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Homeless in Their Own Home: Bulgarian Muslims After 1878[1]

(Krzysztof Popek, *Muzułmanie w Bułgarii 1878–1912*, Kraków: Historia Iagellonica, 2022, 562 pages)

If the book *Muzułmanie w Bułgarii 1878–1912* [Muslims in Bulgaria 1878–1912] had been published in Turkey or Bulgaria, it would certainly have caused not only a heated debate among researchers but also a far wider public debate. Krzysztof Popek's study clearly stands out from everything that I have read so far on Bulgarian Muslims after 1878. Many authors from the Balkan region have dedicated their entire research careers to investigating the emerging Bulgarian state's policy towards Muslims. Researchers particularly worth men-

[1] The title is inspired by the headline *Homeless in thei own home* (Bulg. *Bezdomnitsi u doma*), which comes from "Rights and Freedom" – a Turkish newspaper published in Bulgaria between 1991 and 1995: Черкезов (1991, p. 2).

The work has been prepared at author's own expense.

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tioning include Türker Acaroğlu (1990), Ömer Turan (1998), Bilâl Şimşir (2009) [Turkish academics], and Vera Mutafchieva (Moutafchieva, 1988), Antonina Zhelyazkova (Željazkova, 1990), Petar Petrov (Петров, 1988), Stoyan Mihaylov (Михайлов, 1992) [Bulgarian researchers]. However, I must point out that many of these historians did not avoid bias in their research in that their observations were often characterized by national prejudices and stereotypes.

In the mid-1980s, communist authorities in Bulgaria justified the policy of forced assimilation[2] by arguing that Turks posed a threat to internal security – as a *fifth column* secretly supporting Turkey. The regime actions at the time were advocated by several academics. This is how Christo Christov described the Ottoman rule in Bulgaria in 1980:

> […] Bulgaria's fall under Turkish rule ushered in the grimmest period in the history of the Bulgarian people, a period of almost 500 years of foreign domination. During it, the very existence of the Bulgarians as a nationality was threatened as a result of their extermination, eviction and assimilation and the brutal oppression, and exploitation. […] Bulgaria's conquest by the Turks was accompanied by the destruction of whole towns and villages and eviction of the population. Hitherto prospering towns and villages were reduced to ruins and the land was turned into a desert. (Hristov, 1980, p. 63)

Many years later, some Bulgarian scholars expressed regret that the Muslim heritage persisted in scholarly discourse in Bulgaria. The Ottoman rule, which ended in the 19th century, is clearly seen as a period of great oppression, for which Bulgarian researchers sometimes use the term the *Turkish yoke*. Medieval history, before the Ottoman conquest, is usually idealized and is followed by the demonization of everything that happened after 1396 (Eminov, 1997, p. 5). On the other hand, Turkish academics perceive this time as the idyllic era of the Ottoman community of nations (*Ottoman commonwealth*). As Minkov argued, there are three different models within this discourse. The first, named *the theory of catastrophe*, was usually represented by Bulgarian historians. Another view, called *the theory of blessing*, was more characteristic of Turkish researchers. In fact, both approaches deformed the image of the entire epoch, treating the available historical sources selectively. The few exceptions

[2] The forced assimilation policy (also known as the "Revival process" deprived the ethnic groups living in communist Bulgaria of basic civil rights and freedoms. Roma, Tatars, Pomaks and Turks (Muslim minorities) were forced to change their names to Bulgarian ones. It was strictly forbidden to speak Turkish in public, to publish Turkish press or books, mosques were closed, etc. For more about the "Revival process" in Bulgaria, see: Eminov (1990).

that make a difference are the works of Mutafchieva and Zhelyazkova[3], and Halil İnalcık's work (published in 1954), all of which sought to move away from the instrumentalization of the past. Their studies portrayed *the modern approach* (Minkov, 2004, pp. 29–32).

Furthermore, many western academics have been interested in this problem: Wolfgang Höpken (1989), Justin McCarthy (2010), Richard Crampton (2007), Alexandre Popovic (1994), Ali Eminov (1997), and Mary Neuburger (2004). Polish resercher have also dealt with this subject, for example Zbigniew Klejn (2006), Miroslaw Dymarski (2010), Irena Stawowy-Kawka (2007), and Tadeusz Czekalski (2010). Most non-Balkan monographs are undeniably valuable and are supported by materials from British or German archives. As a result, this helps to broaden the research perspective, but there are still publications where historians present the facts in a one-sided way.

Popek's book, published by *Historia Iagellonica* in 2022, is a continuation of his research work. Krzysztof Popek works as an assistant professor in the Faculty of History at Jagiellonian University. Over the years, he has published more than 50 papers devoted to Balkan culture, literature and history. In addition to a historical education, Popek is also a graduate of Slavic studies, which certainly helps him to conduct reliable research in the field of Balkan studies. In 2019, together with Monika Skrzeszewska, he issued a joint work on the reception of Ottoman heritage in Balkan history and culture (Popek & Skrzeszewska, 2019b). As the authors claimed:

> […] The visions of the "Turkish yoke" and "Ottoman commonwealth" contain as much truth about the Ottoman Balkans as the false and distortions, arising from the simplifications or ideological motivations. […] In that way, in the Balkan cultures and mentalities, there is a place for the contradictory stereotypes of the Turks and Muslims. On the one hand, they are "cruel tormentors", on the other, – "good neighbor", which – with a wider historical perspective – can be translated into the historiographical visions of the "Turkish yoke" and "Ottoman commonwealth". (Popek & Skrzeszewska, 2019a, p. 7)

To write objectively about the Ottoman period in the Balkans or the Turkish population living in Bulgaria after 1878, researchers must maintain a balance by distancing themselves from the extreme concepts presented within the discourse. I am convinced that the author of the reviewed book manages this difficult

[3] And other researchers gathered around the IMIR (International Center for Minority Studies and Intercultural Relations) in Sofia.

challenge. By analyzing the available historical archives and materials, Popek carefully determines their credibility. When looking for answers to specific questions, he always confronts various sources and scenarios. As a result, this consistent and fair method encourages the reader to reflect on the problem. The main aim of his work is to reconstruct Bulgarian policy towards Muslims in the first years of statehood. Popek assesses the veracity of of statements about the liberal policy that is present in the Bulgarian literature on the subject and considers the credibility of accusations regarding the repressive nature of this policy (repeated by Turkish and western scholars) (Popek, 2022, p. 18). As the author points out, the issue is multidimensional; therefore, in my view, the reader should not expect unambiguous answers. However, this is exactly what proves the profound value of the analysis.

The work has a clearly defined structure with an introduction, thirteen chapters and a conclusion. The current state of research, the objectives, methodology and sources are outlined at the very beginning. Popek also explains all the challenges and risks he encountered during his research. The individual chapters can be grouped into three main modules.

In the initial module, the first two chapters acquaint the reader with the ethnogenesis of Bulgarian Muslims and provides statistics on the population and its geographical distribution. These chapters also present how the separate ethnic groups, such as the Turks, Tatars, Roma, Circassians, and Pomaks (Muslims speaking Bulgarian), functioned within the entire community of Muslims under the Sultan's rule. Chapter 2 develops the problem of interreligious relations between Muslims and Christians in the Ottoman period. The author analyzes this question by considering two concepts present in historiography (the *Turkish yoke* versus *Pax Ottomana*). In my opinion, Popek introduces this section in an insightful way and without stereotyping.

Chapters 3 and 4 describe the so-called *Great Eastern Crisis* on Bulgarian lands: between 1875 and 1878, the civilians suffered unprecedented bloodshed and violence. First, the repression affected the supporters of the April Uprising (1876) and many Bulgarians experienced violence from Muslims. Later, during the Russo–Turkish War, the Muslims were terribly persecuted by the Russian and Bulgarian armies. During the war, 130,000–150,000 Muslim refugees left Bulgaria. The Berlin Treaty that ended the Russo–Turkish war divided the Bulgarian lands into two entities: the Principality of Bulgaria (as a Russian protectorate) and Eastern Rumelia (as an Ottoman autonomy). In each part, the Bulgarian policy towards Muslims was different. In the first years after

liberation, Bulgarian authorities continued to fight local Muslim resistance. Between 1878–1880, most of the resistance groups were characterized as political groups fighting for the restoration of the Sultan's rule. After 1880, the Turkish resistance was over, although criminal groups still operated.

The last and largest module (chapters 5–13) constitutes a key overview of Bulgarian policy towards Muslims in the period before and after reunification (1885). Chapter 5 examines the legal status of Muslims in the Principality of Bulgaria and Eastern Rumelia, then in the reunited state and the Kingdom of Bulgaria (1908). The following chapters discuss the position of Muslims in specific areas of social life, such as participation in the army and local administration, religious organization, access to education in their mother language and to press and culture of minority groups. Moreover, Popek focuses on selected social processes, such as the *Agrarian revolution*, when many Muslims lost their economic status; the de-Ottomanization of urban centers, which influenced significant demographic changes; the migrations, which lasted for years, and the religious conversions. Each part of this module reveals specific problems to the reader. Additionally, the author uses archival sources to highlight the stories of ordinary people who, wanting to stay on their land, had to adapt to the newly formed state. These concrete examples help the reader understand what the situation of Muslims in Bulgaria was like after 1878.

The attached bibliography convinces me that Popek has amassed an impressive collection of historical sources from Bulgarian and British archives. Apart from state and diplomatic documents, the author also lists media publications, literary works and memoirs. The list of subject literature he cites takes up 23 pages, thus proving the expertise and due diligence in his work.

Although we are dealing with a scientific publication, the author of *Muzułmanie w Bułgarii 1878–1912* builds its narrative in a way that is comprehensible for casual readers not interested in the history of Bulgaria and its religious minorities. The well-thought-out layout of the book gradually introduces us to the subject, which makes the research more inclusive for a wider audience. The numerous references allow us to deepen our knowledge of the topic.

Krzysztof Popek's study on Bulgarian Muslims at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries is a significant addition to the academic literature on this topic. First of all, these studies are based on archival material, media output, and memoirs of the time, which he then compares with subject literature by other historians. The author tries to distance himself from the common discourses often used by researchers writing about the history of post-Ottoman Bulgaria.

Hence, as I stated at the beginning, if this book were to be published in Bulgaria or Turkey, it would certainly cause a heated debate among historians and other academics. Popek's study of Bulgarian history provides a credible analysis but does not offer obvious answers. The author does not claim to present the only correct assessment of the analysed period. Quite the opposite, he shows the multidimensionality of the issue. As he argues, from the perspective of their legal status, the situation of Bulgarian Muslims seemed fine in the period covered by the book. On the other hand, the economic situation of this group looked disastrous. Many Muslims left urban centres and moved to the countryside, and political changes in the newly established state also had an impact on Muslim participation in social life. Finally, the situation of the Muslims truly depended on regional conditions, such as the Bulgarian neighbourhood or local authority where they lived. One thing is certain: after a period of relative stability, in 1912, with the start of the Balkan Wars, Muslims in Bulgaria became an object of repression again – and not for the last time, unfortunately, as the history of this country shows.

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Bezdomni we własnym domu. Bułgarscy muzułmanie po 1878

Recenzja monografii naukowej *Muzułmanie w Bułgarii. 1878–1912* autorstwa Krzysztofa Popka (Kraków, 2022, 562 ss.). Książka stanowi skrupulatne opracowanie przedstawiające nie tylko historię migracji muzułmańskich i status prawny muzułmanów w nowo powstałym państwie, ale także ich udział w podstawowych obszarach społecznych, takich jak administracja, media, oświata, kultura itp.

Słowa kluczowe: recenzja; „Muzułmanie w Bułgarii 1878–1912"; bułgarscy muzułmanie; bułgarscy Turcy; historia Bułgarii; migracje na Bałkanach

Homeless in their own home: Bulgarian Muslims after 1878

This article is a review of the study entitled *Muzułmanie w Bułgarii 1878–1912* [Muslims in Bulgaria 1878–1912], authored by Krzysztof Popek (Kraków, 2022, pp. 562). This book outlines not only the history of the Muslim migrations and the legal status of Muslims in the newly established state, but also their participation in basic social areas such as administration, media, education, culture, etc.

Keywords: review; "Muzułmanie w Bułgarii 1878–1912"; Bulgarian Muslims; Bulgarian Turks; history of Bulgaria; Balkan migrations

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