

The Bulgarian 'solution'

Among Bulgaria's nine million people is a hidden minority of one million Muslims who are being subjected to growing persecution and abuse. So far, normally vocal western liberals have simply ignored Bulgaria's pervasive violation of human rights.

Communist Bulgaria denies that almost 12% of its population are Muslim Turks, insisting that the nation's people are a homogeneous blend of Bulgars. Nonsense. Like all Balkan nations, Bulgaria is a patchwork of races, tribes, religions and cultures. The Ottoman Turks ruled Bulgaria for five centuries. Themselves a hybrid of many peoples, the Turks took local women, leaving Bulgaria today with a mixture of blood from Asiatic Turks, Bulgars, Slavs, Macedonians and Greeks.

Today's modern Balkan states emerged out of the wreckage of the Ottoman Empire in the mid and late 19th century. While Turkish rule vanished, large numbers of Muslims were left in Bulgaria, Greece, Yugoslavia and Albania.

These people, often villified by their Christian or communist neighbors as "Turks" are, with the exception of Albanians, products of Balkan cross-breeding who happen to have remained Muslims. Only the Aryan, non-Slav Albanians, who are majority Muslim, have retained much of their original ethnic purity.

Last year, Bulgaria began a campaign to force all of its Muslim citizens to substitute Slavic for Islamic names. To us this may not sound very serious, but think, for example, of how an Israeli would feel being forced to adopt an Arab or German name. In effect, Bulgaria's communist regime was attempting to destroy the remaining power of the Muslim religion as a means of erasing any challenge to party authority.

Not surprisingly, Muslim Bulgarians strongly objected. Riots broke out as mosques were closed and Muslims arrested in large numbers. Reports leaking out of Bulgaria suggest that thousands of Muslims have been arrested, scores killed and many tortured and abused. The fact that Muslims have resisted so violently in a nation whose dreaded secret police are notorious killers and thugs testifies to their depth of religious feeling.

In truth, any resistance in a totalitarian nation is remarkable. The communist party and security forces control a person's right to work, to receive food rations, pensions, medical attention, apartments and to travel. Any resistance to the state or

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party in communist nations can swiftly result in an objector losing his job, income and home, not to mention jail and beatings.

Communist nations also have the habit of punishing close relatives of "anti-party elements." This means that one wrong word, one protest, and even one's cousins can lose their homes and jobs; elderly parents can lose their pensions and starve.

Yet in spite of these very real terrors, Muslim Bulgarians continue even now to riot and protest. To date, only Turkey has launched strong protests with the Bulgarian government. Bulgaria has responded by denying that there is any problem at all, trying, at the same time, to crush internal dissent before more word leaks westward.

We should not think, however, that Bulgaria is alone in persecuting its Muslim citizens. Stalinist Albania has simply banned all religion and made worship a crime. At least in Albania all religious believers — Muslim, Catholic or Orthodox—are persecuted alike. Yugoslavia, with nearly three million Muslims, relentlessly discriminates against them, both the two million Muslim Albanians in Kosovo and other Muslims in Bosnia. In Yugoslavia, as in Bulgaria, official persecution is aimed as much at ethnic identity as religious belief.

Both Bulgaria and Yugoslavia have been charged by various western organizations with persistent and widespread violations of human rights against anyone considered "anti-state." Greece, which expelled its Muslim population at the end of World War I, does not face this Balkan problem. The fate of Romania's small Muslim community remains unknown.

Old Balkan hatreds have combined with communist party policy to make life for East Europe's Muslims very difficult. In this respect, Balkan communist parties are mirroring policy of the Soviet Union, whose Muslim minority of between 60 and 100 million is its largest, least known, and perhaps most abused national group. But more about this problem in another column.

