Ethnic and Demographic Issues (NCEDI) is the governmental body responsible for the social integration of Bulgarian citizens with minority status. This body was established by a governmental decree in December 1997 and is directly accountable to the Council of Ministers. It is chaired by a Deputy Prime-Minister and has permanent and associated members. Permanent members are officials from a number of ministries and governmental agencies while associate members could be from government agencies, research institutes, and non-governmental organizations. NCEDI meets at least once a month and has a small staff in which the key role is that of the Secretary. At present a number of minority organizations take part in the work of the Council.

The Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF)

After 1989 ethnic Turks in Bulgaria undertook the defense of their identity at the political level through the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF). The Movement was officially founded in 1990 after several years of underground existence during communism and

participated in the first multi-party general elections of 1990. In 1991, the newly reformed Bulgarian Socialist Party, i.e. the former Communists, challenged the party's registration before the Supreme Court. The Communists claimed that the Movement was illegal because Article 11 (4) of the Constitution prohibits the organization of political parties on ethnic, racial or religious grounds. On April 21, 1992, the Constitutional Court held that Article 11 (4) should be interpreted as "prohibiting only political parties which, through their membership or aims, are restricted solely to persons from a particular ethnic, racial or religious group."⁹³ Since the end of those legal disputes the Movement has established itself as Bulgaria's third major political party. It prides itself in "defending the rights and freedoms of the ethnic minorities in Bulgaria...and in appealing to the whole of Bulgaria for a more concerned examination and understanding of the country's painful past."⁹⁴

In the elections for the Seventh Grand National Assembly in June 1990 the MRF received nearly a quarter of the seats in the National Assembly. In 1994, the Movement won 5% of the vote and had 15 seats in the National Assembly. In the local elections on October 29 and November 1, 5 and 12, 1995 the MRF won 26 seats for mayors and one more seat in coalition with the Union of Democratic Forces. In the elections of 1997 the MRF had 15 seats in the Assembly.⁹⁵

Currently, the MRF is allied with the Movement for National Salvation and is part of the government led by Prime Minister Simeon Sax Coburg-Gotha, and several MRF members hold key positions in several ministries. Mehmed Dikme, for example, is the Minister for Agriculture while Nezhdet Mollov is the government's Minister Without Portfolio.⁹⁶

⁹³ The Council of Europe

⁹⁴ Tatarlu

⁹⁵ Koinova, 19

⁹⁶ "Parliamentary Group" in <http://www.dps.bg>

MRF is the political embodiment of the dissident activity that was spurred by the Communist Party's assimilation program. During the years of forced assimilation numerous dissident protests, all of which varied in their effectiveness, attempted to provide the population with an alternative to the single-party form of government and to communism as a whole. The central organization that coordinated ethnic Turks' opposition to the ongoing assimilation was the Turkish National Liberation Movement, which was most active in Dobrudzha in Northern Bulgaria and in Varna on the Black Sea coast.

In September 1985, the illegal Movement undertook serious reforms following Ahmed Dogan's ascendance to its leadership. By December 8, 1985 the new Movement for Rights and Freedoms was already established and began popularizing its program in the city of Varna. Ahmed Dogan, barely thirty years old, had just completed his studies at the Philosophy Institute of Bulgaria. He was one of the central figures to frame the Movement's ideology around Gandhi's advocacy of peaceful opposition to oppression.⁹⁷

As a leader Ahmed Dogan stubbornly insisted that Bulgaria can overcome its difficult recent history only when it understands its significance. In the spring of 1986 Dogan pledged for an open discussion of the name-changing campaign, but the Communist Party brought him to the prison cell once the security forces confirmed the existence of his Movement. The leader received ten years of prison time and three years of forced labor. The communist government tried to force the death penalty on Dogan by charging him with the attempted murder of Todor Zhivkov's grandson. Although he was not sentenced, the gravity of those charges kept Dogan in the prison cell until May 1989 when "the ethnic Slavic majority joined ethnic Turks in the

⁹⁷ BBC Summary of World Broadcasts. November 6, 1992.

struggle against the totalitarian regime and its unjust assimilation programs” and forced the authorities to take notice of the growing protests.⁹⁸

Once out of the prison cell Dogan joined the street protests erupting across the nation and based his rhetoric around Gorbachev’s *glasnost*. He advocated for a social order where the undisturbed discussion of burdensome issues and the free debate of history would remove the dark remnants of the past and would initiate the process of healing. Previously he had warned Todor Zhivkov that “the policies of genocide and repression do not bring about peace but dedicated freedom fighters.”⁹⁹ Those words echoed in the minds of many hardliners as a real threat to Bulgaria’s future, but Dogan denied all allegations that he dreamed of ethnic Turkish autonomy by publicly sharing that he envisioned Bulgaria as one whole where the different ethnicities lived in peace.

By 1992, the National Assembly drafted the legislation necessary for the just restitution of ethnic Turkish property that was nationalized during the assimilation campaign.¹⁰⁰ In 2002, the MRF composed a report about the name-changing campaign, which was to awaken Bulgarian society and to “allow it to achieve its due catharsis.”¹⁰¹

Unfortunately, the wound of the past is yet to fully heal as is evident from recent internal struggles within the Movement for Rights and Freedoms. Questioning the integrity of its leader, for example, Osman Oktai, who is himself a leading figure in the Movement, challenged the widely accepted view that Mr. Dogan was instrumental in preventing mass bloodshed during the protests against the name-changing campaign. He accused the leader of betraying former colleagues, of exaggerating his role in the peaceful protests he led, and of falsely claiming to

⁹⁸ Tatarlu

⁹⁹ Tatarlu

¹⁰⁰ BBC Summary of World Broadcasts. July 24, 1992.

¹⁰¹ “Dogan Will Not Sue Bulgaria at the Hague”

have prevented the explosion of the Bulgaria-Ukraine oil pipeline that disgruntled ethnic Turks were planning.¹⁰²

Another recent political catastrophe for Bulgaria and for the MRF came from a speech delivered by Redjep Molla Ahmed, the Movement's leader for the city of Pazardzhik. During the annual celebration of the repeal of the name-changing campaign, he said that he "does not recognize the Constitution of Bulgaria, which makes Bulgarian the official language...and that Christians have no place in the Rhodope Mountains."¹⁰³ Molla Ahmed quickly became the subject of a legal investigation that nearly charged him for criminal propaganda of an ideology threatening the country's security and stability. He was quickly dismissed from the Cabinet where he represented the MRF.¹⁰⁴

Islam in Bulgaria Today

A full decade has elapsed since the days when Bulgaria's communist authorities closed mosques and banned Muslim prayer. However, the consequences of this grave attack on Islam are still largely evident. 85-year-old Atem Mustafov Karabelov is one of the many religious leaders to witness the disappearance of his flock.¹⁰⁵ In 1986, the Communists demolished the century-old mosque in the neighboring village of Chepelare and praying was punished. Four years later the formal dissolution of the Bulgarian Communist Party encouraged Karabelov to return to his Quran. When he did that, however, he realized that he was in the minority. Today when Karabelov calls his congregation to prayer, only a handful answer and most are elderly. As he says, "it seems nearly impossible for people to remove themselves from the horror of the past

¹⁰² "Oktai is Asking Dogan"

¹⁰³ "A Leader from the Movement for Rights and Freedoms Wants Turkish to be the Official Language"

¹⁰⁴ "The Prime Minister Fires Molla Ahmed for his Speech"

¹⁰⁵ Bohlen, 4

and to revisit their controversial Muslim, yet Bulgarian identity.”¹⁰⁶ He laments that “most do not consider themselves either Bulgarian, or Turkish, or Christian, or Muslim because they fear that such behavior would cause another Kosovo to erupt...and because of the fear that if they identified one way or another the memories of centuries of Ottoman rule would haunt their future.”¹⁰⁷

Most young ethnic Turks in Bulgaria today say that they are Muslim, but openly confess that they do not know what that means.¹⁰⁸ Unfortunately, the official Islamic authorities in Bulgaria only impede ethnic Turks’ identification with Islam. In February 1992, the Directorate for Religious Affairs, backed by the MRF, issued two letters pronouncing the election of Chief Mufti Nedim Gendzhev and the other seven regional muftis illegitimate because “of improprieties in the election procedure...and because of Gendzhev’s insufficient term in office at the time of his election.”¹⁰⁹ The ousted Muslim leadership filed a case against this decision, but it was rejected and the newly appointed Chief Mufti Sali was put in office. The rift further weakened Islam’s popularity not only at the top levels but more importantly among regional muftis¹¹⁰, imams¹¹¹, and ordinary Muslims.¹¹²

When the Bulgarian Socialist Party came to power in 1995 it initiated a pro-nationalist policy towards ethnic Turks, and the Party’s daily newspaper *Douma* constantly referred to the Turkish minority as Turkey’s fifth column. Nedim Gendzhev, known for his loyalty to the former Communists during the name-changing campaign, was restored to office.¹¹³ In September

¹⁰⁶ Bohlen, 4

¹⁰⁷ Bohlen, 4

¹⁰⁸ Bohlen, 6

¹⁰⁹ Koinova, 33

¹¹⁰ *Muftis* are the Islamic legal authority figures who give formal legal opinion to private individuals’ inquiries.

¹¹¹ *Imams* are the male prayer leaders in mosques who are viewed as the successors to Muhammad and as the temporal leaders of the Islamic community.

¹¹² Eminov, 65

¹¹³ As the country’s Chief Mufti during communism, Nedim Gendzhev complied with the demands of the authorities to support the assimilation campaign. In a speech from March 26, 1985 Gendzhev declared his full support for the

1995, many Muslims protested in Sofia against these acts because “Gendzhev had collaborated with the communists during the assimilation campaign.”¹¹⁴

The rival Chief Mufti, Fikri Sali, organized an extraordinary conference with his followers in March 1996, which elected him the Chief Mufti. However, the state refused to grant him official recognition until “October 14, 1997 when the Supreme Court decided that the 1992 statute was in force at the time of Sali’s election as the Chief Mufti...and that he had been duly elected.”¹¹⁵ On September 9, 1997 the new government led by the Union of Democratic Forces facilitated the signing of an agreement between Fikri Sali and Nedim Gendzhev that promised to convene a unification conference for the overcoming of the existing rift between the two Chief Muftis.

Deputy Prime Minister Veselin Metodiev opened the unification conference on October 23, 1997. The conference was attended by 1,362 delegates who voted for a new statute stating that former Communist Party members, State Security agents, and participants in the name-changing process would not be elected as imams or muftis. The only other condition before prospective imams or muftis was that they be Bulgarian citizens. Mustafa Hadzhi was the only candidate for the post Chief Mufti and the delegates elected him unanimously. The Bulgarian state officially registered Chief Mufti Hadzhi together with a new Muslim statute, which “explicitly points out that Islam in Bulgaria is Sunni from the Hanafi School.”¹¹⁶ This School of Islamic jurisprudence was founded by Abu Hanifa who died in Iraq in 767 and remains one of the oldest schools in the Islamic world. Hanifa was one of the earliest Muslim scholar-interpreters to seek new ways of applying Islamic tenets to everyday life. His interpretation of Muslim law was extremely tolerant of differences within Muslim communities. The recognition

Communist Party’s name-changing campaign by declaring that “Muslims in Bulgaria enjoy complete freedom...profess Islam...and perform their rites.”

¹¹⁴ Koinova, 34

¹¹⁵ Koinova, 34

¹¹⁶ Koinova, 34

of the Hanafi School as the official Sunni school of Islam for ethnic Turks in Bulgaria is important because it signifies a willingness to admit officially Islamic religious existence in the country but more importantly because that existence is from a very tolerant, liberal rite that would not disrupt ethnic unity.

Despite some initial attempts from Gendzhev to challenge Hadzhi's election, the Chief Mufti has been accepted as the legitimate leader of Bulgaria's Muslim community. The number of the country's mosques has also stabilized. While in 1989 there were barely 300 mosques in all of Bulgaria, just three years later there were 920 mosques.¹¹⁷ Some of the support comes from ethnic Turks' relatives in Turkey and other countries, but the biggest portion is from ethnic Turks in Bulgarian and from Bulgarian officials.

The rights that were once taken away are returned and today ethnic Turks can send their children to study Turkish in public schools where classes are funded by the Bulgarian government. The figures from the Ministry of Education show that for 1997 there were "64,000 children who study Turkish as their mother tongue."¹¹⁸ The number of young ethnic Turkish émigrés who return to Bulgaria for their university education is also on the rise. In 1990-1991 there were only 3 such university students. In 1995-1996 that number had rapidly increased to 291.¹¹⁹ The Ministry of Education has stimulated this growth by lowering tuition costs for those dual citizens by one third. At the same time, following the change of textbooks by the socialist government between 1994 and 1997 presently the assimilation campaign is included in the general academic curriculum.¹²⁰

Because the number of ethnic Turkish officers in the military is rather small, the Ministry of Home Affairs has reserved 20 to 30 places in the Police Academy for minority candidates. In

¹¹⁷ Eminov, 63

¹¹⁸ US Department of State, 1997.

¹¹⁹ Hodja, 2

¹²⁰ Gheorgieva, Tsvetana, P. 10.

the current government there are 23 minority Members of Parliament in the 240-seat National Assembly. There are two MRF ministers in the Cabinet and they were the first ethnic Turks to serve in a Bulgarian Cabinet.¹²¹

Although some ethnic Turks remain pessimistic, most share that the “newly granted freedoms and rights affirm their faith in the future.”¹²² What is most promising is that those ethnic Turks hold the communist authorities responsible for the atrocities of the name-changing campaign and not Bulgarians themselves. This optimism is reflected in Bulgaria’s larger political and economic aspirations with respect to the European Union (EU). In preparation for acceptance to the EU Bulgaria remains committed to such international treaties as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which it signed on September 21, 1970.¹²³ On September 6, 1998 Prime Minister Ivan Kostov addressed a forum where he stressed that the government must give priority to the integration of the national minorities into the structures of Bulgarian society.¹²⁴ In February 1999, the National Assembly ratified the Council of Europe’s *Framework Convention on the National Minorities*, which is expected to give minorities a better chance to get involved in the local administration.¹²⁵

The Bulgarian public has also endorsed ethnic diversity when certain occasions have provided good opportunities for that. Religious celebrations have provided a particularly potent means to heal the wounds from the communist-era assimilation campaign. One such occasion was the end of April 2003 when in preparation for Easter several Muslim children from the city of Shoumen joined their Christian counterparts in the traditional egg coloring.¹²⁶ In another symbolic act of tolerance ethnic Turks who had left Bulgaria donated significant funds for the

¹²¹ US Embassy

¹²² Amnesty International. P. 6.

¹²³ Amnesty International. July 1987. P. 5.

¹²⁴ Council of Europe

¹²⁵ Andaj, 2

¹²⁶ “Muslim Children Color Easter Eggs”

construction of a monument honoring Vassil Levski, the national liberation hero from the 19th century whose ideal for liberated Bulgaria included ethnic and religious tolerance. The monument will be erected in the center of the city of Kardzhali, one of Bulgaria's most ethnically Turkish cities.¹²⁷

¹²⁷ "Bulgarian Turks Donate Funds for a Levski Monument"

VI. Concluding Remarks

Fourteen years have passed since ethnic Turks were tragically banished from Bulgaria by the communist government with an ultimatum to deny their identity or leave the country. Much political and religious reform has taken place and “the situation for the ethnic Turkish minority has improved in recent years.”¹²⁸ In 1989, Turkey asked many fellow Muslim nations to abandon all of their contacts with Bulgaria because of the country’s poor treatment of ethnic Turks on its territory. In July 1997, Bulgarian President Petar Stoyanov officially apologized to Turkey and to the Muslim community for the communist-era assimilation policies, and that marked the end of all remaining diplomatic tensions between the two countries that had stalled the relations between the two countries since the assimilation campaign.

Bulgaria has once again reaffirmed its tolerance and its willingness to support the thriving of its multifaceted population. The assimilation campaign that started in December 1984 still lives in the nation’s memory, which recalls the communists’ dramatic attempts to give ethnic Turks Slavic names and claim that no such minority existed in Bulgaria. Members of the victimized minority will forever remember how the Bulgarian Communist party used the assimilation campaign to divert the country’s attention from the declining national economic prowess and the impending deep structural and political reforms that came from the Kremlin. The communist government had interpreted the Turkish Constitution as an overt pan-Turkic project endangering the territorial and political integrity of The People’s Republic of Bulgaria and had propagandized this interpretation to create and magnify a fear of greater ethnic Turkish presence in the country. Parts of the folklore disclosing images of the brutal Ottoman presence in

¹²⁸ Council of Europe

Bulgaria were further exploited by the communist regime, which pointed to the ethnic Turkish demographic growth as evidence that Bulgaria would soon become another Cyprus.

Fortunately, banning the use of Turkish by ethnic Turks and requiring ethnic Turks to deny their religious and cultural identities and adopt imposed ones did not succeed but only strengthened the determination of the Bulgarian people to rid themselves from the excesses of a government that had long proven deeply flawed. The tide of democracy that swept across the Soviet bloc turned ethnic Turks from scapegoats in the hands of the Bulgarian Communist Party to constructors of the newest history of the country they were born in and knew as their own.

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