

VELKO TONEV

FROM THE PAST OF BULGARIAN-GREEK RELATIONS ON THE WESTERN BLACK SEA COAST

Bulgarian-Greek relations occupy an important place in the demographic, economic and cultural-political development of the Western Black Sea coast during the National Revival period. This is natural when one takes into consideration the long and lasting ethnic presence of Bulgarians and Greeks and the fact that they constitute one of the most active and constructive elements in the history of this area. For more than a millennium their destinies were closely and indissolubly connected with the past of the land along the Black Sea, with the struggles and interests of the countries of Europe and the European South-East. In the 18th and 19th centuries, when profound changes took place in the Balkans and the Ottoman Empire, the Black Sea basin gradually came out of the isolation in which it had been for several centuries, and the role and importance of the local population rose extremely. In what spheres did it manifest itself, what were the forms and degrees of participation, what was the character of relations and the stages in their evolution—there are questions which have doubtless scientific and cultural-historical aspects. On account of their long, contradictory and many-sided scope here we consider only Bulgarian-Greek church relations and the place of the Gagauzi in their development up to Bulgaria's liberation from Ottoman rule.

The first question which arises in such a formulation is who and what are the Gagauzi? The Gagauzi are Turkic-speaking Christians, inhabiting separate areas and places in North-Eastern Bulgaria and Adrianople Thrace. There exist numerous and highly contradictory hypotheses about their ethnogenesis. Some explain their origins with a Proto-Bulgarian beginning, others associate them with the Kumans and Uzi, a third group connects them with the Greeks and a fourth group believes that they are Bulgarians, linguistically assimilated during the centuries of Ottoman slavery, etc.¹. Notwithstanding the different

1. A. I. Manov, *Potekloto na gagauzite i tehnite običaj i nravi*, Varna 1938; V. Marinov, *Prinos kām izučavaneto na bita i kulturata na turcite i gagauzite v Severoiztočna Bālgarija*, Sofija 1956; Kr. Baev, Po vāprosā za etnogenezisā na gagauzite, *Izvestija na Varnenskoto arheologičesko družestvo IX* (1953) 89-103.

versions, a convincing generally acceptable theory about their origins is lacking for the time being. It is obvious that this question calls for further studies by historians, linguists, folklorists and many other scholars. There are, however, a few established points, namely that the Gagauzi have developed within the boundaries of the Bulgarian ethnic and language territory, that they are the carriers of the same material and spiritual culture as the Bulgarians and that they are of an identical anthropological type. This gives grounds to some researchers to claim that the Gagauzi are a group which does not stand outside the Bulgarian nationality and nation².

The Gagauzi population along the Western Black Sea coast was concentrated chiefly in the area between Varna and Mangalia. Until the beginning of the 19th c. it was fairly numerous. Migration in that period and particularly in 1828-1830 carried away many people, the majority of whom settled down in Bessarabia and Southern Russia³. In the middle and the third quarter of the 19th c. the Gagauzi in the Varna and Balčik areas amounted to 7,000-8,000 persons. They inhabited some twenty places—Varna, Kestrič (Vinica), Džaferli (Kičevo), Jenikoj (Kumanovo), Dežvizli (Orešak), Čauškjoj (General Kantardžievo), Balčik, Juzgubenlik (Mogilište), Kavarna, Gjavur Sujutčuk (Bălgarevo), Jalā jučorman (Goričane), Šabla, Mangalia, Keramet (Bežanovo), Kalajdži dere (Tvărdica), Jažadžilar (Poručik Čunčevo), Sarāmeše (Gorun), Mihaj bej (Božurec), Karakurt (Primorsko) and separate families in another few villages⁴. With the exception of Varna, Balčik and Kavarna, where besides the prevailing Gagauzi population more or less Bulgarian and partly Greek families were encountered, in other places the Gagauzi constituted a considerable mass which in villages like Kestrič and Gjavur Sujutčuk was almost homogeneous, and in the other places lived together with the local Bulgarian population.

Up to the mid-1840s relations among Bulgarians, Greeks and Gagauzi were most friendly and goodneighbourly. The participation in the Russo-Turkish wars in the late 18th and early 19th c. and the Greek Uprising in 1821, as well as the resistance against the kurdjali scourge marked some of the strongest manifestations in their joint struggle against feudalism. With

2. E. Boev, *Za potekloto na gagauzite, Čirakman-Karvuna-Kavarna*, Sofija 1982, pp. 113-117; P. Boev, N. Kondova, Sl. Čolakov, *Antropologično proučvane na srednevekovni nekropoli, Čirakman-Karvuna-Kavarna*, pp. 62-65.

3. I. I. Mešerjuk, *Pervoe massovoe pereselenie bolgar i gagauzov v Bessarabiju v načale XIX veka, Izvestija Moldovskogo filiala ANSSSR*, No 3-4/11-12 (1953) 65-95; *Ibid.*, *Pereselenie bolgar v Južnuju Bessarabiju 1828-1834g.* Kišinev 1965.

4. A. Manov, *op. cit.*, pp. 52-53.

the formation of a Greek state and the intensification of the nationalist tendencies in the 30s and 40s of the 19th c. there was a decline of a sort which was gradually transformed into a distancing and cooling of their relations. Here one naturally should bear in mind also the maturing and differentiation of the Bulgarian national liberation movement and the devastating emigration after the Russo-Turkish War of 1828-1829 which disturbed the link and continuity with development to that point. Be as it may, there was a decline, a direct continuation of which was the outbreak of the church and national contradictions.

Religious life on the Western Black Sea coast was for a long time under the authority of the Tárnovo Patriarchate. At the beginning of the 14th c., these places, while remaining politically and administratively part of the Bulgarian state, passed under the jurisdiction of the Oecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople. This fact speaks not only of the power of Byzantine influence, it also introduces us to the more recent history of Bulgarian-Greek church relations. Based on tradition and on a certain ethnical foundation, the Patriarchate of Constantinople established an absolute and almost unquestionable spiritual domination here. Through the bishop's centres in Varna, Mesembria (Nesebär), Anhalo (Pomorie) and Sozopol, and to a certain extent with the aid of the cultural and educational activities organized at them, it exercised a strong influence on the Christian population along the Black Sea. In this respect the church authorities were facilitated by the policy of the Ottoman state. The privileges which it granted to the church of Constantinople and above all the fundamental principle in Ottoman state-political practice of religious and not of ethnic division enhanced the prestige of the church institution still higher. Its representativeness, in combination with the economic power and the commercial and seafaring habits of the Greek population explains why in the notes of many travellers who passed along the Western Black Sea coast from the 15th to the 19th c. there is more talk about "Greeks" or in a most general way about "Orthodox Christians".

One should not think, however, that the influence and activity of the Patriarchate of Constantinople were promoted by some ill-intentioned objectives and considerations. Its influence, everything indicates to that, was realized up to the fourth decade of the 19th c. in a very natural and regular way. In this sense Prof. P. Nikov is right when he writes that "up to the beginning of the 1840s in Varna, like in the Varna area, there were no national contradictions or a question of nationalities in general. The ecclesiastical robe of the Patriarchate of Constantinople encompassed and covered all Orthodox Christians, irrespective of language and people. The Bulgarians had, where

they showed need and awareness, freely their language in church or at school, the Greeks their Greek and the Gagauzi their Turkish. It is noteworthy, P. Nikov goes on, "that the Turkish, i.e. the language of the majority—the Gagauzi—was the prevailing language in church and in society. The church service was in Turkish, in the same way as with the Karamanli in Asia Minor. In society the Greek language was spread very weakly and was spoken, besides the metropolitan and his clergy, only by two or three Greeks"⁵.

By the middle of the fifth decade of the 19th c. a dispute broke out here, the echo of which was to linger on for years on the Western Black Sea coast. In 1847 the Metropolitan of Varna, Josif, a Bulgarian from Macedonia, was replaced and was succeeded by Porphyrii. With the aid of his coadjutor and a few Grecianized Gagauzi he removed the Bulgarian priest in Balčik, sold the liturgical books and introduced the Greek language in the church service. This act, which marked the beginning of the church-national struggle on the Black Sea coast, was followed a little later by a new outburst of national extremism. The expropriation of the other Bulgarian church in the town strained to breaking point relations between Bulgarians and Greeks⁶.

The Bulgarian-Greek church conflict during the National Revival period was in its basis a national-political one. Its essence boiled down to the recognition of the Bulgarians as an independent nation within the framework of the Ottoman Empire. The road to this recognition passed through the separation from the Oecumenical Patriarchate and their differentiation into an autocephalous church organization. The first germs of this striving sprouted in the early 19th c., but grew more active and took shape with a centre and programme for action in the 40s and 50s of the same century⁷. This coincided with an important moment in the history of the Church of Constantinople and in particular in its attitude to the restored Greek state. After prolonged confrontation and mutual attacks conciliation took place between them and later developed into close rapprochement on the basis of the national principle. The consolidation of the Greek national idea, the Megali Idea, and the gradual commitment of the Patriarchate to its realization, replaced its hitherto oecumenical policy with the partialities for national exclusiveness and privilege. This stood out in particular relief with the emergence of the Bulgarian national

5. P. Nikov, *Bългарското възraždane във Varna i Varnensko Mitropolit Ioakim i negovata korespondencija*, Sofija 1934, p. 47.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 26-33.

7. Z. Markova, *Bългарското cerkovno-nacionalno dviženie do Krimskata vojna*, Sofija 1976, p. 72 et seq.

awareness, the collision with which did not take long to occur in the second quarter of the 19th c.⁸. The case with Balčik was the initial sign for the region of the Western Black Sea.

Although symptomatic, this incident remained isolated for long. A strong impetus to its spread was given by the Easter action of the Bulgarians of Constantinople in 1860 which was met with joy and spontaneous support. The same year the Bulgarians in Balčik, Varna and practically all the villages of the bishopric broke away from the Patriarchate of Constantinople. A few years later their example was followed in Burgas, Constanta, Mangalia and Kavarna⁹.

This separation, which took nearly a whole decade, was painful and difficult. Because in spite of the official rejection of the dependence on the Church of Constantinople, the Bulgarians in Varna, in Balčik and in many other places maintained contacts and direct relations with the bishopric in Varna. This continued until 1866 when a council of representatives of the whole region was convened and a "Provisional Law Drawn Up by the Bulgarian Society of Varna for the Administration of the Clergy of the Bishopric" was adopted. It regulated the rights and duties of the priests, the order in the Bulgarian shrines, the support which had to be given to the Bulgarian schools, etc.¹⁰. Its effect on ordinary human relations, however, was very relative. The deeply embedded tradition and especially the lasting family and commercial-economic links proved very resilient and difficult to break. Probably for this reason the church struggle on the Black Sea coast bore a particular imprint, one at first glance incompatible coexistence of extreme national antagonism and together with this of mutual tolerance between the ordinary Bulgarians and Greeks. The remark of A. V. Rachinski, the Russian vice-consul in Varna, seems to be well grounded when he writes that the majority of the poor people among the Bulgarians ardently wanted Slavonic church service and in this respect it met the sympathy of the poor Greeks, whereas the minority of prosperous people was either indifferent to the creed and church or was guided by Hellenistic propaganda¹¹.

The differentiation of the Bulgarians from the Greek church authority was made difficult also by the particular position of the Gagauzi in the dispute

8. N. Danova, *Nacionalnijat vāpros v grāckite političeski programi XIX veka*, Sofija 1980, pp. 127-138.

9. P. Nikov, *op. cit.*, p. 60 et seq.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 128-132.

11. Arhiv vnešnej politiki Possii, F. Posol'stvo v Konstantinopole, 1860, d. 1612, l. 42.

that had erupted. On account of their conservatism and isolation the Gagauzi were only slightly influenced by the spirit of the new time while remaining strongly attached to tradition and the long established order. With respect to religion for them, other creed than the Eastern Orthodox and its synonym in these places—the Church of Constantinople—was practically unknown. The Gagauzi retained their loyalty and trust to this church and the Greek bishopric in Varna almost to the end of their existence in this area. For the ordinary population this was loyalty to the spiritual institution with a centuries long history, for the propertied strata it was also moral and material status guaranteeing to a certain extent the road to social success. But for both of them the church was an incontrovertible authority and invariable presence in their characteristic and original way of life. In point of fact it was the most lasting link and mainstay in their anarchic way of life, deprived of self-awareness and historical memory. It was because of this that the megalomania of the Greeks and the new course in the policy of the Varna bishopric found its most numerous and zealous adherents. Bishop Yoachim also notes this in one of his first reports after taking his metropolitan seat in Varna¹².

It is necessary to clarify, however, that the Graecomania among the Gagauzi population seized first and above all the representatives of the wealthier top crust. The commercial links and kinships which they established with the local Greeks and the better education they received in their schools contributed to their gradual assimilation and Hellenization. Some of them later entered the metropolitan council or became school trustees, district mayors, etc. Their situation and role in society carried away others and by this the social base of the Greek bishopric was considerably expanded. From these Graecophiles it recruited its most fanatical and loyal followers. With their help were taken away the Bulgarian churches in Balčik, the building of a school in Varna was stopped, there were daily provocations against the church and school efforts of the Bulgarians in Kavarna, etc. This naturally caused a reaction which resulted in acute complications and grave insults.

For nearly five years the Bulgarians submitted petitions for and insisted on one of the churches in the town to be ceded to them for Slavonic service. This minimal and fully justified request was stubbornly rejected by the bishopric and its Graecophil circle which compelled the Bulgarians to convert one of the school premises into a chapel. A few weeks after its consecration Metropolitan Yoachim gave his consent for the introduction of the Church-Slavonic language in St. George's church, but the bridges for understanding had already

12. P. Nikov, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

been definitively destroyed¹³. In this state of affairs no wonder that the bishop's rank was brought down to its lowest level. "There are two church authorities in Varna", Yoachim wrote, "the one canonical and legitimate, the other anti-canonical and unlawful. The head of the unlawful one does freely and unimpeded everything that has been granted by the Holy Blessing to the canonical leader of the flock, with the exception, perhaps, of the ordainment... This year in order to show the people his omnipotence, while touring the so-called Dobrudža, i.e. the old diocese of Kavarna, he went one day's journey ahead of me, visiting even a village with only one Bulgarian family and ordering them, under the threat of moral death, not to admit a Greek priest in their home"¹⁴. These relations were transferred from the social sphere to the private way of life. On account of mixed marriages, the church-national conflict sometimes found expression in dramatic forms. There were frequent cases where the service at weddings, deaths and christenings was repeated: once officiated by Bulgarian priests and in a Bulgarian church and a second time by Greek ones or vice versa.

These examples, although being the exception, indicate the dangerous escalation of the nationalist passions in which the coastal Gagauzi were also involved. The school board in Kavarna in a long letter to the municipality related "the sorry plight and suffering of the population here, which with all the other difficulties in preserving its nationality, also experiences mortal blows from our bitter enemies the Gagauzi"¹⁵. We come across such qualifications in numerous documents, recollections and descriptions in the contemporary periodical publications. In them no doubt there are many exaggerations and topical events, but it is also doubtless that they contain the great truth about the Gagauzi population which in the Bulgarian-Greek church dispute took non-Bulgarian positions. Even when the mass of this population, true to its primeval mores and customs stood aloof from the nationalistic rage, even in these circumstances it constituted a reserved and potential force for the Greek bishopric. The year 1870 when the independence of the Bulgarian Church was restored, was a divide in this respect.

The Sultan's firman of February 28, 1870 by virtue of which an autonomous Bulgarian Church was set up by the name of Exarchate, in art. 10 laid down the number of dioceses and their boundaries. For the diocese of Varna

13. Arhim. M. Čavdarov, *Petdesetgodišninata na pŕvata bŕlgarska cŕrkva "Sv. Arhangel Mihail" v gr. Varna, 1865-1915g.*, Varna 1915, p. 27.

14. P. Nikov, *op. cit.*, pp. 377, 379.

15. NVKM-BIA II A 1390.

it was explicitly stated that the town and nearly twenty places situated between Varna and Constanta were not included in its boundaries and their inhabitants recognized the authority of the Oecumenical Patriarchate. These were Varna, Kestrič, Džaferli, Jenikjoj, Dževizli, Čauškjoj, Kapakli, Balčik, Mihalbej, Kavarna, Gjavur Sujutčuk, Juzgebenlik, Jală jučorman, Kalajdži dere, Keramet, Šabla and Mangalia. In 1875 their number amounted to 2,038 families, the majority of which were Gagauzi ones¹⁶. There were individual Bulgarian families among them, as in the villages of Kapakli, Gjavur Sujutčuk, etc. and in some of the places indicated (Varna, Balčik, Kavarna, Šabla and Mangalia) there functioned active Bulgarian communities fully subjected to the Bulgarian Church.

The building up in 1870-1872 of the Bulgarian church organization along the Black Sea coast, north of the Stara Planina mountain range, definitively differentiated national relations in this area. The high tension which they reached in these and the following years speaks about the profound split among the Christian population here, about the extreme polarization between the Bulgarian and the Greek population. In the ultimate analysis this shows the unsoundness of the mediaeval feudal and theocratic principles and the destabilization of the church as a unifying institution under the pressure of the bourgeois epoch and the national element that accompanied it. This elemental force for a certain time passed by the Gagauzi population on the Black Sea coast, but gradually its systematic attacks undermined its stability and by this also the most numerous and durable mainstay of the Church of Constantinople in these places. Its decline took place several decades later but this is a different subject.

16. P. Nikov, *op. cit.*, p. 183.