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**Academic purges and reforms in the Academy in
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stages of Communism in Bulgaria**

Liliana Simeonova

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Special Issue

Religious culture and education in 20th and 21st century Europe

Maria Giuseppina Meloni and Anna Maria Oliva (eds.)

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Table of Contents / Indice

Marcello Verga <i>Preface</i>	7-9
Francesca Cadeddu <i>Fighting Religious Illiteracy with Knowledge. Presentation of PARS, Portale di formazione e informazione per il contrasto dell'analfabetismo religioso.</i>	11-18
Federica Candido - Vito Loré - Carla Noce <i>Lost Christianities in textbooks. A case study of the grammar high schools in Rome</i>	19-46
Denis Pelletier <i>Religious history of France and public debate: the "eternal return" of a polemic issue</i>	47-55
Michele Maria Rabà <i>The religious fact between society and politics in the Italian Modern and Contemporary history textbooks</i>	57-74

Isabelle Saint-Martin	75-88
<i>Teaching about religion in France. The role of works of art and iconography</i>	
Aurora Savelli	89-110
<i>Online resources for the history of religion: a look at national history museums and at the House of European History</i>	
Liliana Simeonova	111-117
<i>Academic purges and reforms in the Academy in relation to the studies in Church history in the early stages of Communism in Bulgaria</i>	

Academic purges and reforms in the Academy in relation to the studies in Church history in the early stages of Communism in Bulgaria

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Abstract

Verouchenie (faith-education) was introduced into the Bulgarian schools as early as 1824 and remained a mandatory subject until 1944. With the rise of communists to power, education in religion was scraped from the schools' curricula. Yet even under Communism, history lessons continued to provide knowledge of the Church's role in history. However, professors and teachers, who – after World War II – were labeled as non-Marxists, were dismissed from their jobs and were subsequently replaced by people who would teach history from a Marxist viewpoint. This article presents several cases of well-known professors who lost their jobs in Sofia University on account of their being considered 'bourgeois elements'.

Keywords

Faith-education; Academic purges; Bulgarian schools; Sofia University.

Riassunto

L'insegnamento della religione ortodossa (*verouchenie*) venne introdotto nelle scuole bulgare sin dal 1824 e rimase materia scolastica obbligatoria fino al 1944. Con la presa del potere i comunisti ne vietarono l'insegnamento e la disciplina venne cancellata dai programmi di scuola. In quel periodo, però, grazie alle lezioni di storia si continuava a ottenere certe conoscenze sul ruolo che la Chiesa aveva avuto nella storia. I professori universitari e liceali, dichiarati non-marxisti l'indomani della seconda guerra mondiale, vennero licenziati e sostituiti da quadri leali al regime che avrebbero insegnato la storia da posizioni marxiste. Il saggio presenta alcuni casi di celebri professori dell'Università di Sofia che persero il lavoro perché considerati 'elementi borghesi'.

Mots-clés

Educazione religiosa; purghe accademiche; scuola bulgara; Università di Sofia.

1. Bibliography. - 2. Curriculum vitae.

Even as, from the 1820s onwards, education in Bulgaria was becoming increasingly secular (Petrov, 2013, pp. 85-102), *catechesis* as "an education in the

faith of children” remained an integral part of the school curricula in the country. In the fifty-four-year period between 1824 and 1878, 281 different textbooks and teacher’s manuals in religious education were published. In order to meet the specific requirements of various school boards, textbooks of religious education varied in content and displayed a variety of titles: e.g., *Divine Law*, *Catechesis*, *Church History*, or *Liturgy*. What all those early textbooks and teacher’s manuals had in common was that they, for the most part, were translations from foreign languages, primarily Russian, Greek or German. Prominent National Revival figures such as Yoakim Gruev, Petko R. Slaveykov, Christo G. Danov and Ivan Momtchilov, to name but a few, were either authors or translators of religious education textbooks in the pre-1878 period of Bulgarian history (Sapundzhieva, 2010). On the eve of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877/78, in the Bulgarian provinces of the Ottoman Empire there were 1711 elementary schools, several dozens of middle schools, three high schools and several trade schools (Kolev, 1992, p. 22). All of them, without exception, offered classes in religion.

In the years following Bulgaria’s Liberation in 1878, the secular character of the Bulgarian education system was regulated by legislation (Peev, 2014). In both the state and private schools in Bulgaria religious education remained a mandatory subject. As before, it laid emphasis on the traditional Eastern Orthodox Christian values. In order to qualify as teachers in religious education, teachers attended special courses, which were organized by the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. Following the military coup of 19 May 1934, religious education was assigned special importance; clerics too were allowed into the classrooms. As for the textbooks, their contents ought to be approved by the Holy Synod. Thus, the first-grade textbook was to contain only pictures illustrating the evangelical tales while the second and third grade textbooks included some text as well.

In the 1930s, prominent Bulgarian writers and artists were among the authors and illustrators of the textbooks in religion. To this day, one of the best examples of a primary school textbook in religious education is the fourth-grade textbook that was approved by both the Holy Synod and the Ministry of Education in 1934: it is authored by Chr. Spassovsky and T. Bliznakov and is beautifully illustrated by the famous children’s books illustrator V. Lazarkevitch. Teacher’s manuals too were authored by well-known writers. Thus, the author of the 1936 second-grade teacher’s manual in religious education is the famous Bulgarian writer Elin Pelin who has penned many children’s books as well. Education in religion, or *verouchenie* (faith-education) and *Zakon Bozhi* (Divine Law) as it was popularly known, remained a mandatory subject in Bulgarian schools until 1944 (Pironkova, 2013).

With the rise of communists to power in 1944, dramatic changes took place in Bulgaria. In the school year 1944/45, education in religion was only listed as an optional subject in the curricula. Two years later, in 1946/47 religious education was altogether scraped from the curricula. It was only in 2000 that the Bulgarian Ministry of Education allowed a new subject called *Religion* to be taught in the Bulgarian schools: it was to be offered as an optional, that is, non-mandatory subject, and in two different versions, *Religion-Christianity* and *Religion-Islam*, educating students in Eastern Orthodox Christianity and Sunni Islam, respectively.

Let us go back to the mid-1940s when radical changes were taking place in Bulgarian society. Catechetical education was removed from the school curricula but history lessons continued to provide some knowledge of the cultural and political role, which Christianity in general and the Orthodox Church in particular played in Bulgarian history. In the history textbooks, the periods under consideration were those of the Middle Ages, the Ottoman Rule, and the National Revival of the later 18th to the mid-19th century. The early history of the Church was excluded from the textbooks, and so was the history of the various Church denominations. As I said, if any knowledge of the church history was to be included in the textbooks, it had to be the history of the Orthodox Church, mostly in the context of the cultural role it played in national history.

Furthermore, the narrative of the historical role of the Orthodox Church had to be presented in such a way as to fit into the general Marxist teachings. Professors who did not share the ideology of Marxism-Leninism were expelled from Sofia University. For the same reason, a great number of teachers were dismissed from schools. The purges in the Academia affected the lives and careers of professors and scholars who were considered “bourgeois elements” by the new regime. The subsequent setting of historiography on “Marxist rails” had a tremendous impact on the study and teaching of history, including ecclesiastical history. As a result, the limiting of education in theology and church history had long-lasting consequences as far as the spiritual and societal life in Bulgaria was concerned.

Let me present a brief account of the facts pertaining to the academic purges and reforms in Bulgaria in the mid- to late 1940s and early '50s. The events that followed in the wake of the 1944 coup encouraged the so-called “anti-fascist forces” in Bulgaria to take action against everybody whom they viewed as a “fascist”. (Needless to say, every person who did not share the communist ideology and was not thrilled at the prospect of Bulgaria’s becoming a Bolshevik country was labeled a “fascist”.)

As early as 12 Oct. 1944, that is, only a month after the coup, some faculty members of the History-and-Philology Department at Sofia University drafted a letter, which they sent to the University Committee of the Fatherland Front (FF). In it, they urged the university to immediately purge itself of all the “hostile elements” in its ranks, pointing the finger at some of their fellow professors whom they regarded as being “fascists” or, to say the least, “bourgeois”. In the list containing the names of the university professors to be expelled one comes across such prominent academic figures as Prof. Ivan Dujčev, Prof. Vesselin Beševliev, and Prof. Mikhail Arnaudov, Prof. Boris Yotsov, Prof. B. Filov, K. Galabov, to mention but a few (Mutafčieva - Čičovska, 1995, pp. 50-52).

Only 20 days later, on 3 Nov. 1944, the Council of Ministers, prompted by the Ministry of Education, issued an ordinance, according to which the schools, the teachers’ institutes, Sofia University and the other institutions of higher education had to dismiss all those teachers and professors who had actively supported “the old regime” and propagated its ideas (Mutafčieva - Čičovska, 1995, pp. 54–55). Needless to say, the dismissal of prominent professors from Sofia University exerted a negative impact on the quality of education (Doytchinov, 1991, pp. 48-49; Yanev, 2009).

Three years later, similar measures were taken by the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, which too needed to get purged of “the elements that were hostile with regard to the new regime” (Mutafčieva - Čičovska, 1995, pp. 81-82). Special measures were taken with regard to the education of clergy. For example, in 1950 the Sofia Orthodox Seminary “St. John of Rila” (i.e., the theological high school) was ordered to leave its premises in the city of Sofia. The school was then exiled to the Tcherepish monastery in the mountains, some 90 km to the north-east of Sofia. A year later, in 1951 the Parliament passed a law, according to which the Faculty of Theology was to be removed from Sofia University: it became an Academy of Theology (i.e., an institution of higher education ranking lower than a university).

Let me adduce a few examples of how eminent professors were fired from the Faculty of History & Philology in the mid-40s. A leading authority on medieval history, Prof. Ivan Dujčev was dismissed from Sofia University in November 1945, on account of his being a ‘bourgeois element’ and a ‘fascist’. A doctoral degree was bestowed upon him by La Sapienza University (Rome) in 1934. In 1935, Dujčev took the annual *corso di paleografia, diplomatica e archivistica* at the *Scuola Vaticana di Paleografia*. In 1936, he returned to Sofia to become an assistant professor of medieval studies in Sofia University. In 1939 Dujčev was tenured and, following the deaths of two eminent figures in medieval studies, Prof. Petar Mutafčiev and Prof. Petar Nikov, he came to chair two departments, the Department of Byzantine Studies and the Department of Balkan History

(Avramov, 2013, pp. 2–3). Vesselin Beševliev, an eminent professor in classical studies and archaeology and a corresponding member of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, was also expelled from Sofia University, on account of his being a ‘proponent of Hitler’s ideas. Beševliev had studied in Germany, in the universities of Halle, Jena and Würzburg, where he got his doctoral degree in 1925. Mikhail Arnaudov, a professor in comparative literary studies who had specialized in the universities of Leipzig and Berlin and, along with his teaching career had become a member of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, was not only dismissed from Sofia University but was also sentenced to life on account of his serving as a minister of education in one of the last pre-communist cabinets in Bulgaria. The list of professors who were purged in the Historical-Philological Faculty of Sofia University is longer than that. But even the three cases that I have cited are illustrative of the fact that the purges affected eminent professors who had one thing in common: they were alumni of Western European universities and did not subscribe to the ideas of Marxism-Leninism. Other professors who were also labeled “ideologically unreliable” – a euphemism for being a non-Communist – were fired at a somewhat later date. For example, Professor Borislav Primov, the medievalist, was fired in 1954. It was in 1948 and ’49 that some of the leading professors in the Theology Department of Sofia University, such as Ivan Snegarov and Ivan Goshev, also suffered persecution and repressions.

The late 1940s and early ’50s are also known as ‘the years of debate’: the new, Marxist ideology was being introduced into scholarship and higher education, especially in the humanities and social sciences. This had a tremendous impact on the teaching of history (including history of the Church). It was the year 1948 that marked the beginnings of this process. The first ‘debate,’ which also happened to be of the longest duration and which had the deepest ideological impact on the work of Bulgarian historians, took place during the so-called Meeting of Historians that was organized by the Committee of Science, Art, and Culture (March–April 1948). It aimed at setting up the ideological goals that historians in Bulgaria should strive to accomplish in their future work. All the sessions of the meeting took place in the aula of Sofia University and were presided over by the then prime-minister of Bulgaria Vălko Tchervenkov. Here, I do not intend to review and summarize the proceedings of that ‘debate’. Suffice it to say that all the historical studies conducted and published before 1947 were said to be suffering from ‘bourgeois helplessness’ on account of the methods used. The ideological directives that were being drawn at the meeting were expected to set Bulgarian historiography on new, ‘Marxist rails.’ During that meeting, those professors and scholars who had survived the purges were forced to subject their own views and former writings to adverse criticism while

fervently making promises for their future work, which was going to be in line with the new ideology.

So, while under Communism in Bulgaria education in religion was excluded from the curricula of state schools Church history remained part of the history lessons; however, ecclesiastical history was to be interpreted from a Marxist point of view. As I have already mentioned, the inclusion, in the school curricula, of a discrete academic subject dealing with the religious traditions of Eastern Orthodox Christianity and Sunni Islam became a reality only in the year 2000.

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2. *Curriculum vitae*

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