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## **Religious identity in Bulgaria during the communist regime. The case of Orthodox Christianity and Islam**

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this essay is to analyse the state of the religious identity in Bulgaria during the communist regime from 1944 to 1989. The text deals with the two main religions in Bulgaria – Orthodox Christianity and Islam and it aims to answer the following questions: What was the communist ideology’s view on religion? How was this policy applied in Bulgaria by the Bulgarian Communist Party? What was the effect on the two religions? Was there a different approach towards each one and how did the identities of the two communities react to those approaches?

**Keywords:** religious identity, religion, Bulgarian religious identity, communism, religious identity under communism, Bulgarian Orthodox Church, Islam.

### **Introduction**

From a historical point of view religion has been a key part in forming Bulgarian identity in general, with Orthodox Christianity a fundamental part of the creation of the Bulgarian nation and later the Bulgarian national state. The Bulgarian state took a different approach towards religion during the communist regime, in accordance to the practices in the Soviet Union and other countries under its influence – the general idea being the abolishment of religion and the introduction of atheism to the general population.

### **The approach towards religion in the communist ideology**

Elimination of religion has been a key part of the ideology of communism since the beginning. The Orthodox Church was deeply integrated into the autocratic state of the Russian Empire and therefore it had to be abolished (Luukkanen, 1994) [1]. The Bolshevik ideology included removal of religion and the introduction of atheism as an ideological objective (Ramet, 1993) [2]. The regime in the USSR prohibited public display of religious beliefs and regularly confiscated religious property and harassed believers, with more than 1,200 priests killed in just 4 years (from 1922 to 1926) (Curtis, 1992a, 1992b) [3].

State atheism in the USSR is influenced by Marxist–Leninist atheism (also known as Marxist–Leninist scientific atheism). Marxism–Leninism claims that religion is the opium of the people, as it promotes passive acceptance of suffering on Earth in the hope of eternal reward. Marxism–Leninism advocates the abolition of religion and the acceptance of atheism, as state by Lenin in 1905:

“Religion is one of the forms of spiritual oppression which everywhere weighs down heavily upon the masses of the people, over burdened by their perpetual work for others, by want and isolation... Those who toil and live in want all their lives are taught by religion to be submissive and patient while here on earth, and to take comfort in the hope of a heavenly reward... Religion is opium for the people. Religion is a sort of spiritual booze, in which the slaves of capital drown their human image, their demand for a life more or less worthy of man.”

The same repressive policy towards religion was applied in countries under Soviet influence, including Bulgaria. All religions were being persecuted, the approach to them being determined by their international support and influence inside the country.

## **The approach towards religion in Bulgaria**

### **The case of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church**

The Bulgarian Orthodox Church played a crucial role in preserving Bulgarian culture during the Ottoman occupation and was a guardian of the national identity and a major factor in the education of Bulgarians. It remained central to the sense of Bulgarian nationhood even under the postwar communist regimes.

Assaults, kidnappings, beatings, killings without trial and torture and mistreatment of priests and clerics began right after the coup of 09<sup>th</sup> of September 1944. Repression of the church has as main objective "revolutionary retribution" for cooperation with the old government. Therefore those clerics who have had contact with the political elites before 9<sup>th</sup> of September 1944 were the first in line. We can use as examples is the fates of Archimandrite Irenaeus, coadjutor of Sofia Holy Bishopric who went missing on the 20<sup>th</sup> of September 1944, of Bishop Boris who was assassinated, of Egumenius Kalistrat, administrator of the Rila Monastery, who was imprisoned, and of various other clergy, murdered or charged with crimes against the state. (Chureshki, 2004) [4].

During the People's Court of 1944-1945 [5] more than 100 Orthodox priests were sued, some of whom were sentenced in absentia because they had already been killed or had unknown fate. The archives from this period mention "13 liquidated", i.e. killed with sentences from the People's court. Other archives briefly mention the Sofia priest Kirchev, liquidated without trial on the 09<sup>th</sup> of September 1944. On the 22<sup>th</sup> of September 1944 was shot and then burned priest Stephen Popvasilev from the city of Perushtica (Chureshki, 2004) [6]. These are just some of the examples of the communist regime's persecution of the Orthodox Church's members during the 40s which was the harshest period for religion during the regime.

The communist regime soon replaced all clergy who refused to endorse the communists' policies and from 1944 till 1947 the church was deprived of jurisdiction in marriage, divorce, issuance of birth and death certificates, and other passages that had been sacraments as well as state events (Ramet, 1989) [7].

During later years of the communist regime the communist government tried more to control the church and not completely destroy it. The Orthodox Church and the Bulgarian Communist Party even had a close partnership. The Church's elite supported the communist regime and vice versa – for example 11 out of the 15 in total members of Bulgarian Orthodox Church's Holy Synod worked for communist State Security, while the Bulgarian Communist Party supported the elevation of the exarchate to the rank of patriarchate in May 1953.

Religion was generally something kept at home and not publically demonstrated, however religious gatherings at home were too outlawed (Hayek, 2004) [8]. Religion is presented as a distorted reflection of reality, bearing in itself vicious morality. The only valid, genuine and progressive outlook is that of "scientific atheism". Atheistic upbringing is presented as the only way to build the correct values of the "new people." Therefore it should start from an early age – in kindergarten. The success of this methodology depends on the influence of the family, so even in the late 80s of the 20th century parents again were being advised to never contradict that which their children were taught in school, "as not to confuse young minds". With these actions the regime not only prevented the Church to work directly with children, but also exercised an even stronger control over private and family life of the people. Practicing Christians were subject to a number of restrictions on education, career, social contacts, with political power being completely inaccessible to them.

The dual life is very strongly present in the sphere of religion. People generally have the right to religious freedom only as private individuals but not as communities. There were, however, a few exceptions in the policy of private religiousness – Luydmila Zhivkova, the "uncrowned princess" of Bulgaria, created a permanent exhibition of Bulgarian medieval religious icons in

the crypt of the Alexander Nevski Cathedral in Sofia (Atanasova, 2004) [9]. Some religious rituals were hard to be abolished as well. Baptism, having been an indispensable rite establishing individual identity, continued to have a vital role for many even after the establishment of the communist regime. The rigidity and power of this tradition caused the communist state to introduce a naming ritual called “civil baptism”, so they could control it.

The communist regime achieved its main objective to eradicate religion and to marginalize and undermine the Church, thus for decades the prevailing secular society saw Christianity and the Church as an institution that had only a historical significance for the preservation of the Bulgarian national identity and whose sole function was a place for rituals for only in certain moments of human life - baptism, marriage and death.

After the fall of Zhivkov, the Orthodox Church and other churches in Bulgaria experienced a revival, with rituals such as baptisms and church weddings attracting more and more people and with traditional church holidays observed more widely, such as Christmas, which during communism received very little public attention. The church got back some its property, such as the Rila Monastery. Religious education increased in the early years of democracy (Curtis, 1992a, 1992b) [10].

### **The case of Islam**

The Muslim population of Bulgaria has been a thorny issue for Bulgaria ever since the country's liberation from Ottoman rule in 1878, as the Muslim community, including Turks, Pomaks, Gypsies, and Tatars, has an identity mainly based on their religion. In a time when the Balkans were trying to adopt a nation-state model similar to that in Western Europe – e.g. a homogeneous one, their presence was viewed as an obstacle to national unity (Ragaru, 2010) [11].

Muslims in communist Bulgaria lived mostly in the northeastern parts of Bulgaria and in the Rhodope Mountains and the majority were Sunni Muslims because Sunni Islam had been more widely promoted by the Ottoman Turks during the five centuries of Ottoman rule, with Shia sects such as the Shia Kuzulbashi and the Bektashi also present. The last consisted mainly of descendants of Bulgarians who converted to Islam to avoid Ottoman persecution but chose a Shia sect because of its greater tolerance toward different national and religious customs. For example, Kuzulbashi Bulgarians could maintain the Orthodox customs of communion, confession, and honoring saints. This integration of Orthodox customs into Islam gave rise to a type of syncretism found only in Bulgaria (Curtis, 1992a, 1992b) [12].

At the beginnings of the communists' rise to power, the regime's approach to the Turkish minority was quite mellow. The Bulgarian communist leaders promised equal rights and favoured the Turkish minority's cultural development, in hopes that a secularized Turkish elite would emerge and that it would support the regime and spread their ideology in the Muslim minority. Yet the approach towards Islam was as hostile as towards other religions – it was perceived as a source of socioeconomic backwardness and, seeing that the Muslim identity was not transforming the way that they wanted to, as an obstacle in achieving their ideological aims (Ragaru, 2010) [13].

This process of assimilation, taken on by the state, had produced some effect. Due to the atheist propaganda and the fact that even if young people had shown an interest in religious matters there were no such opportunities available [14], many Muslims played down their religious identity, especially if they wanted to succeed professionally. As no theological education was available and with the post of the hodzha being passed in the family, the religious knowledge was in general poor and resulted in some kind of syncretism.

Bulgarian Muslims were subject to very strong persecution in the later years of the Zhivkov regime. This was a result of many factors. One of them was the fact that the communist regime was suffering an erosion of its legitimacy due to bad economic situation. As a way to strengthen

the party's approval the regime put unification of the nation as its top goal. This whole process was made easier due to the fact that the Orthodox Church traditionally considered them "foreigners", even if they were ethnically Bulgarian (Curtis, 1992a, 1992b) [15]. The Bulgarian communist regimes declared traditional Muslim beliefs to be diametrically opposed to communist and Bulgarian beliefs. This justified repression of Muslim beliefs and consolidation of Muslim into the larger society as part of the class and ideological struggle. (Ragaru, 2010) [16].

In 1984 Zhivkov launched his assimilation campaign, also known as the "Revival process". Within its framework around 800,000 Bulgarian Turks were forced to renounce their Turkish-Arabic names in favor of Slavic patronyms. Far from achieving the intended result, the authorities not only forested a reassertion of distinct ethnic and religious identification among the Turks but also succeeded in upsetting intercommunitarian relationships.

Speaking in Turkish in public was forbidden. So were traditional Muslim practices and customs. All markers of the Turkish/Muslim identity were targeted in an attempt to remove every aspect of them in Bulgaria. According to the official discourse there were not any Turks in Bulgaria, just Bulgarians who had been forcibly Islamized during the Ottoman rule and it was claimed that they had voluntarily returned to their true identities.

The result of this was the emergency of a whole new emphasis on identity. Muslims responded to the state's policy by reversing the longstanding trend of assimilation and integration and by putting an emphasis on exploring the past and uncovering evidence of distinctiveness (Ragaru, 2010) [17].

This assimilation campaign in general had a terrible effect over the relationship of different religions in the country which is a traditionally religiously tolerant one, proving a lot of tension between the Muslim community, the state and the Christian communities.

Like all other religions, Islam in Bulgaria enjoyed greater religious freedom after the fall of the communist regime. In many cities and villages new mosques emerged. Muslims began publishing their own newspaper, *Musiulmani*, in both Bulgarian and Turkish.

## Conclusion

In general the communist regime in Bulgaria followed the Soviet line of proclaiming atheism and suppression of religion and its churches – including abuse, confiscation of property, prohibition of religious books, materials, ceremonies, celebrations, etc, murder of religious persons and so on. Christianity became a thing to be practiced privately at home only and a general inconvenience for a fulfilling social and professional life, with much of its essence being taken away. The suppression towards Muslims had its peak during the "Revival process" which abruptly ended the ongoing assimilation process and instead provoked a reinforcement and consolidation of the Muslim religious identity.

In the end, the communist party's without a doubt approach towards religion introduced a division in the Bulgarian society which still effected it during the first years of the democratic transition.

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