

The Bulgarian Orthodox Church: The Past 150 Years

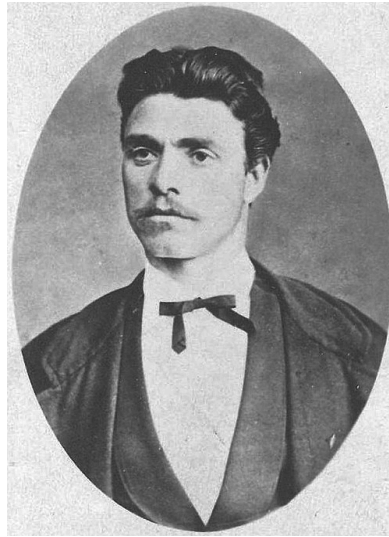
When studying the history of Orthodoxy in the twentieth century, one question that arises is: why is Bulgarian Orthodoxy so invisible? Russian and Greek Orthodoxy are often referred to, occasionally Serbian and Romanian Orthodoxy are brought up, and sometimes Georgian Orthodoxy is given a passing mention. Yet little attention is ever given to Bulgarian Orthodoxy. Perhaps this has something to do with its size in relation to the other Orthodox nations (Russia and Romania), or its lack of involvement in widely publicized international conflicts (the Yugoslav wars in Serbia, and the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine). Moreover there has been relatively little emigration from Bulgaria to the Anglo-American countries, when compared to the mass influx of arrivals from the post-communist nations of Romania, Serbia and Russia, as well as the emigrants who fled from these same countries when communism first asserted itself. This essay seeks to remedy this tendency to overlook this small Balkan nation and the fascinating development of Orthodoxy there over the past 150 years.

The Greco-Bulgarian Schism

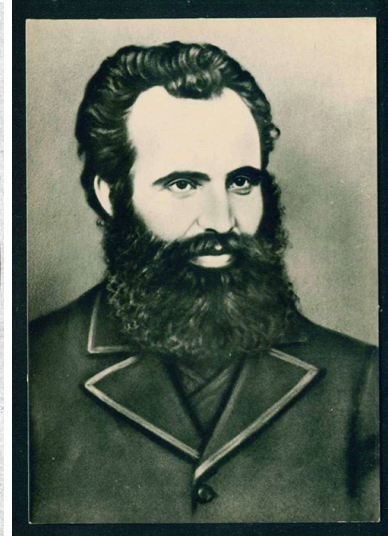
At the time of the Greco-Bulgarian schism in 1872, Bulgaria was the only Orthodox nation in the Balkans that had not gained some degree of political independence through revolution. However revolutionary sentiments were developing in Bulgaria too, and would erupt in the 1870s with armed uprisings against the Ottoman authorities. The revolution in Bulgaria brought about numerous cases of martyrdom among the Bulgarian population, the most remembered being the Batavia martyrs of 1876 (canonized by the Old Calendar Orthodox Church of Bulgaria in 2007). Unfortunately most of the revolutionaries were Freemasons with pro-Western and Enlightenment ideals which were anti-thetical to the Orthodox theologico-political tradition of autocratic rule by an Orthodox monarch. After the success of the revolution, a Western Catholic monarch was imposed on Bulgaria by the Great Powers, as had been the case with Greece in the 1830s. Prince Ferdinand of the House of Hohenzollern was selected as Prince of Bulgaria 1887, and in 1908 he was crowned Tsar of Bulgaria. The presence of a Catholic ruler disturbed the popular Orthodox consciousness of the Bulgarian people, and the Prince was not commemorated during the Divine Liturgy. As a consequence in 1888, the Bulgarian synod was dismissed by Ferdinand, and the members of the synod were expelled from the capital. The government prevented the synod from assembling for six years.



Hristo Botev



Vasil Levski



Lyuben Karavalov

There was also a push towards ecclesiastical independence in tandem with the revolutionary movement. The Bulgarian clergy, which had up until that time subordinate to the Greek Patriarch of Constantinople petitioned for the formation of their own exarchate and their own national church. The Patriarchate was opposed to this, but the momentum towards independence eventually led to the election of a Bulgarian exarch in April, 1872 at a Bulgarian Assembly in Constantinople. The Patriarch of Constantinople Anthimus IV refused to recognize the new exarch, and demanded his repentance. On May 11, 1872, an Act signed by the Council of seven Bulgarian bishops unilaterally declared the Bulgarian church to be independent. On May 15, the Patriarchal synod proclaimed the Bulgarian exarch deprived of his rank and defrocked, and subjected the other Bulgarian bishops, along with all the clergy and laity in communion with them to ecclesiastical punishments. The Constantinopolitan synod soon announced that there was to be a Local Council to deal with the issues related to the Bulgarian Exarchate.

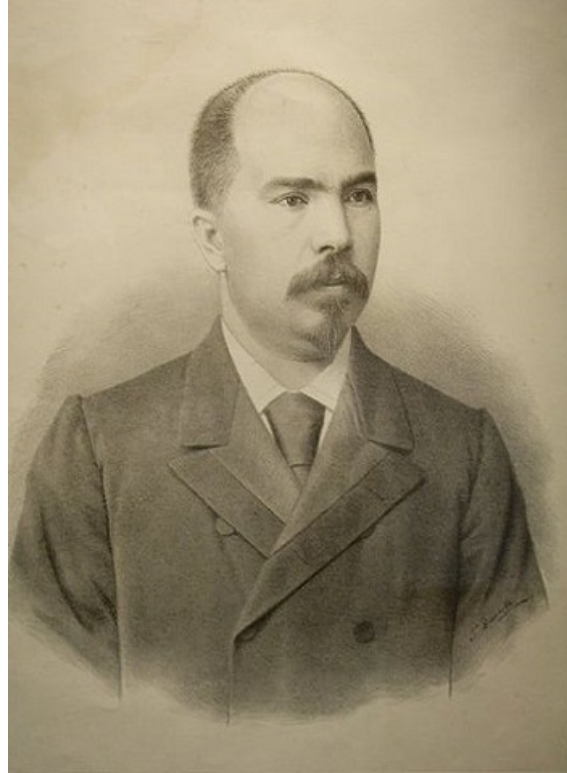
The Local Council of Constantinople opened on August 29, 1872. 32 hierarchs and all the Eastern Patriarchs, except Jerusalem attended. The council culminated in the condemnation of phyletism as a heresy, which was defined as the presence of “racial division, racial differences, national quarrels in the Church of Christ.” On September 16, the Constantinopolitan Council declared that all the Bulgarian hierarchs with their clergy and laity were schismatics, and that the entire Bulgarian Church was schismatic. However the Churches of Russia, Jerusalem, Serbia and Romania all remained in communion with both the Greeks and Bulgarians.

A sizable proportion of the Bulgarian population remained in Thrace and Macedonia. Both of these regions were in fact majority Bulgarian. As Ottoman influence continued to wane in the Balkans in the early decades of the twentieth century, several revolutionary movements and secret societies sprang up seeking to unite the Bulgarian diaspora with the newly established Kingdom of Bulgaria. The most notable of these was the Internal Macedonian

Revolutionary Organization (IMRO), which was notorious for its guerilla warfare tactics against the Ottoman authorities in Macedonia, as well as conducting political assassinations of high-ranking Bulgarian government officials in order to provoke the kingdom into engaging in a war of liberation for the territory of Macedonia (in 1895, the Bulgarian prime minister Stambolov was killed by members of the IMRO).



King Ferdinand I of Bulgaria



Stefan Stambolov, Prime Minister of Bulgaria
(1887-1895)

The Balkan Wars

Greece and Serbia also had competing territorial claims over Macedonia. Greece considered the territory to be a part of Greece since ancient times, and Serbia sought to absorb the territory into a new Yugoslav federation under Serbian domination. In September, 1912, Montenegro declared war on Turkey, and the following month Greece, Serbia and Bulgaria did the same. After seven months of fighting and 500,000 casualties, Serbia gained control of much of Macedonia as well as Kosovo, Bulgaria took control of most of Eastern Thrace, and Greece took back the city of Thessaloniki and Crete.

However, the Bulgarian Prince Ferdinand was dissatisfied with the gains that Bulgaria had made in the aftermath of the war, especially in Macedonia, and attacked Greece and Serbia. This led to the Second Balkan War in 1913, which ended after five weeks of fighting with the victory of Greece, Serbia, Montenegro, Romania and Turkey over Bulgaria.

The regional turmoil of the Balkan wars eventually led to the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. Tsar Ferdinand, being of German lineage, allied his country with the German Empire, Austrian Empire and Ottoman Empire against the Allies (Entente). Instead of making up for the losses that Bulgaria had suffered during the Balkan Wars, Bulgaria ended up losing vast amounts of territory in Eastern Thrace which had given it access to the Aegean Sea. Tsar Ferdinand ended up abdicating in favour of his son Boris III, at the end of the war, and left in exile to Germany.

The Reign of Tsar Boris III

The young Tsar Boris inherited an unstable kingdom after his accession to the throne. In September of 1923, there occurred the infamous September Uprising, a coup d'état orchestrated by the Bulgarian Communist Party with the aim of overthrowing the government and taking control of the country. As a consequence of the coup, the Bulgarian prime minister Aleksandar Stamboliyski was assassinated. Tsar Boris implemented harsh repressive laws against the Communist Party, who retaliated by murdering General Konstantin Georgiev on April 14, 1925. Two days following the murder of Georgiev, the St. Nedelya Cathedral where his funeral was being held was bombed by the communists, caving in the roof and killing 213 people. The evening after the attack, martial law was declared and approximately 450 people were executed without trial including the poets Geo Milev and Hristo Yassenov.

On October 25, 1930, Boris married Giovanna of Savoy the daughter of King Victor Emmanuel III of Italy, at the Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi in Assisi, Italy. Their daughter Maria Louisa was born on January 13, 1930, and their son Simeon II, the heir to the throne on June 16, 1937.

In 1934, a military dictatorship was established in Bulgaria, which abolished all political parties and reduced the Tsar to a figurehead. The king opposed the new government and staged a counter-coup in 1935, establishing himself as a de facto absolute monarch for the remainder of his reign.



Tsar Boris III of Bulgaria



Exarch Stefan I of Bulgaria

Bulgaria remained neutral at the start of the Second World War. On the one hand Germany had been Bulgaria's ally in the First World War and the Tsar was of German descent. On the other hand it would be very difficult to persuade the Bulgarian people to agree to enter into a war against their perennial ally, Russia. Hitler attempted to sway Boris to his side and brokered an agreement in September, 1940 whereby Romania would cede the region of Southern Dobrudja to Bulgaria. This agreement managed to restore a great deal of Bulgarian national pride, since this territory had been won and then subsequently lost in the First World War. In March, 1941, Bulgaria officially allied itself with the Axis powers, and went on to recover most of Macedonia and Western Thrace.

One consequence of this alliance with the Axis was that Hitler demanded that Bulgaria deport her entire population of 48,000 Jews. Bulgaria had a long history of tolerance towards its ethnic minority populations, and this demand was met with widespread opposition including from leading hierarchs and clergy of the Bulgarian Church. Although the Tsar ended up caving to the pressure from individuals such as the parliamentarian Dimatar Peshev, Metropolitan Stefan of Sophia and Metropolitan Cyril of Plovdiv, and declined to deport the kingdom's Jews, 11,343 Jews ended up dying in the death camps after being deported from the Bulgarian occupied territories of Vardar Macedonia and Aegean Thrace. Shortly after a meeting with Hitler at Rastenburg, East Prussia on 9 August, 1943, at which Hitler was reportedly furious with the king's refusal to supply troops to fight on the Eastern Front and deport Bulgaria's Jews, Tsar Boris was found dead from heart failure in Sofia on August, 28, 1943. Rumours that he had been poisoned by Hitler, the British or the NKVD circulated wildly. After an impressive state funeral at the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in the capital of Sofia, the king's remains were

transported by train to the famous Rila monastery and interred there. After his death, the late Tsar's six-year-old son Simeon II was enthroned as king, while the government remained under the direction of a regency led by his brother Prince Kyril of Bulgaria, Prince Kyril tried several times to extricate Bulgaria from the Axis, however the unwillingness of the United States and Great Britain to negotiate with the regency prevented this.



Council of Bishops of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, 1937. From left to right seated: Metropolitans Neophyte of Skopje , Maxim of Plovdiv , Neophyte of Vidin , Exarch Stefan I of Bulgaria and Metropolitan Hilarion of Sliven ; standing from left to right: Metropolitans Boris Nevrokop, Michael of Dorostol and Cherven , Paisius of Vratsa , Sophrony of Tarnovo and Bishop Kiril of Stoby , Chief Secretary of the Holy Synod

The Church Under Communism

On September 9, 1944 following days of intense partisan activity and the invasion of Bulgaria by the Soviet Union, a coup was orchestrated by the communist Fatherland Front party which took control of the government and abolished the regency. On February 1, 1945, Prince Kyril of Bulgaria, his two former prime ministers, several former cabinet ministers, royal advisors and sixty-seven MPs were executed without a trial in Sofia Central Cemetery. Prince Simeon was allowed to continue to rule as Tsar without any real power, until a referendum held on September 15, 1946 declared the monarchy to be abolished, and officially established the People's Republic of Bulgaria. The following day the young prince was allowed to leave the country along with his mother Queen Giovanna and his sister Maria-Louisa. The exiled General Secretary of the Bulgarian Communist Party Georgi Dimitrov was recalled from the Soviet Union and appointed prime minister.

When the communist party first seized power in Bulgaria in 1944, it quickly took control of the foreign policy of the Bulgarian Church. The authorities helped facilitate the Bulgarian Exarchate's rapprochement with the Ecumenical Patriarchate which officially granted autocephaly to the Bulgarian Exarchate on February 22, 1945. Metropolitan Boris of Nevrokop was appointed by the Holy Synod to be a part of the ecclesiastical delegation sent to Constantinople on the occasion of the healing of the schism in 1945. After celebrating the Divine Liturgy in the presence of the Constantinopolitan hierarchs, the Metropolitan congratulated Ecumenical Patriarch Benjamin III for his role in healing the schism.

On May 26, 1946, the day of the celebration of the millennium of the death Saint John of Rila, the most venerated Bulgarian saint, a special formal dinner was held at Rila monastery after the Divine Liturgy was celebrated with the Bulgarian prime minister Georgi Dimitrov and Patriarch Alexei I of Moscow in attendance. The atheist Dimitrov gave a toast which tacitly laid out the policy of the new regime towards the church. He praised Saint John as a "people's saint" who became a hermit as an individual form of class struggle, and opposed the medieval feudal system. He went on to describe the Russian Patriarch Alexei as "the first ecumenical patriarch of the Orthodox church, which is a people's and republican church of all Slavic people.", and exhorted the Bulgarian clergy to stop commemorating the exiled Tsar Simeon and his mother Giovanna during the Divine Liturgy.



Patriarch Cyril of Bulgaria



Georgi Dimitrov

During the inter-war period the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia had also maintained a sizable presence in Bulgaria. There were numerous Russian emigres in the capital Sofia, under the jurisdiction of Archbishop Seraphim Sobolov who had been in charge of the Russian Orthodox community in Bulgaria since August, 1921. He was much loved by the emigres and widely respected within the Bulgarian Church. He had many students and

disciples, among whom was the future Archbishop Averky Taushev of Syracuse, working at that time as a student in the Theological Academy at Sofia University. After the Soviet invasion of Bulgaria, Archbishop Seraphim, who considered it his pastoral duty to remain with his flock, did not flee the country, and was thus compelled to join the Moscow Patriarchate on June 3, 1945, and to accept Soviet citizenship in 1946. Because of his responsibility towards the large Russian emigre population Archbishop Seraphim was not repatriated to Russia, which is what happened to most of the clergy of the Church Abroad who entered the Moscow Patriarchate. On February 13, 1950, he reposed and on February 16, 1950 was buried by his spiritual children in the Russian Orthodox Church of Saint Nicholas the Wonderworker in Sofia. All of the parishes under his pastoral care were transferred to the Bulgarian Exarchate, except for the Church of Saint Nicholas (which to this day serves as the residence of the Moscow Patriarchate's ambassador to the Bulgarian Church).



Saint Seraphim of Sophia (+1950)

In 1948, Bulgarian church representatives attended the Pan-Orthodox conference hosted in Moscow by the Russian Orthodox Church. One of the chief topics of the meeting, was the ecumenical movement and whether the Slavic churches should participate in the newly founded World Council of Churches. Before the Second World War the Bulgarian Exarchate had sought to establish strong ecumenical ties in order to make up for its precarious position in the Orthodox world resulting from the schism which had existed at that point between the Exarchate and Ecumenical Patriarchate since 1872. The Bulgarian Exarch Stefan, was a noted ecumenist

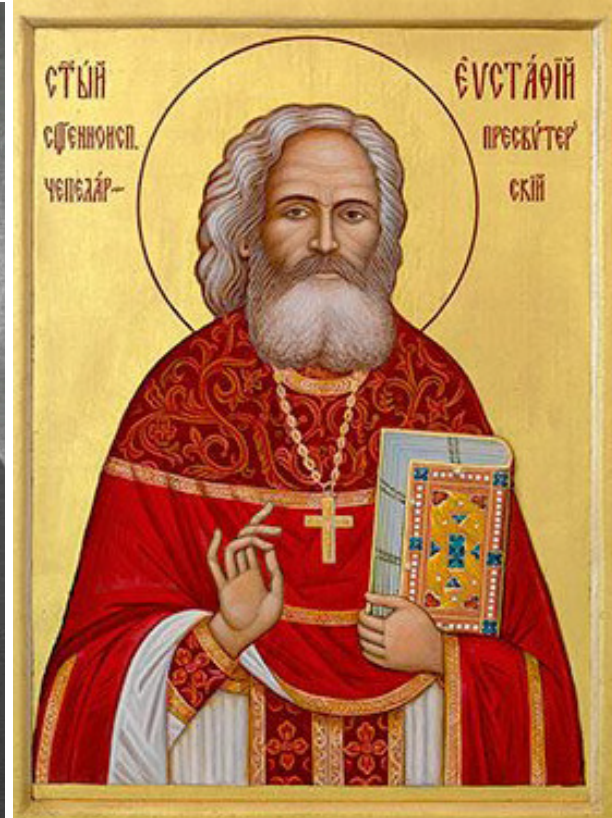
within the church's hierarchy, and most of the Bulgarian bishops had received their theological training in Western universities.

The Soviet authorities as well as the new Balkan people's republics were skeptical of the ecumenical movement and its main organization the World Council of Churches. They considered it to be a "political and undemocratic organization whose aim is to exert political and social influence favorable to the imperialistic countries". Thus at the 1948 Council, ecumenism was condemned as a heresy by its participating members, which included the Russian Orthodox, Georgian Orthodox, Polish Orthodox, Serbian Orthodox, Romanian Orthodox and Bulgarian Orthodox churches. Archbishop Seraphim Sobolev himself travelled to Moscow and presented eloquent arguments against ecumenism as well as the Revised Julian Calendar, in several speeches during the council proceedings. In Bulgaria, the communist leaders Georgi Dimitrov and Vassil Kolarov, tried to undermine the attempts of Exarch Stefan to negotiate the participation of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church in the World Council of Churches. As a result, on September 8, 1948, he was forced to resign. The Politburo of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party decided to transfer his duties to Metropolitan Kiril of Plovdiv, who began to implement the decisions of the Moscow church conference. The former exarch Stefan was exiled to the village of Banya, where he lived under virtual house arrest up until his repose in 1957.

It was at this point that the communist government began to exercise greater control over church affairs, and problematic clergy continued to be removed through administrative or more violent means. From 1948 to 1953, at least ten percent of Bulgarian clergy were arrested and sent to serve various terms in prison and labour camps. On November 8, 1948, the famed Metropolitan Boris of Nevrokop, an outspoken opponent of the new regime, was murdered by a defrocked priest after celebrating the Divine Liturgy. It was later discovered that this former priest had been a communist agent. Metropolitan Cyril of Plovdiv soon became a fervent collaborator with the state authorities. In 1951, he sent a letter relieving the locally famous Protopresbyter Eustati Yankov from regular parish service in Chepelare, a small village in the Rhodope mountains. This same priest was later imprisoned and beaten by the state authorities for his devout Orthodox pastoral service, and died from the wounds he had sustained on the day of Great Lent in 1952.



Hieromartyr Boris of Nevrokop(+1948)



Saint Evstafy of Chepalare (+1952)

This period of persecution coincided with the authoritarian rule of Valko Chervenkov, who succeeded Georgi Dimitrov as the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party in 1949, (Dimitrov had himself died while on a diplomatic visit to Moscow under mysterious circumstances. It is suspected that he was poisoned on the orders of Stalin due to his close relations with Josip Broz Tito at the time of the Yugoslav-Soviet split). Chervenkov was an ardent Stalinist and his rule was marked by rapid industrialization and collectivization.

During this time, the Party was committed to elevating the prestige of the Bulgarian Church on the international stage to act as a champion for inter-Orthodox dialogue and the Soviet peace movement, while continuing to internally promote its atheistic propaganda and restrictions on local clergy. In accordance with a decision made by the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party in 1948, the Bulgarian Patriarchate was restored in May, 1953, with Metropolitan Cyril of Plovdiv elevated as the first Bulgarian Patriarch since the fourteenth century. The Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople Athenagoras refused to recognize this unilateral decision of the Bulgarian Church to declare itself a patriarchate, and relations between the two local churches thawed again for a time but were not completely broken.

On August 3, 1952, Bishop Pimen Inev of Stobia was elected as Metropolitan of Nevrokop. This election was highly controversial since there had been considerable pressure

from the state to get him elected. He was accused of financial abuse, and his election as Bishop of Stobia had been opposed by numerous hierarchs including Archbishop Seraphim Sobolev. However under pressure from the government Pimen was canonically confirmed as Metropolitan on January 4, 1953. It was later discovered that he had been a State Security service collaborator, and the only member of the Church hierarchical council who operated in this capacity at the time of his elevation to Metropolitan status.

Stalin's death in 1953 had repercussions for the regime in Bulgaria. In 1954, Chervenkov accepted the new Soviet model of collective leadership and ceded his position to Todor Zhivkov who would serve as General Secretary of the Communist Party until the collapse of communism in Bulgaria in 1989. The regime liberalized somewhat and under Zhivkov, a great number of political prisoners were released although the government still remained interested in church affairs. All the old ecumenical figures from the pre-war era were retired, a prime example being Fr. Stefan Tsankov, who was fired from the Theological Academy of the University of Sofia, and died in obscurity in 1965.



Valko Chervenkov



Todor Zhivkov

By 1961, the government had taken control of the foreign policy of the church to such a degree that it felt confident enough to allow the Bulgarian Church to return to the ecumenical movement. The Bulgarian intelligence service had now come to view the World Council of Churches as an "object of penetration", which would allow the communists to exert political pressure on the world stage with the Bulgarian Church as their representative. Therefore at the third general assembly of the WCC in New Delhi in 1961, the Bulgarian Church joined the WCC along with several Slavic Orthodox churches including the Moscow Patriarchate, the Romanian Orthodox Church and the Polish Orthodox Church. Upon the Bulgarian Church's entry into the

WCC, Patriarch Athenagoras decided to recognize the Patriarchal status of Metropolitan Cyril of Sofia.

This new ecumenical involvement provided justification for administrative measures aimed at the further marginalization of the Church. On October 11, 1961, the Rila Monastery was declared public property and the Ministry of Education and Culture was assigned to transform it into a National Museum. All of the monks were expelled, and in 1965, the monastery was reopened as a museum. In 1968, the monastery was allowed to reopen in a limited capacity with some of the monks being allowed to return, but it was only after the fall of communism that the monastery property was fully returned to the church.

In 1968, the Bulgarian Church adopted the Revised Julian Calendar at the urging of the Moscow Patriarchate, which wanted to use Bulgaria as a testing ground to see whether a similar reform could be implemented in the Russian Church. The Bulgarian clergy and laity were completely unprepared to resist the change, and when the only Orthodox in Bulgaria who refused to adopt the Revised Calendar turned out to be the Russian Women's Monastery of the Protecting Veil in Sophia, the Moscow Patriarchate decided to refrain from implementing the reform in the Russian Church. The Protecting Veil Monastery was one of the monasteries established by Archbishop Seraphim Sobolev during his pastoral work in Bulgaria, and its inhabitants were some of his closest spiritual children and disciples. Its clergy, which included Archimandrite Seraphim Alexiev and Archimandrite Sergii Yazadzhiev, were lecturers at the Theological Academy of Sofia University and were subsequently either expelled or retired voluntarily.

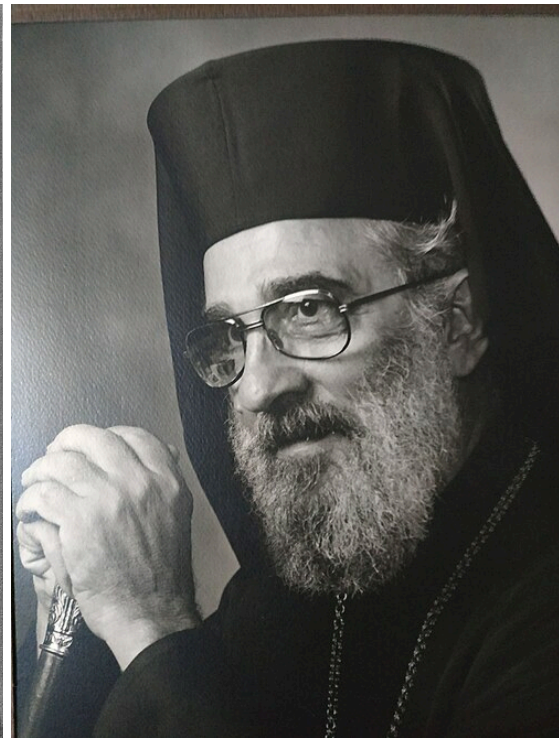
Patriarch Cyril was furious with the presence of this traditionalist Orthodox convent within his own diocese, and threatened to exile the nuns from their convent and disperse them to isolated monasteries. The main convent church of the "St. Apostle and Evangelist Luke" was shut down by the authorities, and the nuns were thus deprived from partaking in the Divine Liturgy. However, the news about the persecution of the convent soon became known abroad and the Bulgarian authorities soon realized that the controversy could bring unwanted attention from the Western world regarding the state of religious freedom in Bulgaria. Thus Patriarch Cyril was forced to concede the right of the convent and its associated clergy to celebrate according to the traditional church calendar, "behind closed doors", and on September 23 (N.S.), 1970, the first Liturgy in two years was served.

The Bulgarian Diocese Abroad, which had been established as an independent diocese in 1937 had severed communion with Sofia after the establishment of the communist regime in 1944. The ruling bishop of the diocese in New York, Metropolitan Andrew Petkov continued to operate independently after an unsuccessful attempt to join the American Metropolia (later known as the Orthodox Church in America), in the late 1950s. Metropolitan Andrew successfully petitioned to restore communion with the Bulgarian Church in 1964. However, due to the anti-communist sentiment of the Bulgarian emigration and the widespread perception that the mainland church had become subordinate to the communist regime, a sizeable portion of the Diocese Abroad led by Archimandrite Kyril Yonchev, petitioned to join the ROCOR. In August,

1964, Metropolitan Philaret of New York and four other ROCOR bishops ordained Archimandrite Kyril to the episcopacy. However after the Bulgarian Church adopted the Revised Julian Calendar in 1968, Bishop Kyril petitioned the ROCOR synod for his parishes to adopt the Revised Calendar as well. Bishop Kyril and most of the Bulgarian parishes were allowed to join the American Metropolia in 1972 with the permission of the ROCOR.



Metropolitan Andrey of New York



Archbishop Kyril of Toledo

In the 1970s and 1980s a serious division began to arise within the Bulgarian church hierarchy between, the older members of the synod who had been consecrated before the Communist Uprising in 1944 (veterans of the Holy Synod such as Neophyte of Vidin and Joseph of Varna), and the younger hierarchs who were almost all State Security agents. The latter group was exemplified by younger metropolitans such as Pancratius of Stara Zagora, Kallinikos of Vratsa and Philaret of Vidin (these three metropolitans eventually became known as “the junta” within the synod). These younger hierarchs were active ecumenical participants, and while most of them were loyal to the regime there were some exceptions. Bishop Parthenius of Levka for example, had been a disciple of Metropolitan Boris of Nevrokop and had inherited his mentor’s anti-communist outlook. He was a prominent thorn in the side of the State Security Services for years which hindered his growth in the hierarchy, but won him many followers among church circles.

The Post-Communist Era

After the collapse of communism in 1989, these divisions which had been simmering under the surface within the Bulgarian Church, erupted onto the public scene. In 1992, six metropolitans: Pimen of Nevrokop, Stefan of Valiko Tarnovo, Sophrony of Dorostol and Cherven, Joanikius of Sliven, Pancratius of Stara Zagora, Kallinikos of Vratsa broke communion with the Holy Synod. They claimed that Patriarch Maxim of Bulgaria's election in 1971 had been carried out under external pressure from the communist authorities and was thus illegal. They called for the election of a new patriarch and elevated Metropolitan Pimen as a rival patriarch. The schism also took on political dimensions, as different political parties took sides and the new prime minister agreed to be sworn in to office by Metropolitan Pimen. This rival hierarchy came to be known as the Alternative Synod.



Patriarch Maxim of Bulgaria

Although Patriarch Maxim's elevation as patriarch had been orchestrated by the State Security services, he had never been a collaborator or an official agent of the government. On the other hand, all the Metropolitans who had set themselves up in opposition to Maxim had been fervent collaborators with State Security. These same metropolitans who had been the most loyal to the Communist Party had also been the most active in ecumenical dialogue, and they reported on the internal affairs of organizations like the World Council of Churches to the State Security, who in turn leveraged this information to further the cause of Marxism-Leninism in several international conflicts (Vietnam, Ethiopia, Afghanistan).

Since the church hierarchy no longer trusted its former representatives in the ecumenical movement from the previous period, this led to the Bulgarian Patriarchate withdrawing from the World Council of Churches in 1998. In the same year, a Pan-Orthodox Council hosted in Sofia, and attended by representatives of the major World Orthodox churches such as Patriarch Bartholomew and Alexy II of Moscow, recognized Patriarch Maxim as the legitimate Patriarch of Bulgaria, and confirmed his election as canonical. Most of the Metropolitans of the Alternative Synod repented by the end of the 1990s, and were allowed to either retire or return to their former diocese.

At the same time, as these major developments were occurring within the Patriarchate, the women's monastery of the Protecting Veil in Sofia was also adapting to the fall of communism. In 1983, the clergy of the monastery had ceased to commemorate the name of Patriarch Maxim during the liturgy, due to what they perceived as the ecumenist excesses within the official church, (coincidentally it was in this same year that the Anathema Against Ecumenism was proclaimed by the Russian Church Abroad). In the following years this "catacomb community" of Bulgarian Old Calendarists established contact with the Greek True Orthodox Church of the Holy Synod in Resistance. The chairman of this synod, Metropolitan Cyprian of Oropos and Fili managed to discreetly ordain several hieromonks for the convent during his travels in Bulgaria. In 1988, on a trip to Greece Rossen Siromahov was ordained a priest at the Holy Monastery of Sts. Cyprian and Justina in Phyle. He was later tonsured to monasticism with the name Photiy. On January 17, 1993 Hieromonk Photiy Siromahov received cheirotonia in the Holy Monastery of Sts. Cyprian and Justina by four bishops of the Synod of Resistance and in the presence of a bishop of the Old Calendar Orthodox Church of Romania. He was ordained with the title of Bishop Photius of Triaditza for the ecclesiastical and spiritual needs of the Bulgarian Old Calendarists. The Old Calendar Orthodox Church of Bulgaria with Bishop Photius as its first-hierarchy, was recognized as an autocephalous church since its inception and was regarded as such by its sister churches: the Synod in Resistance, the Old Calendar Orthodox Church of Romania and the Russian Church Abroad. In the years following 1993, the congregation of the Bulgarian Old Calendar Church expanded rapidly, and today there is one cathedral and fourteen parishes that fall under its jurisdiction, as well as one monastery and one convent.

Meanwhile, the schism within the Patriarchate only officially ended during the reign of Patriarch Neophyte who succeeded Patriarch Maxim upon his repose in 2012. Neophyte's election was itself controversial since it was revealed in that year when the State Security files were declassified that he had himself been an agent. His main rival to succeed Maxim as Patriarch was the staunch conservative Metropolitan Gabriel of Lovech, a disciple of Bishop Parthenius of Levka, and a known traditionalist within the synod. However, the votes clearly came out on the side of Neophyte, and this time since there could be no question of overt government interference in the election, he was elevated to the Patriarchate without any opposition in 2012.



Patriarch Neophyte of Bulgaria

In 2014, the communion of churches which included the Bulgarian Old Calendar Church, the Romanian Old Calendar Church, the Synod in Resistance and a small part of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia which did not accept union with the Moscow Patriarchate in 2007 led by Metropolitan Agafangel of Odessa, entered into communion with the Genuine Orthodox Church of Greece under Archbishop Kallinikos of Athens. The GOC is the largest of all the True Orthodox synods in Greece, and this merger represented the largest union of True Orthodox synods in the past hundred years. In 2017, Bishop Photius of Triaditza was elevated to the rank of Metropolitan. In 2019, hieromonk Victor Todorov was consecrated as Bishop of Nikopol of the Bulgarian Old Calendar Church. In 2020, hieromonk Seraphim Ormanov was consecrated as Bishop of Sozopol for the Bulgarian Old Calendar Church. In 2021, Bishop Victor of Nikopol died from complications due to COVID-19.

Recent Developments

On June 30, 2024 Metropolitan Daniel of Vidin was elected by popular vote to replace the recently reposed Neophyte as Patriarch of Bulgaria. Patriarch Daniel represents a younger generation of Bulgarian bishops who had no involvement with the State Security apparatus during the communist era, and mostly entered the clergy after the fall of communism in Bulgaria. Since his election he has come out firmly in support of the Russian Orthodox Church in relation to the ongoing schism between the Moscow and Constantinopolitan synods, over the Church in Ukraine. More controversially, Patriarch Daniel has been cooperating with the government in

Bulgaria to revoke the legal registration of the Old Calendar Orthodox Church of Bulgaria under Metropolitan Photius of Triaditza. As of the time that this essay is being published, the Bulgarian parliament is preparing to pass amendments to the Act on Religious Denominations that would designate the Patriarchate as the sole representative of Orthodoxy in the country.



Patriarch Daniel of Bulgaria



His Eminence Metropolitan Photius of Triaditza

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