

The Role of the Greek Patriarchate Under Turkish Balkan Rule

*By Christ Anastasoff,
from Balkanika magazine,
volume 2, number 3 (1968)*

The Turkish invasion of Europe during the 14th Century brought about great revolts among the Balkan states and eventually changed the map of the Balkan Peninsula. The Turks conquered in succession the Bulgarians, the Serbians, the Greeks, the Romanians, and the Albanians.

The states founded by all these peoples vanished, and in their place arose a powerful Ottoman Empire, which was involved in the political affairs in Europe from 1353 until its expulsion from Europe in 1912.

In the beginning, the Turks respected the communal organizations of the Christians. What they cared most about was that the latter should be submissive, pay their taxes and render all the services that their masters required of them during the almost incessant wars, which they waged for the extension of their dominion. These wars naturally kept the Christian people in constant servitude, for they were obliged to supply the Turkish army, without any remuneration, with food, means of transportation, and everything else that they might want. The lawlessness of the troops increased the people's hardships and helped to devastate the regions through which they passed on their expedition. It was the Sultan's policy, however, to propitiate his Christian subjects as far as he could, because he needed their assistance in his efforts to push his conquest beyond the limits of the Balkan Peninsula.

The sufferings of the Christian subjects of Turkey increased in intensity when the former power of the Empire began to wane and internal disintegration, owing to the vices and corruption of the authorities, set in. The *Jannissaries* who were recruited from Christian children and converted to Mohammedanism, were the elite troops by which the Sultans won their splendid victories. The corps, under the loose discipline and bad administration of later weak Sultans, degenerated into a body of legalized plunderers, a terror to the Christians and even a standing menace to the Sultans themselves.

The impossibility of obtaining any outside help for their deliverance from the Turkish yoke or of throwing it off by their own unaided efforts, brought about a curious social phenomenon in the life of the Christians, which needs some explanation in order to be understood and appreciated.

Its parallel may be found in the story of Robin Hood, so familiar to students of English history. Among civilized people of today brigandage is considered a highly disreputable

profession, and the brigand a reprobate and an outlaw of society to be despised and hunted down. Not farther back than the last century, before any of the Balkan states had regained their political independence, the Bulgarian *haidout*, the Serbian *haidoolk*, and the Greek *klephtis*, all meaning "brigand," were regarded by their fellow-countrymen with sympathy and admiration. The people delighted in telling of their deeds, and many a popular ballad, current even today, extols them as meritorious heroes.

To a foreigner, unacquainted with the social and political conditions under which the Christians had lived for centuries under Turkish rule, this attitude towards brigandage and brigands seems a sign of moral depravity. The Christian brigand, however, was not a sneak thief or a vile cut-throat who took to his profession out of a wanton desire for murder. He was a man who, wronged and outraged in his own person or in that of his family by Turkish misrule and injustice, or unable to bear the sight of Turkish insolence and oppression, preferred to shoulder his gun and lead a life of freedom in the mountains.

These brigands used to go in bands under the leadership of a chief chosen by them, and their main object was to keep in fear and respect the Turkish oppressor, and afford protection and defense to the Christians. With the loot which they obtained from the exercise of their profession, they not infrequently, as the popular ballads tell us, helped poor people in distress or made donations to churches and monasteries. Among the leaders of such bands women are also mentioned, and some of them are represented to have been superior to the men in valor, and very dexterous in the manipulation of weapons. In the struggle for independence of Greece, Serbia, and Bulgaria, these so-called outlaws took an active part and rendered valuable service as leaders of insurgent bands. With the extinction of Turkish rule the profession of the brigands has fallen into disrepute, and if at any time wicked and lawless men, actuated by ferocious instincts, have taken to it, they have been quickly and summarily dealt with, because their conduct found no support among the people.

The actual course of events in the Balkans is a very close reproduction of the conditions existing previous to the arrival of the Turks in Europe. Then, and even now, the Christian states were engaged in constant destructive strife for hegemony on the peninsula. Victory both in the 10th and again in the 13th Century was with the Bulgarian State.

Then in the 12th and 14th Centuries came the turn of the conquering Serbians. The collapse of these ephemeral states produced no change in the ethnographic composition of the peninsula. Political structures fell and rose again without any attempt being made to fuse the populations into any sort of national whole. At that stage, indeed, the national idea was not as closely connected with the State idea as it is now. The Bulgar, the Serb, the Romanian, the Albanian remained Bulgarian, Serbian, Romanian, or Albanian, throughout the successive regimes. The ancient ethnographic composition, therefore, remained unaltered until the Turkish conquest came, leveling all the nationalities and preserving them all alike in dormant or inactive condition.

The Turkish regime unconsciously worked for the destruction of the national consciousness of the conquered Balkan peoples in the most effective possible way. They banished or assimilated the ruling class, or the warrior class, in the conquered countries. In the communities no one remained but the village peasants, whose only ethnic bond was that of religion. Here again the Turkish regime did much to reduce the ethnic and national significance of the religious element to its lowest terms. The religion of all the conquered nationalities being the same, that is, Eastern Orthodoxy, the Turks had decided to recognize only one clergy as representative of the *rayas*, or Christian subjects. The one chosen was the prominent Greek clergy in Constantinople. The Phanar (the Greek quarter of Constantinople in which the Greek Patriarchate is situated), finally became the sole Orthodox Church in Turkey. And by a special decree of the Greek Patriarchate of Constantinople, the last remains of the autonomous Bulgarian Archbishopric of Ohrid which was maintained till 1767, and the Serbian Patriarchate at Ipek which also existed until 1766, were being abolished. Consequently, a common race name was given to the orthodox population in the official language of the Turkish bureaucracy: they were all "*Roum-mileti*," from the name *Romaïos*, of the Greek people, which name the modern Greeks gave themselves down to recent times.

The Turkish establishment upon the Balkans was detrimental to all the Christian inhabitants, but particularly to the Bulgarians. The Greeks, the Serbians, and the Romanians had, indeed, lost their political independence, but they were able to preserve their spiritual integrity, the Greeks for all times, the Serbians and Romanians only for a short period. Of all the Balkan peoples the Greeks were the people who most easily ingratiated themselves with the Turkish authorities, and thus took advantage of this privileged position for the realization of their national ideals. They had lost their political freedom but retained their church and civil rights. The Constantinople Patriarchy remained intact. It not only strengthened its position, but also acquired from the Sultans such privileges as it had not enjoyed even under the Byzantine rulers. The Greeks under the name of *Roum-mileti* formed a separate community within the Ottoman Empire endowed with full church and civil autonomy, with their Patriarch as its chief.

The abolition of the Bulgarian Archbishopric of Ohrid in 1767 placed the Bulgarians under the direct spiritual jurisdiction of the Greek Patriarch of Constantinople. All the church affairs in the Bulgarian dioceses were administered by Greek Bishops and it was a rare exception that a Bulgarian was appointed a Bishop. Since the Patriarch and the Bishops acted as the official representatives of the Christians before the central government in Constantinople and the provincial authorities, the Bulgarians, and even the Serbians, in the Turkish Empire had no representatives of their own race; for all practical purposes they were represented by Greeks.

The Greek Patriarch, by a special charter granted to him by Sultan Mohammed II, the conqueror of Constantinople (1453), had the rank of the highest Pasha or a Vizier (a minister of state) in the Ottoman Empire; the Bishops also had civil ranks corresponding to the administrative hierarchy of the Empire. All authorities on this subject agree in describing as most pitiable the condition of the Greek Church under Turkish rule. All offices from the highest to the lowest were sold to the highest bidder; and on account of

that the patriarchal throne was sometimes occupied by men who were a disgrace not only to religion itself, but also the principle of morality,

The Bishops were as a rule, men of low character, greedy and voracious, bent upon extorting money from the lower clergy and their Christian flock under various forms and pretexts. In addition, especially since the beginning of the last century, a regular system of Hellenization among the non-Greek populations was begun and zealously pursued. This process of Hellenization was greater in the Bulgarian lands than elsewhere.

In Bulgaria, which until 1878 was a mere Turkish province without any political and spiritual rights, the jurisdiction of the Greek Patriarch and Bishops was intact and absolute. The various excessive tolls levied upon the people by the Greek Bishops were the least objectionable part of their rule, but taken in connection with the heavy taxes and extortions of the Turkish government and local officials, they must have weighed pretty heavily on the people.

What was infinitely more obnoxious and men-acing was the proscription of the Bulgarian language in the schools and of the Slavic liturgy in the churches. The Bulgarians were called and treated as blockheads, their language was considered as barbarous, and everything Bulgarian was despised. In the cities and towns of Bulgaria only Greek schools were tolerated, and every one more or less educated Bulgarian, imbued with the spirit of Greek learning, was ashamed to call himself a Bulgarian, but prided himself as being a Greek.

As late as the beginning of the 19th century, the Greek Patriarchate of Constantinople had absolute control of the ecclesiastical administration and the schools of the Bulgarian lands. Having a complete mastery of the psychology of the Turks, the Patriarchate was not only the most potent spiritual organization in the Ottoman Empire, but it was also in position to play the second political factor in it. In virtue of the tremendous prestige which the Patriarchy enjoyed under the Sultans, it had practically its own way not only in matters of religion, but also in politics.

The Hellenization of all alien races in the Empire, and more particularly the compact Bulgarian population adjacent to Constantinople, was the greatest aim of the Greek Patriarch of Constantinople. As it has already been stated, the above had succeeded in 1767 in stamping out the Bulgarian Archbishopric of Ohrid, the heart of Bulgarianism. The Patriarch's influence with the Sultan Mustapha III (1757-1774) was so powerful that the latter was unable to withstand the demand for the abolition of the long-detested Bulgarian Archbishopric of Ohrid.

This event coincides with the period of Catherine II (1762-1796) of Russia, the great patron of the Eastern Orthodox Church, and an ardent champion for the restoration of a new Byzantine Empire. Another important event connected with her policy for the restoration of Byzantium was the treaty of alliance concluded between Catherine and Frederick the Great (1740-1786) who until then was an outspoken friend of Turkey. A direct result of the understanding arrived at by Catherine II, Frederick the Great, and the Constantinople Patriarchate, were the revolts which subsequently broke out in Morea, Crimea, Montenegro, Serbia, and Bulgaria.

At that period, therefore, the Constantinople Greek Patriarchy was at the zenith of its power and energy. And the suppression of the Bulgarian Archbishopric of Ohrid in 1767 was the greatest triumph achieved over its most hateful, and dangerous rival, the Bulgarian race. The Bulgarians were thus deprived of their only official spokesman and defender. At that time the Constantinople Patriarchate had succeeded in filling all the Bulgarian sees with Greek or Hellenized prelates. The whole Balkan Peninsula was now under its full ecclesiastical jurisdiction and dominion.

The Bulgarian Church, school, social institutions, liturgy, literature, and even the language, were passing through the darkest period in the history of the Bulgarian people. The latter were now not only under the political domination of the Sultan of Turkey, but also under the spiritual oppression of the Greek Patriarchate of Constantinople.