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**Education as a Means for Nationalistic Propaganda
The Bulgarian Policy of Assimilation in Eastern Macedonia
and Thrace 1941-1944**

During W.W. II and after the accession of Bulgaria to the Axis, the German authorities allowed for the entrance and establishment of their allied Bulgarian forces into the region of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace. Their presence in the region, which commenced on the 20th of April 1941 and was terminated on the 25th of October 1944, was viewed by the Germans as being of a temporary nature for the sake of policing the area. From the point of view of Bulgaria, however, this granting was viewed as an excellent opportunity for potential permanent annexation of those regions to the Bulgarian State in the event that the outcome of the war would fall in favour of their allied Germans. For this reason, Bulgaria followed, in all sectors of public life a clear policy of assimilation.

One of the sectors within which the Bulgarian State acted in order to exert such a policy in occupied regions was that of education.

1. The Establishment of New Administrative-Educational Boards. The Incorporation of the Region's Education into the Bulgarian Educational System

As the Bulgarian Ministry of National Education itself proclaimed, the control of education is the best and most efficient way not only for the enlightenment of the intellect, but also for its channeling. Furthermore, the Bulgarianization of the masses of the “newly liberated” regions would be “facilitated and more complete if education were to veer towards the Bulgarian language and culture”. Thus, the Bulgarian authorities pursued the replacement of Greek schools with Bulgarian —elementary and high schools (in the cities)— in order to bring their “Bulgarian

brethren who were enslaved for many years” into contact with the Bulgarian language and civilization. The operation of Greek schools was in any case suspended upon the declaration of the Greek-Italian War. Any Greek educators who remained in the region were expelled from the larger cities according to a decision of the Bulgarian Ministry of National Education. The supervisory means used by the Greek education system disappeared and was eradicated.

Furthermore, upon the decision of Ministry of National Education, the Bulgarians proceeded to the establishment on May 1941 of the “Unified Educational Region of the Aegean”, which was incorporated within the Fourth Educational Region of Bulgaria (Stara Zagora, Plovdiv/Philippoupolis, Belomorie/Aegaeis). The administrative headquarters were located in Xanthi, which also became the headquarters for the regional school supervisor and included the provinces of Drama, Komotini, Serres, Alexandroupolis and Xanthi. The respective capitols of these provinces were appointed as the headquarters for the provincial school superintendence.

It was required that the schools of the occupied regions were to follow exactly the model of the schools of Bulgaria proper, which was divided into three levels: 1) Basic (elementary) School (1st to 4th grade); 2) Junior High (5th to 8th grade); 3) High School (9th to 11th grade)¹.

Within the context of this Bulgarian policy for the “improvement” of educational life in the “newly liberated territories” the Bulgarian Ministry of National Education proceeded towards the end of the school year 1940-1941 to the following measures: 1) It invited all the provincial school superintendents to Xanthi in order to charge them with the drawing up of catalogues describing the number of children in their

1. *Uchilishten Pregled* (School Review, Official Organ of the Bulgarian Ministry of National Education) XL (1941), n. 6, p. 826; *Uchilishten Pregled* XL (1941), n. 10, p. 1374; Also, D. Jonchev, *Balgariia i Belomoriето (oktomvri 1940-1949 septemvri 1944 g.); voennoistoricheski aspekti*, Sofia 1993, p. 71. King Boris appointed the first regional educational superintendent for the “region of the Aegean” himself. The Provincial Superintendence of Serres also covered the area of Sidirokastron, the Superintendence of Xanthi also covered Kavala, Eleutheroupolis, Chrysoupolis and Thasos and the Superintendence of Drama also covered the area of Zichnis (G. Daskalov, “Izgrazhdane na balgarskata administraciia i politicheskata sistema v novoosvobozhdenite zemi na Zapadna Trakiiia i Iztochna Makedoniia (1941-1944 g.)”, *Voennoistoricheski Sbornik* 1992, n. 6, pp. 111-112); *Uchilishten Pregled* XL (1941), n. 6, p. 777, art. Encyclical of the Ministry 5623, 3/6/1941.

respective regions which were to be under mandatory education; also to report on the reactions of the population to the re-opening of the schools under the new regime as well as the founding of new schools in regions where there were none. The ultimate goal of this Bulgarian policy was of course that as many children as possible from the occupied regions attain Bulgarian national educational formation. 2) It published an informative encyclical to Bulgarian educators who were to be appointed to those regions and described the historical and social conditions prevalent in these regions up until the time of their “liberation” (1941). The encyclical was clearly propagandistic in nature and dealt with the national rights of the Bulgarian people, the fugitive issue and the policy of Greece and Serbia vis-à-vis the “newly liberated regions”².

2. *The Propagandistic Nature of Bulgarian Education*

By May of 1941 the Bulgarian Ministry of National Education had proceeded nominally to the founding of Bulgarian schools in the “region of the Aegean” (Eastern Macedonia and Thrace), within which children of Bulgarian origin as well as the children of “settlers” in the region were to be enrolled. During the school year 1941-1942 in the region of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace the following schools were in operation: 128 elementary schools with 9,647 students and 252 teachers, who had been transferred from “old” Bulgaria; and 24 junior high schools with 1,374 students and 48 teachers. These children were mainly of Bulgarian origin and some were Gypsies and a few Armenians.

The next school year, 1942-1943, an attempt was made to increase the number of elementary schools to 173 with 390 teachers and the number of junior high schools to 36 with 16 more teachers. These extra teachers were transferred there once again from Bulgaria proper while, in order to increase the number of students, all were accepted without an entrance exam and measures were taken for the granting of scholarships and financial aid for the destitute (art. 8382, 8/6/1942). Simultaneously Bulgarian destitute students and orphans were transferred from the Bulgarian hinterland³. During the school year of 1942-1943 six coed Bul-

2. *Uchilishten Pregled XL* (1941), n. 6, pp. 735-736 and 824-833.

3. *Uchilishten Pregled XLI* (1942), n. 5-6, p. 726; D. Jonchev, *Balgariia i Belomoriето*, pp. 74-76. See also D. Magriotis, *Θυσίαι της Ελλάδος και εγκλήματα κατοχής κατά τα*

garian high schools in Serres, Drama, Kavala, Xanthi, Komotini and Alexandroupolis and six nursery schools were also put into operation. According to a decision of the Bulgarian Ministry, any Greek children who wanted could also enroll in these schools. These Greek children were in fact christened as “Bulgarian children” of Greek Macedonia, whose education was interrupted due to the Greek-German war. In contrast to this, Armenian and Muslim Turkish children could continue to go to their own schools and they were also allowed the operation of their own elementary schools, day-care centers and junior high schools. The Pomakoi children obligatorily attended Bulgarian schools which were opened in their villages⁴.

The goal of the Bulgarian authorities was that this increase in the number of schools be matched by a corresponding increase in the number of students; according to the expectations of the Ministry, this increase would verify the need of the “Bulgarian” people to know the Bulgarian language and culture. Furthermore, this could be employed later as an argument that the majority of the population of that area was Bulgarian. Up until the very last school year (1943-1944) this attempt to increase the number of students —especially in the elementary schools— continued and care was taken to increase this network to the utmost so that educational propaganda could also spread⁵.

έτη 1941-1944, Athens 1945, p. 229. In order that the data be read correctly it is necessary to refer to the numbers relating to Greek education immediately before the war and specifically in 1938. During that time there were 1,074 schools with 2,060 teachers and 137,614 students operating in the region (Ph. Dragoumis, *Τα Ελληνικά Δίκαια στη Διάσχεση της Ειρήνης*, Thessaloniki 1949, 1951).

4. *Uchilishten Pregled XLI* (1942), n. 10, chapter III, appendix 1 and 2, p. 1374; D. Jonchev, *op.cit.*, pp. 75-76 and 99. During the school year of 1941-1942 13 Turkish elementary schools, 1 Turkish junior high school, 2 Armenian nursery schools and 4 Armenian elementary schools, all private, were in operation. In 1942-1943 20 Turkish elementary schools, 2 Armenian nursery schools and 4 Armenian elementary schools and 1 Italian or French elementary private school (evidently that of the Lazarist Fathers in Kavala). On the Bulgarian propaganda towards the Pomakoi see G. Daskalov, “Demografските procesi v Iztochna Makedoniia i Zapadna Trakiia (1 januari 1942 - 25 oktombri 1944)”, *Voennostoricheski Sbornik* 1992, n. 1, pp. 33, 36 and 41. Also see P. Photeas, “Οι Πομάκοι της Δυτικής Θράκης, μικρή συμβολή σε ένα μεγάλο θέμα”, *Zygos* 25 (1977) 66-67, where it is noted that, besides an hour’s time instruction on the Koran in Arabic, the Pomakoi children aged 7-15 were taught all their lessons obligatorily in Bulgarian in schools which were founded and functioning mainly in the region of the Rhodope Mountain Range.

5. *Uchilishten Pregled XLII* (1943), n. 1, pp. 146-147.

At the elementary schools the program that was proscribed by the Ministry of National Education for the Fourth Educational Region of Bulgaria was basically followed. From the program it can be assumed that the children were first taught reading and writing from the Alphabet Book and an elementary level reader. Subsequently, they continued with mathematics, religion, national studies, natural history, practical geometry and choir. It is not clear how and within which classes history and geography were taught. Perhaps they were taught within the context of the lessons on national studies and language. In any case, we know that much emphasis was given to these lessons and to their propagandistic role. It is characteristic of this whole milieu that, according to a decision of the Ministry (art. 213, 15/08/1941), the hours for the lessons on the Bulgarian language and literature, history, music and gymnastics were to be increased in all grades and all levels of education for the “newly liberated” areas. It is interesting to note that emphasis was given to the lesson of music and much attention was given for the organizing of choirs in all schools. Within these students were to be taught Bulgarian songs —necessarily the Bulgarian national anthem and the anthem of King Boris III, as well as processional marches and hymns for their patron saint. The philosophy behind all this was, of course, quite simple: songs are learned easily and quickly and “facilitate” the learning of the language, in this case the Bulgarian language⁶. Also, children were required to learn a prayer “for Bulgaria”, the “mother-nation”, which was to be recited daily before the commencement of class. In this way, their religious belief was employed in such a way so as to strengthen simultaneously their faith in the Bulgarian nation⁷.

Besides the actual teaching, other measures of the Bulgarian Ministry served for these plans of the Bulgarian assimilative, such as: the planned sending of students from the region of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace to Bulgarian childrens’ camps “in order to come into contact with compatriots of the same age from within the old borders of the Kingdom of Bulgaria”. Also, according to the same philosophy was the urging of the Ministry directed towards teachers and superintendents to create contacts amongst the students from their specific area with students from

6. *Uchilishten Pregled* XLI (1942), n. 7, pp. 1018-1019. See also n. 10, p. 1374.

7. *Uchilishten Pregled* XLI (1942) n. 9, pp. 1193-1194.

“old” Bulgaria through exchange programs, excursions, correspondence and any other means⁸. On this same wavelength was also the decision not to consider the academic year from October 1940 to April 1941 as lost for candidates for the Universities within the “newly liberated” areas as well as the general leniency shown to all students from those regions and the curtailing of the bulk of the material for the lessons on the Bulgarian language, history and geography for junior high school levels. It was decided by the Ministry that junior high school students of these regions be exempt from being examined on lessons where they had the grade —“very good” or “excellent” (except for the lesson on the Bulgarian language which was seen as a gauge for the ascertainment of the general efficacy of the learning process/ (art. 6755, 1/05/1942)⁹.

Economic-material privileges were also employed to serve this assimilative policy. In some of the elementary schools in 1942 student canteens were put to operation. The plan was for an establishment of such soup kitchens in almost all schools for Bulgarians, Muslims and the children of immigrants from “old” Bulgaria. The lure of free food or food with coupons for their children was especially attractive for the destitute inhabitants of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace and could work positively towards luring them into declaring themselves “Bulgarian”¹⁰.

8. *Uchilishten Pregled* XL (1941), n. 6, p. 738 and XLI (1942), n. 6, p. 987, n. 7, pp. 1036-1037 and n. 10, pp. 1378-1379.

9. *Uchilishten Pregled* XL (1941), n. 9-10, pp. 1370-1371; *Uchilishten Pregled* XLI (1942), n. 10, 1369; *Uchilishten Pregled* XLII (1943), n. 1, p. 147; *Uchilishten Pregled* XLI (1942), n. 5-6, pp. 742-743. Verbal witness of surviving inhabitants of the area can also be cited (from interviews compiled by the author).

10. *Uchilishten Pregled* XL (1941), n. 6, pp. 874-885. It is interesting and very characteristic that the first Bulgarian census of children who were under obligatory education registered the children of this region in the following categories: Bulgarians, children of mixed marriages, children of hellenized Bulgarians, Greeks, Armenians, Jews, children with a Turkish consciousness and others. Of these children 11,429 were considered to be of Bulgarian descent and of mixed marriages. The children of the Pomakoi were considered by definition Bulgarian; they were not distinguished from those of Christian Bulgarians and were included in the aforementioned sum (Jonchev, *Balgaria i Belomorieto*, p. 74). The Bulgarian Peripheral Superintendence of Education and corresponding local sectors were those who brought this first census to fruition (July 1941) in Eastern Macedonia and in Thrace. These figures cannot be viewed as a result of mere chance once one takes into consideration the immense significance that the government gave to the assimilative potentialities and the role of education in the region.

3. *The Role of the Bulgarian Educators*

The Ministry gave much weight to the maintenance of the strong national consciousness of the teachers in the region, so that they would be efficacious in the task of “Bulgarizing” the population. During the summer of 1941 the Ministry organized and held “educational” seminars for educators of Belomorie, “Macedonia” and “Dovroutsa”, where emphasis was given to the lessons on Bulgarian literature, on history and on geography and on the obligation of educators to “heal the wounds that slavery had brought to the intellect and consciousness of Bulgarian brothers on those holy lands” and that they be illumined as to the Bulgarian civilization (15 June-30 August 1941)¹¹. Within the context of a three-day conference-seminar organized once again by the Ministry in Kavala —already by the 3rd, 4th and 5th of May 1941¹²— prospective teachers were briefed on the goals of Bulgarian education in the region. At this seminar special teaching methods were articulated and taught regarding the learning of the Bulgarian language in the schools, and an attempt was made for the teachers to realize that they were the “intellectual leaders” of a people “from time immemorial Bulgarian”, which was in danger of losing its “Bulgarian consciousness and its national identity due to foreign occupations and influence”.

The Ministry considered the teachers as front-line fighters in the struggle for the imposing of Bulgarian national-cultural models —not only through education per se— but also through the exercise of their holy duty to teach the manners, customs, songs and dances of Bulgaria, to organize pilgrimages and excursions to Bulgarian monuments, to cultivate and foster friendly relations with the native inhabitants and to offer them advice and aid for whatever they need so as to please them and satisfy them on the one hand and, on the other hand, to become a point of reference for them (art. 8382,6/08/1942). This fact is verified by various and frequent encyclicals sent by the Minister of National Education to the schools (art. 8209, 8222, and 8248). In one of these and, more specifically, in his communication for the commencement of the school year of 1941-1942, the prime minister Bogdan Philov, who simultaneously was responsible for the vital Ministry of National

11. *Uchilishten Pregled* XL (1941), n. 6, pp. 874-885.

12. *Uchilishten Pregled* XLII (1942), n. 5-6, pp. 648-651.

Education, emphasized to the Bulgarian educators their obligation to reveal to the population of the “newly liberated” regions their unknown rich Bulgarian past and to protect the youth from “bad habits” and propaganda that the “enemies” of Bulgaria were exercising.

Finally, the educators were directed to contribute to the attempt of the Bulgarian Ministry to expand the basic education to adult illiterate “Bulgarians” of the “newly liberated” regions¹³. The Ministry called upon the teachers of the schools to help in the “Bulgarization” of all those “Bulgarians” who, due to “bitter” fate, found themselves “foreign” and “unilluminated” regarding their mother tongue. Teachers were called to give lectures and talks, but also to urge the adults to self-education through exercises in the oral and written word so as to fulfill their obligation to the intellectual unification of Bulgaria¹⁴. Teachers also helped in the founding of public reading rooms¹⁵.

In order to lure the teachers of those regions the Ministry secured privileges, mainly economical, for them¹⁶: increases in their salaries, special monetary grants, the distribution of free books and their free transportation from and to old Bulgaria¹⁷.

13. *Uchilishten Pregled* XL (1941), n. 5, pp. 591-602.

14. *Uchilishten Pregled* XLI (1942), n. 5-6, pp. 724-725 and n. 10, p. 1379; G. Daskalov - I. Koev, “Ustanoviavane I izgrazhdane na balgarskata voenna vlast v Belomoriето (april-juli 1941 g.)”, *Voenoistoricheski Sbornik* 6 (1990) 119. Also, Ελληνικό Λαογραφικό και Ιστορικό Αρχείο (ELIA), Αρχείο Βουλγαρικής Κατοχής και Προπαγάνδας (ABK), art. 188, testimony of Eythymios Ferchatidis from Drama and 2nd testimony, Nicholas Philippidis (Drama) 16/6/1942. Also ELIA, ABK, art. 175, testimony A. Pougarras, 25/5/1942 and ELIA, ABK, art. 227, testimony Emmanuel Chatzipetros (St. Athanasius, Drama), 29/8/1942. *Η Μαύρη Βίβλος των βουλγαρικών εγκλημάτων εις την Αν. Μακεδονίαν και Δυτ. Θράκην 1941-1944*, Athens 1945, pp. 55 and 70. Also, oral witness of living people from the occupation period.

15. *Uchilishten Pregled* XLI (1942), n. 10, p. 1375, paragraph 4. Joncev, *op.cit.*, pp. 74-76; G. Daskalov, *Dramskoto Vastanie 1941*, Sofia 1992, p. 82, note 114; G. Daskalov, *Izgrazhdane*, p. 119. See also the newspaper *Balgarski Jug*, 16 November 1941, on the reading room “Dimtso Debelianov” in Serres and the newspaper *Belomorska Balgariia*, art. 888, 1/6/1944 on the reading room “Prosveta” in Komotini.

16. *Uchilishten Pregled* XL (1941), n. 7, pp. 913-915; *Uchilishten Pregled* XLI (1942), n. 5-6, pp. 648-651; *Uchilishten Pregled* XLI (1942), n. 5-6, pp. 726-728; *Uchilishten Pregled* XLI (1942), n. 5-6, pp. 881-883 and n. 10, p. 1380; *Uchilishten Pregled* XLI (1942), n. 10, p. 1381.

17. *Uchilishten Pregled* XLII (1943), n. 1, p. 147; On the highest salaries granted to teachers and professors in the region and on the special privileges they enjoyed see also United States National Archives (USNARA), 874.9111/273, 23 July 1943, B. Berry

4. The "Results" of the Bulgarian Educational Planning

In any case, by the beginning of 1944 the Bulgarian educational propaganda in the region was terminated. By then all Bulgarian schools of the country interrupted their classes until the end of the school year subsequent to a decision of the Bulgarian Council of Ministers (10/1/1944) due to the commencement of allied bombing¹⁸. Despite the grandiose declarations of the Ministry, no new school seems to have been added to the Greek schools already in existence, and not-one new school building was constructed¹⁹.

It is, however, interesting to investigate who in fact were the recipients of this grandiose propagandistic educational venture in Eastern Macedonia and Thrace. This becomes especially significant when one takes into consideration the immense difference that results from the mere comparing of the arithmetical figures regarding Greek pre-war and Bulgarian occupational education (1,074 Greek vs. 173 Bulgarian schools, 137,614 pre-war students vs. 11,021 during the occupation). During the first months of the occupation an attempt was made to attract Greek children into the Bulgarian schools through the distribution of food, and this enrollment was even labeled as mandatory. Many parents, especially from the cities, hastened to enroll their children in schools for the school year of 1941-1942, without really considering that these were Bulgarian schools, in order that their children not lose that school year. Soon, however, it became clear not only that classes were taught in the Bulgarian language but also that an intense anti-Greek propaganda was being exercised on the students, that history was being distorted and a Bulgarian consciousness was being cultivated. Most students gradually started dropping out whether because they couldn't

(Istanbul) to the Secretary of State; 874.00/658, 27 October 1942, S. Honaker (Istanbul) to the Secretary of State. Data exists on the fact that teachers were also provided with a full agricultural dowry as were also the priests (see A. Chrysochoos, *H Katochē en Makedonía*. Book 4. *Oi Bouýλαγοι εν Ανατολική Makedonía kai Θράκη*. Volume A' (1941-1942), Thessaloniki 1952, pp. 233-236); *Uchilishten Pregled* XLII (1943), n. 4-5, p. 646.

18. *Uchilishten Pregled* XLII (1943), n. 4-5, p. 669; D. Jonchev, "Osigurivane na otbranata na Belomorskiia briag ot 2-ri korpus (dekemvri 1943-mai 1944 g.)", *Voennoi-storicheski Sbornik* 2 (1992) 55.

19. *Uchilishten Pregled* XLI (1942), n. 10, pp. 1374-1375; Ph. Dragourmis, *op.cit.*, p. 68.

follow or learn the Bulgarian language or because their parents withdrew them. Indeed, many Greek children abandoned the Bulgarian schools after the victory of the Russian army at Stalingrad and the German losses in Africa, as their morale was lifted and hope for the termination of the war was strengthened by the defeat of the Germans.

Besides this, the fact is that, as far as the authorities are concerned, the registering of Greek children in Bulgarian schools was soon abandoned while later their enrollment was even prohibited. From that time on the schools were earmarked only for the children of Bulgarians and of those who had a Bulgarian consciousness, the ultimate goal being the writing up of as many as possible Greeks as Bulgarian. In practice, though, they continued to accept Greek children in the earlier grades of the elementary schools as well for they knew that such children were more prone to learn the language. This was in contrast to the older children who did not progress and even often *reacted* against the Bulgarian nationalistic propaganda²⁰.

In the final analysis, it seems that the only “accomplishment” gained by this Bulgarian educational policy was the following: in big cities wherever there were other schools such as in Kavala, the Armenian elementary or the French school of the Lazarist Fathers, some Greek children continued their education whereas in smaller cities and in the villages the vast majority of Greek students simply did not attend school during the occupation.

20. *Mémoire sur les réparations dues par la Bulgarie à la Grèce*, Paris 1946, p. 10; Hans-Joachim Hoppe, “Bulgarian Nationalities Policy in Occupied Thrace and Aegean Macedonia”, *Nationalities Papers* 14 (1986) 91; *Μαύρη Βίβλος*, pp. 19, 55; Magriotis, *Θυσίαι*, p. 229. Also, ELIA, ABK, art. 188, testimony Nov. 2nd, Nicholas Philippides (Drama) 16/6/1942. See also, USNARA, 874.00/683, Feb. 3rd 1943, Burton Y. Berry (Sophia Embassy) to the Secretary of State. This document assumes that some Greek schools were functioning in Thrace, even though the basis for this assumption is merely the fact that “it couldn’t be that the Greek children in Kavala, for example, were obliged to attend Bulgarian schools”. However, in his own memoirs a few months later, he declared that all Greek schools had been closed (USNARA, 874.00/749, 24 May 1943, Burton Y. Berry to the Secretary of State). Bulgarian historians maintain that the enrollment of Greek children was prohibited “because of the inability to secure the necessary educational staff” (Daskalov, *Dramskoto vastanie*, p. 82, note 114). See also Jonchev, *Balgariia i Belomoriето*, pp. 99 and 101-102.