

## OPINION

on the thesis

of Assoc. Prof. Yura Toteva Konstantinova, PhD

“The Bulgarians in Salonica from the 1860s to the Balkan wars”

Professional line 2.2. History and Archaeology

Salonica, which during the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. was the second biggest cosmopolitan city in the Balkans, has a specific significance for Bulgarians. Its place in Bulgarian historiography is traced by many professional and lay publications on different aspects of our connection with that city. However, a realistic picture might be attained only after a painstaking collection of the numerous scattered pieces of evidence, a comprehensive investigation of Bulgarian participation in the political, economic and cultural life of the city, and, finally, after a reflection on that matter based on contemporary professional achievements. Assoc. Prof. Yura Konstantinova makes the impressive observation that a hundred years after the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> c., and in a context of strong emotions evoked by that city, due to PC reasoning, Salonica is totally absent from the official narrative of the history of Bulgaria and Bulgarians (p 5).

According to Konstantinova, that “quietist” practice re the participation of Bulgarians in the life of Salonica underrates their role in the modernization processes in the late Ottoman Empire. That is the reason why she has offered to the academic community her thesis “The Bulgarians in Salonica from the 1860s to the Balkan wars”. It is founded on years of research in many Bulgarian and foreign archives, on the analysis of publications by Bulgarian and foreign historians, and of relevant works of art. Part of the thesis is based on the successful interdisciplinary project led by her “Salonica and the Bulgarians: history, memory, contemporaneity”, supported by the Fund for Scientific Research of the Ministry of education and science.

The structure of the thesis is appropriate given the goals set. The thesis comprises an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion and a bibliography. In the Introduction, the author establishes convincingly the importance of the topic, then analyses the state of current research and sources, and presents her goals and methods. She is right to start her research from the recognition of the Bulgarian Congregation (with its regularly functioning school), for it legitimized Bulgarians in relation to the Ottoman authorities and foreign states as a separate organized community. The upper chronological limit, 1913, is also adequate, for it is the year of destruction of the Bulgarian institutions in Salonica. Both limits are not absolute, as Konstantinova has included information about Bulgarians in Salonica before 1860, as well as the existence of Salonica in Bulgarian collective memory after 1913. The thesis unfolds thematically, and the separate themes are presented chronologically.

The first chapter, entitled "Formation and strengthening of the Bulgarian community", deals with the demographic development and national separation of the Bulgarians from the Greek community, their emergence as unity due to organizing, and their public presence as a group. The critical analysis of statistics of varied provenance is complemented by information about the places of origin of the immigrants, their trades, financial status, social profile, and even behavioral stereotypes. Of decisive importance for the strengthening of Bulgarian national consciousness was the creation of national institutions, in the first place the Bulgarian Congregation, and its restoration after the "years of fear" (1876-1880), the time of the Great Eastern Crisis. For the majority of Salonica Bulgarians, their national consciousness was buttressed by the moral and financial support of the Exarchate through its organizational ties with the Congregation, the government of Bulgaria, and the SS Cyril and Methodius Boys' gymnasium of Salonica. The author is the first historian to deal systematically with the Bulgarian real estate in Salonica. Konstantinova also pays tribute to Atanas Shopov, the first Bulgarian commercial agent in the city, and his activity in support of Bulgarianism as a stimulating factor for Bulgarian national consolidation.

The second chapter deals with education. It is the focal point of the thesis, for education concentrates the self-organization of the Bulgarian community plus its relations to other communities via their schools. Bulgarian schooling is analyzed in terms of its educational and social functions, together with its role in the general enhancement of literacy and culture in the community. It is seen in the context of the rise of education in all of cosmopolitan Salonica, which in the period in question had 86 schools belonging to various national or confessional groups. The author points out the tendencies in the development of primary, high school, pedagogical and commercial education of Bulgarians, as well as the difficulties arising from the mixed system of financing of primary schools and from personal clashes. Next to the well-researched SS Cyril and Methodius Boys' Gymnasium, center of the education and the revolutionary movement in Macedonia, Konstantinova has researched for the first time in full the Holy Evangel Girls' Gymnasium. That Girls' pedagogical high school received a more limited support from the Exarchate, thus for financial reasons it was not able to realize fully its great potential. The author considers the presence of Bulgarian students in the SS Cyril and Methodius Bulgarian Catholic Seminary, in the Turkish, French (lay and Catholic) and American educational institutions. The Greek, Serbian and Rumanian schools in Salonica are presented as a counter point to Bulgarian education. Konstantinova is able to draw the important conclusion that Bulgarian education was fully competitive in terms of number of students, qualification of teachers, types of schools and quality of education (p 323).

In the third chapter, Yura Konstantinova deals with the participation of the Bulgarian community in the public and political life of Salonica. She uses again the comparative approach in order to place and assess

the Bulgarian acts against the backdrop of other national and religious groups' initiatives. This enables her to show the Bulgarian progress: starting from an encapsulated community, handicapped by Ottoman authorities and the Exarchic regulations imposed by them, subsisting in poverty and pre-modern culture, the Salonica Bulgarians developed into a self-modernizing group, staging its own public events after the Young Turks' coup of 1908. Konstantinova also gives an account of the Bulgarian periodical and other publications; of the proliferation of revolutionary ideas in the community; of the counter activity of the Greek nationalistic organization and of Serbian politics resulting from the activities and "affairs" of IMARO. Once again Konstantinova also notes the presence of Atanas Shopov (first a commercial agent, then Consul and Consul General), dedicated to the cause of supporting and strengthening Bulgarian national consciousness by all available means. The author honors the contributors to the unity of the community: the free Bulgarian state, the Exarchate, the cultural activists (mostly teachers), namely Kone Samardjiev, T. Karabelev, Anton Strashimirov, Gyorche Petrov, Yordan Yartsev and many others, along with the wealthy Bulgarian families – the Hadjimishevs, Shavkulovs, Vessovs, Kondovs, Rizovs, Popstefanovs, Kyulyumovs.

The conclusion presents the main findings. It delineates the main tendencies in the development of Salonica Bulgarians and their causes, the role of the Bulgarian state, the Exarchate and some individuals.

Konstantinova does not overlook the contradictions between clerical and lay actors, between adherents to different strategies for national unification and to different political ideologies: the division lines are many. Yura Konstantinova is convincing when she argues that the main problem of the Bulgarian community in Ottoman Salonica was the mechanism of its formation in the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> c.: it was the result of voluntary expatriation from various parts of Macedonia, brought to the same place in search of security, educational opportunities and economic well-being. This determined the group's composition: mostly small merchants, artisans, seasonal workers, teachers, printers, intellectuals, revolutionaries. From that, Konstantinova infers the group's financial means, modest in comparison to the means of other national and confessional groups, in the first place Greeks and Jews. The author speaks of "the specificity of Salonica, where the Bulgarian community isn't uniform, but is a collection of representatives of various strata, whose interests and ideologies often clash" (pp 137-138). It would be interesting to know whether that characterizes Bulgarians in that city only, or can also be found in other large cities during the period in question. That could be done after a comparative in-depth research of at least several representative cases.

Yura Konstantinova is convincing when she writes that Salonica, as a center of nationalism in the late Ottoman Empire, due to strong influences from the national Bulgarian states, its Jewish majority and its Bulgarian hinterland has a specificity that in the last resort predetermined its fate.

I have a few recommendations in view of the publication of the thesis.

The use of the key notion “community” for the Bulgarians in Salonica should be preceded by some theoretical clarifications. (Yura Konstantinova has appropriately done that when introducing, for example, the notion “collective memory”.) Besides, the representatives of the Dual Monarchy should be called representatives of Austria-Hungary and not of Austria, as now stands in the text.

The author has researched, compared and analyzed critically some tenets, popular in Bulgarian historiography and questions some of them. She offers alternative opinions on the Bulgarian community of Salonica, in bloom in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. She reveals the attempts of the Russian Consuls General in the city Alexander Yakobson and Ivan Yastrebov to control and direct through various means the behavior of the Bulgarian community leaders. She also presents new evidence on the incessant strife with the Salonican Greeks and Serbs. The analysis of the real estate of the Congregation prompts her to research support and charity. In the third chapter, especially interesting is her narrative of Ottoman Salonica through the eyes of Bulgarians, pieced together from memoir literature, as well as of the collective Bulgarian memory of that city, reflected in works of art after 1913. That part of the thesis connects it with our time and rounds up the text.

The Abstract presents the thesis correctly, contains the necessary information re the main contributions of Yura Konstantinova and her relevant publications (ten studies and papers in specialized professional publications in the period 2013-2018).

The thesis submitted, entitled “The Bulgarians in Salonica from the 1860s to the Balkan wars” has qualities and makes contributions, which are ground for a positive decision; Assoc. Prof. Yura Toteva Konstantinova, PhD merits the degree “Doctor of Science”, Professional Line 2.2.

Sofia, 30.12.2019

Prof. Dr. Roumiana Il. Preshlenova