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CHURCH LIFE IN MACEDONIA DURING WORLD WAR II

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Abstract:

The article is devoted to the history of church life in Macedonia during the occupation from 1941 to 1944, which contributed to the initiation of the organization of the autocephalous Macedonian Orthodox Church. This process was prompted both by the spiritual administration of the Bulgarian Church and the communist government. The growth of the Macedonian Church occurred immediately after World War II with the communist government of Yugoslavia's active support since they were interested in diminishing the influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church.

Key words: Macedonian Orthodox Church, Second World War, Bulgarian occupation, communist government of Yugoslavia, Serbian Orthodox Church.

The period during the Second World War and the immediate post-war period mark the years of the formation of the new autocephalous Macedonian Orthodox Church (which was officially proclaimed in 1967), despite the fact that its independence was never recognized by any other Local Orthodox church, including the Moscow Patriarchate, for which supporters of autocephaly and communist authorities of post-war Yugoslavia had high hopes. There are two diametrically-opposed viewpoints in the Yugoslav and Bulgarian historiography regarding the process of the formation of the new church. Almost all former Yugoslav and current Serbian Christian historians (for example, Djoko Slijepčević, Božic Zečević, Slavko Dimevski, Radmila Radić, etc.) claim that the Macedonian communists, supported by the leadership of the Yugoslav Communist Party, initiated this process, whereas the local separatist clergy served only as an

“obedient tool” in their hands. The meeting between several priests associated with the partisans from the liberated territory of Western Macedonia, held in October 1943, was decisive. This allegedly marked the beginning of the Macedonian Church organization under the auspices of the communists. Because of this, the organization of the Macedonian Orthodox Church was evaluated as a highly negative event.

On the other hand, Bulgarian historians (Svetlozar Yeldyrov, V. Stoyanova, P. Petrov, H. Temelski, Daniela Kalkandzhieva, and others) suggest that the pro-Bulgarian Macedonian clergy played a crucial role in this process, and that the foundations of the new church in Macedonia was due to the Bulgarian spiritual administration present during the war.¹ This claim was supported by one Serbian historian, Predrag Puzović, who maintained that the initiative concerning the secession from the Serbian Church was largely motivated by the Bulgarian clergymen who remained to live in the Republic of Macedonia. However, he certainly disagreed with the evaluation of the process conducted by Bulgarian and contemporary Macedonian historians, who mainly held a positive view of the establishment of the new church. The archives containing source documents related to the spiritual administration of the Bulgarian Church in occupied Macedonia show that the Bulgarian historians were closer to the truth in understanding the initial stage of this process, although the influence of the Yugoslav communist authorities was, nevertheless, stronger than they believed it to be.

Prior to the war, the Orthodox parishes in Macedonia belonged to three dioceses of the Serbian Orthodox Church, i.e. the Diocese of Skopje, the Diocese of Zletovo and Strumica, and the Diocese of Ohrid and Bitola. The first diocese was established in 1932 by one of the most famous Serbian hierarchs of the twentieth century, Metropolitan of Skopje Josif (Cvijović). The second hierarch who served after the war was the future Serbian Patriarch (1950-1958), the

¹ The Bulgarian Orthodox Church did not recognize the Macedonian Church due to political reasons.

Bishop of Zletovo and Strumica, Vikenty (Prodanov), who simultaneously ruled over the Diocese of Ohrid and Bitola.

The attack on Yugoslavia in the spring of 1941 by Nazi Germany and its allies, Italy, Hungary and Bulgaria had tragic consequences for the Serbian Orthodox Church in Macedonia. On April 7, 1941, the German armed forces had already conquered the capital of Macedonia, the city of Skopje, and then launched the invasion of the entire territory of the region (the Bulgarians came only a few weeks later). The Seminary in Bitola was closed for classes in the beginning of April. On April 10, the Seminary facilities were first occupied by the Germans, later transforming into a German military hospital and, finally, into a Bulgarian police station. In the middle of May 1941, all the teachers from the Seminary left Bitola for Serbia.²

Soon after the beginning of the German occupation of Macedonia, Metropolitan Josif was imprisoned under house arrest and consequently, he was isolated from the clergy. On May 4 and 5, Josif, along with Bishop Vikenty and other priests who were born in Serbia, or had Serbian spouses, or were considered loyal to the Serbs, were deported from Macedonia.³

At the end of April, Macedonia was divided into two parts by its invaders: a large portion of the eastern territory, including the city of Skopje, was amalgamated to Bulgaria, and the smaller, western part of the country was under the government of the Italians, i.e., was under their protectorate of the so-called Great Albania. The demarcation line between the Italian and Bulgarian occupation zones was defined by the Vienna Agreement which took place at the end of April 1941. However, this demarcation line did not satisfy any side, and armed clashes took place and continued to result in violence. In September 1941, the Bulgarian Prime Minister B.

² Р. Радић. *Држава и верске заједнице 1945-1970* ["State and Religious Community 1945-1970"]. Vol. 1, 1945-1953. Belgrade, 2002, p. 62.

³ Ibid., p. 51; Митрополит Скопски Јосиф. *Мемоари* [Metropolitan of Skopje Josif. Memoirs], 1998, Cetinje, p. 260; С. Димевски. *Историја на Македонската Православна Црква* ["The History of the Macedonian Orthodox Church"]. Skopje, 1989, p. 989.

Filov stated that “We are neither satisfied with the border of Western Macedonia, nor with the position of Italy. This border is groundless; it is neither historically nor strategically nor economically justified.” The situation became so acute that the Bulgarian War Minister Lukov predicted a near-future conflict between Italy and Bulgaria. On the other hand, the Albanian residents of eastern Macedonia, supported by Italy, expressed their dissatisfaction with the accession to Bulgaria. Thus, on November 28, 1941, an anti-Bulgarian demonstration took place in Skopje, demanding that this city should be included within Albania. On March 29, 1943, an agreement was concluded on delimitation of the Italian and Bulgarian occupation zones in Tirana.⁴

The Bulgarian army completed the occupation of the eastern part of the province (Vardar Macedonia) on May 6, 1941. Soon, the Bulgarian military, civil, and religious administration was established. A group of Macedonian emigrants from Bulgaria participated as representatives of the local elites of the Central Bulgarian Committee. Immediately, a course was taken to instill Bulgarian national identity to the Slavic population of Macedonia, in which a significant role was assigned to the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. At the same time, the Bulgarian leadership officially considered Macedonians to be Bulgarians.

The Holy Synod believed that with regard to the occupied territories, the Bulgarian Church had only restored its historical justice; that she reinstated what belonged to her up until 1913.⁵ On April 29, 1941, the Synod adopted a resolution for establishing three dioceses of the Bulgarian Church in Macedonia: the Diocese of Strumica and Drama, including a small part of the Greek Aegean Thrace (under the leadership of Metropolitan Boris of Nevrokop), the Diocese

⁴ D. Bogdanović. *Kosovo. Vergangenheit und Gegenwart*, Zürich-Lausanne, 1992, p. 249.

⁵ Although before the Balkan wars of 1912-1913 Macedonia was part of the Ottoman Empire, most of its Orthodox parishes were under the jurisdiction of the Bulgarian Exarchate. Only after the defeat of Bulgaria in the Second Balkan War of 1913 they were amalgamated to the Serbian Church.

of Skopje and Veles (under the command of Metropolitan Sophroniy of Turnovo), and the Diocese of Ohrid and Bitola (under Metropolitan Philip of Lovech). On April 30, the following assistants of the metropolitans were appointed: Bishop of Dragovitsa Hariton to assist Metropolitan Boris; Bishop Branitsky Maxim to assist Metropolitan Sophroniy, and Bishop of Bregalnitsa Panareth to assist Metropolitan Filaret. The dioceses were divided into vice-regencies, which in turn, were composed of parishes. Having been established in the summer of 1941, the provisional spiritual administration was largely preserved until the autumn of 1944.⁶

The Holy Synod immediately decided to take all the necessary measures to replenish the clergy in the new territories. On April 29, the Synod decided to allow the Bulgarian priests who served before World War II to return to the new dioceses so that the new parishes may be staffed by a sufficient number of priests. Experienced but retired priests were also asked to return and to continue to serve as parish priests, whereas the diocesan bishops were instructed to send at least five percent of their parish priests to the new dioceses. Initially, the Synod expected to send about 200 parish priests and church clerks from Bulgaria to “the newly liberated lands” in order to assist the 500 local Slavic priests in serving the parishes. Thirty vicegerents were suggested to be sent to the district centers.⁷

The *Protosyncellus* of the Sofia Metropolitanate, Archimandrite Stefan (Nikolov), upon his arrival from Bulgaria with three other priests, a secretary and a cashier, became the *Protossyncellus* of the Metropolitanate of Skopje and Veles. For the first time in 23 years, on

⁶ Централен държавен архив на Република България [Central State Archives of the Republic of Bulgaria], далее: ЦДА. Ф. 791к. Оп. 1. А. е. 67, р. 30, 43; Bundesarchiv Berlin (BA), R5101/23177, Bl. 131; В. Стоянова. *Църковно-административната уредба на Македония и Тракия и изборът на патриарх на Българската православна църква (април 1941 – септември 1944 г.)* [“Church and Administrative Regulation in Macedonia and Thrace and the Election of the Patriarch of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (April 1941 – September 1944)”], Minalo, Sofia, 1994, № 2, pp. 55-65.

⁷ ЦДА. Ф. 791к. Оп. 1. А. е. 67, pp. 32-37; С. Елдъров. *Православието на война. Българската православна църква и войните на България 1877-1945* [“Orthodoxy at War. Bulgarian Orthodox Church and Wars in Bulgaria 1877 – 1945”], Sofia, 2004, pp. 245-246.

May 6 in Skopje, the Bulgarian clergy performed the Divine Liturgy and the Thanksgiving *Moleben* for the liberation of Macedonia. A few days later, the bishops of the Bulgarian Church arrived in the region. Metropolitan Sophroniy arrived in Skopje on May 11 and settled in the building of the Metropolitanate of Skopje, which had remained intact after the bombing of the city.⁸

In Eastern Macedonia, where Macedonians made up a majority of the population, the spiritual administration of the Bulgarian Church was received most loyally by the local residents. The Synod heard the diocesan bishops' reports with regard to these areas on June 12 and 13, 1941. Metropolitan Sophroniy, in his report dating from June 7, informed the Synod that he had been cordially greeted by the majority of the congregation, remarking that only in the northern outskirts of the newly formed Eparchy of Skopje and Veles (in Southern Serbia and Kosovo) was the new church authority received "cold-heartedly." There—in Surdulica, Vranje, Preshevo, and Kachanik—lived a majority of Albanian Muslims, whose terrorizing attacks have prosecuted many Serbian priests. The rest of the metropolitans were confirmed in the parishes.

In Skopje, a city of 80,000 inhabitants, there were 16 parishes and six churches, most of which were slightly affected by the German bombing raids, but were quickly restored afterwards. The bombing caused severe damage to the Diocesan Museum, and many valuable church items were either lost or destroyed. Serving in the city parishes, about 16 Serbian priests and deacons were deported to Belgrade along with Josif, Metropolitan of Skopje, before the arrival of Bishop Sophroniy. Only Russian and Macedonian priests remained in the city.

The district of Skopje (apart from the city area) consisted of 15 Orthodox parishes, where each parish extended to 10 to 15 villages. Metropolitan Sophroniy visited three monasteries (St. Andrew, "Matka," and St. Nicholas) and several parishes, observing that in many of the churches

⁸ ЦДЛ. Ф. 791к. Оп. 1. А. е. 66, p. 191.

“during the 23 years of occupation the old inscriptions on the icons had been replaced from Slavic-Bulgarian to Serbian.” In addition, the Bishop inspected the second diocesan center, the city of Veles. There were three churches and five parishes there. Some of the Serbian priests had left, but others had stayed and continued with their ministry.⁹

About 145 out of the 189 parishes (600 to 3000 people each) remained to be governed by the local priests (Macedonians), 21 parishes were looked after priests sent from Bulgaria and 23 did not have any clergy (by July 3, the total number of parishes had risen to 206). In addition, there were 37 monasteries and nunneries in the Eparchy of Skopje and Veles. Metropolitan Sophroniy received all abbots and abbesses in Skopje, some of whom wished to serve in the Bulgarian Church, while others desired to go to Serbia (they were released). By June 7, the Bishop had also appointed 12 temporary episcopal vicegerents.

At the end of the report, Metropolitan Sophroniy listed the main problems that in his opinion were necessary to be resolved by the Synod: to open a special course in the Sofia Seminary for young priests who cannot read Church Slavonic and can hardly speak Bulgarian; to send ecclesiastical literature to Macedonia; to pay pecuniary amounts to priests who have been removed from their service by the Serbian Church authorities; to clarify the issue of mixed marriages of Bulgarians and Serbs, etc.¹⁰

On July 20, 1941, Metropolitan Sophroniy sent a second report to the Synod in regards to the situation in the Eparchy of Skopje and Veles. It was mainly about the plight of the Macedonian clergy living in the western part occupied by the Italians. The Bishop also asked the

⁹ Ibid., Оп. 2. А. е. 226, p. 1-3.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 4-5.

Bulgarian military and civil authorities to prevent the agents of the Catholic propaganda and the Protestant sects from spreading their agenda in the newly liberated provinces.¹¹

Somewhat better was the situation in the main part of the Diocese of Ohrid and Bitola, where almost all 170 parishes had priests, of which 150 were of Macedonian origin (by July 3, the specified number of parishes rose to 195). The new congregation was loyal to the clergy, and in some places, Metropolitan Filaret was even met with sheer joy. There were, however, some parts of the eparchy where the situation for the Macedonians was very hard under the Italian rule. Metropolitan Filaret paid a visit to the Italian-occupied city of Ohrid and the monastery of St. Naum, but his residence remained in the city of Bitola. The most difficult situation was in the Diocese of Strumica and Drama, as it was formed as a result of a mechanical connection of two dioceses (Macedonian and Greek), which for a very long time had been under a different ecclesiastical and political government and thus differed greatly in their ethnic composition. In the Aegean Thrace (which was composed of 350 parishes), Metropolitan Boris was mainly met in a hostile manner, and it was only in the Macedonian part of the diocese that he was able to find understanding and support. Here, the Metropolitan established four spiritual districts (later they evolved into five) and four episcopal vicegerents: in Strumica, Gevgelia, Kavadarci, and Berovo. Strumica became the metropolitan residence of the diocese and it was there that a temporary Diocesan council was formed. Twenty out of 80 Macedonian parishes of the diocese were vacant, whereas the rest of them were overseen by several Serbian priests.¹²

Having heard the reports of the metropolitans, the Synod appointed a special commission to deal with questions related to these reports. The commission soon delivered a report “On the ecclesiastical structure and administration of dioceses in the newly liberated territories.” The

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 9-10; Он. 1. А. е. 100, pp. 1-24.

¹² Ibid., Он. 1. А. е. 67, pp. 53-56, 77-81.

report suggested that these dioceses become an integral part of the Bulgarian Church, and that their organization and management was to be carried out in harmony with the Exarchate.¹³ With a resolution delivered by the Synod on November 19, 1942, the artificially formed Diocese of Strumica and Drama was abolished. On January 1, 1943, the Greek part was separated from the diocese as an independent Diocese of Drama, whereas the Macedonian part was divided and attached to the three neighboring dioceses: two districts were amalgamated to the Diocese of Ohrid and Bitola, one to the Diocese of Skopje and Veles, and two to the Bulgarian Diocese of Nevrokop.¹⁴

In December 1943, at the peak of the development of church life under the Bulgarian spiritual administration, the remaining two Macedonian dioceses were the Diocese of Skopje and Veles with 360 churches, 36 chapels, 167 priests, 35 monasteries and three nunneries, 63 monks and nuns; and the Diocese of Ohrid and Bitola with 398 churches, 43 chapels, 148 priests, 38 monasteries and four nunneries, 19 monks, 32 nuns, and 100 novices.¹⁵

On July 4, 1941, the Synod appointed the Rector of the Sofia Seminary, Bishop Hariton of Dragovitsa as episcopal vicegerent of the Diocese of Ohrid and Bitola. It was also decided to transfer the Residence of the Diocese from Bitola to Ohrid. A year later, on July 3, 1942, the Synod decided to send Bishop Hariton to reside permanently in Ohrid. However, this city was in the Italian zone of occupation, and it was not that easy to have a Bulgarian prefect appointed there, so the bishop remained to reside in Bitola.¹⁶

Church life in the occupied territories significantly affected the Bulgarian government's policy in regards to discrimination of the Serbs, and during the war, 45,000 people were

¹³ Ibid., Ф. 1318к. Оп. 1. А. е. 2264, pp. 1-6.

¹⁴ Ibid., Ф. 791к. Оп. 2. А. е. 10, pp. 93-95; *Църковен вестник* [Church's Newspaper]. 5.01.1943; В. Стоянова. Op. cit., pp. 149-150.

¹⁵ ЦДА. Ф. 791к. Оп. 2. А. е. 163, pp. 51, 54.

¹⁶ Ibid., Оп. 1. А. е. 67, p. 168.

relocated from Eastern Macedonia to Serbia. The majority of the Serbian clergy and a number of Russian priests were either deported or arrested. However, apart from several isolated cases, there was no evidence of physical violence or killings (as there was in Western Macedonia where 11 priests were killed by Albanians). Nevertheless, the exiled priests had 48 hours to bring only a small selection of their belongings with them and all their other property was subject to confiscation. In total, 86 parish priests were banished from the three dioceses in Macedonia and South Serbia.¹⁷ Greeks, as well as Serbs, suffered greatly due to the deportation from Macedonia.¹⁸

Every aspect of social and cultural life in Macedonia was under attack of Bulgaria's assimilation strategy. It was forbidden to receive letters, reports, and administrative acts written in languages other than Bulgarian; only Bulgarian textbooks were used in schools, and Serbs were never employed in public services. Soon after the occupation began, a special commission was set up to destroy any "foreign" manifestation in worship. As a result of its activities, Serbian inscriptions, emblems, icons, and church books were taken out of use and replaced by Bulgarian ones; instead of Serbian saints and lords, the Bulgarian ascetics and enlighteners were propagandized. Thus, all evidence of the Serbian historical past in these lands was destroyed, yet the memory of the long forgotten Macedonian dioceses within the Bulgarian exarchate was restored. On a mandatory basis, worship services were to be conducted only in Church Slavonic,

¹⁷ Ђ. Слијепчевић. *Историја Српске Православне Цркве* ["The History of the Serbian Orthodox Church"]. Vol III, Cologne, 1986, p. 85; М. Димитријевић, *Српска црква под бугарском окупацијом. Српска Православна Црква 1920-1970* ["Serbian Church Under Bulgarian Occupation. Serbian Orthodox Church 1920-1970"], Belgrade, 1971, pp. 211-213; А. Белич. *Сербская Православная Церковь во время II Мировой войны. Диссертация на соискание ученой степени кандидата богословия*. ["Serbian Orthodox Church during World War II. Dissertation of Theology Students at the Seminary"] СПб., 2010, pp. 29, 59.

¹⁸ ЦДА. Ф. 791к. Оп. 2. А. е. 10, p. 26.

and traditional customs which were common for the Serbian Church were forbidden. In the summer of 1941, language courses in Bulgarian were organized for the church employees.¹⁹

In general, the Bulgarian Church took a much more tolerant attitude towards the Serbs than the government authorities in the country. All Serbian bishops and a significant part of the priests were expelled from Macedonia by the German and the Bulgarian administration even before the establishment of the Bulgarian ecclesiastical authority. The monks of Serbian descent who wanted to leave the country were released by Metropolitan Sophroniy “in peace.” All the property of the Metropolitan of Skopje was registered in special inventory books, and the personal belongings of Metropolitan Josif were sent back to him in Belgrade in June 1941 by a special courier. The clergymen of non-Bulgarian origin who wished to remain in the occupied territory and to continue their religious activities were obliged to sign a declaration of loyalty to the Bulgarian Church. Those who agreed to these conditions received the same salaries from the state budget as the Bulgarian priests. Thus, for example, in the Diocese of Ohrid and Bitola, until the autumn of 1944, Serbian archpriests Milošić and Hadžić and the remaining Serbian monks received financial support from the Metropolitan funds.²⁰

One of the main challenges that the Bulgarian Church was facing, even within its previous jurisdiction, was the task of finding priests to fill vacancies. In order to solve this problem, several dozen Macedonians were admitted at the Bulgarian Theological Seminary and at the Theological Faculty of Sofia University. In particular, on July 7, 1942, the Holy Synod

¹⁹ Р. Терзиоски. *Бугарската православна црква во окупирана Македонија (1941-1944)* [“The Bulgarian Orthodox Church in Occupied Macedonia (1941-1944)”], *Glasnik na institutot za nacionalna istorija* [Newspaper of the Institute of National History], 1965, № 2, p. 58; С. Димевски., *Црковна историја на македонскиот народ* [“The Ecclesiastical History of the Macedonian People”], Skopje, 1965, p. 211.

²⁰ Елдџров. Указ. соч., pp. 256-257.

provided scholarships for 30 students from Macedonia and Dobruja to study at the Sofia Seminary.²¹

However, it soon became clear that the return of the clergy to the new eparchies from the Bulgarian exarchate and the training of young clerics could not solve the problem entirely. Therefore, from 1941 onwards, a decision was made to bring priests who had never served in those parts before. On November 25, 1941, the Synod decided to ask the government for permission to send priests from the old eparchies to the new provinces.²²

The National Assembly (the parliament of the country) approved the allocation of a loan in order to pay 280 Bulgarian priests and deacons who had been sent to the parishes and monasteries in Macedonia. These priests would travel from Bulgaria in order to supervise the local clergy and in four to five months would be replaced by another group of clergymen. On June 26, 1942, the Synod appointed a commission regarding the distribution and destination of the clergymen who were sent to the new provinces.²³

At the same time, the commission tried to make a selection of the most educated and dedicated priests. Those who voluntarily remained in the occupied territories much longer than the appointed time limit received additional benefits. By the end of the occupation, in September 1944, some 160 Bulgarian priests were still serving in Macedonia and Aegean Thrace, accounting for more than eight percent of the total number of population in the country.²⁴ Thus, the process of Bulgarian assimilation entered even parishes and monasteries. In particular, the

²¹ ЦДИА. Ф. 791к. Оп. 2. А. е. 10, p. 68.

²² Ibid., Оп. 1. А. е. 67, p. 241.

²³ Ibid., А. е. 70, pp. 65, 72-74.

²⁴ BA, R5101/22177, Bl. 159; Слијепчевић . *Македонско црквено питање* ["The Macedonian Ecclesiastical Question"], Munich 1969, p. 42.

authorities of the Bulgarian Church tried to ensure that in every monastery, there was at least one Bulgarian monk, who more often than not, was in charge of the monastery.²⁵

Local Macedonian clergymen were also actively involved in church administration. They were already included in the provisional Eparchial Councils from May 1941, and these bodies were elected in accordance with the constitution of the exarchate. By a circular message of August 17, 1942, the Bulgarian Synod organized two-stage elections. Three priests and three electors were elected in each of the new spiritual counties on October 4, 1942. Six months later, these clergymen elected the members of the permanent Diocesan Councils. The newly elected councils were approved by a decree of the synod on July 24, 1943.²⁶

In general, the number of priests sent from Bulgaria to the eastern part of Macedonia did not exceed ten percent of the clergy. Thus, the assertions of some Yugoslav historians that the local clergy allegedly constituted an insignificant minority that was deliberately ignored by the Bulgarian spiritual authority and was massively replaced by priests²⁷ who were sent to the region, were far from the truth. Macedonian clerics, as a rule, were not deprived of their posts; priests served as episcopal vicegerents or filled the vacant posts of the abbots in the churches. Most of the priests who were sent from Bulgaria engaged more in political activities than in any specific ecclesiastical undertakings.²⁸

²⁵ Терзиоски ., Op. cit., p. 54; Слијепчевић, *Македонско црквено питање*, p. 41.

²⁶ ЦДА. Ф. 791к. Оп. 1. А. е. 68, pp. 366, 483-489, 499-501.

²⁷ Терзиоски ., Op. cit., pp. 47-75; Ibid., *Денационализаторската дејност на бугарските културно-просветни институции во Македонија (Скопска и Битолска окупациона област) 1941-1944* ["Denationalizational Policy of the Bulgarian Cultural and Educational Institutions in Macedonia (in the occupation zones of Skopje and Bitola) 1941-1944"], Skopje, 1974, pp. 223-228; Н.Велјановски. *Бугарската црква и нејзиното религиозно воспитно влијание во Македонија во периодот на окупацијата од 1941-1944 година* ["The Bulgarian Church and the Religious Impact in Macedonia During the Occupation (1941-1944)"], *Prosvetno delo*, Skopje, 1967, № 7-8, pp. 444-450.

²⁸ С.Димевски. *Историја на Македонската Православна Црква* ["The History of the Macedonian Orthodox Church"], pp. 993-996.

In terms of the church buildings and property in Macedonia, the Bulgarian Church allocated considerable funds in order to maintain its assets. From July 1, 1941, to September 30, 1944, the Diocese of Ohrid and Bitola amounted to 24,314.3 levs. In the Diocese of Skopje and Veles, the Bulgarian Church spent 44,824.4 levs during the same period: 5,741 for salaries to local Macedonian priests, 5,604 for renting premises, 2,612 for charitable and cultural activities, and so on.²⁹

Despite the financial help from Bulgaria, church life in Macedonia (mainly in the western part occupied by the Italians) suffered significant damage during the war.³⁰ It should be noted that the Serbian Synod repeatedly, in one way or another, reacted to what was happening in Macedonia. Thus, for example, at a meeting on March 18, 1943, the Synod heard the introduction of Metropolitan Josif, who presented the report of Archpriest Karanfil Jović on March 9 concerning the situation with the churches, clergy, and people under the Bulgarian occupation. At that meeting, the Synod decided to ask the head of the collaborationist Serbian government, Milan Nedić, to intercede with the occupational authorities, so that the Bulgarian and other military priests would not perform ecclesiastical services in Serbian churches.³¹

The Bulgarian occupational authorities brutally persecuted the participants of the Resistance movement. On July 14, 1941, an order was issued for the arrest of the people by reason of “suspicious elements.” However, the incipient resistance was not suppressed. The first partisan detachment in Macedonia was formed towards the end of September 1941, and two more were established at the beginning of October. On November 5, 1941, the Territorial Committee of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia in Macedonia decided to transform the

²⁹ ЦДА. Ф. 791к. Оп. 2. А. е. 192, pp. 3-6.

³⁰ Димитријевић . Op. cit., p. 214.

³¹ Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts Bonn (AA), Inland I-D, 4795.

province that had been occupied by the Italians into a military base for the people's uprising forces, but this would only come into fruition two years later.³²

In Western Macedonia, a significant part of the Orthodox clergy cooperated with the partisans. Shortly after the surrender of Italy (September 8, 1943) and after the liberation of a significant part of the occupation zone (which was conveyed almost without any resistance from the Italians), on October 11, 1943, a religious commission was established in Macedonia, which included workers from the Communist Party, priests, and theologians. On October 15, the headquarters of the People's Liberation Army and partisan detachments of Macedonia appointed a religious viceroy naming the priest, Veljo Manchevski, who was an episcopal vicegerent of Debar and who actively fought along with Tito's army. His instructions were binding for all the priests in the liberated territory. One of the first resolutions adopted by the religious commission was the abolition of any kind of dependence of Macedonia on the ecclesiastical authorities outside its borders and the introduction of the Macedonian language as an administrative and liturgical language in the churches.³³

The religious commission initiated a meeting of 11 out of 13 Orthodox priests, which took place on October 21 on the territory occupied by the partisans in the village of Izdeglavje. The meeting was chaired by Fr. Veljo Manchevski and was also attended by laity and members of the Communist party. The following was decided: to establish a special episcopal vice-regency on the liberated territory of Karaorman (between the cities of Ohrid and Debar), headed by a priest from the village of Slatino, Antim Popovski, who was elected without the approval of a bishop. The governorship formed in this way consisted of nine parishes led by abbots. The

³² История Югославии. ["History of Yugoslavia"] Т. 2. М., 1963, pp. 197-198.

³³ В. Zečević. *Die Autokephalieerklärung der Makedonischen Orthodoxen Kirche*, Würzburg, 1994, p. 19; С. Димевски., *Црковна историја на македонскиот народ* ["The Ecclesiastical History of the Macedonian People"], pp. 215-216; Скурат К.Е., *История Поместных Православных Церквей* ["The History of the Local Orthodox Churches"], Ч. 1. М., 1994, p. 159.

Assembly also unanimously voted for the support of the People's Liberation Army and partisan detachments of Macedonia and appointed several priests to parish churches. The restoration of the ancient Ohrid Archdiocese was proclaimed possible, but only after the liberation of Macedonia.³⁴

This meeting was important, but it was still considered to be a local event, and it cannot be considered, as some Yugoslav and Serbian researchers suggest, the “nucleus” of the Clergy and Laity Assembly or “the nucleus of the Macedonian church organization led by the Communists.” Also, one cannot agree with the statement that the only purpose of the meeting was to establish an independent Macedonian Church and to withdraw it from the jurisdiction of the Serbian Patriarchate.³⁵ Although, it should be mentioned that at the Second Meeting of the Anti-Fascist Assembly of the People's Liberation Army of Yugoslavia in November 1943, Macedonia was recognized as a free federal state in the future post-war federation, and for many Macedonians, this was an opportunity to solve the issue of the independence of the ecclesiastical organization.³⁶

The partisan episcopal vice-regency lasted for less than two months. On December 4, 1943, German troops and the Albanian organization “Balli Kombëtar” attacked and soon seized the liberated territory of Western Macedonia. The priest, A. Popovski, was arrested, the viceroyalty was liquidated, and the management of the Albanian Church was restored on this

³⁴ Zečević. Op. cit., p. 21; Димевски. *Историја на Македонската Православна Црква* [“The History of the Macedonian Orthodox Church”], p. 1012.

³⁵ Zečević. Op. cit., p. 21; Слијепчевић. *Македонско црквено питање* [“Macedonian Ecclesiastical Question”], p. 43; Димевски. *Црковна историја на македонскијот народ* [“The Ecclesiastical History of the Macedonian People”], pp. 215-216.

³⁶ Радић. Op. cit., p. 283.

territory. Most partisan priests were killed or held captive in Bulgaria, but there were some who did survive and continued to participate in the Resistance movement.³⁷

Separatist and anti-Serb sentiments were felt at the First Meeting of the Anti-Fascist Assembly for the National Liberation of Macedonia (ASNOM), which was held on August 2, 1944, and at which a proclamation was issued declaring the independence of the People's Republic of Macedonia. Two clergymen participated in the work of the Assembly—Cyril Stoyanov (Stoyanovski) from Skopje and Ivan Yorgov from the village Drenovo—whereas the priest, Metodij Gogov, joined ASNOM on October 27, 1944. The Assembly decided to form a religious commission regarding the principle of freedom of religion.³⁸

The withdrawal of Bulgaria from the war in September 1944 led to the abolition of the Bulgarian spiritual government in Macedonia. From September 6 to 10, 23 clerics left the Eparchy of Skopje and Veles for Bulgaria. Another group of 20 clerics returned to Bulgaria from the Eparchy of Ohrid and Bitola.³⁹ The leaders of these dioceses, Metropolitans Sophroniy and Filaret left Macedonia in August. Before his departure, Bishop Sophroniy formed a new provisional Diocesan Council composed of local priests who were asked to manage the eparchy on his behalf until the re-establishment of a legitimate ecclesiastical authority. The interim leadership of the diocese began to function with the priest, Cyril Stoyanov, as chairman of the council and its two members, the priest, Stoil Davidov, and the archpriest, Spiro Lichanovsky. In addition, according to the instructions of the Metropolitan Protossingel, the rest of the departing Bulgarian clergymen handed over the ecclesiastical and administrative authority of the parishes to senior clerics of local origin to serve as episcopal vice-regents. Metropolitan Sophroniy, who

³⁷ Слијепчевић. *Македонско црквено питање* [“Macedonian Ecclesiastical Question”], p. 44; Zečević. Op. cit., p. 23.

³⁸ Слијепчевић. *Македонско црквено питање* [“Macedonian Ecclesiastical Question”], p. 44.

³⁹ ЦДА. Ф. 791к. Оп. 1. А. е. 106, p. 15.

was residing in Bulgaria, continued to stay in touch with them for some time. In the report from September 15 that was sent to the Chairman of the Synod, Metropolitan Neofit, the bishop wrote the following report: “Preservation of church administration both in dioceses and in provinces in general.”⁴⁰ The correspondence with the Bulgarian authorities regarding the abandoned church property of the Dioceses of Skopje and Veles and of Ohrid and Bitola continued until October 29, 1946.⁴¹

Many leading posts of the Diocese of Skopje and Veles between August and September 1944 were occupied by local priests who closely cooperated with the Bulgarian spiritual administration during the occupation.⁴² The continuity of church and administrative authority was preserved in the Eparchy of Ohrid and Bitola, where the administration authority was transferred to local priests, i.e., the former members of the Diocesan Council or to the newly appointed episcopal vice-regents. This church administration was in service until the establishment of the communist regime in the republic after the liberation of the entire territory in Eastern Macedonia from the German occupation between October 8 and November 19, 1944. The history of the establishment of the Macedonian Church did not receive any publicity by the Yugoslav historians.⁴³

Even after the liberation of the province, there were several Bulgarian priests and church officials who were still working against the Serbs. The former secretary of the Synod of the Bulgarian Church, Archimandrite Stefan, who remained in Skopje, was especially active in this regard. Even after the liberation of the province, he was still advocating the administration of the

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 15-17.

⁴¹ Ibid., A. e. 132, pp. 1-215.

⁴² П. Пузовић. *Раскол у Српској Православној Цркви. Македонско црквено питање* [“Schism in the Serbian Orthodox Church. Macedonian Ecclesiastical Question”], Belgrade, 1997, p. 3.

⁴³ Cf.: Димевски. *Црковна историја на македонскијот народ* [“The Ecclesiastical History of the Macedonian People”], pp. 215-218; Ј. Белчовски. *Автокефалноста на Македонската православна црква* [“The Autocephaly of the Macedonian Orthodox Church”], Skopje, 1986, pp. 137-140.

Bulgarian Church. Some Serbian historians suggested that it was at the insistence of the Archimandrite Stephen that the “Sofia” radio station announced that the Bulgarian Church had entrusted the leadership of the church life in Macedonia to the priests, Kiril Stoyanov and Metodij Gogov.⁴⁴

The Bishop of Dragovitsa Hariton remained in Bitola for another six months after September 9, 1944 with the intention of settling the church’s affairs.⁴⁵ However, in the spring of 1945, he was imprisoned on the request of the Communist leadership in the Republic of Macedonia. The Exarch of the Bulgarian Church, Metropolitan Stefan, appealed to the head of the Yugoslav military mission in Sofia on April 20 with an urgent request for the bishop to be released and be allowed to return to Bulgaria.⁴⁶ This request was granted and the bishop, Hariton, was soon released and returned to Bulgaria.

The members of the temporary Diocesan Council, who had remained in Skopje after the evacuation of the Bulgarian Church leadership, formed a new organ of ecclesiastical administration in September, composed of an initiative group of five local clergymen. It was these five clergymen who would initiate the movement for the organization of the autocephalous Macedonian Church. According to some Serbian historians, they did this so as to avoid punishment from the Serbian Church “for canonical crimes committed during the occupation period.”⁴⁷

Regardless, in October 1944, on the territory of Vranovich, which was liberated by the partisans, and where the headquarters of the People’s Liberation Army of Yugoslavia were temporarily stationed in Macedonia, the “Initiative Committee for the organization of church life

⁴⁴ Радић. *Op. cit.*, p. 283.

⁴⁵ ЦДА. Ф. 791к. Оп. 1. А. е. 122, p. 20.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, Оп. 2. А. е. 55, p. 1.

⁴⁷ Пузовић. *Op. cit.*, p. 6.

in Macedonia” was formed by the clergymen, Veljo Manchevski, Metodij Gogov, Pande Popovski, Spiro Dimevski, and Shako. The Initiative Committee proposed the organization of “clerical committees” in the towns of the region, in order to take over the administration of church’s affairs after the liberation. Such committees were soon established in the cities of Bitola and Prilep.⁴⁸

On November 3, 1944, Skopje was liberated from the Germans.⁴⁹ On the same day, Fathers K. Stoyanov and N. Apostolski occupied the building of the Metropolitanate of Skopje, where the city priests gathered with the members of the Initiative Committee who had come from Vranovich. At this meeting, a new “Initiative Committee for the organization of the Macedonian Orthodox Church” was formed, composed of four people: K. Stoyanov (chairman), N. Apostolski, M. Gogov and V. Manchevski. Soon, he addressed all the bishops of the region with a letter, in which he suggested organizing “priestly committees” in order to regulate church affairs. In this way, the church-administrative division of Macedonia, which had been introduced during the Bulgarian occupation, was preserved.

In the final years of the war, the separatist Macedonian priests began to cooperate more closely with the leadership of the Communist Party of Macedonia, who were supporting their aspirations. The envisioned renewal of the ancient Ohrid Archdiocese was a real opportunity to solve the “Macedonian ecclesiastical question” (at least in a political way with the help of the Communist Party), i.e., an opportunity for the Macedonian Church to become completely independent (autocephalous) from other church jurisdictions. However, ever since the Second

⁴⁸ Zečević. Op. cit., p. 27; Радић. Op. cit., Op. cit., p. 283.

⁴⁹ Towards the end of the Second World War, the Bulgarian units fought with the allies against Nazi Germany and participated in the liberation of Yugoslavia together with the Soviet Army and the People’s Liberation Army of Yugoslavia.

World War, a wide-ranging solution to the “Macedonian ecclesiastical question” has not yet been found.