The vŭzhroditelen protses (commonly translated as the revival process or rebirth) was the last forced assimilation of Pomaks in Bulgaria, and, for the first time, it targeted the Turkish-speaking Muslims, too. Because the Turkish vŭzhroditelen protses of 1984–1985 was much larger in scale, it ultimately obscured the Pomak name changing of 1972–1974. The following two chapters deal exclusively with the Pomak vŭzhroditelen protses, limiting the Turks's assimilation to contextual reference only. Nevertheless, it is my hope that the revivalist campaign against the Turkish Muslims at least receives an adequate introduction in the next two narratives. While the nature and methods of both assimilations are identical, there is one significant difference. The first campaign targeted a smaller and ethnically ambiguous community in comparison—the Pomak Muslims, who shared linguistic ties with Bulgaria’s majority. The second one was directed against a highly defined and substantially larger minority group in Bulgaria, with strongly developed ethnic self-identity—the Turkish Muslims. Whereas chapter three is preoccupied with the vŭzhroditelen protses as a totalitarian policy, political persecution, and Pomak resistance as a collective experience, chapter four focuses of the life and struggles of Ramadan Runtov, a vocal anti-revivalist, political prisoner, and Pomak expatriate to Turkey.

Policy and Ideology of the Vŭzhroditelen Protses

Pre-communist Bulgaria was a turbulent place for the Rhodopean Muslims. After the grueling pokrŭstvane of 1912–1913, the Pomak hopes for a peaceful existence within their new country vanished completely. For a brief while, however, there were no forced conversions. In fact, during the Agrarian government of Alexander Stamboliyski, the Muslims of Bulgaria, and particularly the Pomaks, came to enjoy a substantial freedom of religion and cultural expression. But this period was short-lived and ended with the overthrow of Stamboliyski’s cabinet in June 1923. The situation became especially critical after 1934, when a military junta came to power. Toward the end of the 1930s

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1 See chapter two.
and until 1944, a new humiliating pokrŭstvane of the Pomaks was underway. Unlike the tightly organized and sweeping Christianization of 1912–1913, this one was sporadic, patchy, and more propaganda-oriented. As a result, many Muslims were able to avoid the renaming altogether simply by going into hiding or learning to quickly slip away every time pokrŭstvane operatives showed up in their villages. A number of Muslims also fled to Turkey to permanently evade the conversion. After the communist takeover in Bulgaria of 1944–1945, the pokrŭstvane stopped. Moreover, within the first few years of the new regime, the political situation of the Pomaks improved significantly. In the first decade of their rule, the communist authorities were politically and culturally accommodating to the Muslims. “The Party,” as the regime came to identify itself, needed all support it could get to consolidate its power. The Pomaks, like most Muslims, were a relatively easy win. Any regime willing to be tolerant of them would have had their backing given the history of oppression under previous governments. Understandably, the communists seized the opportunity of that crucial moment. They took care to expressly incorporate provisions for the freedom of conscience and religion in the new constitution, adopted by the National Assembly in 1947. It became known as the Dimitrov Constitution, named after the then supreme communist leader Georgy Dimitrov. Ironically, while these constitutional guarantees were reaffirmed in the Law on Religious Denominations of 1949, all religious schools—until then the traditional form of schooling for all Muslims—were being shut down the very same year. Moreover, the second constitution adopted by the communists in 1971—at the zenith of the Pomak vŭzhroditele protses—restated the freedom-of-conscience-and-creed guarantees (Article 53). Article 35(2) of this constitution specifically stipulated that “no privileges or limitation of rights based on nationality, origin, creed, sex, education, social and material status is allowed.” Simultaneously, the Bulgarian Penal Code criminalized the instigation of hatred on religious grounds. Constitutional guarantees and criminal liability notwithstanding, laws amounted to nothing once the regime had determined to pursue the vŭzhroditele protses.

As early as the mid-1950s, the communist politics in Bulgaria began to change. By then, “The Party” had stabilized its control over the country and could comfortably consider a reversal of minority policy, especially in regard to the Muslims. The emerging communist nationalism saw the large number of people professing Islam (roughly a fifth of about seven million) in the country as a malignant growth within—what had to be—the healthy, ethnically

2 Cited in Ali Eminov, Turkish and Other Muslim Minorities in Bulgaria (New York: Routledge, 1997), 52.