CHAPTER 2

Nationalism and Violence: The Case of Pomak Christianization (Pokrŭstvane) in Bulgaria, 1912–1913*

The history of forced assimilation is the defining aspect of Pomak heritage in Bulgaria, and it is the ideology of violent nationalism that underwrote it. The young nation-state’s need to affirm sovereignty and forge respectable national identity required the rejection of the Ottoman-Islamic past, as well as the purging of everything reminiscent of the former “oppressor’s” dominance over the perceived Bulgarian “homeland.” In unison with this sentiment, Bulgaria immediately singled out the Muslim Pomaks for conversion to Orthodox Christianity during the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913 because, as a sizable minority group, their assimilation fulfilled two vital objectives. On one hand, it enabled the fledgling nation-state’s claim to all territories settled by Bulgarian-speaking Muslims based on language commonality. On the other hand, it helped diffuse the freshly forged Bulgarian-Christian national identity to newly conquered populations, notably to the Pomaks. Ultimately, various Bulgarian regimes, like many others, consistently and effectively exploited the ideology of nationalism to achieve political and cultural consolidation, including through violence.

This chapter enfolds the historical picture of the pokrŭstvane based on two primary sources: existing documents dating back to the time of occurrence, and surviving Pomak oral histories. Much of the first-hand evidence I draw from the collection of archival records published under the editorship of the Bulgarian scholars Velichko Georgiev and Stayko Trifonov, as well as from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace’s Report on the Balkan Wars of 1914 (hereafter, the Carnegie Report). Organized in chronological order, Georgiev and Trifonov’s volume effectively reveals the pokrŭstvane as a premeditated and hushed affair in which ecclesiastical, state, and military authorities participated directly. The Carnegie Report, on the other hand, illuminates the broader Balkan conflict and reveals the picture of violence committed by all belligerents against civilian populations. (Controversial today for its politi-

cally incorrect language, my use of the Carnegie Report is limited to its well-documented witness reports of violence committed by the nationals of all belligerent nations against “enemy” nationals.) Surviving Pomak oral stories, for their part, attest to the widespread murder of Pomaks in the (Western) Rhodopes, committed mostly by insurgent Christian bands with the active support of the regular army. Ultimately, even though direct admission of killing is conspicuously absent from the communication exchange and documented meetings of ecclesiastical authorities, religious missions, and military officials in available Bulgarian sources (for reasons explained in this chapter), evidence to that effect could be gleaned from the Carnegie Report and from existing oral histories.

The chapter further analyzes this first comprehensive Christianization (pokrŭstvane) of the Pomaks in Bulgaria on the premise of nationalism and violence (the same as nationalism of violence), which sets the ideological context for the rest of this book. The nationalism premise, however, first and foremost requires an explanation of just what accounts for the preponderance of violence in the Bulgarian (and Balkan) national context. The next several pages will explore the definition of nationalism and its specific Balkan application before detailing the pokrŭstvane of 1912–1913 as the first comprehensive step in Bulgaria’s attempt to appropriate Pomak heritage in the process of nation-building.

The Nationalism Premise

What I have come to regard as the classical definition of nationalism, established by twentieth-century theoreticians, describes the phenomenon as eighteenth-century, West-European popular struggle against dynastic absolutism and revolutionary drive for increased participation of the people in state government.1 The early stages of nationalism were marked by civil revolutions in two of the most preeminent West European monarchies, England and France. While the English Civil War of the mid-seventeenth century, whereby Parliament challenged and effectively curtailed the authority of King Charles I,

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