

† *Giorgos Tousimis*

### **The Bulgarian High School in Thessaloniki**

**(published posthumously on the basis of the author's handwritten notes)**

After the Russo-Turkish War, the Exarchate's jurisdiction over the Bulgarian communities in Macedonia was virtually non-existent, owing to the dismissal of the Archbishop of Ohrid, Nathaniel, and the Archbishop of Skopje, Cyril; but also, and mainly, owing to the temporary removal of the Exarch from Constantinople to Eastern Rumelia. The schools had closed, and those that were still operating were now under the control of the Patriarchal metropolitans. In these circumstances, the Exarchists based their hopes of improving their situation on the implementation of article 23 of the Treaty of Berlin, on condition that the Exarch return to Constantinople from Bulgaria (Eastern Rumelia), whither he had fled during the war. The situation began to change after the war and until the signing and approval of the law on the *vilayets*.

Between the summer of 1880 and the passage of the law on the *vilayets*, the situation began to change. In order to prove to Europe that it was implementing some reforms, the Turkish government decided to remove the Greek metropolitans' privilege of controlling the Bulgarian schools and to place the schools under state control.

With this in mind, in the principal centres in the *vilayets* the Turkish authorities established special boards (*mearif houmissoular*), before which the teachers were obliged to undergo examinations to be granted the right to teach. Patriarchist teachers were exempt from this obligation. Also a school board controlled the syllabuses and the primers of the Christian schools. The Exarchate initially accepted the measure with some relief, even though it affected the privileges it had been granted by sultanic firman.

All the same, the school boards later constituted an obstacle to the development of Bulgarian education in Macedonia. Kangupareb reports that certain political trends developed in the administrative circles in

Constantinople in this period. One trend maintained that the Bulgarians in the *vilayets* should not be given special privileges; while the other maintained that the Bulgarians should be granted the right to open their own schools and to establish ecclesiastical-cum-educational communities. It is hard to accept that this situation prevailed at that time because the Turkish authorities took a favourable view of education in many places. For instance, the *vali* of Thessaloniki, Galip Pasha, advised the directors of the Bulgarian schools to take full advantage of the rights which the Turkish authorities had granted them.

Bulgarian educational activity thus began in the *vilayet* of Macedonia under quite favourable conditions. Until then, Bulgarian education in Macedonia had gone no further than elementary level, and only in certain urban centres with two- or three-class primary schools.

The inspiration behind the Bulgarian High School for Boys and Girls in Thessaloniki is considered to have come from an elderly teacher from Ohrid named Sapkarev. He explained his plan to certain prominent figures in Sofia and pointed out the need for a Bulgarian high school in Thessaloniki for boys and girls from all over Macedonia. He subsequently explained his views to Exarch Joseph in Constantinople.

Objections were expressed, however, both in Sofia and by Exarch Joseph, with regard to Thessaloniki, which the Bulgarians regarded as a foreign city because the majority of the population was Greek. The Greek element predominated in Thessaloniki and the city was a Greek intellectual centre; for which reason, certain Bulgarians felt that they should not delude themselves that their high school would be able to operate successfully in Thessaloniki. It was disheartening and discouraging to consider that for twenty-one years the two-class Bulgarian primary school there had not only been costly but also made no progress, owing to a severe lack of pupils. We need only note that in the school year 1879-1880 there were only seven or eight pupils in the boys' class and eleven beginners in the girls' class.

The little town of Prilep was considered the most suitable for a Bulgarian High School. The population was purely Bulgarian, so there would be quite a number of pupils and the school's running expenses would be lower.

However, Sapkarev's arguments in favour of Thessaloniki proved stronger. To his previous arguments he added the fact that if a school in

Thessaloniki could not find enough pupils in the city itself, where the majority of the population was Greek, children would come from the interior, from the hinterland, because Thessaloniki was the capital and focal point of Macedonia, unlike Prilep, which was remote and could not attract pupils from all over the region. He also added that, owing to Thessaloniki's cosmopolitan character, the children would benefit at a cultural level and would continue to learn through extracurricular activities. Sapkarev also launched the notion that foreigners would realize that the Exarchate had higher educational establishments in Thessaloniki, while at the same time the presence of consulates in the city would prompt them to intervene if the Turkish authorities tried to close the Bulgarian schools.

Faced with Sapkarev's insistence on founding a Bulgarian High School in Thessaloniki, the Exarch gave way, telling him: "Go and do as you think fit. We shall help you as much as we can".

All the same, the debate over the Bulgarian intellectual centre in Macedonia was still unresolved in 1880, although the decision had been taken to found the two Bulgarian High Schools, one for boys and one for girls, in Thessaloniki.

The Exarchate, through its representative, senior archimandrite Metodi Kusev from Prilep, favoured establishing the high school in Prilep, because of the town's purely Bulgarian population. Sapkarev and other notables in Thessaloniki disagreed and wrote to tell the Exarchate that the population of Macedonia was very displeased with this decision by Kusev and the Exarchate, who were wrong to favour the founding of a high school in such a remote town as Prilep. The Exarchate eventually yielded, and the St Cyril and St Methodius Bulgarian High School opened in Thessaloniki in the spring of 1880; followed two years later by the Annunciation Bulgarian Girls' High School.

But in 1880 a suitable person had not yet been found to go to Macedonia and establish Bulgarian education on a firm footing. Exarch Joseph suggested to the Bulgarian government that Sapkarev was the most suitable choice. In his opinion, Thessaloniki ought to become a centre of education, and for this reason a full high school for boys should be established there, together with a full high school for girls with boarding facilities.

At this point, however, the Bulgarian government voiced its

objections that Thessaloniki was not the most appropriate place, owing to its demographic situation. Prilep was considered more suitable, with its more compact Bulgarian population. The issue was eventually resolved in Constantinople by Exarch Joseph, who also had objections to Thessaloniki. He considered that there was no chance that the Bulgarian high school would succeed there, owing to the prevalence of the Greek element, which had turned it into a Greek intellectual centre. For this reason, he said, certain Bulgarians should not delude themselves by shutting their eyes to the fact that the elementary Bulgarian school which had been operating in Thessaloniki with very few pupils for the past twenty-one years could hardly keep going or meet its expenses and had not made any substantial progress or great contribution in all that time. But the Exarch yielded to the persistent Sapkarev and spoke the words quoted above.

At that time, a European committee had convened in Constantinople to draw up an organizational charter in accordance with the promises made by Turkey in the Treaty of Berlin for reforms in Macedonia. A Bulgarian committee headed by Sapkarev repeatedly visited the members of the European committee in an effort to separate the education of the Bulgarian people from the Orthodox Oecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. The Sultan did not accept their petition, however, and the Bulgarian representatives returned home empty-handed. It was in these circumstances that Sapkarev arrived in Thessaloniki on 2 June 1880 (?). At this time, the Bulgarian school in Thessaloniki was not making any progress at all. When Sapkarev arrived, he found only seventeen beginners there, and only four in class one. The girls' school had only eleven beginners.

Simultaneously with the European committee in Constantinople, a similar committee had been set up in Thessaloniki, its members representing the various ethnic groups in the city for the purpose of supposedly drawing up an organizational charter for the educational reforms which Turkey could provide for its subjects in the *vilayet* of Thessaloniki. The committee was composed of representatives from the Turkish, Jewish, Greek, Armenian, and other communities, but not the Bulgarian community. The latter protested vigorously about its exclusion, whereupon the enraged Turkish authorities began to persecute the Bulgarians for daring to protest when only a few years before they

had tried to play a dirty trick on Turkey. These Turkish atrocities were officially denounced and a European investigative committee was expected. Sapkarev was told that an English delegation led by Lord Fitzgerald had arrived in Thessaloniki to gather evidence of the Turkish atrocities against the Bulgarians. One member of the European committee visited Sapkarev, probably to ascertain the Bulgarian views of the Turks' brutal persecution of the Bulgarians.

But while all this was going on and Sapkarev had set the project in motion for the school year 1881-1882, the Exarchate began to tergiversate. Just when he was awaiting instructions regarding the Bulgarian High School in Thessaloniki, Sapkarev received orders to go to Prilep and establish a high school there. The Bulgarians had apparently changed their mind or been persuaded that Thessaloniki was a city with a strong Greek component and that the Bulgarian High School would not be able to attract many pupils, whereas at Prilep there would be many Bulgarian pupils —some 800— owing to the large Bulgarian element. Furthermore, the small, almost purely Bulgarian Prilep would keep the students' nationality pure and unalloyed. Also, Thessaloniki would entail considerable running expenses, while Prilep would present lower costs, consequently the Bulgarian town was economically advantageous, it would be less expensive.

In the end, the following considerations presented the strongest case for founding a Bulgarian High School in Thessaloniki.

- 1) If children from within the city itself did not attend the high school, it would be fed by the area around Thessaloniki and by the wider hinterland, all of Macedonia, because the city was in the very centre of the region.

- 2) Prilep was remote and could not draw pupils from all over Macedonia.

- 3) In contrast to the provincial Prilep, Thessaloniki's cosmopolitan character would broaden the children's education, enabling them to learn about things that they would not be taught at school.

- 4) Prilep was remote and the population of Macedonia would not realize that the Exarchate also had institutes of higher education. By contrast, the coastal Thessaloniki had considerable commercial traffic, large numbers of people flocked there, mainly from Asia Minor and Europe, it hosted the consulates of many countries, and many foreign

nationals lived there, even Americans. So many Bulgarians judged that the city also had the potential to acquire a Bulgarian profile, along with all the rest.

5) Most importantly of all, a high school in Prilep could easily be closed by the Turkish authorities, as had happened to the high school in Serres, which Saravov had not been able to keep going on a stable basis. Whereas it would be more difficult to close the school in Thessaloniki once it had legitimately opened, for fear of direct intervention by the consuls.

Despite all the shilly-shallying, the Thessaloniki High School did eventually open, and a two-storey house was rented for the students to board in. A second house bought later was used as the premises of the high school. Some 190 pupils arrived at this time, some with scholarships, others with half-scholarships, and a very few paying their own fees. A prelatial exarchic delegate also arrived at that time.

Throughout the life of the high school, it experienced periods of peaceful progress and periods of internal unrest and rebellion. It was the battlefield of two rival political trends. The unrest began as early as the school's second year, though it was not well organized at first, nor were specific demands formulated. The reasons for the unrest became clearer and more specific during the later periods of unrest, especially in 1897.

The first spell of unrest was due to poor administration, and arose out of protests against the inadequate, poor-quality food. To maintain order, the teachers' committee took certain disciplinary steps and expelled the troublemakers. However, the literature reveals another side to the issue. Some of the teachers who were deemed to have fomented the unrest were transferred. Their purpose was quite specific. There is information from the transferred teachers themselves. In accordance with instructions from a revolutionary group of teachers in Sofia, the older students of the high school were organized by the teachers and thus formed a revolutionary anti-Exarchic cell, which disagreed with the educational policy of the high school's Exarchist and administrative authorities.

In the school year 1887-1888 there was further unrest, more serious this time and with a clearer aim. The instigators this time were three teachers who did not want to follow the educational policy implemented by the director.

The situation within the high school went through two phases. The first, until the end of 1887, was calm and peaceful, while the second, from the beginning of 1888, was marked by disorder and unrest, which lasted for three months.

Three teachers, incited by someone, made considerable, and unreasonable, demands and were insubordinate to the director. They eventually submitted their resignations to the Exarch's delegate. The Exarch was aware that external forces were fomenting unrest against the educational policy and system which the director was implementing and following on the Exarch's orders. The outcome of these rebellions was grievous, for the students and teachers divided into two warring factions, which seriously disrupted the smooth running of the high school. Indeed, its very existence was threatened. Even the Bulgarian community was divided. In order to bring the unrest to an end, the teachers' committee was now forced to expel eight students and strip others of their scholarships. The smooth running of the school was now seriously disrupted. The Serbian consulate agreed to give many of the expelled students scholarships in Serbia. Thirty-six students were eventually expelled or left the high school, leaving 156 on the register.

The reasons for, and the external factors which precipitated, the unrest of 1897-1898 were clearer. On 7 April 1897, the students refused to attend classes and shouted down the director, Naumov. The situation was looking serious, so a representative of the Exarchate came from Constantinople to investigate the reasons for the unrest and ascertain the Bulgarian community's attitude towards the students. In fact there was no conflict between students and teachers, but there was a difference of opinion among the teaching staff. Opinion was also divided within the Bulgarian community, which was split into two warring factions over what form educational activity should take in Macedonia. Both sides were inspired by patriotic sentiments.

One side was in favour of an ecclesiastical educational struggle, which would develop in such a way as to enable the Exarchists gradually to take over important posts in the Turkish administration, supplanting the Greeks therein. This faction was led by men of the Exarchist church.

A few teachers, however, as also some members of the Bulgarian community, favoured a revolutionary approach and could not reach any kind of compromise with the other side. They supported the VMRO,

which was already in existence and was gradually organizing and expanding a network of secret conspiratorial committees (*komitata*) throughout Macedonia.

The one side was led by ecclesiastical Exarchists, whose slogan was: "Legitimate struggle, education, church, and school". The other, revolutionary, side was led by the VMRO, which launched the slogan: "The revolution doesn't need an exarch, it needs Karadja". For the one side, multi-ethnic Macedonia would be saved by autonomy within the framework of the Ottoman Empire; for the other, Bulgaria was powerful enough to rule all of Macedonia and there was no need for autonomy. The Exarchate in fact openly supported this latter view. Many historians condemn the Exarchate's intervention in the high school's internal affairs.

The interesting statistical data which Giorgos Tousimis collected in the course of his research reveal the impact on the Exarchists of this particular Bulgarian High School in Thessaloniki, which operated continuously for thirty-three years, from the academic year 1880-1881 to 1912-1913. During the first year, it attracted 123 pupils from various parts of Macedonia, some with scholarships from the Exarchate, some with half-scholarships, and a few paying their own fees. During the first year, the high school ran three classes and was directed by Sapkarev himself with three teachers. That is, the two pre-high school classes, which were already offering primary education and had been promoted to the level of years two and three of secondary school, and the first year of secondary school, formed by the new arrivals. As a new class was added every year, the high school acquired its full complement of six classes by the school year 1885-1886, which was also when the first graduates left, eleven in all, from various parts of Macedonia. During this school year, the number of students had risen from the original 123 to 342, of whom 314 had scholarships and 28 paid fees.

Final examinations were held twenty-seven times, the first time being in the school year 1885-1886, when the first pupils finished the sixth and final class. During its thirty-three years, 5,820 pupils attended the school and 488 received their school certificate. Of these, 172 were from the *vilayet* of Thessaloniki, 143 from the *vilayet* of Skopje, 132 from the *vilayet* of Bitola, 15 from Thrace, and 26 from Bulgaria.



As for Sapkarev, after the first school year he was transferred to Kilkis (then Kukus) and at the same time the entire teaching staff with whom he had worked to run the Bulgarian High School in Thessaloniki was replaced. Some report that, very content that his dream of founding a Bulgarian High School in Thessaloniki had been realized, Sapkarev tendered his resignation. But in his memoirs he himself attributes everything that happened to the scheming and accusations of his colleagues. But the basic reason was the fundamental disagreements that began to arise regarding Bulgarian education in Macedonia, and hence the division of the Bulgarians into a revolutionary and a moderate faction.

Giorgos Tousimis's notes stop here. This study may help future researchers to find their bearings more easily in the field of research in which Giorgos Tousimis was involved.