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Ethnic cleansing during the Cold War. The forgotten 1989 expulsion of Turks from Communist Bulgaria

by Tomasz Kamusella, Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2019, 274 pp., £120.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-138-48052-0

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BOOK REVIEW

Ethnic cleansing during the Cold War. The forgotten 1989 expulsion of Turks from Communist Bulgaria, by Tomasz Kamusella, Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2019, 274 pp., £120.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-138-48052-0

After the dissolution of Yugoslavia, social scientists and historians began to shine a light on a large variety of local and regional determinants in the attempt to unveil the main causes of interethnic war and gross human rights violations. Far from registering a similar interest, domestic factors and international events that drove Bulgaria's transition from Communism to democracy remain largely under-researched. In this vacuum, Tomasz Kamusella delves into the usually overlooked 1989 mass-expulsion of ethnic Turks and Muslims from Communist Bulgaria.

Judging by the title and subtitle, the monograph might mislead the audience of those scholars attempting to detail the events that anticipated the downfall of the Communist regime in the country. In fact, Kamusella neither solely recollects a chronological series of brutal events and merciless policies that ethnic Turks and Muslim groups suffered from, nor does he merely calculate the seriously unreported number of expellees. More interestingly from a scholarly viewpoint, Kamusella shows the double-threaded connection between the 1989 mass-expulsion of ethnic Turks and the previously implemented assimilation campaigns carried out through forced name-changing against ethnic and religious minority groups in Communist Bulgaria. This lens of investigation does not only allow Kamusella to define such merciless policies as the largest ethnic cleansing campaign in the postwar Europe (61–67). It also gives credit to his call for further and deeper investigation of those tragic events among the young generations of today's Bulgaria. In other words, his study is of paramount importance as it provides a vastly nuanced typology of information and data from open archives and secret documentations to a broader international audience. In addition, it juxtaposes the subject-matter with other related issues of national history and identity in the Bulgarian society.

In the first part of the monograph, the author rightly notes how a particularly widespread anti-Turkish sentiment had remained hidden beneath the parapet of Communist propaganda after the Second World War. Once unfolded during the 1960s, Kamusella traces out the subtle yet telling rationale behind the "Revival Process". For instance, he recalls the scholarly vague "scientific truth" that the two most prestigious academic institutions, the Sofia University "Sveti Kliment Ohridski" and the Bulgarian Academy of Science, respectively, began to support. The latter was built upon the assumption that Turkish and Muslim minorities accounted for communities of ethnic Bulgarians forcedly converted to Islam during the Ottoman Empire and thereby accustomed to the Turkic folklore and livelihood. Interestingly enough, Kamusella does not only point out how all Bulgarian scholars and academics were dragooned by such dogmatic position and tasked to work on it. He also notes how some Turkish members of the Bulgarian Communist Party supported such a "scientific truth", whose diffusion laid out the ideological justification of the "Revival Process" (24–25).

Hence, Kamusella correctly clears up any potentially ideological explanation over the Communist assimilation campaigns against Turks and Muslims. Although Islam was considered a socio-cultural barrier in Communist Bulgaria, he disentangles the real aims of the Zhivkov-led Communist regime. Having little to do with seeking out the best Communist society ever, he indicates how an ideological continuum on which Bulgaria has historically fabricated

its own socio-cultural and political institutions and national identity, was steeped in reinforcing imaginings of ethnic enmity and otherness ideologically and marking national pillars of Bulgarian identity and culture after the liberation from the "Turkish Yoke". Although the Bulgarian context does not prove anything new within the Soviet Union and its satellite region, Kamusella contributes to advancing the state-of-the-art research on the scholarship of so-called Communist "nativisation policies". They had little to do with Communist-internationalist values and practices but instrumentally supported one's monolithic ethno-majoritarian cultural system (*edinstvo* in Bulgaria) aimed at increasing loyal representativeness within the Party structures. In a few words, the suppression of all visible traces of Turkish-ness and having no longer "Arab-Turkic" heritage and culture in the aftermaths of 1985 national census (51–55), has been implemented in promotion of an ethnolinguiticcum-ethnoreligious national identity steeped in the Bulgarian language and Orthodox Christianity (73).

Tellingly, the high salience given to the "Turkish question" may have legitimised - Todor Zhivkov's promptness to prevent Bulgaria from a Cyprus-like scenario that Turkey would have escalated in support of its countrymen in the southernmost region. Against this presumption, Kamusella rejects the latter by unveiling the subtle mechanisation of the regime. He unravels the main reason for which the exodus of thousands of ethnic Turks came to fall under the etiquette of "Big Excursion" in the second half of the 1980s. In short, the Communist rhetoric of "big excursion" (i.e. *goliama excursia*), which was used to explain the increase of movement across the Bulgarian-Turkish borders, could not but hide a much sinister scenario of forced expulsion that had already begun in the summer of 1984. Those about 80.000 Bulgarian Muslims – mostly ethnic Turks – who began to leave the country, were not simply *tourists* who wanted to satisfy their desire of visiting Turkey, but victims of an unprecedented forced assimilation campaigns.

The central section of the monograph follows coherently the main argumentation. Focusing on the international press coverage on the ethnic cleansing between 1984 and 1985, as well as the passage from Communism to democracy, the third and fourth chapters explore the domestic and international affairs. While the former sheds light on how international stakeholders and actors reacted to the "Revival Process" by officially calling for the protection and respect of minority rights in Bulgaria, the latter shows how the democratisation was slowed down by the aftermaths of the "Revival Process". Overall, Kamusella notes that the name-change policies and the 1989 expulsion of ethnic Turks and Muslims did not come with no cost for post-Communist Bulgaria and took a heavy toll on the society (82). On an international level, Zhivkov's intention of expatriating about 400.000 Turks deteriorated rapidly the interstate relations with Turkey. After 1989, Bulgaria was rather isolated while juggling with establishing full-fledged democracy and rocketing emigration driven by economic recession. Within this, Kamusella has no doubts regarding the fact that Bulgaria had to pay a high price for having tried to assimilate and forcedly expel almost 10 percent of its population (77). For example, replacing the workforce of ethnic Turks and Muslims in agriculture – a central sector where minority members overrepresented Bulgarians – turned out to be a herculean task. Moreover, the previous accusation against Ankara, guilty of levelling down Kurdish villages and forcedly moving ethnic Kurds westward, did not pay off (68–73) in discrediting the Turkish hostility due to the mass-expulsion of Turks and Muslims living in Communist Bulgaria. On the contrary, it exacerbated West's criticism toward the newly established democratic institutions.

The last chapters display the Bulgarian cognitive dissonance with the past. In this, Kamusella recalls the aftermaths of the 1989 events. While only about 70.000 Turks decided to stay in Turkey after having cheaply sold everything they possessed, other returnees had to deal with a more hostile environment. The first demonstrations for democracy made room

for rehabilitating the Turkish minority in a democratic Bulgaria. Despite the fact that the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) – the de facto minority party in the political spectrum – came to live, not a single Party member was brought to the dock for the "Revival Process". Kamusella notices how the rise of the MRF was not simply contested, but also politically disturbing for the majority of Bulgarians. Similar to many scholars, likewise Kamusella notices how the MRF feels immediately under suspicion of the wider public in a time when anti-Turkish sentiment was used as a political instrument. Paradoxically, rather than expressing solidarity with minority members who suffered from Zhivkov's persecutions during Communism, those Bulgarians and young human rights associations who called for the return of the original names to Turks and Muslims were accused of being "traitors" and "enemies" of the country (83).

In short, the post-1989 period meant a lost chance for Bulgarians to come officially to terms with the past. The arrival of democracy shifted the gears among Bulgaria's national consciousness by almost tabooing the "Revival Process". The latter, which is still trapped into an official amnesia, has definitely become a sensitive issue to touch upon. As Kamussela correctly notes, the MRF has always attempted to represent the guarantor of the "ethnic peace" in spite of being systematically accused of mobilising the ethnic population stoke against Bulgaria. When it comes to tracing out the tangible discomfort of the Bulgarian society on the 1980s events and the Turkish heritage, it should be enough to mention that not a single perpetrator has been brought to the dock (115). Nor an official place of remembrance has been so far built for commemorating ethnic Turks and Muslims that were persecuted during Communism. To a certain extent, the Monument of the Victims of Communism in Sofia downtown commemorates minority members in Communist Bulgaria. Yet, among the 7500 names of the victims inscribed on the wall of the monument, the memory of ethnic Turks and Muslims is equalised with all other Bulgarian victims murdered from the period between 1944 and 1989.

To conclude, this monograph helps not only to galvanise the debate over Communism in Bulgaria, but also debunks the myth of Bulgaria's peaceful transition to democracy. By critically noticing that Milosević – the decision-maker of the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo – would have simply looked next door for a shining example of an ethnic cleansing (17), Kamusella strongly condemned the lack of international investigation and scholarly interest over the "Revival Process" in Bulgaria and beyond. Tellingly, the fact that Bulgaria did not face any serious inter-ethnic violence does not mean that nothing happened. Likewise, the fact that the country was largely favoured for its democracy building and later smooth accession to NATO in 2004 and to the European Union in 2007 (68), should not stop the wider public of scholars, academics and practitioners from putting a spotlight on the "Revival Process" and its legacy in Bulgaria.

Nevertheless, Kamusella does not advance any potential accusation of genocide against Bulgaria. Those Turks forced to change their personal and family names, or those others forcibly expelled to Turkey, suffered an ethnic cleansing (141) in Bulgaria: one of the most unnoticed European countries resembling the brightest and darkest pages of XXth century in a nutshell.

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