

REVIEWS OF BOOKS

Dimitri Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth: Eastern Europe 500-1453*. (History of Civilization.) London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971. Pp. xiv+445+93 black-and-white illustrations and 10 maps.

For years now Dimitri Obolensky has been studying the medieval history and civilization of the south-eastern Slavs and the impact of Byzantium among them. In 1945 he published an article on the Bogomils and three years later a book on the same subject. That book called him to the attention of the scholarly community concerned with the Byzantine world. The series of studies which followed established his reputation as an attractive and readable historian and scholar. He has now come forth with a general book which will enhance that reputation still more.

The *Byzantine Commonwealth* is a well-written, clear and stimulating book. In contents it ranges from a brilliantly conceived and executed chapter, describing the geographical features and the natural routes of the Balkan peninsula and the Russian lands, to an analysis of the factors of the process of cultural diffusion and the "features of the Byzantine tradition which were borrowed by the East European nations and [of] what became to them in their adopted home." The features analysed are religion, law, literature and art. In between, the subjects treated include the invasions of the south-eastern Slavs and their settlement on the lands where they now are; the formation, power and ambitions of the Bulgarian Kingdom; Christianity as the bond between Byzantium and the Slavs; the appearance of the Russians and their relations with Byzantium; the rise of Serbia and in general the Slavs and Byzantium during the last phase of Byzantine history. The treatment includes the Hungarians and other peoples, though they were not Slavs. In general, however, what the book does is to give an account of the cultural evolution of the south-eastern Slavs.

In this evolution, Byzantium, of course, played the dominant role and its cultural influence remained vital to the very end. But the vast majority of the Slavs involved, whatever the fiction, remained politically alien to Byzantium, more often than not its bitterest enemies, and, of course, were never assimilated. It is quite wrong, therefore, to speak of

them as constituting with Byzantium a commonwealth, i. e., a "community of states and nations... all of which in varying degrees owed allegiance to the Byzantine Church and empire." No such commonwealth, of course, ever existed.

There were Slavs, however, dwelling in certain areas who were absorbed and lost their identity. About these areas and the conditions which promoted the assimilation of their Slav dwellers Obolensky has this to say (p. 74):

"The areas which the Byzantines sought to reclaim first of all and in which they met with particular success were the plains... These plains form a fringe round the Balkan peninsula: the most important were Thrace, the North Aegean seaboard, the Macedonian 'Campania'; Thessaly, Boetia and Attica, the Peloponnesian coast, Southern Epirus... A largely Greek population, only temporarily submerged during the Slav invasions; the presence of ancient cities from which imperial power had never wholly vanished; the proximity to the seas which brought relief to their beleaguered garrisons, trade to their merchants in time of peace, and which fostered an outward-looking and cosmopolitan mentality; a diet whose basic ingredients were supplied by the olive, the vine and fish; these conditions, which prevailed in the maritime plains, forced the Slavs who came down from the mountains to adapt themselves to a new way of life, and... hastened their absorption by the local Greek population."

Some pages later he comes back to the subject in connection with the absorption of the Slavs in Greece proper. He writes (p. 209):

"By the first half of the eleventh century the imperial policy of settling Byzantine peasant soldiers in the *Sklaviniae* - [throughout his book Obolensky uses the term *Sklavinia* rather loosely], of setting up an extensive network of bishoprics and parish churches in the southern part of the Balkan peninsula, and of insisting on the use of Greek in the Church, the army and the local administration had been remarkably successful. The Byzantinisation of the Slavs in Greece was now virtually complete. Only in the remoter areas of the Southern Peloponnese did Slav tribes retain their language and their sense of ethnic distinction until the end of the Middle Ages:

these recalcitrants were the Melingoi, on the slopes of the Taygetus Mountains, and the Ezeritai, who lived on the northern and eastern coast of the Gulf of Laconia, from Gytheion to Vatikia Bay near Cape Malea... Apart from these two isolated pockets the Slav language was probably extinct in Greece by the late twelfth century. Christianity and the prestige of Byzantine civilisation had together succeeded in absorbing and Hellenising the Slavs. It is probable that the Slav racial stock, later supplemented by the Albanian, has remained to the present day a strong component of the population of Greece; but this hypothesis, however likely, is scarcely susceptible of rigorous proof. Today all that remains in Greece as evidence of the ethnic predominance of the Slavs in the seventh and eighth centuries is the relatively large number of place-names of Slavonic origin. For the rest, the rapid assimilation of the Slavs is eloquent testimony to the vitality and prestige of Greek Byzantine civilization."

There is of course considerable truth in Obolensky's last statement. Byzantine emperors, particularly Nicephorus I, did settle peasants and others in Greece proper and elsewhere; the bishoprics in Greece did increase beginning with the ninth century; Greek was the language of the Church, of the army, of the administration. But if Greece had indeed been over-whelmingly settled by Slavs, if the original population had indeed been exterminated or virtually so, it is highly questionable if the Church, the army, the administration would have been sufficient unto themselves to have brought about the complete absorption of the Slavs. This is especially so since the imperial government made no special effort to make Greek speakers of the Slavs under its jurisdiction. The one text cited by Obolensky to the contrary has no reference to language as G. Tsaras who has carefully studied this text (*Byzantina*, 1:135 ff.) observes. To find the true explanation of the absorption of the Slavs in Greece, we have to turn to the first statement of Obolensky where we are told that "a largely Greek population only temporarily submerged during the Slavic invasion," was one of the factors in the complete assimilation of the Slavs in Greece. Therefore, if eventually the Slavs in Greece abandoned Slavic and made Greek the language of their speech, became indeed Greeks, that was primarily because they found themselves in the midst of Greeks.