

## A GLANCE AT THE ISLAMISATION OF GORA AND OTHER ŽUPAS OF THE ŠAR MOUNTAIN COMPLEX\*

It is a matter of record that, until the Ottoman invasion, Serb Slavs populated the Šar Mountain župas (roughly: districts) of Sirinić, Sredska, Gora, and Opolje, and the entire region between the Crni Drim and Vardar rivers, with the Gornji Polog and Donji Polog valleys (the Tetovo region). The area was home to two imperial capitals of the Mediaeval Serbian state - Prizren and Skopje. With the Ottoman invasion of the Šar lands in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century (after the occupation of Skopje in 1392 and of Prizren in 1455), the until then ethnically purely Serbian and religiously purely Orthodox Christian environment experienced its first major ethnic, religious, and demographic changes. Colonies of Ottoman Turkish townspeople - artisans and traders, as well as military personnel *spahis*, *yannisaries* and other services of the Turkish regular and ancillary armies began to be formed in the neighbouring Orthodox imperial cities of Prizren, Tetovo, and Skopje. Parallel with the invasion and settling of its people, mostly from Anatolia (Asia Minor), the Ottomans carried out Islamisation on a lesser or greater scale - Turkicization of the indigenous Serbian population, and of a large section of the Arbanasi (Albanians) populating the area between the Crni Drim river and the Adriatic Sea. Turkish administrative, judicial, and agrarian institutions - which were based on the *Shari'ah* law - imposed a *timar-spahi* agrarian and legal system in their socio-economic dealings with the subjugated population (*reaya*, Turkish for flock). Since the *Shari'a* law, based on the religious precepts of the Koran, promised the subjugated Christian nations exemption from numerous taxes - where *harc* (tribute) and *kulluk* (*angaria*, forced labour) were the worst obligations imposed by *spahis* on the *reaya* - on conversion to Islam, many from among the subjugated populations converted and thus became "true" Turkish citizens with full rights. Ottoman Turks lived only in towns, and the Islamised Christian population, only in villages. The Islamisation of the Šar Mountain župas - for

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demographic, religious, economic, and especially, security reasons (because of Christian Serbian *haiduks*, or guerrillas, and other outlaws - especially the notorious Arbanasi *kesicis* or slashers) - was pursued by the highest Ottoman imperial administration - Turkey - and was especially ruthless in Rumelia after the late 16<sup>th</sup> and the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Islamisation was carried out through the offices of *sanjak-beys* - district administrators - and through Turkish judicial bodies and institutions - *kadis* (judges) and *mescems* (courts). In the western Šar Mountain župas and the riparian areas along the Crni Drim, Islamisation was carried out especially assiduously by the notorious Kulin-bey and Sinan-pasha, according to historical sources and folk legend.

## II

**T**urkish rule over the subjugated Balkan nations, and especially the Islamisation of South Slav lands, as well as of Greeks and Arbanasi, was the subject of numerous research papers and Turkish archive documents - official files of both European and Balkan historiography centres, especially those concerned with specialized oriental studies (Sofia, Sarajevo, Skopje, and to a lesser extent, Belgrade and Priština). These sources indicate that Islamisation in areas of the Mediaeval Serbian and Bulgarian states was carried out mostly by force, but there were - albeit far fewer - voluntary conversions to Islam, the "Turkish religion". As for the Šar Mountain župas, the first to be Islamised, after the neighbouring Luma region, was Opolje, where the assimilation of the local originally Slavic, Serbian, population with the Arbanasi was accomplished comparatively swiftly, and the process was over by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Gora, however, had a different historical fate. Two or three factors were decisive here. First, a weakening of the central government - the Sublime Porte - rendering it impotent to offer legal protection and public safety to the far-flung parts of the Ottoman Empire against raiders, who made incursions from the infertile mountainous areas of neighbouring Albania (across the Drim), Donja Dibra and Luma. They were plundering both Christians and Muslims (Islamised Christian farmers) in the western reaches of the Prizren *sanjak* (which stretched to include Polog and Tetovo). Secondly, the Phanariot (Greek aristocrat) bishops of the Constantinople Patriarchate, having obtained their positions with money and bribery at the Porte and the Phanar (part of Constantinople where the Patriarchate was and is situated), levied draconic taxes on their Christian flocks in the form of tithes to the church, persecuted priests and outlawed Christian rites, driving entire villages into Islam, especially after the abolition of the Peć Patriarchate (1557-1766). Thirdly, although rich in livestock, Gora was forced to send a large proportion of its population away as migrant workers, not only to the European part of Turkey - the Rumelian *vilayet* (province) - but also to Constantinople, Anatolia, Syria, and Egypt. Migrant workers often lived for years away from their Gora homeland. The hardships at home - especially the

plundering of sheep, cattle, and horses by neighbouring Lumans forced them to convert to Islam, in order that the new religion and the Turkish administration, via *kadis* and the Turkish authorities in the town of Prizren - *pashas* and *beys* - should give them some protection. Goranians converted to Islam practically all at once, so that, because of their social compactness, they managed to preserve their Slavic national character, the Serbian language, and many of the customs of their forefathers of before the Ottoman conquest. The last Christians in Gora either moved to Prizren, which until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century - according to Miller and Bouet - had an Orthodox Serbian majority, or converted to Islam at the time of the Crimean war (1853-1858). Evidence of this was offered also by Prizren's own great Petar Kostić - whose father was a Goranian - author of several well-documented, objective, and critical works on Serbs in Prizren and the general situation in the Prizren area from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the end of Turkish rule in 1912 (and since). Also, Russian Consul in Shkoder and Prizren Ivan Yastrebov researched for years before and after the Serbian-Turkish wars of 1876-1878 the life, past and present, of the Prizren area, and wrote a voluminous work on Old Serbia. Especially valuable is his research - based on authentic historical documents - of the Šar Mountain župas. His opus was written according to strict rules of scientific research, owing to his broad education and a good knowledge of the history of the region. His excellent knowledge of the Turkish and Serbian languages, and a working knowledge of Albanian, too, was also a great help.

In view of the main topic of the symposium organised at the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts by the Academy's "Jovan Cvijić" Geographical Institute, and the subject of our endeavour, we have tabulated here highly valuable and indispensable information about the Šar Mountain župas, with the dominant Slavic character of their populations and the Serbian language spoken by them.

### III

Yastrebov drew up his religious-linguistic (ethnic) structure of three Šar Mountain župas when he was the Russian consul in Prizren, after having toured almost all the villages, i.e., some years after the Serbian-Turkish wars of 1876-1878.

An analysis of the facts and figures shows the following: Orthodox Christian Serbs, together with Serbian-speaking Muslims in Gora and Sredska, made up a large majority of nearly nine-tenths, or 87.97 percent, of the population, as against the just over one-tenth, or 12.03%, of Arbanasi.

There were no Ottoman Turks in these župas. At the time the data were collected, Gora had a population made up solely of Islamised Slavs (Serbs). In Sredska, the Serbian-speaking population of both religious groups - Orthodox Christians and Muslims - made up nearly three-fourths of the entire population, while Arbanasi accounted for just over one-fourth.

Table 2. *Linguistic structure of the population*

			Linguistic structure of the population					
			Number of households					
			Serbian language				Albanian language	
	Number of Villages	Total number of households	Orthodox Christians	Muslims	Total		Muslims	
					No.	%	No.	%
Sirinić	15	943	786	-	786	83.35	157	16.65
Sredska	32	1,888	488	900	1,388	73.52	500	26.48
Total:	47	2,831	1,274	900	2,174	76.80	657	23.20
Gora	31	2,617	-	2,617	2,617	100.00	-	-
<b>Grand Total:</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>5,448</b>	<b>1,274</b>	<b>3,517</b>	<b>4,791</b>	<b>87.97</b>	<b>657</b>	<b>12.03</b>

Goranies, including those Islamised in Sredska, and Arbanasi - although they all practiced the same "Turkish" religion - were two separate ethnic entities, separate ethnic groups, with the Goranies remaining close to Orthodox Christian Serbs in Sredska and in neighbouring Sirinić.