

## OPINION

of Prof. Dr. Vesselin Kostov Yanchev,  
Sofia University "St. Kliment Ochridski"  
re the thesis of Yura Toteva Konstantinova  
"The Bulgarians in Salonica from the 1860s to the Balkan wars"

### Professional line 2.2. History and Archaeology

The submitted thesis vindicates the Biblical saying "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven". Thanks to it, a bit more than a hundred years after the end of Bulgarian presence in the cosmopolitan city, the ones interested in the past may finally satisfy their curiosity and get answers to a multitude of questions regarding the material and spiritual life of "Bulgarian Salonica".

This has become possible not only because the time has come, but also thanks to the appearance of the right kind of researcher, with unquestionable erudition and ability, namely Assoc. Prof. Yura Konstantinova, PhD. A graduate of Sofia University in History and Modern Greek Philology, she has appropriately directed her professional career to the study of Modern Greek History and Bulgarian-Greek relations. In 2006 Konstantinova earned a PhD. in History, defending her thesis "Greek Balkan policy at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> c.", later being elected Associate Professor with the monograph "The fight of Bulgarians and Greeks for the Ottoman heritage". Meanwhile she has published 27 studies and articles and has participated in a number of research projects, thematically connected with the history of the Balkan peoples. In 2016 a team led by her won support from the Scientific Research Fund for the project "Salonica and the Bulgarians: history, memory, contemporaneity", which points to the fact that this problematique is to Konstantinova not just an object of interest, but also food for deep reflection. It isn't a coincidence that so far she has ten publications on that theme.

In that context the thesis "The Bulgarians in Salonica from the 1860s to the Balkan wars" comes as a logical result. The motives for choosing the topic are more than convincing. It is a fact that in contemporary Bulgarian historiography there is a lack not only of a comprehensive research on the Bulgarians in Salonica, but also of any study of Bulgarians in Salonica. And that's despite the fact that the subject is heavily charged emotionally and is being articulated frequently. It is also a fact that though Bulgarians have been an important factor in the development of that economic and cultural center of the Ottoman Empire, they don't appear in the numerous publications by foreign authors that have focused their attention on the city. Konstantinova's fundamental motive, of course, has been that the Salonica Bulgarians form an integral part of Bulgarian history and memory, which would be incomplete without their story, professionally told.

It might be argued whether such an "absence" or "invisibility" is due to contemporary PC or to the difficulty of the subject, resulting from lack of a fundamental corpus. However, both problems prod the author rather than dishearten her. She has put in enormous effort in order to track, process and present all relevant documental and non-documental sources (such as informative fiction). She has drawn from forty funds of the Central State Historic Archive, and also from the State Archives in Blagoevgrad and Plovdiv, the Scientific Archive of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, the Bulgarian Historical Archive of the SS Cyril and Methodius National Library, the Clerical History and Archive of the Bulgarian Patriarchate, etc. Dozens of periodic publications, memoirs, diaries and travelogues have definitely filled in and nuanced the picture, and whatever had not been covered by them has been searched for in foreign archives: in the Republic of North Macedonia, the Greek Republic and Great Britain, plus in film and fiction.

Like all serious professional research, the thesis of Yura Konstantinova is well founded in relevant Bulgarian and foreign historiography: more than 200 publications have been used.

The chronological scope of the thesis spans half a century, which is a long time for a historical research of this kind, and makes it difficult – yet that span is logical and fully justified in this case.

The study is classically structured and proportioned, having an Introduction, three Chapters and a Conclusion.

In the Introduction, the motives and goals of the study are laid out. It is contended that the Bulgarian colony in Salonica, albeit small in a Salonican context, is an important urban group in an all-Bulgarian context. The aim of the study is to present and analyze the relevant factology for the late Ottoman period.

Chapter 1 covers the formation and strengthening of the Bulgarian community in Salonica and the public moves of the Bulgarian Congregation. The Bulgarian presence and the causes for its growth are analyzed, together with the input of the merchant stratum and the intelligentsia in the enhancement of national consciousness among citizens of Bulgarian origin. The conclusions drawn are objective and lack chauvinistic bias. It becomes clear that the Bulgarians don't compare favorably with the rest of the urban communities, both in terms of numbers (just 7% of the citizenry) and economic power.

The emergence, development, problems and achievements of an organized Congregation of the Bulgarian community are presented and clarified in detail, along with matters to do with the acquisition and maintenance of its public buildings, mainly churches and schools. The role of the Bulgarian state as chief sponsor is affirmed, without belittlement of local or foreign donations.

Chapter 2 deals with Salonica as a center of education for Macedonians, but also for all Bulgarians. For the first time considers all levels of education received in the Bulgarian schools of Salonica are considered, together with school organization and financing, and the teachers role as main school motors. Education of Bulgarian students in schools of other nationalities is covered. The achievements and problems of Bulgarian education in the city are shown with objectivity and precision. Problems were due to, e.g., the low social status of the students, the lack of funding, and the political differences among the staff. Thanks to this study we have a fuller picture of the Boys' high school, while the picture of the Girls' high school is produced starting from zero knowledge. It is concluded that Bulgarian education in Salonica was fully competitive with the numerous other national and religious educational establishments in terms of number of students (in proportion to national group membership) and qualification of teachers, types of schools and quality of education.

The last chapter is of special interest, as it deals with the Bulgarian participation in the public, political and cultural life of Salonica. Chronologically and comparatively are enumerated the reasons why the Bulgarian community remained encapsulated and conservative until the Young Turks' revolution, when it erupted into activity, but in parallel and not in cooperation with the other ethnic and religious communities. The teachers in the Bulgarian high schools are shown as bearers and promoters of modern ideologies such as nationalism, anarchism and socialism, which they transferred to their students. Central to the narrative are the political activities, in two directions: one is the fight for national emancipation, the other socialism.

The story of Atanas Shopov, the representative of the Bulgarian state in Salonica, and his multifarious activities in defense of the Bulgarian community and interests, rightly finds a place in the thesis. The circumstances that put an end to the Bulgarian presence in the city after the Inter-allies war of 1913 are also described. However, that is not the end of Yura Konstantinova's narrative about the Salonica Bulgarians. It is continued into our time with a rendering of memories and attitudes of their heirs and Bulgarian society as a whole re Salonica, a place saturated with symbolism, tied to all Bulgarian dreams and disappointments. The picture would probably have been fuller if the positions of the Great Powers and the Balkan stakeholder states had also been shown.

The Conclusion synthesizes the main points and findings of the thesis.

The thesis of Yura Konstantinova is an original and innovative piece of work, mostly based on hitherto unknown documents. It supplements successfully the knowledge re the historic past of the Bulgarians in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> c. and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. in a full-blooded, convincing and objective manner. The study demonstrates high professionalism, in-depth insight and analytical ability. The attached Abstract and the Achievements enumerated reflect the contents of the work fully and objectively.

All this gives me ground for a positive vote in the procedure to award Yura Konstantinova the degree “Doctor of Science”, Professional Line 2.2.

Sofia, 07.01.2020

Prof. Dr. Vesselin Yanchev