

## Comment

### Notes on “The Rise and Fall of Exarch Stefan”

I read Professor Spas T. Raikin’s article (*RCL* Vol. 12 No. 3, pp. 281-92) with considerable interest since I met the Exarch on a number of occasions. The most bizarre was when he came to Geneva “disguised” in a very loud brown and yellow check plus-four suit and bowler hat in the early 1940s. I wonder whether this mysterious incognito visit had any connection with the insinuation by the Russian soldier quoted by Professor Raikin that Stefan had some involvement with the French or British intelligence services?

My relatively limited contacts with the Bulgarian Church between 1938 and 1977 do not entitle me to question Professor Raikin’s findings, but some personal observations may be worth recording on the margins of his article. I had a very definite impression that before 1948 there was in the leadership of the Bulgarian Church another element besides the pro-communist and conservative movements which he describes. This was a group of more ecumenically-minded bishops, priests and laymen, some of whom had been associated with the flourishing Bulgarian Student Christian Movement suppressed under Nazi pressure in 1941. They looked to Exarch Stefan and Stefan Zankov as their spiritual leaders and stood for the inner reform of the church, the recovery of a sense of mission, and for attempts to relate the insights of ecumenical “Life and Work” and “Church and State” studies to the Bulgarian situation. As far as I knew the group was not committed to any particular political party, either monarchist or left-wing, but sought to apply Christian principles whatever the character of the regime. (A large delegation of younger members attended the World Conference of Christian Youth in Amsterdam in 1939.)

I must confess that I was more impressed by Stefan’s political dexterity than by his spirituality, so I was surprised to find that in the sixties he was regarded as a martyr and to hear that many people were going to lay flowers on his grave.

Someone who had been close to Stefan told me a quite different story about his resignation in 1948. According to this informant, Stefan as Exarch did a great deal for the revival of the church in the period 1944-48, so the communists decided to take advantage of disagreements

between him and some other members of the Holy Synod to get rid of him. Accordingly Mr Iliev, the Minister of Cults, came to Stefan secretly and said: "We know that you are having difficulties with some of your colleagues. We support you, but we suggest that you should give them a shock by offering your resignation. Even if they accept it we assure you that the government will not do so." But at the same time Mr Iliev assured the other bishops that if they accepted the Exarch's resignation the government would give the church an easier time. Everything happened as Mr Iliev had planned. When the government confirmed Stefan's resignation as Exarch he tried to continue to hold office as Metropolitan of Sofia; but Professor Zankov, who held the chair of ecclesiastical law in the Academy, was persuaded to declare that this proposal was illegal, and so Stefan had to go into "internal exile" in the village of Banja. I have no means of checking this version of the Exarch's resignation, but the fact that so many different stories have been circulated about it justifies Professor Raikin's judgement that Stefan's "fall has never been satisfactorily explained". (p. 285).

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