

## The Bulgarian Exarchate in the Occupied Eastern Macedonia and Thrace (1941-1944)

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### Abstract

Once Bulgaria occupied Eastern Macedonia and Thrace, the Bulgarian government developed an ambitious and expensive action plan, which aimed at the administrative, economic, and cultural integration of the Greek provinces as an indivisible part of the Bulgarian state. For the successful implementation of this plan, the active participation of key actors and stakeholders of the social and political sphere was of paramount importance. The aim of this paper is to provide a concise presentation of the role the Bulgarian Exarchate played during this period, utilizing primary and secondary sources.

**Keywords:** World War II, Bulgarian Occupation, Bulgarian Exarchate

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### Introduction

Once Bulgaria occupied Eastern Macedonia and Thrace, the Bulgarian government developed an ambitious and expensive plan aimed at the administrative, economic, and cultural integration of the Greek provinces as an indivisible part of the Bulgarian state. To this end, the official terminology adopted for the occupied regions was "*newly acquired territories*", "*newly liberated lands*", or similar terms. Additionally, the Bulgarian government, for the successful implementation of the integration plan of "*the new territories*" with "*old Bulgaria*" (i.e. the pre-March 1941 Bulgaria), mobilised a number of key actors and stakeholders at all levels of public, religious and military administration, as well as in the socio-economic sphere.<sup>1</sup> The aim of this article is to highlight the role of the Bulgarian Exarchate in the implementation of the government's goals, as well as the Exarchate's activities in the occupied territories of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace. The main sources of this paper are the relevant literature and Bulgarian primary and secondary sources.

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed account on the Bulgarian policy during this period: Άννα Μπατζέλη, Όψεις της βουλγαρική πολιτικής στη Γιουγκοσλαβική Μακεδονία κατά τη διάρκεια του Δευτέρου Παγκοσμίου Πολέμου (1941-1944). Εκδόσεις Ηρόδοτος, Αθήνα 2023.



Bulgarian claims in Macedonia and Thrace, as illustrated by илюстрация илinden (Iljustracija Ilinden), February 1941

## Beginning of the Bulgarian Occupation: The Ecclesiastical Division of the "Newly Acquired Lands"

Considering the place of religion in the ethnic and cultural identity of the Balkan nations, it is not surprising that the Bulgarian army, upon entering Eastern Macedonia and Thrace, targeted Greek priests, who were among the first to face severe persecution.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the Bulgarian Exarchate worked to adapt the local ecclesiastical administration to the Bulgarian model. On April 16, 1941, the Bulgarian Exarchate convened an extraordinary Holy Synod, under the presidency of Metropolitan Neophytos of Vidin, with the participation of all the Bulgarian Metropolitans of "old Bulgaria": Metropolitan Stefanos of Sofia, Metropolitan Michael of Silistra and Cherven, Metropolitan Paisios of Vratsa, Metropolitan Voris of Nevrokopi, Metropolitan Sofronios of Veliko Tarnovo, Metropolitan Iosif of Varna and Preslav, Metropolitan Kyrillos of Plovdiv/Philippopolis, Metropolitan Philaretos of Lovech, Metropolitan Evlogios of Sliven, and Metropolitan Kliment of Stara Zagora. About two weeks later, on April 29, 1941, the Holy Synod issued a decision regarding the ecclesiastical division of the "newly acquired territories". The structure of the decision consisted of three parts, the first of which referred to the purpose of convening the extraordinary meeting:

*"The recent important events require the convening of an extraordinary Holy Synod. First of all, we welcome the Resurrection of Christ. We also welcome the restoration of trusting relations with the Bulgarian people and ask God to give strength to our people and our church to fulfill our mission in history, guided by the principles of morality and under the auspices of His blessing. The issue that the Holy Synod has been called to consider in this meeting concerns the necessary regulatory measures to restore the operation of our holy churches in the newly liberated provinces, as well as their ecclesiastical administrative division. Furthermore, we should make the relevant decision promptly because the ecclesiastical division of the new areas will be considered by the political state authorities in proceeding with their administrative division".<sup>3</sup>*

The work of the Holy Synod was particularly important, as the ecclesiastical structure of the "new regions" would also affect their administrative division. This part of the Holy Synod's decision highlights the pioneering role of the Exarchate in public life, which is evident in the Bulgarian press, where the active participation of Exarchate representatives in key public events and celebrations is documented.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Ξανθίππη Κοτσαγεώργη-Ζυμάρη, «Η Ελληνική Εκκλησία στην Ανατ. Μακεδονία και τη Θράκη κατά τη διάρκεια της Κατοχής», p. 71 in Ξανθίππη Κοτσαγεώργη-Ζυμάρη (επιμ.), *Η Βουλγαρική Κατοχή στην Ανατολική Μακεδονία και την Θράκη, 1941-1944, Ίδρυμα Μελετών Χερσονήσου του Αίμου*, Εκδόσεις Παρατηρητής, Θεσσαλονίκη 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Protocol nbr. 4 of the meeting of the Holy Synod regarding the ecclesiastical division of the new areas (Sofia, 29 April 1941), quoted in: Александър Гребенаров, Надя Манолова-Николова (ed.), *Българското управление във Вардарска Македония (1941-1944): документален сборник* (София: Държавна агенция "Архиви", 2011), p. 26-27 (note: all Bulgarian sources have been translated into English by the author).

<sup>4</sup> Indicatively, see: *Целокупна България*, 12 January 1942: *Илюстрация Илинден*, April 1943, p. 4.

The second part of the Holy Synod's decision included a historical overview of the Bulgarian Exarchate's work and role in the "*newly liberated lands*", starting from the period of the second Bulgarian Empire through the Ottoman rule to the national liberation. Special emphasis was given to the activities of the Bulgarian Exarchate in Ohrid and the role of Paisios Chilandarinos in the formation of national identity.<sup>5</sup> The third and final part of the Holy Synod's decision concerned the ecclesiastical division of the "*new provinces*", which was as follows:

1. *Holy Metropolis of Maronia: under whose jurisdiction will be included the cities of Komotini, Alexandroupolis, Didymoteicho, Xanthi, Soufli, and Feres,*
2. *Holy Metropolis Ohrid-Monastiri: under whose jurisdiction will be included the cities of Bitola/Monastiri, Dibri, Kitsevo, Kastoria, Krusevo, Lerin, Achrid, Prilep, Resen, and Struga,*
3. *Holy Metropolis of Skopje-Veles: under whose jurisdiction will be included the cities of Veles, Vrana, Gostivar, Kočani, Kratovo, Kumanovo, Leskovec, Palanka, Skopje, Tetovo, Stip,*
4. *Holy Metropolis of Strumica-Drama: under whose jurisdiction will be included the cities of Herakleia Serres, Demir Hisar, Drama, Kavala, Pechtsevo, Radovits, Serres, and Strumica. The issue of the Holy Metropolis of Thessaloniki will remain open until the borders are clarified.*<sup>6</sup>

It is interesting to note the fact that the Holy Synod makes special reference to Thessaloniki, which both the religious and the political leaders hoped that Germany would consent to be included in the Bulgarian Zone of Occupation.

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<sup>5</sup> Protocol nbr. 4 of the meeting of the Holy Synod regarding the ecclesiastical division of the new areas (Sofia, 29 April 1941), in Александър Гребенаров, Надя Манолова-Николова (ed.), *Българското управление във Вардарска Македония (1941-1944): документален сборник* (София: Държавна агенция "Архиви", 2011), p. 27-30.

<sup>6</sup> Protocol nbr. 4 of the meeting of the Holy Synod regarding the ecclesiastical division of the new areas (Sofia, 29 April 1941), quoted in: Александър Гребенаров, Надя Манолова-Николова (ed.), *Българското управление във Вардарска Македония (1941-1944): документален сборник* (София: Държавна агенция "Архиви", 2011), p. 30-31.

## Allocation of Resources in the Newly Established Metropolises

Four Bulgarian Metropolitans undertook the role of Metropolitans in the "*liberated areas*" of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace and of Yugoslav Macedonia:

1. *Metropolitan Kirillos of Philippopolis will take over the administration of the Holy Metropolis of Maronia,*
2. *Metropolitan Voris of Nevrokopi will take over the administration of the Holy Metropolis of Strumitsa-Drama,*
3. *Metropolitan Philaretos of Lovech will take over the administration of the Holy Metropolis of Ohrid-Monastiri and*
4. *Metropolitan Sophronios of Veliko Tarnovo will take over the administration of the Holy Metropolis of Skopje-Veles.*<sup>7</sup>

Due to the key duties associated with the role of the Metropolitan, the Holy Synod decided to utilize existing human resources to ensure the smooth ecclesiastical integration of the "*new provinces*" with the "*old ones*". A similar approach was adopted by the Bulgarian government, which appointed senior staff to key positions at public/state services.

In both cases, the allocated resources had the crucial responsibility of conveying the message of the union of the occupied territories with the "*motherland*". Furthermore, the recruitment process to meet the needs of lower-level positions, as implemented by the Bulgarian Exarchate, mirrored that of the Bulgarian government. Both entities also offered training to the staff appointed to roles in the occupied regions.<sup>8</sup> At the beginning of the occupation period, the number of candidates was quite high due to the material rewards offered to Bulgarians assigned to the occupied regions (such as higher salaries and the disposal of immovable assets).<sup>9</sup>

Despite these incentives, several public and ecclesiastical services remained understaffed throughout the occupation period, as the available human resources were insufficient to cover the needs of both the "*old*" and "*new*" provinces.

Additionally, staff turnover in the occupied regions was high, as many Bulgarians resigned shortly after taking office due to difficult working conditions, which gradually deteriorated with the strengthening of the resistance movement. Soon, the Bulgarian Exarchate decided to mobilize retired priests to address the increasing needs in both the Bulgarian and the occupied territories. Retired priests capable of offering their services mainly undertook positions close to their place of residence, allowing younger priests to be allocated to the occupied provinces.

<sup>7</sup> Protocol nbr. 4 of the meeting of the Holy Synod regarding the ecclesiastical division of the new areas (Sofia, 29 April 1941), quoted in: Александър Гребенаров, Надя Манолова-Николова (ed.), *Българското управление във Вардарска Македония (1941-1944): документален сборник* (София: Държавна агенция "Архиви", 2011), p. 30-31.

<sup>8</sup> See for ex. Newspaper Целокупна България, 8 September 1941, 3 January 1942.

<sup>9</sup> See for ex. ДА – Ловеч (State Archives of Lovech), фонд 122К, опис 1, а.е. 295, Written request of the secretary of the Diocese of Burgas, Dimitar Bl. Daskalof, to Metropolitan Lovets, Philaretos, in which he expresses his desire to provide his services to the newly established Metropolis of Ohrid-Monastiri (Lovech, May 4, 1941).

Despite mobilizing the retirees, the Exarchate was unable to fully meet the needs, resulting in approximately 225 Greek priests remaining in their positions throughout the occupation period. The Exarchate forbade these priests from holding services in the Greek language.<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that the Bulgarian government faced similar challenges in staffing public services. The need for qualified personnel, such as doctors and pharmacists, for example, led to the release - and eventually the rescue - of 67 Yugoslav Jewish doctors and pharmacists and their families.<sup>11</sup>

Regarding the third and final part of the Holy Synod's decision, it included communication guidelines between the Holy Synod and the Metropolitans. The following day, a new Holy Synod took place, during which the special secretaries of the newly established Holy Metropolises were appointed:

1. *The role of Special Secretary of His Holiness Metropolitan Filaretos of Lovech in the administration of the Holy Metropolis of Ohrid-Monastiri is undertaken by the Most Reverend Bishop Maximos, the so-called Branitski.*
2. *The role of Special Secretary of His Holiness Metropolitan Kirillos of Philippopolis in the administration of the Holy Metropolis of Maronia is assumed by the Venerable Bishop of Nis, Hilarion.*
3. *The Venerable Bishop Chariton of Dragovitsa takes over as Special Secretary of His Holiness Metropolitan Voris of Nevrokopi in the administration of the Holy Metropolis of Strumitsa-Drama.*
4. *The role of Special Secretary of His Holiness Metropolitan Sophronios of Veliko Tarnovo in the administration of the Holy Metropolis of Skopje-Veles is assumed by the Venerable Bishop Panaretos of Bregalnitsa.<sup>12</sup>*

In addition, the Holy Synod sent the following instructions to the provincial bishops:

1. *All priests who previously resided in the occupied or newly acquired territories of the newly established Holy Metropolises, and now serve in the old provinces of the Bulgarian Kingdom, are invited to move to the newly acquired areas to offer their services in the new Holy Metropolises.*
2. *All priests who have recently retired but are still able to offer their services are invited to undertake service in the parish churches of the new provinces as needed. The Holy Synod recognizes the importance of the work that these priests are called to perform, as well as its special symbolic value for the Bulgarian Church and the Holy Exarchate.*

<sup>10</sup> Ξανθίππη Κοτσαγεώργη-Ζυμάρη, «Η Ελληνική Εκκλησία στην Ανατ. Μακεδονία και τη Θράκη κατά τη διάρκεια της Κατοχής», p. 76 in Ξανθίππη Κοτσαγεώργη-Ζυμάρη (επιμ.), *Η Βουλγαρική Κατοχή στην Ανατολική Μακεδονία και την Θράκη, 1941-1944*, Ίδρυμα Μελετών Χερσονήσου του Αίμου, Εκδόσεις Παρατηρητής, Θεσσαλονίκη 2002.

<sup>11</sup> Жамила Колономос, Вера Весковиќ-Вангели, *Евреите во Македонија во Втората светска војна (1941-1945)*, *Зборник на документи*, том 1, и том 2 (Скопје: 1986), p. 834-885.

<sup>12</sup> Protocol nbr. 4 of the meeting of the Holy Synod regarding the ecclesiastical division of the new areas (Sofia, 29 April 1941), quoted in: Александър Гребенаров, Надя Манолова-Николова (ed.), *Българското управление във Вардарска Македония (1941-1944): документален сборник* (София: Държавна агенция "Архиви", 2011), p. 30-31.

3. *The chief priests of each province must provide the necessary facilities for the priests who wish to serve in the newly liberated provinces, so they can begin their duties as soon as possible in Macedonia and Thrace.*
4. *This invitation does not apply to the priests serving in the parishes of Tserven, Varna, Preslav, and Silistra, as they are invited to offer their services in the geographically closer to their place of residence areas of South Dobrudja<sup>13</sup>*

The Holy Synod makes special reference to the crucial role that priests in the occupied regions must undertake. Priests were able to build trusting relationships with citizens through direct interaction, thereby influencing political and social development. To this end, Greek priests in the occupied regions of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace were considered a major obstacle to the success of the national cause. As stated above, Greek priests were among the first to suffer the consequences of the Bulgarian Occupation and the great majority of them were displaced to the German-administered areas. The following testimony of Archimandrite D. Nikolaidis serves as an indicative example of the persecution of Greek priests:

*"After forcing me to strip completely, they began to search my clothes and luggage. After removing all the money I had inside my clothes, they ordered me to put on the flannel and underpants. They immediately began to beat me with their cleats and shoes, calling me a Comitadji and asking: 'How much Bulgarian blood have you drunk, you devil?' This tragedy was repeated five times in three hours, and after each beating, they pulled my hair and beard with all their strength so much so that many hairs remained in their hands".<sup>14</sup>*

In addition, the Holy Synod discusses budget and human resources allocation in the occupied regions:

1. *To cover the needs and other expenses of the newly established Holy Metropolises, the amount of 6,000 leva will be allocated to each Metropolitan per month.*
2. *Likewise, to cover the needs and other expenses of the assistants of the four Metropolitans, the sum of 5,000 leva will be paid each month to each of them.*
3. *Also, the movement of thirty archpriests and their assistants to the new provinces of the Bulgarian Kingdom, from the old ones where they are now serving, is foreseen, in order to offer their services to our church from their new position. Regarding the coverage of the needs and other expenses of the archpriests and their assistants, with the present decision of the*

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ξανθίππη Κοτζαγεώργη-Ζυμάρη, «Η Ελληνική Εκκλησία στην Ανατ. Μακεδονία και τη Θράκη κατά τη διάρκεια της Κατοχής», p. 74 in Ξανθίππη Κοτζαγεώργη-Ζυμάρη (επιμ.), *Η Βουλγαρική Κατοχή στην Ανατολική Μακεδονία και την Θράκη, 1941-1944*, Ίδρυμα Μελετών Χερσονήσου του Αίμου, Εκδόσεις Παρατηρητής, Θεσσαλονίκη 2002.

*hierarchy of the Holy Synod, it is decided to continue the monthly payment of their salary.*

4. *Accordingly, 500 priests will move to minister in the parishes of the new Holy Metropolises. Payment of their monthly salary will continue without interruption.*
5. *In addition, Bulgarian priests already living and ministering in the newly liberated areas will be asked to continue offering their services.*
6. *Furthermore, 200 active priests of the old provinces of the Bulgarian Kingdom will be moved to the new Holy Metropolises, in order to contribute to the process of restoring the functioning of the churches.*
7. *To cover the expenses of the four new Holy Metropolises, the disbursement of the amount of 15,000 leva for each Metropolis is defined. This amount is judged to be sufficient to cover the expenses of each Metropolis for a period of eight months.*
8. *In order to handle the administrative issues, it is decided to hire four protosegiles, four secretaries, four accountants-treasurers, four archivists, eight auxiliary staff, thirty secretaries to handle the affairs of the high priests and thirty scribes.*
9. *To cover the cost of consumables and other expenses, a total of 500,000 leva will be allocated.<sup>15</sup>*

The hierarchy of the Holy Synod, therefore, with this resolution settled the immediate administrative and financial needs of the "new provinces", making available the required material and human resources. Just one day later, the participants of the Holy Synod prepared a draft letter of thanks addressed to Hitler and Mussolini, in which they expressed their gratitude for their contribution to "national liberation" and pointed out the necessity of the ecclesiastical unification of the "old provinces with the new":

*"Today the Bulgarian National Church is happy again, because its children have been liberated, thanks to the victorious battle fought by two great allied nations - Germany and Italy. This historic moment was God's will to come true. It was God's will to restore justice.*

*The Bulgarian National Church expresses its gratitude to God for His love and mercy. The Bulgarian National Church still feels the need to express its gratitude to the brave German nation and its great leader Mr. Adolf Hitler who*

<sup>15</sup> Protocol under no. 5, of the Meeting of the Holy Synod, which includes decisions on the following subjects: 1. designation of assistants to the Metropolitans of the newly established Metropolises; 2. draft of a memorandum of thanks to Germany and Italy for their contribution to the liberation of Bulgarian lands from "foreign administrations" and 3. budget of the amount that should be disbursed from the church fund to cover emergency needs (Sofia, April 30, 1941), quoted in: Александър Гребенаров, Надя Манолова-Николова (ed.), *Българското управление във Вардарска Македония (1941-1944): документален сборник* (София: Държавна агенция "Архиви", 2011), p. 33, 36.



*selflessly fought for the restoration of order, for justice. By their act this will ensure a lasting peace between the nations of the Balkans.*

*Let us hope that the merciful God will rest the souls of the soldiers who died heroically during the conflicts and will contribute to the speedy restoration of the order in the world.*

*The Bulgarian National Church has no doubt that the historical moments we are living today are the product of divine intervention. It was God's will that the claims of the Bulgarian nation to be restored. It was His will that the Bulgarian provinces returned within the boundaries of the Bulgarian state.*

*It was His will to restore the dominance of Bulgarian culture in our precious Macedonia. It was His will for Macedonia to return to the Motherland, as an integral part of it.*

*The hierarchy of the Holy Synod feels the need to express its gratitude to the Venerable Bulgarian Government, headed by His Majesty King Ferdinand III.*

*We hereby express our sincere thanks to the King of all Bulgarians. The King responded to the wishes of all Bulgarians and contributed to their realization.*

*For this reason, His Majesty enjoys the esteem of the Holy Church and we wish him every success in his work and may he always enjoy the esteem of Our people".<sup>16</sup>*

Finally, the hierarchy of the Holy Synod decided to proceed with the allocation of the amount of 150,000 leva to cover part of the needs of the Italian and German soldiers who were injured during the conflict.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

## The Law "On Citizenship in the Newly Liberated Areas"

The issue of enhancing the necessary human resources for the Metropolises in the occupied regions remained high in the agenda throughout the Occupation period. For example, in a letter sent by the Metropolitan of Strumitsa-Drama, Voris, to his counterpart Metropolitan of Ohrid-Monastiri, Philaretos, he asked his support to identify "*trusted persons*" to cover key positions, such as psaltes and secretaries. These persons would "*contribute to the national-ecclesiastical adjustment of the recently liberated territories*".<sup>17</sup>

The issue of enhancing the necessary human resources became even more challenging due to the introduction of the Law "On Citizenship in the Newly Liberated Areas" in June 1942. The Bulgarian Exarchate held a new Holy Synod to discuss the changes imposed by the Law. In particular, the Law "On Citizenship in the Newly Liberated Territories" stipulated that Yugoslav and Greek nationals who wanted to remain in the Bulgarian-administered territories had to apply for Bulgarian citizenship, otherwise they had to leave their homes and emigrate outside of the Bulgarian Zone of Occupation.<sup>18</sup>

Inevitably, this law led to the forced migration of thousands of Yugoslav and Greek nationals to the territories under German or Italian Occupation. On June 12, 1942, the Holy Synod issued a special circular, according to which Yugoslavs, Greeks and other priests of foreign nationality (mostly Russian) could work in the local parishes, only if they acquire Bulgarian citizenship. The circular also defined the special conditions that non-Bulgarian priests had to fulfill in order to obtain Bulgarian citizenship:

*"All Yugoslav and Greek priests who have their permanent residence in the recently liberated provinces, meet the conditions and have received Bulgarian citizenship, can resume service in their parish.*

*Interested priests must submit to the church and state authorities a signed declaration of interest, where they will affirm that they wish with sincerity, faith and devotion to serve the state and the church".*<sup>19</sup>

Bulgarian priests, upon assuming their duties in the occupied regions, proceeded to the registration of their property.<sup>20</sup> Several studies refer to the replacement of church liturgical books with Bulgarian ones, the collection of movable relics and the transfer of valuable church objects, such as religious icons, to the "*old provinces*" of

<sup>17</sup> ДА – Ловеч (State Archives of Lovech), фонд 122К, опис 1, а.е. 295, Metropolitan of Strumitsa-Drama Voris' letter to his counterpart Metropolitan of Ohrid-Monastiri, Filaretos (Lovech, 14 May 1941).

<sup>18</sup> Държавен вестник (Government Gazette), 10 June 1942.

<sup>19</sup> ДА – Ловеч (State Archives of Lovech), фонд 122К, опис 1, а.е. 257, Directive of the Holy Synod to Metropolitan Lovets Filaretos regarding the recruitment criteria of Yugoslavs, Greeks and other priests of non-Bulgarian origin in the newly liberated provinces (Sofia, 12 June 1942).

<sup>20</sup> Protocol under no. 6, of the Meeting of the Holy Synod, which includes the oral reports of the Metropolises of Skopje-Veles and Ohrid-Monastiri, regarding the situation that prevailed in their Metropolises (Sofia, June 12, 1941), in Александър Гребенаров, Надя Манолова-Николова (ed.), *Българското управление във Вардарска Македония (1941-1944): документален сборник* (София: Държавна агенция "Архиви", 2011), p. 66-76.

Bulgaria.<sup>21</sup> Simultaneously with the registration of the church property of the occupied territories, the registration of the Catholic churches was done.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ξανθίππη Κοτζαγεώργη-Ζυμάρη, «Η Ελληνική Εκκλησία στην Ανατ. Μακεδονία και τη Θράκη κατά τη διάρκεια της Κατοχής», p. 71, 78-79 in Ξανθίππη Κοτζαγεώργη-Ζυμάρη (επιμ.), *Η Βουλγαρική Κατοχή στην Ανατολική Μακεδονία και την Θράκη, 1941-1944*, Ίδρυμα Μελετών Χερσονήσου του Αίμου, Εκδόσεις Παρατηρητής, Θεσσαλονίκη 2002.

<sup>22</sup> ЦДА (Central State Archives Agency), фонд 160К, опис 4, а.е. 62, Letter from the Eastern Catholic Diocese in Sofia to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Religious Affairs regarding the number of faithful of the Eastern Catholic Church in the newly annexed provinces (Sofia, 26 May 1941).

## The First Joint Holy Synod of Metropolitans of the "Old and New" Provinces

The first joint Holy Synod of Metropolitans of the "old and new" provinces was held in Sofia on June, 1941. During the Holy Synod, special emphasis was given to the needs of the newly founded Holy Metropolises of Ohrid-Monastiri and Skopje-Veles (the issues of the other newly established Metropolises were examined in a separate Synod, which took place between June 4 and 17, 1941). In both Holy Synods, participants discussed both ecclesiastical and non-ecclesiastical matters (such as the struggles the local markets were facing due to essential goods shortages and overpriced products). In both Synods, the Metropolitans claimed that "*the religious and Bulgarian sentiments of the population remained thriving*" and the locals were satisfied with the "*national liberation of Macedonia and Thrace*". They also discussed the difficulties to staff due to the new Metropolises and described their efforts to allocated Bulgarian priests in the Italian and German Occupied areas. From the minutes of the Holy Synods, it is also apparent that while Bulgaria was responsible for the administration of the occupied provinces, they had to follow orders of the German troops present in the area.<sup>23</sup>

In addition, the resourcing needs of the local priests was discussed:

*"In the province of Skopje – Veles and, probably, in the provinces of Ohrid – Monastiri and Strumica – Serres, there are many young priests who have completed their training in Monastiri and Karlovic, where they were taught how to officiate in line with the Serbian standard. They hardly speak Bulgarian, even if they are of Bulgarian origin. They are still unable to read the Church Slavonic language. For all these reasons, we suggest to the members of the Holy Synod to design and implement special training programs that meet the special needs of this category of priests. These programs can take place either in Sofia, or in another Bulgarian city, and it is considered appropriate that they take place immediately, ideally during the summer".<sup>24</sup>*

The first issue to be settled was the training of the Bulgarian priests of the "*newly acquired provinces*". These priests, in addition to participating in ecclesiastical seminars, had to be trained linguistically, in order to be able to officiate in the Bulgarian language. The celebration of the divine service in Bulgarian by priests who were familiar to the inhabitants would serve a twofold purpose. On the one hand, ecclesiastical unification would be hastened, and on the other, the priests would act as an example for the locals to follow. Their study of the Bulgarian language, in other words, would encourage the residents of the "*recently liberated territories*" to participate in Bulgarian language courses for adults conducted by teachers

<sup>23</sup> Protocol n. 6 of the Holy Synod (Sofia, June 12, 1941), in Александър Гребенаров, Надя Манолова-Николова (ed.), *Българското управление във Вардарска Македония (1941-1944): документален сборник* (София: Държавна агенция "Архиви", 2011), p. 69-76; Protocol n. 8 of the Holy Synod (Sofia, June 12, 1941), in Александър Гребенаров, Надя Манолова-Николова (ed.), *Българското управление във Вардарска Македония (1941-1944): документален сборник* (София: Държавна агенция "Архиви", 2011), p. 77-79.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 75.

transferred from the "old" Bulgaria. Seminars of a similar nature were held on a periodic basis for all public administration professionals, such as teachers, administrators, Mayors, etc., but also for journalists. These seminars were organised throughout the Bulgarian Occupation and were widely disseminated by the press.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Александър Гребенаров, Надя Манолова-Николова (ed.), *Българското управление във Вардарска Македония (1941-1944): документален сборник* (София: Държавна агенция "Архиви", 2011), p. 80-83.

## Propaganda Actions of the Bulgarian Priests

The Bulgarian priests in the occupied territories devoted themselves to the systematic promotion of the public image of the Exarchate. Several of them had frequent presence in the Bulgarian press and active participation in political, cultural, social and sporting events. The development of relations with regional political and social actors and their constant presence in official meetings was driven by the strengthening of the effort to consolidate ecclesiastical unification and acceptance of the new situation. In particular, the heads of the newly established Metropolises often toured the towns and villages under their jurisdiction, while making sure that important Bulgarian anniversaries and religious holidays were celebrated with splendor. Often the Metropolitans made their tours together with policy makers. In addition, the contribution of prominent historical figures of the Bulgarian Exarchate in nation building was a common topic in the newspapers.<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, the Bulgarian Exarchate organized cultural activities, such as exhibitions of historical religious icons. Such actions were often supported by Bulgarian teachers in the occupied territories, who organized educational trips to well-known monasteries of "old" Bulgaria (especially to the Rila Monastery, which is the largest and most famous Monastery in Bulgaria). These excursions were part of the curriculum drawn up by the competent Ministry of National Education.<sup>27</sup>

The image of the Exarchate was also promoted by Bulgarian organizations, especially those that published newspapers. In *Illustratsija Ilinden*, for example, there were frequent tributes to Bulgarian priests who participated in the "*struggle for the liberation of the Macedonian lands*". Newspapers also made tributes to popular saints of the Bulgarian Exarchate, especially Paisius. Finally, some Bulgarian priests published articles in the press.<sup>28</sup> The priest Kirill Lilin, for example, wrote in the "*Belomorska Bulgaria*" a newspaper circulated in Xanthi:

*"By the power of eternal law, Bulgaria was not forgotten, as her eternal enemies wanted. Her lands that were taken from her in Neuilly, the time has come for them to be returned to her again. The melodious Bulgarian songs from the beautiful girls of Thrace, Dobrudja and Macedonia are heard again. Once again, the sonorous Bulgarian song can be heard from the green Ohrid to the Danube and from the sunny Balchik to the quiet waters of the Aegean".<sup>29</sup>*

In addition to the articles in the press, the Bulgarian priests circulated in the area of Xanthi a propaganda publication of religious content.

<sup>26</sup> Newspaper *Целокупна България*, 17 September 1941, 26 September 1941, 9 December 1941, 16 December 1941, 18 December 1941.

<sup>27</sup> Newspaper *Целокупна България*, 9 December 1941; *Училищен преглед (School Inspection)*, XL 6 (1941), σ. 874-885; *Училищен преглед*, XL 7 (1941), p. 913-915.

<sup>28</sup> Newspaper *Нива*, 5 June 1941; *Целокупна България*, 31 December 1941; *Илюстрация Илинден*, February 1942, p. 13; *Илюстрация Илинден*, May – June 1943, p. 11-15; *Македония (journal)*, February 1943.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Ξανθίππη Κοτζαγεώργη-Ζυμάρη, «Η Ελληνική Εκκλησία στην Ανατ. Μακεδονία και τη Θράκη κατά τη διάρκεια της Κατοχής», p. 80 in Ξανθίππη Κοτζαγεώργη-Ζυμάρη (επιμ.), *Η Βουλγαρική Κατοχή στην Ανατολική Μακεδονία και την Θράκη, 1941-1944*, Ίδρυμα Μελετών Χερσονήσου του Αίμου, Εκδόσεις Παρατηρητής, Θεσσαλονίκη 2002.

## Conclusion

In summary, the role of the Bulgarian Exarchate during the Occupation was multifaceted and directly linked to the goals of the Bulgarian government. In this context, the Bulgarian priests carried out propagandist actions and participated in acts of violation of the rights of the citizens of the occupied regions. To strengthen their action, the Bulgarian ecclesiastical leadership allocated significant resources, which, according to estimates, in the region of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace alone amounted to twenty-two million leva. This amount was allocated to cover the cost of salaries and did not include other operational expenses of the newly established Bulgarian Metropolises.<sup>30</sup>

Taking into consideration the significant resources (both human and material) allocated by the Bulgarian Exarchate during the occupation of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace, further research is needed to highlight the Exarchate's role in contributing to the development and implementation of government policies, especially regarding the implementation of cultural assimilation policies. Finally, the role of the Exarchate in the post-war reconciliation process between Bulgaria and the Allies bloc has not been sufficiently examined.

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<sup>30</sup> Report of the Holy Synod to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the expenses it incurred in Macedonia during the period 1941-1944 (Sofia, July 20, 1945), in Александър Гребенаров, Надя Манолова-Николова (ed.), *Българското управление във Вардарска Македония (1941-1944): документален сборник* (София: Държавна агенция "Архиви", 2011), p. 456-457.