

REVIEW

of 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

The thesis of Assoc. Prof. Yura Toteva Konstantinova, PhD is the first voluminous work on the Bulgarian community in Ottoman Salonica from its formation in the mid-nineteenth century to its ending during the Balkan wars. That topic, despite its importance for understanding the process of national integration and the place of the “second capital of the Empire” in Bulgarian collective memory, is absent not only from the numerous foreign publications on Salonica, but has remained persistently in the periphery of professional Bulgarian historiography.

In the thesis complex problems intermesh, from the domains of demographics and statistics, economic, cultural and political history and even literary criticism; so the approach may be called interdisciplinary. Thanks to her huge preparatory research, Assoc. Prof. Konstantinova has drawn a rich and full picture of the life of the Salonica Bulgarians, of the events, processes and tendencies during half a century of development of that community. The bibliographical basis impresses with its volume and variety of sources, including documents from nearly twenty archives (Bulgarian, Greek, North Macedonian, British); periodicals and pamphlets; memoirs, reference books and fiction; travelogues and movies; a great number of varied professional publications.

The architectonics of the text is consistently systematic, which allows the author to highlight the main accents in the formation and strengthening of the Bulgarian community in the most important economic, cultural and administrative center of European Turkey; the development of Salonica into an educational center for Bulgarians in the European vilayets; and the sentiments of Bulgarians to that city in the form of “public, political and cultural reflections”. The three-chapter structure follows logically the problematique of the whole; the chapters and their subdivisions follow an internal logic, complementing one another and contributing to the factual and conceptual plenitude of the study.

The Introduction to the theme enumerates the goals and tasks of the study, gives ground to its chronological limits and structure, and evaluates critically its sources and historiographic basis. The professional relevance of the theme is established doubly: via the significance of Salonica as port and center of trade and of the vilayet, with important economic, military and administrative functions in the Ottoman Empire; and via the presence of a Bulgarian national urban community, relatively small, but important in the context of Bulgarian reality. Emphasizing the role of Salonica in the spiritual, economic and political development of the Macedonian Bulgarians, which makes it an integral part of Bulgarian history and national memory, Assoc. Prof. Konstantinova very aptly characterizes the effect of Salonica on

Bulgarian society in the beginning of the 20th c. as “hypnotic”. The clearly marked ascendance of the Bulgarians in the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th c., as well as the stable presence of Salonica in the Bulgarian programs for integration of the state, clarify the author’s strong motivation to fill in the historiographic void that prompts extremist positions, such as total ignorance of the Bulgarian urban community or the contention that Salonica is a city of Bulgarians. Among the tasks of the thesis is to shed light on the significance of small national communities in the multiethnic imperial cities and the participation of Salonica Bulgarians in the modernization of mentalities and proliferation of new political ideas.

Chapter one of the thesis deals with the formation and strengthening of the Bulgarian community in Salonica. The introductory part describes the dynamics and ethnic composition of the urban population as a necessary background, which would be better fleshed out if complemented by a socio-economic picture (even a synthesized one) of the city as a port and center of trade and administration. Based on the existing sources: travelogues, codices (*kondiki*), documents of the trades organizations, and Ottoman censuses, Assoc. Prof. Konstantinova states convincingly that in the first half of the 19th c. Bulgarians were a visible segment, mostly in the middle and lower strata of Salonica. The analysis of the documents brings her to the conclusion that despite some manifestations of national consciousness based on the Bulgarian language, during that period the Salonica Bulgarians were not part of the national religious and educational movement (excepting the short-lived existence of the printing house of Teodosiy Sinaitski). This is the author’s argument for the lower chronological limit of the study. Thus, Assoc. Prof. Konstantinova sees the 1860s in Salonica as the period when Bulgarian national consciousness became manifest: Bulgarians separated from the congregation of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, although Grekization tendencies were still strong among them. That line of thought is pursued in several directions, showing the uneven and contradictory development of this process, influenced by economic and psychological considerations, together with dangers concomitant with the political conjecture, mostly to do with the proclamation of the Bulgarian Exarchate as schismatic, plus the Russo-Turkish war. Research on the effort for establishment and recognition of a Bulgarian Congregation, for opening of the first Bulgarian schools and church in the 1860s and 1870s, naturally leads to the question of the number of Bulgarians at the time, their social profile and the formation of business and public elite. The factology of these problems is researched exhaustively through the use of various sources, subjected to precise critical analysis. The main tendencies and their dynamics in the last quarter of the 19th and the first decade of the 20th c. are delineated clearly. Considering the causes of the constant increase of the influx of Bulgarians in Salonica, Assoc. Prof. Konstantinova estimates their numbers, as well as their religious affiliation (Exarchist, Patriarchist, Uniate, Protestant), their professional and socio-economic status (predominantly middle and below-middle stratum, engaged in all economic activities), their migrant provenance and composition.

Interesting information regarding the richest, most influential families, and the formation of familial and commercial networks, which, together with the intelligentsia, fortified Bulgarian national consciousness; also, regarding the cultural and mental specificities of migrant sources from different parts of the Macedonian vilayets, produces a rich picture of Bulgarian ethnic presence in Salonica.

In this chapter, the strengthening of the Bulgarian Congregation after its restoration in the beginning of the 1880s is especially emphasized. After a period critical for its existence (during the Great Eastern Crisis), the Bulgarian community progressed markedly, despite problems with finance and governance, infighting and personal animosities, complicated relations with the Ottoman authorities and the presence of foreign political interests. These problems are adequately defined and researched within the limits set by the Ottoman administrative framework, Greek counter-activity, and economic and ideological clashes within the Bulgarian community, which came to a head after the formation of the Bulgarian revolutionary organization. The study not only sketches the complicated situation within which the Congregation had to function, but evaluates its achievements objectively. They are due to the effort of the Salonica Bulgarians, helped by the Exarchate and the Bulgarian state. Nonetheless, the Congregation did not manage to gain the authority of an officially recognized institution, and remained rather vulnerable to the Ottoman officials.

The last part of Chapter one deals with the real estate belonging to the congregation, a topic which has never been in the focus of Bulgarian historiography. Its detailed research not only fills a factological void, but also further develops the theme of achievements and setbacks of the Bulgarian community through this subject matter. Different thematic lines intermesh here, to do with the statute of the Congregation and the Ottoman normative boundaries; with the endeavor of Salonica Bulgarians to establish for themselves a national spiritual space and the vehement opposition of Greek nationalist circles; with the resolution of the problem with school and church buildings as a pragmatic necessity, yet also as a matter of enhanced national self-assertion. In that context is addressed the problem of the character and extent of charity, reflecting social, mental and psychological peculiarities of the Bulgarian national community. By following the fate of the Congregation's real estate through the next decades, the author addresses also the devastating effect of inter-ethnic conflicts on cultural heritage and national memory.

Chapter two deals with the establishment, rise and role of the Bulgarian educational institutions in Salonica, which turn it into an educational center of the Bulgarian nationality in European Turkey. Education is an important factor for, and sign of, national identity in the Ottoman context during the researched period. It is largely the prestige of Bulgarian schools in Salonica that gives Bulgarians ground for seeing that city as part of their national development. That theme is researched in all its aspects: primary schools, the Boys' and Girls' gymnasiums, and attitudes towards other educational institutions in that

multiethnic city. The author stresses the fact that the Bulgarian schooling was already restored in the first year after the Russo-Turkish war, albeit a large exit of churchgoers from the Exarchate.

The first part depicts the increase of pupils resulting from the increased influx of immigrants, prompting a proliferation of the Bulgarian primary schools, which gradually covered all Bulgarian neighborhoods.

Special attention is given to the organizing of the schools within the framework of the Ottoman regulations. Numerous problems and conflicts arose, due to the unclear (mixed) system of governance and financing; they were resolved only towards the end of the period in question, when the elected Board adopted a general rule, and payment of teachers was ordered.

Charity, which arose in the beginning of the 1880s and found various forms throughout the period, is also carefully researched. The author makes several points here, to do with: the policy of the Exarchate to encourage the participation of the Salonica Congregation in education; the low social standing of the majority of the students; the attempt of foreign educational institutions to use the poverty of Bulgarian families in order to attract children to their own schools; the disappointment at the inadequate participation of rich Bulgarian merchants in charities and collections.

Assoc. Prof. Konstantinova evaluates the development of Bulgarian primary education in Salonica as exceptionally positive: one result was that literacy in Bulgarian among Salonica Bulgarians became higher than the average for the Principality of Bulgaria.

The following two subdivisions deal with Bulgarian high school education. The Boy's gymnasium in Salonica, intended to become a showcase for Bulgarian education in the Empire, is viewed as outstanding even in comparison to high schools in the Principality. The author praises the first steps and gradual development of that school, but does not lose her objectivity and also makes points of criticism: governance was chaotic, educational programs were lacking, so were textbooks and school necessities; personal conflicts among the staff abounded. Further serious problems were caused by Ottoman censorship, Greek effort to close down the school, official repressions against teachers, students and Congregation members following the so-called "affairs", i.e. the uncovering of Bulgarian revolutionary organizations. On the topic of the school boarding house and its pedagogical functions, the author presents a rich and lively picture of the material circumstances and the untiring effort to improve them, considering also the ambiance and discipline, while conservative and modern methods and ideas clashed. In its 30 years or ups and downs, the Bulgarian Boys' gymnasium of Salonica secured a place among the most prestigious schools in European Turkey, with its highly qualified staff, state of the art labs, library and reading room – a view corroborated by the European representatives in the city. Unlike the great interest in the Boys' high school shown in memoir and historic literature, the Girl's high school has garnered only penumbral attention. The thesis fills in adequately that research void. The author's narrative begins with the first ideas for girls' education and the establishment of the school in the beginning of the 1880s, and

follows it up to the period when it became the only full Exarchate gymnasium in the Empire. Its development is narrated with an accent on the specific problems of girls' education re the content of the curriculum, the ethical code required of the staff, the lower salaries of women teachers, and the attempts at pedagogical modernization. The reasons for the constant increase of the number of students, the professional realization of graduates predominantly as teachers, and other differences from boys' education are noted.

An important part of the subject matter is the role of foreign educational institutions in the life of the Bulgarian Salonicans. The author has analyzed the various causes and ambiguous effects of Bulgarian children attending Greek, Serbian, Turkish, or West European religious or lay schools. There were attempts at imposition of foreign cultural influences or even different national identities, and, on the other hand, pragmatic attitudes, aimed at receiving an education tailored to a better self-realization in Ottoman administration and business. At play here were also the specific ambiance of a multinational merchant city, various theories of education, competing pedagogical practices and the modern prioritization of practical know-how. The conclusion that Bulgarian schools were on a par and fully competitive with other schools in the city is well founded, and is an important contribution of the study.

Chapter three is entitled "The public, political and cultural life of Bulgarians in the city: reflections". It deals with the influence of the social, business and cultural milieu in the city on its Bulgarian inhabitants, and conversely, the impact of Bulgarian presence on Salonica. The characteristics of the Ottoman social structure and political system up to 1908 would re-produce a fragmented public and cultural space and a marked encapsulation of the national groups. Conditions for a more vigorous and real public and political life in the Empire appeared only after the Young Turks' coup, and Salonica was central to the process. Following the internal periodization of her thesis, the author looks at Bulgarian activities in the context of urban life from two main aspects: the public press, and various organizations and their acts. She starts with the first teachers' initiatives for a Bulgarian printing press and newspaper in the beginning of the 1880s, and follows every attempt in this quarter in the subsequent decades, clarifying the reasons for failure. Emphasized are the publication of calendars and the first Bulgarian journal, which managed to sidestep the political obstacles to national press during that period.

After the Young Turks' coup and the immigration of Bulgarian intelligentsia in Salonica, there was an upsurge of public energy, producing numerous newspapers, journals and organizations with cultural, professional and political agendas. The author analyzes these events, showing the organizational development, social composition and the ideological and political goals of Bulgarian public life in the context of the public life of the city during the period. She comes to important conclusions, viz.: the

Bulgarian periodic publications were unstable and short-lived, due to the fragmentation of the Bulgarian community, and lack of communication and basis for cooperation among the various nationalities. That is why local mental modernization would result mostly through the direct influence of intelligentsia immigrating from Bulgaria.

Subdivision two of chapter three deals with the place of Salonica in the ideological and organizational development of the Bulgarian national movement. Special attention is paid to the permeation of new political ideas, mostly via high school teachers, who participated personally in revolutionary structures (such as IMARO and the *Bulgarian secret revolutionary brotherhood*. The “Gemidjii” in the spring of 1903, and their regrettable consequences follow extremist ideas on the left in detail, doubtless because of the terrorist attacks for the Bulgarians in Salonica and for IMARO. Socialist ideology is also researched, bearing in mind that “leftists” abounded among IMARO members in Salonica after the Young Turks’ coup, and that the *Socialist workers’ federation* emerged, to become the most influential organization of the Left in the late Ottoman period. The part dealing with the founding of the two Bulgarian parties, viz. the *Union of Bulgarian constitutional clubs* and the *Bulgarian peoples’ federative party* completes the picture of the participation of Bulgarians in the life of Salonica as center of political events and processes in the Empire after the Young Turks’ coup.

Although the emphasis on left ideologies is understandable, as their emergence in European Turkey is attributed chiefly to Bulgarians, I find that the Bulgarian liberal programs have obviously remained under-researched, which I believe is a shortcoming of the study. In that respect the contention of the author that Bulgarian printed publications would address internal problems of the community exclusively isn’t quite correct. Actually, the press as well as party programs peddle quite a few ideas for reformation of the Ottoman political system, which were analyzed and debated in newspapers and at party fora. That could probably explain the interest shown by a wider readership in the city to the Turkish and French versions of *Fatherland*, the newspaper of the *Union of Bulgarian constitutional clubs*.

An interesting moment in the thesis is the text dedicated to Alexander Shopov, the diplomatic representative of Bulgaria in Salonica, and his active and multifarious activities in defense of Bulgarian interests. The marked effort of the Bulgarian diplomatist to counter Serbian and Greek antibulgarism naturally leads us into the theme of the escalation of national animosity among ethnic groups in the city and the Macedonian vilayets as a whole. Various manifestations of enmity and confrontation are mentioned, from attempts on the lives of community leaders to ridicule and defilement of national symbols. Special attention is devoted to the reasons for emergence and to the acts of the Greek *Salonica organization*, to the unending tension in Bulgarian-Greek relations after 1908, and to the atmosphere of danger in the city after it was entered by Greek and then by Bulgarian troops during WWI. The years-long national confrontation and struggle for supremacy culminated in the Inter-allies war of 1913 and brought

about the destruction of the Bulgarian community of Salonica, which marks the chronological end of the study.

However, there is a *sui generis* afterword: the part dedicated to the Bulgarian perception of Salonica – impressions, memories, fiction, documentary and feature films. It fleshes out the study and makes it exceptionally complete, injecting color and originality, unusual in academic historiography.

The conclusion sums up the researched processes, events and tendencies in the half-century long development of the Bulgarian community in Salonica. The inclusion of Salonica into Bulgaria had become a public ideal, despite the unfavorable geopolitical, military and demographic realities.

The thesis of Assoc. Prof. Yura Konstantinova, PhD, is an outstanding professional achievement, which as a whole is a contribution to the study of history. The multitude of facts, personalia and various data successfully fills in a void in Bulgarian historiography in a thematic field of extreme importance to Bulgarian national memory. Based on a factology that impresses with its abundance and variety, we have here an analysis of the dynamics, processes and tendencies in the development of the Bulgarian community from its formation in the middle of the 19th c. to the Balkan wars that put an end to the Bulgarian presence in Salonica. Undoubtedly, this study with its high professional quality and objectivity will enrich Bulgarian historiography significantly.

That evaluation of the thesis, along with the other publications and citations, which fully cover the accepted professional criteria, gives me ground for recommending with full conviction that Assoc. Prof. Yura Konstantinova, PhD, be awarded the degree “Doctor of Science”.

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