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# In Search of a Homogeneous Nation: The Assimilation of Bulgaria's Turkish Minority, 1984-1985

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This article analyses the causes of the most extreme nationalist undertaking in Eastern Europe in the 1980s – the Bulgarian government's attempt to change the names of nearly one million Turks in the space of a few weeks in 1984-1985. The article argues that the assimilation campaign emerged as a result of a combination of threats and opportunities on a number of levels. Domestically, the failure of alternative strategies of dealing with the ethnic minorities created a temptation to resort to a radical solution, whilst the political and economic resources which the communist leadership commanded and which reached their high point in the mid-1980s gave it the means to undertake such a policy. Internationally, the Soviet Union, Bulgaria's main strategic ally, was powerful enough to protect it against possible Turkish and Western reprisals, but not strong enough to impose its own more tolerant nationalities policy on Bulgaria. Turkey, Bulgaria's historical enemy and the perceived patron of the Turkish minority, was seen as both posing a threat to Bulgaria after the invasion of Cyprus, and as suffering from weaknesses which would prevent it from undertaking serious counteractions. There thus existed in 1984-1985 a false 'window of opportunity' which encouraged the Bulgarian communist leadership to obliterate once and for all the problem of ethnic diversity with which they were increasingly unable to deal by other means.

This article aims to examine the reasons for what was probably the most extreme nationalist policy in Eastern Europe in the 1980s – Bulgaria's attempt to assimilate its Turkish minority by changing their names from Arabic-Turkish to Slavic-Bulgarian. The policy stands out both because of its numerical parameters and the nature of the imposed changes. In the little more than a month between December 1984 and January 1985, nearly one million people, more than a tenth of Bulgaria's population were forced to change their names. This represented one of the most extensive and certainly the most rapid assimilation campaigns in European history. The change of personal names was something to which no communist regime had resorted before. Even Ceausescu in Romania, whilst ruthlessly obliterating any trace of Hungarian cultural autonomy (Schöpflin, 1990: 1-3), did not go so far as to force Romanian names on the minority.

Theories of nationalism can offer only a partial explanation of why the Bulgarian authorities began to perceive the Turks as a 'lost' part of the Bulgarian nation and attempted to 'retrieve' them. Primordialists who see nations as eternal and unchanging entities (Smith, 1995: 30-33) would find it difficult to explain why Turks could be regarded by the Bulgarians as constituting part of their nation, given the sharply different language, religion and culture of the two ethnic groups. One minority strand of primordialism, that of socio-biology (Badcock, 1991) can, however, provide a partial explanation. By presenting ethnic groups as an

extension of kin groups, it can help us to understand, if not necessarily accept, the claim by the Bulgarian authorities that the Turks were descendants of Bulgarians who had been forcibly converted to Islam and had adopted the Turkish language under the Ottoman empire. Modernists who perceive nations as the product of modernization can explain the assimilation as part of the modernization of Bulgarian society through the creation of common 'high culture' (Gellner, 1983), but would find problematic the fact that the process was legitimised with reference not only to present and future modernisation (becoming part of a 'socialist' Bulgarian nation), but also to the past (retrieving the Turks' 'forgotten' Bulgarian identity), as well as the fact that the campaign was undertaken by force and with such startling speed. Theorists such as Anthony Smith who straddle the primordialist-modernist divide by accepting the importance of modernization as a mobilisation device but stressing that nations have premodern roots in the form of an *ethnie* (Smith, 1986), can help in understanding the selective reinterpretation of history which occurs when *ethnies* are transformed into nations during the process of modernisation, but not the wholesale revision of a historical past which obliterated the fact that the Bulgarian and the Turkish *ethnies* not only did not recognise any common identity, but defined themselves in opposition to one another.

A more productive approach would be to focus our focus our attention on the role of the state as a primary actor in nationalist politics. O'Leary and McGarry's typology of state strategies for dealing with ethnic conflict offers a useful starting point (O'Leary, 1993: 1-40). The assimilation campaign of 1984-85 can be seen as the result of the failure of the alternative strategies used by Bulgarian governments to deal with the Turkish minority. At least three methods identified by O'Leary and McGarry were used and seen to fail in Bulgaria, namely population transfers in the form of forced emigration, hegemonic control by the Bulgarian majority, bipartisan arbitration between Bulgaria and Turkey, and integration on the basis of non-ethnic criteria such a transnational communist society, before assimilation was adopted as state policy. One further option, secession, never reached practical stage, but was present as a potential threat in the minds of the Bulgarian leaders. Whilst the state made policies autonomously, it did not make them in a vacuum. It is here that some of the factors highlighted by the theories examined above, can help us by providing the context for the state's policy-making. The assimilation campaign was justified through a systematic redefinition of a Bulgarian nation in order to make it possible to claim the Turks as ethnic Bulgarians. The campaign was preceded by rapid modernisation which substantially equalised the life-chances of Bulgarians and Turks, and assimilation could be seen as taking that that

process even further. It is also important to also look at the impact of the international factor which is ignored by conventional theories which treat the nation-state as their primary unit of analysis, in isolation from the international system. In a situation where the Turkish minority could look towards a neighbouring country, Turkey, as its 'mother-country', the state of Bulgaria's relations with Turkey was clearly a significant determinant of Bulgarian policy. Another important factor, given Bulgaria's limited sovereignty within the Soviet bloc, was the role of the Soviet Union. Finally, the process of decision-making itself needs to be examined, in order to determine who and when took the decision to launch the 'renaming' campaign, and to what extent could the decision-making process be seen as rational, at least given the premises from which it proceeded, or as irrational and haphazard.

## **I. From Hegemony to Assimilation: The Strategies of the Bulgarian State Towards its Turkish Minority, 1878-1984**

The foundation of the independent Bulgarian state in 1878 left it with a sizable Turkish minority, amounting to between a fifth and a quarter of the population (Eminov, 1997: 71; Stoianov, 1993: 193). In the next sixty years, Bulgarian governments pursued a policy of hegemonic control, aiming to maintain the political and economic supremacy of the ethnic Bulgarian majority and keep the Turks in an inferior position. There were no attempts at integration or assimilation. Turkish-language primary and secondary education was tolerated, but in the form of private schools which received no support from the state in contrast to their Bulgarian counterparts. This ensured that the educational level of the Turkish minority would remain very low and they would not be able to challenge Bulgarian dominance. As late as 1934, less than 20% of the Turkish male population over the age of 7 could read and write, as opposed to nearly 80% of the Bulgarians (Stoianov, 1993: 197). Similarly, religious freedom was allowed, and indeed encouraged, in the hope that it would prevent the Muslim population from integrating in secular society. In the long term, the future of the Turkish minority was envisaged mainly in terms of emigration to Turkey, and indeed a steady flow was maintained throughout the last decades of the 19th century and the early decades of the 20th century (Stoianov, 1993: 204).

One other method used was bilateral arbitration, in the form of international agreements between Bulgaria and Turkey. The treaties of 1908 and 1913 postulated the protection of the

rights of the Turkish and Muslim minorities and indeed envisaged the assent of the *Sheih ul Islam* (the supreme religious authority of the Ottoman empire) as part of the election process of the head of the Muslim community in Bulgaria, the chief *Mufti*. The 1925 treaty of friendship between the newly-founded Kemalist republic and Bulgaria reiterated the minority protection pledges, but did not accord Turkey any rights as the champion of the Turkish minority, the role of the *Sheih ul Islam* having lapsed through the secularisation of Turkey (Simsir 1988: 290-302). The treaty held good as long as the two countries remained on friendly terms, and whilst never officially abrogated, it effectively lapsed once Bulgaria and Turkey found themselves of the opposite sides of the Cold War.

On coming to power in 1944, the communists embarked on two parallel policies. First, they attempted to divest themselves of as much of the Turkish minority as possible, forcing 150,000 across the border in 1949-1950 before Turkey refused to accept any more. (Kostanick, 1957; Schechtmann, 1962). The remaining portion which amounted to some 600,000 people was given cultural autonomy, and indeed Turkish- language education was positively encouraged by the state. This autonomy was seen as a step towards integrating the Turks into a transnational communist society, on the Soviet model (Trifonov, 1993: 212-213). The policy was, however, largely the product of perceived Soviet preferences, and was not internalised by the Bulgarian communist leaders. As soon as the process of de-Stalinisation gave them greater freedom of action, they began to change course. For the next 25 years, they attempted to integrate the Turks not in some shapeless communist entity but in a nation which whilst communist would still be recognisably Bulgarian. Since the process was based on unequal terms, the implicit assumption being that the Turks would be expected to merge into an already existing Bulgarian national identity, it can best be described as assimilation rather than integration, regardless of the official terminology used. The fusion was expected to come about through gradual cultural and economic homogenisation, and was assigned very long, if not indeterminate, time horizons. Turkish language education was gradually phased out, and Turkish schoolchildren were integrated into the mainstream Bulgarian school system. For about a decade, in 1959-1970, Turkish was retained as an optional subject, before being abandoned altogether. Muslim religious activity was drastically cut down, with the number of clerics declining from sixteen thousand in 1944 to some 580 in 1960 (Trifonov, 1993: 214). Extensive efforts were made to raise the standard of living of the Turkish minority, and whilst it remained predominantly rural, by the 1980s its had roughly caught up with the Bulgarians in most socio-economic parameters (Takirov, 1978: 112). The emigration option was not

abandoned altogether, and was used as a safety valve to deprive the minority of its natural leaders (Simsir, 1988: 210, 245).

A quarter of a century of evolutionary assimilation did not fulfil the expectations placed upon it by the party leadership. By the mid-1980s, the Turkish minority was interacting with the ethnic Bulgarians to a far greater extent, but maintained its distinct identity in terms of language, religion and attitude towards Turkey. Indeed, improved economic opportunities seemed to make the minority more rather than less inclined to develop its identity. Its birth-rate was far higher than that of the Bulgarians, and could conceivably challenge their numerical dominance, at least in the distant future. In economic terms, the Turks were becoming crucial for the survival of the Bulgarian economy, an increasing proportion of the agricultural labour force in agriculture from which ethnic Bulgarians were rapidly withdrawing (Eminov, 1997: 94-95. Attendance of Bulgarian schools did succeed in making knowledge of Bulgarian virtually universal amongst the younger generation, but did not lead to a significant reduction of the use of Turkish at home. The option of emigration, whilst never entirely abandoned, was made less attractive both by the Turks' economic importance and the changed perception of them as indigenous Bulgarians, as well as by Turkey's unwillingness to take on board an excessive number of emigrants (Asenov, 1996: 88-91). Faced with such a situation, in 1984 the Bulgarian leadership decided to make assimilation irreversible by undertaking by force the cultural assimilation which was not forthcoming 'spontaneously'.

## **II. Who is Bulgarian? The Changing Definitions of Nationhood**

The changes in the definitions of the Bulgarian nation generally corresponded and justified the strategies adopted by the Bulgarian state to deal with its Turkish minority, although on a number of occasions they acquired a force of their own. As was the case with most Eastern European nations, Bulgarian nationhood was constructed through conscious elite action in the 19th century. The construction was based, however, on a number of primordial elements. In 1878-1944, the Bulgarian nation was generally identified in terms of language and religion, as encompassing the Orthodox Christian Slavic speaking inhabitants of Bulgaria. The Turkish-speaking inhabitants were excluded, as were the *Pomaks*, Bulgarian-speaking Muslims. At least on two occasions, in 1912-13, and again in the late 1930s and early 1940s, the *Pomaks*

were re-defined as ancestral Bulgarians who had been converted forcibly to Islam under the Ottoman empire and who therefore needed to be reclaimed back by the Bulgarian nation. State-sponsored efforts were made to change the *Pomaks'* Turkish-Arabic names to ethnic Bulgarian ones, using both coercion and inducements. The first, but not the second assimilation campaign also involved the conversion of the *Pomaks* to Eastern Orthodoxy. The campaigns proved largely successful in the short term, at least in achieving their nominal objectives. Bulgaria's unstable domestic politics, however, made it difficult for the state to pursue a consistent policy, and both campaigns were reversed within a few years by governments seeking to gain the Muslims' votes. The Turkish-speaking population was regarded as descendants of colonists from Asia Minor, and was therefore seen as alien element which was not liable to assimilation. Whilst tolerated, the Turkish speakers were not seen as having a future in Bulgaria, and were expected sooner or later to emigrate to Turkey. (Stoianov, 1993: 204).

In their first decades in power, the communists denigrated the importance of ethnic differences, both on the Bulgarian and the Turkish side, and expected ethnicity to be submerged with the development of a socialist and then communist society. This made the issue of the origins of the *Pomaks* and the Turks almost irrelevant. The growing awareness of the importance of ethnic characteristics which emerged with the partial relaxation of the Stalinist system after 1956 and the increasing efforts of the communist leadership to legitimise its power at least partly in nationalistic terms, focused attention once again on the status of the *Pomaks*. They were redefined as ancestral Bulgarians and pressurised into adopting ethnic Bulgarian names. The initial surge of party pressure was met with stiff resistance by the *Pomaks*. In 1964, for example, attempts to rename the *Pomaks* in the south-western region of Blagoevgrad bordering on Greece and Yugoslavia resulted in a virtual revolt in a number of villages. The *Pomaks* responded to the incursions of police and armed Bulgarian 'volunteers' into their villages by staging mass protests and in some cases, throwing the intruders out. The party leadership in Sofia responded to the protests with a mixture of threats and concessions. On one hand, the *Pomaks* were threatened that the army would be sent out against them and they would be crushed with tanks. On the other hand, the party leaders in Sofia claimed that their 'true' policy of voluntary renaming had been distorted by local officials in Blagoevgrad, and that the *Pomaks* could keep their names if they wished to do so (Trifonov, 1993: p. 219). However, this claim did not prove to hold true for future policy. In 1970, the 'renaming' was resumed, using more gradual means, and by 1980 the

names of most *Pomaks* (some 200,000) had been changed. Encouraged by the success, in the beginning of the 1980s local party leaders began to trace the descendants of mixed marriages between the *Pomaks* and the Turkish-speaking Muslims. Since the two populations were highly intermingled, the scope of this operation grew steadily wider and it was expected to affect some 50,000 people by the end of December 1984 and twice that number by the following year. The elusive search for 'Bulgarian roots' was thus leading the party leaders deeper and deeper into the Turkish-speaking population (Asenov, 1996: 30-31; 70).

At the same time, in the late 1970s research in the Ottoman archives was persuading a significant number of Bulgarian historians that not only the *Pomaks* but also the majority of Turkish-speaking Muslims had descended from indigenous Bulgarian population converted to Islam during the Ottoman rule. The difference which could be observed between the two groups was explained by insisting that in the case of the *Pomaks* the assimilation into the ruling group had taken place only on the religious level, whilst the Turkish-speakers had gone further and adopted the language of their occupiers. (Petrov, 1987; Hristov, 1989; Dimitrov, 1992). These findings, which have been vigorously contested by other Bulgarian historians and by most of their Turkish colleagues (Eminov, 1997: 36-37), might have remained of purely academic interest, had not the communist party given its support to a policy of cultural revival in the late 1970s and the early 1980s. The new policy was spearheaded by the daughter of the party leader, Liudmila Zhivkova, who became a member of the Politburo (the highest decision making organ of the communist party) in 1977 and was possibly groomed for succession. Zhivkova surrounded herself with intellectuals and began emphasizing the value and potential of Bulgarian culture. Zhivkova herself was remarkably open-minded, and saw Bulgaria's cultural revival in terms of the country restoring its broken links with world culture. The fact that she was interested in oriental religions would have made her especially reluctant to suppress what she would have perceived as a valuable aspect of Bulgaria's cultural diversity. Some of her associates, however, saw the revival as an opportunity to restore Bulgaria's cultural purity, or rather to create it because Bulgaria had never been culturally homogeneous. Zhivkova's early death in 1981 resulted in the submergence of the inclusive aspect of the cultural revival, and the ascendance of the narrow-minded nationalists. This made it possible for the theory of the Bulgarian origins of the Turkish minority to become accepted as official party policy. The theory was to provide some of the motivation and the bulk of the official justification for returning the 'prodigal' Turkish 'sons' to the Bulgarian fold (Dimitrov, 1992: 158).

### **III. Communism and Nationalism**

In order to understand the political context which made the assimilation campaign possible, we have to focus our attention on the relationship between communism and nationalism in the 1970s and the 1980s. This period has usually been regarded as being dominated by the decay of the communist system, with the official norms of the system becoming of progressively decreasing relevance to its actual operation (Schöpflin, 1993). Nationalism was seen as one of the devices through which defunct communist leaders sought to fill the legitimacy gap left open by the denunciation of Stalinism in the 1950s and the failure of economic and political reforms in the 1960s. Whilst this is true in general terms, it does not describe the full complexity of the situation. In some Eastern European countries such as Bulgaria, communism reached its peak in economic terms sometime in the mid-1980s. In contrast to industrialised countries such as Czechoslovakia and East Germany, and even semi-industrialised ones such as Hungary and Poland, Bulgaria had been an overwhelmingly agrarian country at the time of the communist takeover. The development of industry, even if of an inappropriate kind, and the introduction of modern machinery in agriculture kept the economy growing and the standard of living rising until the mid-1980s. (Lampe, 1986; Crampton, 1994) The growth was not sustainable, and was to crumble with surprising rapidity after 1985. The years 1984-85 therefore represented a unique moment when the Bulgarian leadership could look back with satisfaction on decades of steady progress, and yet could not perceive the forthcoming collapse. In political terms, the leadership also had reasons for confidence. The party leader, Zhivkov, had stood at the helm for some thirty years and had eliminated all challenges to his authority. The omnipresent secret police and the well-equipped army seemed more than capable of maintaining order in the country and indeed imposing changes by force.

The nationalist traditions on which Zhivkov could draw had a number of different indeed sometimes contradictory strands. Bulgarian nationalism, in common with that of most other dominant ethnic groups in Eastern Europe, tended to define the state in exclusively ethnic terms. The state was seen being the ultimate 'property' of ethnic Bulgarians rather than as an impartial institution standing above ethnic differences. Decades of official suppression under communism kept Bulgarian nationalism at the level of the 1930s and prevented its modernisation and integration into a liberal democratic culture, as largely happened in Western Europe after the Second World War. A particularly strong feature of Bulgarian

nationalism was its acute sense of vulnerability. Five centuries of subjugation to the Ottoman empire and all the uncertainties implied in an elite-led process of national formation, the loss of territories regarded as belonging to Bulgaria by right, such as Macedonia and Thrace, the influx of refugees whose descendants formed nearly a quarter of Bulgaria's population, and powerlessness in the face of the great powers, all served to produce something resembling an inferiority complex and increase the propensity for radical solutions. An opportunity to assert Bulgarian nationhood at least on the territory which had been left to Bulgaria could not be missed if it presented itself.

It should be pointed out, on the other hand, that Bulgarian nationalism also contains long-standing traditions of toleration and has rarely supported frontal assault on the country's minorities. The sense of vulnerability could also lead to the wish to treat the minorities in a way in which the Bulgarians themselves wanted to be treated by outside powers. In the interwar period, Bulgaria's treatment of its minorities had probably been better than elsewhere in Eastern Europe. Bulgaria was remarkably free of anti-Semitism, and successfully resisted Nazi demands for the deportation of its Jews to the concentration camps. Furthermore, the consistent failure of nationalist endeavours in the past (Bulgaria had been on the losing side of the Second Balkan War of 1913, the First World War and the Second World War) created a disincentive to engage in any sort of active policy which could have unforeseen consequences. Since the Turkish minority was heavily concentrated in two regions of the country, most of the ethnic Bulgarians had no contact with it and were largely indifferent. Opinion polls seem to indicate that most Bulgarians were not so much worried about the Turkish minority and preferred not to concern themselves with it at all. (Mahon, 1996). The complexities of Bulgarian nationalism gave Zhivkov's assimilation campaign a curious shape. There was no serious attempt to mobilise the ethnic Bulgarian majority during the campaign, indeed it was only rarely mentioned by the central media. The process was almost entirely elite-led, although it probably had the passive sympathy of the ethnic majority.

#### IV. The International Factor

The international situation provided a combination of threats and opportunities which encouraged a radical approach to the 'problem' of the Turkish minority. The Soviet Union and Turkey were of key importance to Bulgaria, as respectively the country's main strategic ally and enemy. In the early 1980s the Bulgarian communist leadership found itself in a uniquely favourable situation. It could rely on the Soviet Union's military shield whilst at the same time finding itself largely free of direct Soviet control. The military might of the Soviet Union reached its peak in the early 1980s and the onset of the 'Second Cold War' made it inconceivable that the Soviet leadership would be prepared to make concessions to the West or pay much attention to the susceptibilities of Western governments. At the same time, a succession of weak leaders in Moscow in the early 1980s made it virtually impossible for the Soviet Union to undertake any active policies or exercise a close control over its satellites. At the time when the decision to rename the Turkish minority was taken and implemented (December 1984-January 1985), the Soviet leader Chernenko had entered into a prolonged illness from which he was unable to emerge in the few remaining months of his life. In such a situation, even a small satellite like Bulgaria could afford to deviate from Soviet wishes in its domestic affairs without risking a reprimand. The international repercussions of the Bulgarian move could be absorbed in the general hostility of East-West relations. Bulgaria's scrupulous (indeed slavish) pursuit of a pro-Soviet line in foreign policy gave it a degree of manoeuvre denied to the more troublesome satellites.

Turkey's behaviour also served to stimulate radical Bulgarian policies. In the interwar period, the Kemalist denunciation of the Ottoman heritage and the definition of the Turkish nation as embracing the population only of the existing Turkish state seems to have largely mollified Bulgarian fears of Turkish aspirations towards the southern Bulgarian regions where the Turkish minority is concentrated. The intense rivalry of the early Cold War years was largely attributable to the two countries' geo-political status as the front-line states of the Warsaw Pact and NATO and did not involve territorial ambitions. Turkey's interest in the Turkish and Muslim minorities in Bulgaria was motivated primarily by security and cultural considerations. Emigrants from Bulgaria to Turkey did not coalesce into effective pressure groups in their new country; the organisations that did exist were primarily cultural in orientation. (Karpat, 1990; Simsir, 1988).

It was the Turkish occupation of Northern Cyprus in 1974 that served to demonstrate to the Bulgarian leadership that Turkey's interests in minorities outside its borders was becoming more than purely cultural. NATO's inability to solve the problem could be seen as demonstrating that the geo-political alliances were not always effective in disputes between small powers. Whilst there is no evidence that the Bulgarian leadership expected an actual Turkish attack at any stage in the 1970s or the 1980s, Turkey's clear departure from the principles of Kemalism made it a potential aggressor in the eyes of the Bulgarians (Asenov, 1996: 88-91).

One important factor which heightened the perception of Turkish threat was the wave of terrorist activity which affected a number of Bulgarian cities in 1983-1984 and which the Bulgarian leadership saw as being inspired if not actually directed by Turkey. The high point was reached with the explosion at the train station in Plovdiv, Bulgaria's second largest-city, which killed a woman and wounded forty four people, and at the airport in Varna, the country's main sea port (Asenov, 1996: 67). The two explosions occurred on the same day, 30 August 1984, strengthening the impression that they were part of a co-ordinated attempt to destabilise Bulgaria. The impact of the explosions was more dramatic than it would have been in a more open society, both with regard to the regime and the general population. For the regime, these acts represented a fundamental challenge to its ability to maintain control over the country. For the population at large, the secrecy that enveloped the explosions as a result of the regime's deliberate policy of keeping them hidden from public view, made them seem even more serious than they actually were.

The mid-1980s not only raised Bulgarian fears of Turkey, but also provided a good opportunity to address the potential Turkish threat. The military coup of 1980 cast doubt on Turkey's democratic credentials and served to discredit it internationally. The strenuous and inconclusive war against Kurdish insurgents tied up a large proportion of the Turkish army, making it more difficult for Turkey to undertake active operations in other geographical regions, whilst the human rights abuses which accompanied the war could hinder Turkish efforts to garner international support when the rights of its own ethnic 'brethren' were violated in another country. Finally, there was the hope that the renaming campaign could be carried out quickly with closed frontiers, leaving little time for the Turkish leadership to learn about its true scope, let alone take effective counter-measures. Turkey was indeed largely caught unawares by Zhivkov's sudden move and awaited until the summer of 1985 before

embarking on an all-out campaign of condemnation in international forums (Simsir, 1987 and 1990).

## **V. The Decision and Its Implementation**

The factors outlined above combined in 1984 to lead Zhivkov to adopt the policy of forcible renaming. He took the decision on his own, without consulting his colleagues in the Politburo, nominally the Party's supreme policy-making body. The documents available in the Communist Party's Central Party Archive (it is of course possible, and likely, that important documents were destroyed in the years immediately after 1989 by implicated party officials) show that the first time the question was considered by the Politburo was on 18 January 1985. That was three weeks after the campaign had started on the night of 24-25 December 1984. By 18 January, the names of 310,000 people in the southern Bulgarian regions of Haskovo and Kurdzali, which had the highest concentration of ethnic Turks and were close to the Turkish border, had already been changed. The Politburo was thus only in position to recognise what by that time had become a *fait accompli*. The only real decision facing the Politburo was whether to extend the assimilation campaign to other parts of the country with substantial Turkish population. Presented with rosy reports on the success of the renaming in southern Bulgaria, the Politburo decided to authorise the continuation of the campaign until all the Turkish population had been assimilated. The records of this Politburo meeting also give us the only direct indication of the motives which guided Zhivkov's decision. The most important reason was the alleged disloyalty of the Turkish population, which was seen as inevitable as long as they retained a separate ethnic identity. Zhivkov said: "When we began the policy of developing the backward regions along the southern frontier in the early 1980s, whole Turkish villages from the interior of the country, which had a very good life, wanted to go to the frontier. We know why they were interested in the frontier." Whilst the Turks' stubborn refusal to yield to the campaign of gradual assimilation provided the main motive, Turkey's relative weakness provided the main opportunity. Zhivkov identified two important factors causing Turkey's weakness. The first was the conflict with Greece, which limited Turkey's options elsewhere. The second was Turkey's domestic instability, as shown by the struggle against the Kurds and the numerous explosions that had taken place in some of the largest Turkish cities. Zhivkov claimed that "it is not in Turkey's interest to make much noise, as they have a whole army fighting against the Kurds." Turkey's own repressive

policies made protest against Bulgaria's actions rather difficult: "Unlike them (the Turks), we are not fighting a war, we are only changing peoples' names. Anybody can change their name, there is nothing exceptional about that." (Trifonov, 1993: 222). To summarise, Zhivkov saw, at that point in time, a possibility to 'solve' once and for all a 'problem' that would endanger Bulgaria's security for generations to come, if left unattended. This interpretation is confirmed by Niko Iahiel, a key member of Zhivkov's personal *cabinet*. He quotes Zhivkov as saying that he had decided to take personal responsibility for such a 'momentous' action: "If I leave the question to the next General Secretary (of the Communist Party), years would have to pass before he would become strong enough to take such a step". (Iahiel, 1997: 258).

Zhivkov's decision to take personal charge of the campaign reflected the extent to which by 1984 he had become the law unto himself, without being subject to control even by his closest colleagues in the Politburo. The Politburo had lost its significance as the effective centre of policy-making. Zhivkov did not need to seek its authorisation, he could simply sidestep it. That option had the added advantage, from Zhivkov's point of view, of depriving members of the Politburo who may have had doubts about the wisdom of the policy from voicing their concerns. One indication that not all members of the Politburo shared Zhivkov's opinion is the fact that on the last occasion before January 1985 on which the Politburo discussed the situation of the Bulgarian Turks, in July 1984, it still decided in favour of the policy of gradual assimilation that had been followed since the late 1950s. One particular opponent of the 'renaming campaign' was likely to have been Stoian Mihailov, Secretary of the Communist Party's Central Committee responsible for the party's ideological and cultural policy. A report prepared in February 1980 by the Central Committee's 'Propaganda and Agitation' section which Mihailov was overseeing, considered and rejected the forcible change of names as a senseless and counterproductive policy. It noted that such a step would result in "extremely serious difficulties for us" and would not be understood by "the fraternal parties, most notably, the CPSU". By sidestepping the Politburo, Zhivkov reduced to the minimum the possibilities of disagreement, as well as making it difficult for any concerned party leaders to exert pressure on him through the Soviet Union. Once the decision had been taken and implemented in southern Bulgaria, there was no danger of bringing the matter to the Politburo, as it could do little but express its approval of what was presented as a successful policy. In the January 1985 meeting, everybody fell into line. The Central Committee plenary session taking place on 12 and 13 February 1985 i.e. after the 'renaming' had been extended to all parts of the country, was even enthusiastic in its approval of Zhivkov's policy.

The actual process of 'renaming' involved submitting an application to the relevant local authority 'asking' to change one's Turkish name to an ethnic Bulgarian one. In order to ensure compliance, teams of party activists, policemen and civil servants went house to house soliciting 'applications'. The villages were surrounded by tanks and personnel carriers and cut off from the outside world. Borders were closed and entry by unauthorized personnel (especially foreigners) into the campaign zone was prohibited. There was significant resistance on the part of the Turkish minority, but it tended to be sporadic and disorganised (Amnesty International, 1986). Stunned by suddenness of the state's decision and faced with seemingly overwhelming odds, most Turks had no choice but to accept the changes (Asenov, 1996: 102-105; Gocheva, 1994).

The overnight renaming was backed up by a package of measures in the course of the next few years. Speaking Turkish in public places was banned and fines were imposed on the transgressors. Religious activity was heavily restricted and in many localities the mosques were closed altogether. Circumcision and other Muslim rites were declared criminal (Karpat, 1990; Simsir, 1988).

Whilst during the actual renaming the press was largely silent, in the subsequent years it was flooded with material seeking to prove the Bulgarian descent of the Turks and the voluntary nature of what began to be called the 'revival process'. Over 20,000 Turks were compelled to issue declarations proclaiming their new-found Bulgarian identity. The army, schools and economic enterprises did their best to inculcate 'patriotic values' in their charges. The work was directed both by the respective ministries and by specially-set departments of the regional party committees. Given the all-embracing nature of the communist state, the net cast over the renamed Turks was thorough indeed (Asenov, 1996: 106-107).

The result of the campaign was, not surprisingly, to stimulate the growth of national feeling amongst the Turkish minority. The reports of the political intelligence services indicate that whilst there was outward compliance with the new status quo, the Turks hung stubbornly to their identity. Only Turkish was spoken at home and even newly born babies were given informal Muslim names. Circumcision continued to be practised, emerging as an important gesture of defiance. The official ceremonies were evaded by all possible means whilst the flood of propaganda served to irritate rather than to convince. The previous policy reversals

induced scepticism in the durability of the current state policy, a doubt continuously reinforced by information reaching the minority from Turkish and Western radio broadcasts which the Bulgarian regime never entirely succeed in jamming (Karpat, 1990; Simsir, 1990).

## VI. A Full Circle?

Zhivkov's 'achievement' was clearly vulnerable, and started to unravel within a few years as the factors which has given him his false confidence began to change. The Bulgarian economy declined with astonishing speed, with foreign dept increasing by some \$2 billion a year after 1985. Political stability was undermined by Gorbachev's reforms in domestic and foreign policy which were bound sooner or later to reach Bulgaria. The country's reputation in the West plummeted, a development made even more serious by the increasing influence the Western powers were acquiring over Bulgaria, as a consequence both of its indebtedness and the gradual withdrawal of the Soviet Union from Eastern Europe.

The breakthrough came in May 1989. As part of Gorbachev's new world order, Bulgaria had signed the Vienna convention on human rights and made its provisions part of its domestic law in early 1989. The government could no longer deny its citizens the right to travel without restrictions. In late May 1989, there was a wave of demonstrations in the Turkish minority areas. Whilst the initial protests were suppressed, with some loss of life, coercion was no longer sustainable.

Faced with the emergency, Zhivkov decided to open the borders and to allow and indeed encourage the most active members of the minority to emigrate. (Trifonov, 1993: 223). The decision to let go of the 'native' Bulgarians was an implicit admission of the fraudulent nature of the 'revival' process. Instead of solving Zhivkov's problems, opening of borders only exacerbated them. The numbers of migrants soon exceeded expectations and passed beyond 300,000. Turkey's decision to close its border in August 1989 left thousands of people in a no man's land, having sold their possessions and yet deprived of the possibility to emigrate. The pictures of helpless refugees stranded on the border flashed across Western television screens and served to discredit the regime even further. Soviet efforts to resolve the crisis through the shuttle diplomacy of its ambassador to Ankara, Chernishev, failed to achieve any results, leaving the Soviet leadership more convinced than ever that Zhivkov had outlived his day.

(Trifonov, 1993: 223). In the autumn of 1989, Moscow began to give illicit support to a group in the Politburo which was turning increasingly against Zhivkov. Significantly enough, the lead was taken by the foreign minister Mladenov who was more aware than any other member of the party leadership of the international repercussions of the crisis.

Internally, Zhivkov's impulsive and apparently inexplicable decision in May 1989 destroyed the aura of invincibility which he had build up over the preceding three decades. Ethnic Bulgarians found themselves asked to leave their homes and places of work at short notice in order to replace the departing Turks. In spite of a real sense of betrayal, which was of course also encouraged by the official media, the overwhelming reaction was one of bewilderment rather than nationalist mobilisation. The dissident groups then in the process of formation used the debacle to criticize the government in the open, and established links with imprisoned Turkish intellectuals (Asenov, 1996: 121).

Zhivkov's ouster in a palace coup in November 1989 marked the beginning of the end of the communist system. His 'revival process' was one of the first to go. In December 1989 the new party leadership denounced the campaign as a deviation from 'Leninist' norms (as well as from the Bulgarian constitution) and gave the Turkish minority the right to restore their former names (Central Committee of the BCP, 1989). Curiously enough, it was the reversal of assimilation which provoked the first and the only spontaneous reaction from the ethnic Bulgarians, far in excess of what had occurred in support of the campaign a few years ago (Karadzhov, 1995). This can be explained by a number of factors: the passive nature of Bulgarian nationalism, reluctant to undertake active measures yet extremely vulnerable to any perceived threat, manipulation by the former party *nomenklatura* then in the process of losing their jobs, as well as from people who had been deeply implicated in the campaign or had acquired property from the departing Turks at rock-bottom prices. Furthermore, the sudden dawn of democracy might have encouraged people to engage in protests against the government regardless of the reason, just in order to demonstrate their new-found power. Faced with these protests, the Communist Party's top leadership dithered indecisively for a few weeks, torn between the wish to maintain the policy of allowing the Turks to reclaim their names in order to make possible Bulgaria's return to the international community, and the temptation to exploit nationalism in order to keep themselves in power, as communists in other Balkan countries had done. The communist leadership eventually decided in favour of the former option, and their centralised power was sufficient to bring the local party

*nomenklatura* to heel. This episode demonstrated both the potential temptation of nationalism for the Bulgarian communist leaders, and their ultimate ability to overcome it in favour of their strategic choice of Europeanising Bulgaria. The same pattern was to be repeated on a number of occasions in the course of the 1990s. The anti-communist opposition, the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF), has largely avoided tinkering with nationalism, partly because it has sought to legitimise itself by rejecting the legacy of the past, and partly because it has hoped to gain the allegiance of the Turkish minority or at least to build an alliance with a party representing it.

The acceptance of ethnic diversity by the two major political forces in Bulgaria, more grudging in the case of the communists (who changed their name in April 1990 to the Bulgarian Socialist Party), and more sincere in the case of the UDF, created conditions for dealing with ethnic problems within a democratic political framework. Indeed, it is possible to argue that the very excess of Zhivkov's decision and the disastrous consequences that followed served to inoculate the ethnic Bulgarian majority against oppression of the minorities. As far as the Turkish minority itself is concerned, the unity it found in 1985-89 has provided a basis for the virtually unchallenged acceptance of the Movement of Rights and Freedoms as its legitimate representative in the Bulgarian party system. MRF's control of the minority has allowed its leaders to pursue realistic and flexible policies in the defence of the minority's interests. These interests themselves have not been purely ethnic, and at some points have been dominated by socio-economic concerns. In 1992, for example, the MRF switched its allegiance from the UDF to the BSP in response to the latter's more gradual policies of transition which appealed to the overwhelmingly poor and rural constituents of the MRF. The 4% threshold required by Bulgarian electoral law for party representation in parliament has made it possible for the MRF to emerge as the third strongest party in Bulgaria and on occasions hold the balance of power between the BSP and the UDF. The MRF's switch of coalition partners in 1992, for example, was sufficient to force a change of government. The MRF position in the Bulgarian political system has by no means remained unchallenged. For a number of years after its creation, the party was repeatedly attacked as unconstitutional because it allegedly fostered ethnic divisions. The constitution of 1991 contains a provision prohibiting the formation of parties created on an ethnic basis. This clause was, however, effectively nullified by a decision of the Constitutional Court of April 1992. The Court ruled that the existence of the MRF did not contravene the constitution by pointing to the fact that the party did not limit its membership to a particular ethnic group nor

defined its aims solely in terms of defending the interests of that group (Stoichev, 1993: 264-279). Whilst coming short of recognising the rights of minorities to form their own parties, the Court's judgement effectively brought to an end the attempts to question the legality of the MRF, and confirmed its place as a key actor in the Bulgarian political system.

A number of ethnic tensions remain in Bulgaria. The desperate economic position of the Turkish minority has become a serious structural problem, and attempts to deal with it have generally been ineffective. Whilst ethnic identity has been recognised, opportunities for the development of ethnic culture have remained limited. Both the BSP and the UDF have been committed to universal compulsory education in Bulgarian, although they have been prepared to tolerate the teaching of Turkish as a voluntary option. The progress that Bulgaria has made since 1989 lays not so much in resolving these tensions, but primarily in the fact that they can now be articulated within a democratic political framework.

## **VII. Conclusion**

The assimilation campaign of 1984-85 was partially brought about by the process of modernisation and the shift of the definition of the Bulgarian nation from language and religion towards common descent. Whilst these factors lend support to modernist and primordialist explanations of the assimilation, the critical actor shaping the policy process was the state. It was the state that formulated the problem of modernisation not simply in terms of equalising the life-chances of Turks and ethnic Bulgarians, but also in terms of achieving cultural integration between them, which to all intents and purposes amounted to the assimilation of the Turks to the dominant Bulgarian culture. Similarly, it was the state that made the academic findings on the 'biological' roots of the Bulgarian nation, which were themselves of contestable scholarly value, into the basis of a new primordialist definition of the Bulgarian nation. Finally, it was the combination of political threats and opportunities faced by the state, both domestically and internationally, which made the assimilation campaign possible. There was a false 'window of opportunity' in 1984-85 when the economic, political and international resources of communist Bulgaria seemed to be at their peak and encouraged an attempt to 'solve' once and for all what was seen as the increasingly intractable problem of the Turkish minority, which had proved irresolvable by all other means. The structure of the communist political machinery, combining an ambitious bureaucracy at the

low and middle levels, ready and able to rush blindly into radical policies, with increasing fragmentation at the top allowing an octogenarian leader to take momentous decisions without consulting even his closest colleagues, proved a combustible mixture. The pointless and faintly ridiculous exercise indicates that ethnic excesses tend to occur when the dominant ethnic group feels both a perception of strength and vulnerability. Either of those on their own was not likely to produce the seemingly unstoppable escalation of assimilative measures seen in communist Bulgaria.

The assimilation campaign also demonstrates that whilst the state may try to shape social processes, and indeed succeed in doing so for a limited period, the fundamental bases of collective identification prove remarkably resistant to change. The state-sponsored 'discovery' of their Bulgarian roots was rather unconvincing to the Turks, given their separate language, religion, culture and historical traditions. Similarly, whilst the Turks participated in the modernisation of Bulgarian society, they were not prepared to pay for that with the abandonment of their identity. Indeed, the attempt to assimilate them by force achieved the opposite result, by giving them a sharply-defined awareness of their separate identity and reversing the partial assimilation that had taken place in the previous two and a half decades.

There is little chance of a recurrence of the assimilation policy, as the factors which brought it about in the mid-1980s are no longer applicable. The modernisation of Bulgarian society would of course continue, but socio-economic progress is no longer seen as requiring cultural homogeneity. Indeed, the emerging European norms on minority rights which Bulgaria is increasingly adopting, regard ethnic diversity as a positive value. Primordial definitions of the nation, regardless of whether they are based on language, religion or descent, are becoming increasingly irrelevant as the definition of the Bulgarian nation is shifting away from ethnicity and towards a polity based on civic rights. The assimilation campaign of 1984-85 is itself acting as a restraining influence, as its dismal failure proved to the ethnic Bulgarian majority that extremist policies tend to be self-defeating.

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