

plans for the renovation of historic sites involving artists, writers and historians both in public meetings and in the press. Tourists, local historians, local people, schoolchildren and their teachers can all be a great help in the discovery, registration, and study

of monuments of history and culture. It is time to use to good purpose the genuine interest in the history and culture of the Motherland which is shared by hundreds of thousands of our compatriots today.

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Turkish Muslims in Bulgaria*

In October 1986, Keston College received a press release (addressed to *Religion in Communist Lands*) from First Secretary Plamen Voynovsky, Press Officer at the Embassy of the People's Republic of Bulgaria in London. The substance of this release was the visit to Bulgaria of Ahmed Zabara, Mufti of the Yemen Arab Republic, his impressions of the country and of the current situation of the Muslim population in particular. Sheikh Zabara visited Sofia, Plovdiv, Kardzhali and Smolyan, and his views are quoted from an interview which he gave to the Bulgarian newspaper *Nova Svetlina* (New Light) on 21 October 1986.

He was full of praise for his Bulgarian hosts, and impressed by "the fruitful amity and friendship existing between Bulgaria and the Soviet Union". "Bulgarian Muslims," he affirmed,

enjoy the rights of total freedom.

They are citizens with equal rights.

Their children go to present-day schools. Traditions and new way of living [*sic*] are well co-ordinated and this is really wonderful.

Questioned on the reports in "some foreign newspapers" concerning the

murder of Muslims, the destruction of mosques, and the persecution of imams, the Mufti declared these to be untrue. Referring to the "lies" emanating from Turkey and other neighbouring countries, he said that he personally had met many of the imams "declared killed" and prayed in mosques reported "razed to the ground". Speaking of the "ordinary Muslims" in the Kardzhali district, he said: "They are undisturbed and assured in their future. This is another proof of the groundlessness of the falsification being disseminated against your country."

The remarks attributed to Sheikh Zabara bear a clear resemblance to those made by the Syrian Grand Mufti during his visit earlier in 1986 and closely reflect the standard line taken by various official bodies and spokesmen in Bulgaria, both before and since the publication of the carefully documented Amnesty International report on the forced assimilation of the ethnic Turkish (mainly Islamic) minority, published in 1986. This gave details of many reported serious abuses of human rights in the course of the coercive "Bulgarisation" campaign which began (or was renewed) in late 1984 and was at its height during 1985. A main feature of this campaign was the enforced renunciation by this minority of their Muslim names

*This is an update to the *Sources* item on Bulgarian Press Articles which appeared in *RCL* Vol. 14, No. 1, pp. 82-84.

and their replacement by Bulgarian-sounding ones, apparently in the interests of the government's declared policy of achieving a "one-nation state". In fact, it is thought that the Turks in Bulgaria — who are believed to number about one million (over ten per cent of the total population) and have a much higher birth-rate than that of the indigenous Bulgarians — are regarded as posing, at least potentially, a real threat to the country's political stability.

Amnesty International received the names of over a hundred ethnic Turks allegedly killed in the course of the campaign. According to eyewitness accounts received by Amnesty, in the Kardzhali district (which Sheikh Zabara visited) the security forces used tear gas and dogs and opened fire on demonstrators, killing six of them — including a two-year-old child and her mother — and wounding forty others.

As well as pointing to many instances of imprisonment and to cases of internal banishment (sometimes of whole families), reports on the situation in Bulgaria indicate that more specific forms of religious persecution took place. It is alleged that imams who refused to collaborate with the authorities were dismissed, and their mosques closed. Some Islamic practices, in particular circumcision and certain burial rites, are reported to have been penalised. In this connection, the role of the newspaper *Nova Svetlina*, quoted in the above press release, is of interest. It appears three times a week and is intended principally for the Muslim minority. It used to be a bilingual publication (Turkish and Bulgarian), but since January 1985 it has been printed only in Bulgarian. (The use of Turkish is being phased out in the press and the other media as well as in schools and public places generally.) Radio Free Europe recently reported that *Nova Svetlina*

had published a number of articles opposing Islamic practices, including one on circumcision, "A Tradition that Comes from the Stone Age" (No. 33, 20.3.86), and one on fasting, "Harmful to Human Health" (No. 56, 13.5.86).

In 1985, the Secretary General of the Islamic Conference alluded to the "vital role" played by the Turkish community in Bulgarian life, and its attempts to preserve its faith, identity, and culture in accordance with the "internationally recognised rights of minorities". Deep concern was expressed over the name-changing campaign and the "violence, intimidation and murder". Similar sentiments have been expressed elsewhere in the Western and Islamic media.

However, the Bulgarian authorities now refuse to accept that there is such a thing as a Turkish minority. The official view was expressed in October 1985 by Academician Blagovest Sendov, representing Bulgaria at a General Conference of UNESCO. He responded to the Turkish delegation's criticism of his country's treatment of the Muslim minority as a "gross intervention in the internal affairs of the sovereign Bulgarian state and its Muslim nationals". "This elevated forum," he declared, "is being used for manipulations of such notions as a 'Turkish national minority', a 'Turkish Muslim minority' . . . in Bulgaria." Bulgarian Muslims, he maintained, had nothing to do with the Turkish nation. They were descendants of *Bulgarians* who had been forcibly "Turkicised" during the five-century Ottoman yoke. All name-changes occur spontaneously and voluntarily, say the authorities, and all reports of violence, the destruction of Islamic buildings and religious persecution generally are unfounded fabrications.

From April 1986 onwards, a series of articles began to appear in the

official Bulgarian press containing interviews with people whom, it was claimed, Amnesty International had stated to be dead or to have "disappeared". Amnesty, in their newsletter of November 1986, pointed out that, in many instances, these articles seriously misquoted their report. In two separate press articles, Felina Arsova and Temenouzhka Yulianova were named as having been reported by Amnesty to have been killed by the Bulgarian authorities. In fact, neither of them had been mentioned by Amnesty. Similarly, it was alleged that Amnesty had claimed that the mosque in Benkovski had been demolished, whereas their report stated, in fact, that it was the mosque in Gorski Izvor that had been destroyed. Some names appearing in a (February 1986) list of cases about which Amnesty had requested information were mentioned in the articles; in other instances, people's new-style Bulgarian names were used, without reference to their former, Islamic, ones, thus rendering verification by Amnesty impossible.

The defection to Turkey, in the summer of 1986, of Halil Ahmedov Ibishev, a former National Assembly deputy and prominent Turkish community figure, helped to undermine the official Bulgarian position. Similarly, anger and resentment were aroused when world champion weightlifter Naim Suleimanoglu (or Naum Shalamanov, in Bulgarian) sought refuge in Turkey and proceeded to give an account of the sufferings of fellow-Turks in Bulgaria.

In what may be interpreted as an effort to reassure world opinion that, despite any evidence to the contrary, the religious needs of the Muslims will indeed continue to be catered for, a "regular training course" for "district imams", with state financial support, was opened in Sofia in

October 1986. According to *Sofia News* (the official Bulgarian English-language weekly) of 22 October 1986, the curriculum includes "doctrine, Koran, history of Islam, as well as a detailed study of Bulgaria's history, geography and government". The course, which appears to be of six months' duration, is organised by the Theological Council of the Chief Mufti's office, with the "assistance" of the Committee for the Affairs of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and the Religious Denominations, a government body, chaired by a Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, who attended the inauguration in person.

Since the end of 1986, in further response to criticism from Western and Islamic countries, the Bulgarian authorities, through the media, have concentrated their attacks on Turkish domestic and foreign policy. Turkey's treatment of her own ethnic minorities and her human rights record generally have been singled out for special censure. Bulgarian radio, endorsing an article in *Zemledel'sko Zname* (Banner of the Agrarian Party) by Yasen Ognyanov (31 December 1986) claimed that, "in order to deflect the attention of its own public and of the international community from the real problems besetting the country itself, Turkey created a diversion by drawing that attention to non-existent or artificially raised problems". The article is quoted as indicating that

jingoistic anti-Bulgarian propaganda has been kept up unscrupulously for more than two years, and undisguised threats and insults have been levelled at Bulgaria. The 'special' Turkish services have been blackmailing, abducting, torturing, and killing Bulgarian nationals in Turkish prisons. Provocations against Muslim Bulgarians are particularly active, even though Muslim Bulgarians

themselves have categorically declared that they are bone of the bone and flesh of the flesh of the Bulgarian people.

In *Sofia News* (14.1.87), Lyubomir Popov, chairman of the state committee for religious affairs, wrote a lengthy article including comments in a similar vein. "In order to fan the groundless accusations against Bulgaria," he wrote,

Turkey is spreading untruths about killings, violence, demolished mosques and religious shrines, as well as about restrictions imposed on the Muslim religion in this country. Turkey is trying to take advantage of various international forums and meetings, and above all various Islamic organisations, for anti-Bulgarian attacks.

In the same article, Popov expressed his surprise that representatives of the Islamic Conference Organisation had not so far accepted Bulgaria's invitation "to take a first-hand look at the truth". (Meetings at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, including talks with Popov, the Chief Mufti and church leaders, as well as visits to mosques in Sofia and elsewhere, had been proposed.)

Also in January, a meeting was held in Sofia's Palace of Culture for some two hundred ethnic Turks, said to have returned to their "native" Bulgaria after finding life in Turkey unbearable. Individual testimonies, in which people detailed the miseries endured in Turkey and expressed their happiness at being back in Bulgaria, were given considerable prominence in the Bulgarian press. (*Rabotnichesko Delo*, 16.1., 21.1.87;

Sofia News, 21.1.87.) In response, a Turkish foreign ministry spokesman alleged that Bulgarian officials had conspired with some members of the ethnic Turkish minority, encouraging them to leave the country but then to return claiming that things were so much better in Bulgaria. (BBC report, 21.1.87.)

Soviet support for Bulgaria in all her recent altercations, both religious and political, with Turkey has been somewhat muted. However, in an English-language broadcast on 21 February 1987, Bulgarian radio quoted, with obvious satisfaction, an article in *Sovetskaya Rossiya* (18.2.87) to support its condemnation of the "Voice of Turkey" radio station as an organ of "pan-Turkish and pan-Islamic policy" and "anti-Bulgarian hysteria".

Although the use of physical force by the Bulgarian authorities in implementation of their "Bulgarisation" campaign appears to have subsided, there is no sign, at present, of any let-up in the war of words between Bulgaria and Turkey. In a recent interview in *Otechestven Front* (Fatherland Front) (26.2.87), Ambassador Konstantin Grigorov, leader of several Bulgarian delegations to international conferences, again condemned Turkey's right to concern herself with Muslims in Bulgaria. Bulgarian Muslims, he claimed, had chosen their own national conscience. No-one had the right to impose a foreign one on them.

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