

## ISLAM, THE BALKANS, IDENTITY

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**Abstract:** *Even before the conquest of the Balkan peninsula was completed by the end of the 15 century, the Ottoman Empire was faced with the need to increase the Muslim component of the local population so as to affirm Ottoman power in the new lands. The central authorities, the army and the clergy began to systematically implement a policy of Islamization. Colonization and migration were among the factors that led to the settlement of a numerous Muslim population. Conversion to Islam was linked to certain advantages, such as pardon for violations of law, the distribution of offices and positions, assistance for impoverished new Muslims, inclusion in Ottoman military organizations such as the spahi, the janissaries, the yaya (peasant infantry), the muslem (autonomous peasant cavalry), the akinji (advance cavalry), the yuruks, etc. There was a merging of ethnic and religious identity stemming from the way in which the Empire was organized and from the importance of religion for the exercise of power. Religious affiliation became an ethnonym of power, and power was in Muslim hands. Evidently, the causes and factors of the conversion to Islam of part of the Balkan population have not been definitively clarified and will remain debatable if the explanation is looked for in "coercion" alone or in "voluntary choice" alone. Perhaps the causes might be related to the internal political strategy of the Ottoman state with regard to the numerous population of the Balkans as well as to the medieval religiousness of the peasants and the incapacity of the Orthodox Church, in its subordinate position, to maintain their faith and provide them with material assistance.*

**KEYWORDS:** ISLAM, BALKANS, IDENTITY, ETHNOS, RELIGION, ISLAMIZATION, COLONIZATION, MIGRATION

During the period of Ottoman rule, a numerous Muslim population settled in the Bulgarian lands. The settlers included military contingents, administrative and religious officials, nomadic pastoral tribes, etc. The new migrants settled in cities and villages. Because of this migration, the Muslim population on the Balkan peninsula, including the Bulgarian lands, grew and in places become the majority. The spread of Islam in the Balkans led to changes mostly in the religious structure of the population rather than the ethnic. The statistical data, though limited, leave no doubt that the Muslim population was constantly growing in absolute numbers and in relative proportion. Various explanations have been offered for this growth. A considerable number of scholars from Bulgaria and other Balkan countries ascribed this trend – and some still do – to forced conversion to Islam. This was the official and dominant hypothesis at the time of the so-called Revival Process, when the policy of the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP) required that historians emphasize, by all means, the coercive nature of the imposition of Islam. The shortage of source materials facilitated the assertion of this hypothesis. By contrast, the lack of first-hand testimony regarding mass-scale forced conversion pursued through a purposeful, specially prepared campaign, has led a number of authors to the conclusion that the spread of Islam may have partially occurred on a voluntary basis, and repeatedly over long periods of history. The Ottoman registers indicate that adherents of heretical religious movements were the first local residents to convert to Islam. The new religion also spread successfully among those who continued to be under the influence of paganism (Yalamov 2002). This view became dominant in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Based on new source materials, certain Bulgarian and foreign scholars have argued that Islam was embraced by the local population for a variety of reasons, including by personal choice of individuals, whole families, and groups of people in a village or town. The question as to the motives, however, remains disputed. More than a few historians attribute the change of religion only to the economic interests of individuals or entire social strata: specifically, the new converts could expect to share the privileged status enjoyed by Muslims in Ottoman society. Other researchers believe it would be mistaken to overemphasize the economic factors. "... The economic argument regarding conversion to Islam must be accepted with great reservation /.../ In any case, other factors were also involved. In the same context, we should not forget that, in the course of their crushing victories over the Christian armies of Europe, and especially after the fall of the then powerful Hungarian kingdom in 1526, the prestige of the Ottoman Empire grew very highly. Many must have thought that God was showing His favour towards Islam, and so it would be better to go

over to the side of the more powerful. Moreover, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Islam was 'fashionable'" (Kiel 1998: 76).

Until the end of the 1980s, the "correct" theory prevailed among scholars, according to which Islamization in the Rhodope mountain region had been either imposed by force or came as the result of colonization directed by the Sultans (who brought over shepherds from Turkey, known as Yuruks, as well as slaves), as well as the emigration of Christian population. Although colonization was one method used by the Ottoman authorities to change the ethnic structure of the Balkans, the latest studies of sources show this factor was on too small a scale to be the chief cause of Islamization of the Balkans. Moreover, as Maria Todorova has pointed out, the settlement of population coming from Anatolia occurred chiefly between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century, while the number of Muslims continued to grow after that time (Todorova 1987).

The trend of adopting Islam by the local Rhodopes population, and its causes, are a difficult object of study; much remains unclear about it. According to Antonina Zhelyazkova, it began with individual cases of conversion as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century, gradually grew during the whole of the 17<sup>th</sup>, becoming especially strong in the second half of that century, and continued into the 18<sup>th</sup> century. At present, scholars acknowledge that in some cases, conversions to Islam were voluntary, being motivated by economic and social considerations: Muslims were exempt from tax burdens; moreover, conversion opened the way to social prosperity (Zhelyazkova 1990). Consequently, it would be more correct to refer to indirect coercion through economic pressure. Some forms of this pressure included: the slave trade in war captives, the forced recruitment of certain subordinate groups into the Ottoman Army, the well-known tithes, and the so-called *devshirme* (the practice of taking boys from the families of Christian residents of the Balkan provinces, for service in the so-called Janissary infantry units). But even these elements of Ottoman policy were not unequivocally perceived as negative by the population. Some families willingly gave their children to serve in the army, seeing in this an opportunity for rising in the social hierarchy.

Economic incentives played an important role. During the *first period*, they were an influential factor mostly for the local upper class. Quite a few Bulgarian boyars converted to Islam, in order to preserve possession of their estates, and seeped into the ruling class of the Ottoman Empire. Among them was Alexander Shishman, son of the last Bulgarian tsar, Ivan Shishman. Under the name Suleiman Pasha, Alexander was appointed vali (governor) of the Aydin Province. According to an unwritten rule, many offices and lucrative posts in the state hierarchy were assigned to aristocrats who had converted to Islam. During the 638 years of Ottoman rule,

there were, in all, 215 grand viziers (a position that corresponded to that of prime minister). Of these, only 78 were Turks; the other 137 were Christians who had converted to Islam (Yalamov 2002).

During the *second period*, however, a growing number of subjects converted for social-economic reasons. There was inequality among Muslims. The participation of non-Muslims in government was strongly restricted. Christians paid *jizya*, the annual per capita tax, and during a certain period, the *devshirme* (blood tax) as well. Conversion to Islam not only exempted people from additional taxes but also opened access to higher social ranks and a better economic status. The desire for a better life motivated quite a few local Christians to convert. Ottoman *defterleri* (registers) dating from 1679-1680 indicate that in the *Odrin* region alone, in just one year, 379 people converted to Islam. In many of the formal applications, passing over to Islam was grounded on the desire for appointments to official positions or recruitment in the Ottoman army (Yalamov 2002). Many such individual applications are preserved in the Ottoman archive collection of the Bulgarian National Library Saints Cyril and Methodius. For its part, the central government indirectly encouraged this trend, but in the period between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century, it did not pursue a targeted policy of Islamization, because it was not in its economic interest to impose the religion on a mass scale.

Here are some examples of the social-economic motivation underlying the voluntary conversion to Islam in the 17<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> century (*Ottoman Sources... 1990*):

In a number of "applications", the applicants request to be assigned some official state position, or to be included in a military unit as a reward for having entered the "true faith". Neither the form nor the contents of these documents permit us to think they were written personally by the converts. Such applications were written by experienced scribes and schooled clerks from the chancelleries of the capital city, by the vizier *divans* or at least by the *cadi* offices. In the functional aspect, these documents are not exactly applications but rather serve as a start of a finance-related correspondence for justifying expenditures from the state treasury. They represent forms written according to certain rules, upon which the grand vizier and *bash-defterdar* (head-treasurer) had to pass a resolution in order to legalize the expenditure of state money.

*Statement on acceptance into Islam on behalf of a boy from Yambol*

Your Majesty, happy and magnanimous, my Sultan. May health be with you!

I am a Bulgarian boy from Yambol. My two brothers converted to Islam. I came before your fortunate person so that you may likewise award me, Your slave, with the honour of adopting Islam. Be so kind as to grant me clothes. The order is that of my Sultan.

Your servant, the new Muslim.

New entries and resolutions on the document

1. [*Resolution of the grand vizier*]: True! Clothes should be given to a young boy, a new Muslim, as is the custom. This is an order!...

9 jemazi-yul evvel 1097 (3. IV. 1686)

*Statement on acceptance into Islam on behalf of a boy from the Kaza of Ruse*

Your Majesty, happy and blessed, my Sultan. May health be with you!

I, Your slave, am a poor man from the Kaza of Ruschuk. In my native place, the desire was born in me to become a Muslim, and that is why I came to You. My request is to be granted the honour to adopt Islam in the presence of You, the Sultan. Grant that a set of clothes be allotted to me, as well as a bit of livelihood. I beg for your decision. The order belongs to Your Majesty, my brilliant Sultan.

Your slave, Abdullah.

Additional entries and resolutions on the document

1. [*Resolution of the grand vizier*]: True! The cost of the clothes is to be given to a boy awarded the honour of embracing Islam. Order!

16 muharrem 1124 (24. II. 1712) r.

2. [*Resolution of the bash defterdar*]: The receivable bill is to be issued!

3. [*Note from the Chief Accountancy*]: The receivable bill was issued on 16 muharrem 1124 (24. II. 1712).

*Protocol from the session of the majlis of Vratsa, concerning the entry into Islam of a Bulgarian girl from the village of Tlachane*

Tsena, daughter of Kara Tsono, a resident of the village of Tlachane, kaza of Ivrazhda, voluntarily declared that she adopts Islam of her own will in order to marry at her own desire Suleiman, son of Mehme, from the same village. Questioned by the majlis in the presence of the notables, she confirmed that she would marry the above-mentioned, that she would obey him and, adopting the true faith, [henceforth] would be called Hatidje.

On this occasion, we prepared and dared to bring to your knowledge a modest protocol. To be decided.

5 djemazi-yul evvel [12]70 [3. VII. 1854].

*Protocol from the session of the majlis of Vratsa, concerning the entry into Islam of a Bulgarian girl from the village of Malo Peshtene, kaza of Vratsa*

The twenty-year old Maria, daughter of Yole, resident of the village of Malo Peshtene, kaza of Ivrazhda, came to our humble majlis and stated that, glory be to Allah, she would take the righteous divine path. She was conferred the honour of the true faith, and adopting the name of Ayshe, was married to Podara Ibrahim, of the same village, who verbally expressed his consent [*for this*].

In composing this humble protocol, we dare to announce the event, as required by the high command on these matters. To be decided!

27 djemzi-yul evvel 1270 [25. XII. 1854] r.

*Protocol on the adoption of Islam by girls from the village of Ostrets, Lovech district, and from Troyan*

The 19-year old daughter of Denko, from the village of Ustorch, kaza of Lofcha, and the 20-year old daughter of Velichko, from the village of Toriyan in the same district, declared their desire to adopt Islam according to the Muslim rite. In fulfillment of the necessary formalities, the two girls were sent, together with their parents, to the district administration of Lovech. After questioning was conducted, it was established that the adoption of Islam occurred without the exercise of coercion. Despite the advice of the parents and the representatives of the metropolitan bishop that the two girls should not adopt Islam, the act of adoption of Islam was performed and the daughter of Denko received the Muslim name Hatidje, while Velichko's girl, Fatma.

14 djemazi-yul ahar [16. VII. 1876] r.

*Letter to the district administration of Tarnovo concerning the adoption of Islam by an under-age girl from Sevlievo*

To the district administration of Tarnova

The girl Kira, resident of the kaza of Servi, wished to become a Muslim and for that reason, a letter was sent here, №797 of 5 safer (12)92 (28. III. 1876).

Since it became clear that she is still a child that has not reached mature age, the Administrative Council of the willayah announces and reminds that it is natural that such persons not adopt Islam. It is brought to your attention that [the girl] needs to be returned and to adopt the religion she desires when she has attained maturity. This time, due to the indicated reasons, she was sent back.

[*Note*]: Written on 2 shaban 1293 [23. VIII. 1876]

*Instruction on cessation of infringement upon the property, life and honour of Christian subjects of the Ottoman Empire*

Your Excellency! It is known that, in order to set European public opinion in opposition to Islam, our enemies are

daily, everywhere presenting to the world groundless, meaningless, and false communications about what Muslims have done, or will do, to Christians, and spread these throughout Europe in the newspapers. It is needless to explain how much the scoundrels who are not ashamed to say such pure lies would exaggerate the smallest dispute or brawl between Muslims and Christians, and if, by mishap, a Christian be killed in such a brawl, they would even provoke an international trial through exaggerations and fabricated stories. Since the times are complicated, and the conditions not particularly favourable, the situation of our state is difficult and hard, which is why it is necessary to seek new approaches. Thus, it is very important and necessary precisely at this moment, more than ever, that the Muslim population, and especially the Circassians, keep still. Ignorant Muslim youths and Circassians in towns and villages, who are unaware of their own situation or that of the state, should not perpetrate arbitrary violence against the Christian population, not infringe upon the property, life and honour of Christians! Muslims and Christians must live in mutual understanding!

Foremost, the current situation should be very clearly explained to the district governors of the kazas, who in turn should explain to those who understand the situation of Islam and the reasonable notables in cities and villages, and through them, to the ignorant and thoughtless Muslims. The high-ranking persons must personally make the round of the kazas! Let them clarify with the most forceful words to the district governors, to the enlightened notables in the kazas, the police chiefs, that, at present, any small incident would draw upon the state and the Muslim nation the burden of great justifications and excuses. *[Let them be advised]* to refrain from such things. The district governors should also make a round of Muslim villages in order to convince with the same forceful words the notables of the villages, so that, with their collaboration, some evil-doers in the villages would not remain without supervision. The responsible and high-ranking persons are informed of the need that all this be done and the present order is delivered to them. It is the order of His Majesty.

On 10 sheffal 1293 [16. X. 1876]

*Undated, report on adoption of Islam by an indebted Bulgarian family*

Magnanimous, grand, powerful and great benefactor, my wise master! Long live Your happy imperial highness!

Having first of all prayed to God, now I make bold to care about my well-being in addressing this plea to You. My husband – Your humble servant – some time ago joined the ranks of those who confess the true faith. That is why I too – Your humble slave – with God's blessings want to achieve the same. I came, guided by the wish to become a Muslim, to pray You to explain the true faith to me as well. May I be illumined by the light that will cover me: may I stand in the ranks of those who have the privilege of the illumined; may I joint the submissive servants of the faith, granted with the honour of Islam, so that I too may benefit by it.

My great and brave master, I, Your humble slave, am very poor and have no home. In addition to that, Your humble slave, my husband, as he receives no resources from anywhere, by God's will has fallen in debt in the amount of 5-6 grosh. We seek a solution everywhere, but we will not be able to pay the debt soon and my husband will be imprisoned. No matter how urgent it is, neither I, Your humble slave, nor my husband, Your humble slave, will be able to pay our debt in any way. We are helpless and have not the slightest possibility of escaping from this situation, and may God forbid *[that worst things await us]*. This is why we seek compassion, and likewise shelter and protection, from God.

Mercy, all-merciful lord, mercy, gracious lords! I submit this plea for justice as an expression of our selfless devotion to the young, very attractive and life-loving prince, for the sake of his happiness. Our distressful situation must be resolved mercifully. For your saddened and desperate humble servants, there is no other recourse but Your favour. We offer our respects and wishes for happiness and merriment in Your fortunate days. We leave the issuing of the high order to Your decision,

Your humble slave, Dimie.

V. Dechov, author of a monograph on the history of Chepelare, has a different view on the question. According to him:

- The Islamization of the population of the Central Rhodope region began with the conquest of the Rhodopes and ended in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.

- Even when the campaign of forced Islamization and the large-scale killing was stopped, none of those converted to Islam were allowed to return to Christianity.

- Those Christians who had avoided the forced conversion were forbidden to live with their Islamized families and neighbours and were ordered to migrate elsewhere.

- Many Christians converted to Islam from fear of their Muslim neighbours. It was under pressure from their neighbours that the residents of the village of Bogutevo converted to Islam.

- Many families were Islamized by Janissaries, i.e., by their own children, who had been recruited at a young age in the Janissary units.

- The Yuruks had sheltered Christians attempting to escape Islamization (Dechov 1987: 61-62).

Acts of violence did of course take place during certain periods, but not on as massive a scale as claimed by our 19<sup>th</sup> century historians. The specific local conditions, the desire of the oppressed population to survive by adapting to the new rule, the desire of people to switch to a different social and economic category, the efforts of the Balkan aristocracy to preserve its privileges and property, were all preconditions for the native residents' turning to the dominant religion (Zhelyazkova 1990). Violent administrative measures were applied on concrete occasions: suppression of revolts of the Christian population, in time of war, and especially during clashes between the Ottoman and Russian empires.

*Conclusion:* Various and complex causes determined the spread of Islam in the Balkans and the Bulgarian lands; the factors included colonization, resettlement, conversions to Islam, internal migration. Very probably, during the first period, the military successes of the Ottoman Empire struck respect in the local population. During the second period, economic incentives were foremost. Islamization did not in all cases lead to adoption of a Turkic identity. But it did create certain preconditions conducive to Turkization. The new converts to Islam lost the marks of their former ethnicity and, after a few generations, might merge completely with the Turks providing they lived in a Turkish linguistic and cultural environment. The history of the dissemination of Islam in the Bulgarian lands, and more generally in the Balkans, confirms this claim. The Ottoman government was interested not so much in ethnic as in religious assimilation. Islam, as many other religions, is not the faith a single nation and thus is open to all ethnic groups. The Ummah is a space of total identity not confined to a specific territory, language, ethnic group or nationality (Bosakov 2015).

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