

BULGARIAN TRANSLATIONS OF THE QUR'ĀN (1900–2020): MISSIONARY AGENDA, COMMUNIST IDEOLOGY, AND CANONICAL IMPULSE¹

PAVEL PAVLOVITCH

Sofia University of St. Kliment Ohridski

The present paper aims to analyse the historical and political contexts in which the Bulgarian translations of Qur'ān were created and disseminated. The history of Bulgarian translations of Qur'ān may be divided into three periods: 1900–1944, 1944–1989 and the 1990s onward. The first period is dominated by two Protestant translations from English motivated by a missionary incentive. In the second period, translations of Qur'ān were controlled by the Communist state and thus suppressed or intended to justify persecutions against Bulgarian Muslims. The third period saw the publication of multiple Bulgarian translations of the Qur'ān as well as the first rendition from Arabic. All stages are carefully and critically examined to demonstrate the relevant socio-political influence on the Qur'ān's presence in Bulgaria. The logical progression of approaches taken by subsequent translations is also shown. The paper concludes with a systematic summary of the status of the Qur'ān in Bulgaria, thereby suggesting possible directions for future researchers and translators.

Keywords: Qur'ān, translation, Bulgarian, Arabic, Turkish, missionary agenda, state security, Communist ideology, canonical translation of Qur'ān

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The story of the Bulgarian Qur'ān began in the early twentieth century, driven by two factors of political and cultural significance. In 1878, Bulgaria gained autonomy from the Ottoman Empire. Despite the severing of ties with the imperial heartland, 676 000 Muslims, accounting for 21 percent of the country's population amounting to 3 154 000 people, remained within Bulgarian territory (Statistique 1911: 46, for 1887). This group included both Turks and Bulgarian-speaking Muslims (Pomaks). At the same time, Protestant missionaries in Germany and the United States believed that the situation had become ripe for attempting to convert these Muslims to Christianity.² Bulgarian translation of the Qur'ān was expected to facilitate the process of conversion.

The history of the Qur'ān's Bulgarian translations unfolded in three consecutive stages: 1900–1944, 1944–1989, and the 1990s onward. This periodization follows landmark political events in recent Bulgarian history but also reflects specific dogmatic and political motives of the individuals and institutions that undertook to translate the Holy Book of Islam. It will be shown that two Protestant translations from English underpinned by a missionary agenda were the hallmark of the first period. The second period was marked by state security- and Communist party-led initiatives to translate the Qur'ān as part of a twofold official policy to suppress the rise of Islamic awareness in Bulgaria while pretending to the world that religious freedom was respected in the country. The third period saw the first translation from the Arabic original by Tzvetan Theophanov, which was endorsed by Muslim authorities in Bulgaria and Turkey, thereby attaining canonical status. This study is focused on the historical circumstances in which the Bulgarian Qur'ān took shape and the personality of its translators. The quality of translation is rarely mentioned, as it remains a topic for future study.

Notwithstanding its 120-year history, the translation of the Qur'ān into Bulgarian has rarely come to academic attention. In 1933, Natanail (Husayn) Nazifoff published a short review in *The Moslem World* (Nazifoff 1933). Nazifoff, a Muslim from Plovdiv, the second largest Bulgarian city, was a barber by trade and worked as a typesetter at the German Orient-Mission (Deutsche Orient-Mission; hereinafter, DOM) printery. DOM was founded in 1895 by the German pastor Johannes Lepsius (1858–1926) to support the Armenian people in the Ottoman Empire and spread Christianity among Muslims in the former Ottoman realm. On 21 May 1914, Nazifoff was baptized by DOM's affiliated pastor Johannes Avetaranian (1861–1919), and in 1921

² On Protestant activities in Bulgaria during the 1860s and 1870s, see Stoyanov 1964, Petkov 1990.

he became a Protestant pastor, actively proselytizing among Bulgarian Muslims.³ To further this mission, from 1933 to 1943, Nazifoff published the monthly magazine *Hakikat Şahidi* (*The Witness of Truth*), which focused on the religious and spiritual affairs of Bulgarian Turks who embraced Christianity (Ivanchev 1969: 42).

In his *Moslem World* article, *The Bulgarian Koran*, Nazifoff documented two translations of the Qurʾān: a partial rendition by Nikola K. Litsa, and a complete one – sponsored by Ernst Max Hoppe and carried out by Stefan Tomov and Stefan Skulev. Nazifoff's article includes a summary of the Bulgarian academic audience's reception of the latter translation, although without reference to the sources – likely newspapers and journals – from which the respective statements were excerpted.⁴ Litsa's, and Tomov and Skulev's translations are referenced in the *Bibliography of Translations of the Qurʾān into European Languages*, compiled by James D. Pearson as an appendix to the first volume of the *Cambridge History of Arabic Literature* (Pearson 1983: 505).

The next academic study of the Bulgarian Qurʾān only appeared in 2015, when Alper Ahmedov defended an MA thesis titled *Quranic Studies in Postottoman Bulgaria* at the Istanbul University. Written in Turkish, the thesis provides significant details about the Bulgarian translations of the Qurʾān and comments on some of the linguistic choices made by various translators. Ahmedov rarely digresses to discuss adverse political factors that overshadowed the translation during the Communist era, likely because he did not have access to Bulgarian archives. Nazarska (2022: 118) rectifies this shortcoming in a short but well-documented survey of failed initiatives to translate the Qurʾān under Communism.

In 2018, Atanas Shinikov released two online articles devoted to important aspects of the Bulgarian Qurʾān. In the first article, written in English, Shinikov studies Hoppe's 1930 translation (Shinikov 2018a). The international reader will appreciate Shinikov's translation of Hoppe's foreword. Shinikov's second publication, in Bulgarian, scrutinizes the samizdat translation by Shaykh Mohammed Shemsuddin, released around 1986 (Shinikov 2018b). Although marred by the lack of familiarity with Ahmedov's MA thesis and gratuitous sarcasm, Shinikov's study pays close attention to the linguistic nuances of Shemsuddin's translation, revealing its Turkish origin. To his credit, Shinikov outlines the daunting challenges facing the self-taught translator during the Communist era.

³ On Nazifoff, see Damianov 2003: 146, 158–160, 181–182; Angelova 2016: 131–133, 138, 143.

⁴ Nazifoff likely cited his sources in his 1932 article titled *Wie der bulgarische Koran aufgenommen wurde*, which appeared in the *Orient* journal, published by the Dr. Lepsius Deutsche Orient-Mission (Damianov 2003: 176, note 745). I did not have access to this article.

A summary of the Qur'ān's translations into Bulgarian between 1991 and 2019 is included in the entry *Quran, translations*, which is part of the first volume of Yordan Peev's encyclopedic work *Dom na Islyama* (Peev 2022: 648–649). Another brief review is included in the introduction to the Festschrift on the seventieth anniversary of Tzvetan Theophanov, penned by Galina Evstatieva and the present writer (Evstatieva & Pavlovitch 2023: 12–16). Theophanov's translation along with the 1993 translation overseen by Nedim Gendzev received attention in Mykhaylo Yakubovych's monograph *The Kingdom and the Qur'an* (51–53), discussing the role of Saudi Arabia in sponsoring the translation of the Qur'ān worldwide.

While several translations of the Qur'ān appeared after 1989, many of which included introductions, none of the translators made a systematic effort to delve into the history of the Bulgarian Qur'ān. Strikingly, Theophanov's translation, the sole rendition by an Arabist from the Arabic original, also lacks such a study. Drawing on archival documents and hitherto unacknowledged sources, the present article aims at filling the significant gap in the academic historiography of the Bulgarian Qur'ān. It may inspire future researchers to look for any documentation that is not discussed in this paper as well as thoroughly evaluate the merits of each individual translation.

THE PROTESTANT QUR'ĀN (1900–1944)

Nathanael Nazifoff's article *The Bulgarian Korans* opens with a paragraph telling the reader that efforts to translate the Qur'ān into Bulgarian were first expended by Reverend Nikola K. Litsa. Nazifoff (1933: 187) recalls that in 1905 Litsa published *the first few pages*, but, eventually, his death thwarted the undertaking. Nazifoff states in passing that he knew Litsa in person, without providing any biographical details. A more detailed account was compiled by Plovdiv historian Nikola Alvadziev (1900–1974). He portrays Litsa as an antiquarian bookseller of a Slovak origin, who ran a small dusty shop on *Saborna 12* street. Acknowledging the passage of time and the fading of his childhood memories, Alvadziev wonders, *[w]hen had he (i.e., Litsa) come to Plovdiv, where had he acquired these books and these antiquities, when had he vanished, and to where had he taken this treasure?* (1984: 142). These questions indicate that Alvadziev knew little about Litsa, likely because the Reverend *vanished* when Alvadziev was a small child. It should also be borne in mind that Alvadziev wrote down his memoirs at the end of the 1960s, more than half a century after the events – a span of time that inevitably clouded his perhaps indirect recollections of Plovdiv's early-twentieth-century history.

From Litsa's family name, it can be reasonably inferred that he came from a Greek family. This possibility, which goes against Alvadziev's Slovak-origin hypothesis, finds support in a scathing review of Litsa's translation of Plutarch's *Life of Alexander the Great*, penned by the famous Bulgarian writer Ivan Vazov (1979: 129).⁵ Suggesting that Litsa was Greek, Vazov laments his mediocre command of Bulgarian. Vazov's hypothesis can be supported by reports that in 1877 a certain Nikola Litsa converted to Protestantism in Bitola⁶ at the hands of several missionaries working in collaboration with the Greek Dr. Aristidis (Jonovski 2017: 147–149). If this convert was Nikola K. Litsa, which is highly likely, he may be considered a Greek from Bitola, who came to Plovdiv towards the beginning of the 1890s (I shall return to this matter later).

In the introduction to his translation of the Qur'ān, Litsa (1902: iii) describes himself as a theologian and historian. His *alma mater* is unknown, but given his proficiency in English, it could have been an English-speaking institution. An inkling of Litsa's education is found in the press report that in 1904 he was employed as a paid preacher for the American Board in the city of Samokov. After the Board's refusal to pay him the agreed sum, arguing that *the congregations he served* should partake in his remuneration, Litsa brought a lawsuit against his employers (Telefon 1904).⁷ The business link between Litsa and the American Board in Samokov allows us to think that he may have graduated from the Boys Missionary School, which had been operating in the city since 1871 (Hall 1938: 88–89; Stoyanov 1964: 53). The Samokov school was attended by the Albanian Gerasim D. Kyrias (1858–1894), who belonged to the same group of converts as Litsa. Another possibility to consider is the American Robert College in Istanbul, which was a popular destination for Bulgarians during the 1860s–1880s, but Litsa is not recorded among this institution's students (Ilchev 1981: 57–61; Sabev 2015: 91–162, 175, 349, 359–416, and *passim*).⁸ Less likely, he may have studied in the United States, just as Stefan Tomov, one of the later translators of the Qur'ān.

From newspaper reports, we learn that in 1885 Litsa preached the Gospel in Bulgarian in Seres. Before long, he was *mobbbed by Greeks and afterwards driven from the city*, because of fears that he was spreading Bulgarian influence (Missionary News 1885: 2). As early as 1892, he

⁵ The original review, published in 1891 in *Dennitsa* magazine, is anonymous, but the article is included in Vazov's collected works (Vazov 1979).

⁶ The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions established its station in Bitola in 1874 (Petkov 1990: 28).

⁷ I am grateful to Dr. Vidin Sukarev, Plovdiv Regional History Museum, for this reference (e-mail message, 14.10.2022).

⁸ Robert College was founded in 1863 by the American philanthropist Christopher Rhinelander Robert (1802–1878).

preached in Plovdiv and its neighbouring cities, aided by his wife (Missionary News 1892a: 2; 1892b: 1; 1895: 5–6). At the beginning of the twentieth century, Litsa was active at the Evangelical church on Sahat Tepe hill in Plovdiv (Litsa 1907).⁹ His choice of Plovdiv is not surprising, given that the city was one of the earliest centres of Protestant proselytism in Bulgaria (Stoyanov 1964: 47–52).

Litsa was a prolific translator of historical works of the Classical Antiquity, including Plutarch's *Life of Alexander the Great* (1890) and *Life of Romulus* (1891), and Josephus Flavius's *Jewish War* (1892). Later research has shown that he translated directly from the ancient-Greek originals (Beteva 1942: 98–99). Litsa's knowledge of Greek is indirectly attested by an advertisement in the Plovdiv newspaper *Balkanski Novini* on 28 July 1907, in which the Reverend offers for sale a 1639 Greek edition of the New Testament published in Amsterdam and a 1727 Greek edition of Aristoteles's *Logic* (Litsa 1907). It is unknown why Litsa decided to part with these rare books, but one recalls that, apart from being a bookseller, three years earlier he had sued the American Board in Samokov for unpaid dues. Litsa's interest in the field of hagiography is witnessed by his translation of the vita of St. Marina of Antioch (Litsa, transl. 1930).

I could not identify Litsa's dates of birth and death. If Litsa, indeed, embraced Protestantism in 1877, supposedly as a young person, we may tentatively date his birth to the 1850s. His earliest publication, a translation of Demosthenes's *Speech on the Crown*, is dated to 1889, which establishes a *terminus ante quem* for the onset of his activity as a translator of antique texts. Nazifoff, who was acquainted with Litsa, is ambiguous about the date of his death. He only states that Litsa's death prevented him from completing his translation of the Qur'ān, leaving the impression that the Reverend died not long after 1905, when the last part of his work saw light of day. This impression is contradicted by the publication of Litsa's translation of the *Life of St. Marina of Antioch* in 1930. Although listed in the Bulgarian National Library's catalogue, this work could not be obtained for analysis in this paper. It is hardly likely that, if alive, Litsa would not publish anything between 1905 and 1930, which suggests that either the *Life of St. Marina of Antioch* was published long after the translator's death, or an error in the catalogue occurred whereby an original 1903 was written down as 1930. By the time he wrote *The Bulgarian Koran*, Nazifoff would have forgotten the exact year of Litsa death, hence his vague expression. Another

⁹ I am grateful to Dr. Vidin Sukarev for the above reference and the information about Litsa's work in the evangelical church on Sahat Tepe (e-mail message, 14.10.2022).

possibility, suggested by Alvadziev's expression that Litsa *vanished*, is that Nazifoff imagined the reverend's disappearance from Plovdiv as his death.

Litsa's translation of the Qur'ān is based on George Sale's (d. 1736) first English translation from Arabic, printed in 1734.¹⁰ The source text is identified on the title page of Litsa's publication, which consists of four short fascicles printed in Plovdiv in 1902, 1904, and 1905 (Qur'ān 1902–1905). Litsa's edition begins with a four-page introduction, dated 15 April 1902, and includes the translation of *Sūrat al-Fātiḥa*, *Sūrat al-Baqara*, *Sūrat Āl 'Imrān*, *Sūrat al-Nisā'*, and a fragment of *Sūrat al-Mā'ida* (verses 1–84). The incomplete translation of *al-Mā'ida* lends support to Nazifoff's suggestion that Litsa died before he managed to finish his work. The Reverend's advertisement in *Balkanski Novini* on 28 July 1907 indicates that he lived at least two years after the publication of the fourth fascicle, without resuming his translation project, perhaps due to financial constraints.

It remains uncertain whether the activities of DOM in Bulgaria had a bearing on Litsa's translation. The Mission's first representative, Pastor Abraham Amirhantiants, arrived and commenced work in Bulgaria at the end of 1896 (Damianov 2003: 45). In a 1900 publication discussing future missionary activities among Bulgarian Muslims, Amirhantiants highlighted the need for Protestant missionaries to be proficient in Arabic and possess a deep understanding of the Qur'ān (Damianov 2003: 47). Amirhantiants's proposal may well have influenced Litsa's undertaking to translate the Qur'ān, although our available sources are unforthcoming with information about any meeting that might have taken place between the two pastors. In 1901, Amirhantiants was succeeded by Pastor Johannes Avetarianian. He visited Plovdiv twice before 1906 and began preaching to the local public in September of that year (Damianov 2003: 84). Just like Amirhantiants, we lack information on whether Avetarianian ever met with Litsa or suggested the idea of translating the Qur'ān to him. Given that Nazifoff, who knew Litsa, was baptized by Avetarianian, there is a possibility that Avetarianian may have encountered Litsa during his sojourns in Plovdiv.

The next major step in the translation of the Qur'ān to Bulgarian was made by the German Protestant missionary Ernst Max Hoppe, who came to Bulgaria for the first time in 1922 (Damianov 2003: 165–166). In 1930, Hoppe was appointed head of DOM's renewed mission to Bulgaria, which was headquartered in the capital, Sofia. Hoppe began to teach Evangelical

¹⁰ The first English translation of the Qur'ān was published in 1649, based on the 1647 French translation. George Sale knew Arabic, but, according to recent research, his work is greatly indebted to the Latin translation by the Catholic cleric Ludovico Marracci (Bevilacqua 2013: 101–106). Sale's work remained the standard English translation of the Qur'ān until the beginning of the 20th century.

Christianity to Muslims of Turkish and Roma origins, including such who were incarcerated in Sofia's central prison (Damianov 2003: 166–167). Hoppe and his collaborators travelled across Bulgaria to preach and distribute Christian literature in Turkish among Bulgarian Muslims (Hoppe 1955: 204; Damianov 2003: 173–176). Hoppe's activities in Bulgaria continued until 1934, when he was recalled to Germany due to drying up funds (Damianov 2003: 181). In 1955, Hoppe was still alive in Heidenau bei Dresden (Hoppe 1955: 204). Apart from his missionary work, Hoppe published two scholarly articles devoted to religious and ethnic minorities in Bulgaria: *The Yuruks* (1933) and *I Gagauzi, popolazione Turco-Cristiana della Bulgaria* (1934).¹¹ Aided by the American Christian Literature Society for Muslims, he also made twenty publications in Bulgarian, intended for converting Muslims to Christianity and recruiting local Christians for this enterprise (Hoppe 1955: 204; Damianov 2003: 177).

In 1930, Hoppe accomplished the milestone of publishing the first complete translation of the Qur'ān into Bulgarian. To bring his project to fruition, he had commissioned as translators Dr. Stefan Tomov (1850–1939) and Stefan Skulev. Born in Kotel, Tomov embarked on his educational journey in 1862. At the recommendation of the American Methodist pastor, Dr. Albert Long (1832–1901), he spent three years at Malta Protestant College, taking, among others, courses in English and Arabic. Between 1865 and 1869, Tomov attended the Robert College in Istanbul, and in 1878, he earned the degree of Doctor of Divinities from Drew University in New Jersey. Upon returning to Bulgaria, Tomov ministered in the cities of Svishtov, Shumen, and Varna.¹² Tomov's co-translator, Stefan Skulev, was a Protestant reverend affiliated with the evangelical church in Varna.¹³ His knowledge of English is evident from a 1925 newspaper advertisement promoting his sermon for sailors of two British cruisers berthed in this Black Sea port city (Novini 1925a).

In the foreword to the translation, Hoppe only noted that Tomov and Skulev worked from English (Hoppe 1930: 8), but Shinikov has argued that George Sale's translation stands behind this expression (Shinikov 2018a). The validity of Shinikov's conclusion becomes evident when one compares the two texts. Sale's edition does not enumerate the individual verses; the same continuous text flow is observed in Hoppe's edition. The Bulgarian translation faithfully adheres

¹¹ Noted by Shinikov 2018a.

¹² About Stefan Tomov, see Stoyanov 1957: 353 (I am grateful to Prof. Ivan Roussev for this reference); Stoyanov 1964: 59, 61; Damianov 2003: 47; Hristov 2012: 56–57.

¹³ On 18 October 1925, Skulev held a talk in the Varna Evangelical Church about the Stockholm Conference on Practical Christianity (Novini 1925a). See also Ikonov 1933.

to Sale's wording, which often departs from the Arabic text and takes the form of a concise exegetical commentary. For illustrative purposes, let us consider the first five verses in *Sūrat al-Baqara*:

THE ARABIC ORIGINAL

Alif, lām, mīm. (1) Dhālika l-kitābu lā rayba fī-hi hudan lil-muttaqīn (2) alladhīna yu`minūna bi-l-ghaybi wa-yuqīmūna l-ṣalāta wa-min-mā razaqnā-hum yunfiqūn (3) wa-l-ladhīna yu`minūna bi-mā unzila ilay-ka wa-mā unzila min qabli-ka wa-bi-l-ākhirati hum yūqinūn (4) ūlā`ika `alā hudan min rabbi-him wa-ūlā`ika hum al-mufliḥūn. (Qur`ān 2: 1-4)

SALE'S TRANSLATION (ITALICS BY SALE)

A. L. M. There is no doubt about this book; it is a direction to the pious, who believe in the mysteries of faith, who observe the appointed times of prayer and distribute alms out of what we have bestowed on them; and who believe in that revelation, which hath been sent down unto thee, and that which hath been sent down unto the prophets before thee, and have firm assurance in the life to come: these are directed by their Lord, and they shall prosper. (Qur`ān 1734)

Sale's distinctive choices of wording are *mysteries of faith* for *ghayb* (the unseen), *who believe in the appointed times of prayer* for *yuqīmūna l-ṣalāt* (perform the prayer), *distribute alms out of what we have bestowed on them* for *wa-min-mā razaqnā-hum yunfiqūn* (expend of that We have provided them), *that which hath been sent down unto the prophets before thee* for *wa-mā unzila min qabli-ka* (what has been sent down before thee).¹⁴ Tomov and Skulev's Bulgarian translation includes each of these distinctive features, which indubitably points to Sale's translation as their original source text.

Members of protestant clergy who oversaw the first two translations of the Qur`ān believed that they would facilitate conversion of Bulgarian Muslims to Christianity. In the foreword to his partial translation, Litsa argues that verses from the Old Testament were borrowed in the Qur`ān either verbatim or in a slightly altered form, because Muḥammad received instruction from *a certain Jew or a Greek* (Litsa 1902: i). Litsa does not draw specific conclusions from this assertion, but one can hardly doubt that he considered the Qur`ān to be an imitation of the Bible. Furthermore, Litsa avers that the earliest Muslims were originally Christians who belonged to various devotions, including Gregorian, Nestorian, Jacobite, Arian, semi-Arian, Monophysite, Marian, and the congregation of Thomas the Apostle (Litsa 1902: iii). All things considered, Litsa leads his reader to conclude that Islam is only a distorted version of Christianity, and its followers should be restored to their pristine faith. Evangelization is an

¹⁴ All translations in parentheses are from Qur`ān 1955.

outstanding motive behind Hoppe's translation. As noted by Nazifoff, Hoppe *was afraid of neither labor nor trouble and worked in every way to lead the Mohammedans to the feet of Jesus Christ* (Nazifoff 1933: 187). It was hoped that, once translated into Bulgarian, the Qur'ān's text would arm Protestant missionaries with arguments that Muḥammad based his teaching on many borrowings from the Bible (Nazifoff 1933: 189, citing the "Duhovno Slovo" magazine; cf. Shinikov 2018a). Such arguments were expected to win over Bulgarian Muslims to Christianity, especially given that most of them did not have access to the Qur'ān in a language they could easily understand.

Christian agenda could be advanced not only through the short exegetical commentaries found in Litsa's translation but also through subtler methods. Frequently deploying turns of phrase and grammatical structures reminiscent of the Bulgarian Bible, Hoppe's rendition of the Qur'ān effects a linguistic shift, which could reinforce the polemical assertion that the Holy Book of Islam is derived from the Bible both formally and substantively. Beyond instilling the notion of the Qur'ān's derivative nature in the minds of Bulgarian Muslims, Hoppe's translation aimed to promote the knowledge of Bulgarian among the Turkish-speaking population, thereby encouraging their acquaintance with Bulgarian national literature and eventually conversion to Christianity (Nazifoff 1933: 188).¹⁵ Additionally, Bulgarian intellectuals lauded Hoppe's work for providing an opportunity to read the Qur'ān in Bulgarian instead of relying on its translations into other languages (Nazifoff 1933: 188).¹⁶ Nazifoff's article hints that some intellectuals deemed Hoppe's translation as a response to the Serbian translation of the Qur'ān published two decades earlier (Nazifoff 1933: 187).¹⁷

Nationalist arguments are immediately apparent in Hoppe's foreword to the 1930 translation of the Qur'ān. The German missionary praises Bulgarian history while heaping words of denigration and scorn against the Qur'ān. *Whoever reads the Qur'ān, gets the nauseating impression of the horrid and demoralizing power of Islam*, writes Hoppe and goes on to lament the Qur'ān's *petrifying impact on the Bulgarian mother tongue and the entire Bulgarian national*

¹⁵ Nazifoff cites Boris Yotsov (1894–1945), who was Professor at the Department of Bulgarian and Slavic Literature, Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski, and Minister of national education (1942–1944). On 01.02.1945, Yotsov fell victim to the Communist purge in Bulgaria. Similar thoughts are voiced by Vladimir Todorov-Hindalov (1883–1934), Turkologist and librarian at the Oriental Department of the Bulgarian National Library (Nazifoff 1933: 189).

¹⁶ Nazifoff cites Professor Toma Stefanov Tomov (1891–1988), founder of the Departments of Romance Philology and Spanish Philology at Sofia University. Toma Tomov was son of Dr. Stefan Tomov, who together with Stefan Skulev translated the Qur'ān. The Communist regime banned Toma Tomov from teaching at Sofia University between 1944 and 1961 because of his Protestant persuasion.

¹⁷ Nazifoff cites the Bulgarian writer and ethnographer Stilian Chilingirov (1881–1962).

soul (Hoppe 1930: 6). Hoppe's statements outline his nationalist goals, namely, to furnish Bulgarian audience with a translation that would help it overcome what he saw as the Qur'ān's suppression of Bulgarian national identity. Once given a Bulgarian linguistic form, the Qur'ān would strengthen this identity.

Hoppe's second point is theological. He highlights the differences between Islam and Christianity with regard to the nature of Jesus Christ, whom Muslims consider a prophet and ordinary human being, whereas Christians venerate him as God's son and the Redeemer. Hoppe argues that this important difference may be understood only by those who have read the Qur'ān and who therefore realize the deceptiveness of Muslim claims that the two religions are similar (Hoppe 1933: 7).

The linguistic reason, that is, promoting the knowledge of Bulgarian among Turkish-speaking Muslims, aligned with the nationalist agenda of the Bulgarian state after the 19.05.1934 *coup d'état*. On 24 February 1937, the *Rodina (Motherland)* society was founded in Smolyan with the aim of assimilating Muslims into the Bulgarian nation. *Rodina* quickly became a state-sponsored organization, with the spread of Bulgarian language among Muslims at the top of its priorities (Gruev & Kalyonski 2008: 16–18). In 1940, *Rodina* launched a campaign to substitute Bulgarian for Turkish in Muslim ritual, including prayer. To expedite the transition, *Rodina* activists distributed free copies of the Qur'ān in Bulgarian, reprinted on government expenses (Gruev & Kalyonski 2008: 17).¹⁸ Since no other full translation except for Tomov and Skulev's existed at that time, it should have been the one that *Rodina* utilized in their campaign.

THE COMMUNIST QUR'ĀN (1944–1989)

Atheism is a staple of the Communist ideology. After Bulgaria's occupation by the Soviet Army in September 1944 and the ensuing coup led by the Bulgarian Workers' Party (Communists), the new regime promoted atheism in all spheres of public life. Article 78 of the 1947 Constitution guaranteed freedom of conscience and religious observance, but, in practice, participation in religious rituals, and the publication and spread of religious literature were discouraged by both the political authorities and the state-security structures. Those unwilling to toe the official line had to be prepared for far-reaching consequences for their career and sometimes freedom.

On 26 April 1951, the Bulgarian Communist Party's highest authority, the Politburo, which served as the country's de facto government, decreed that religious education, including study of the Qur'ān, should be excluded from the curricula of Turkish schools (Politburo 1951: f.

¹⁸ On institutional endorsement of the translation, see Hoppe 1955: 204.

39). Apart from this, Muslim community in Bulgaria quickly fell out with Communist authorities for political and administrative reasons, such as the issuing of passports in 1953. To the Muslim holders' indignation, the new passports bore the owner's photograph (in breach of the Islamic ban on images) and intentionally misidentified some Turkish Muslims as *Macedonians* (Gruev & Kalyonski 2008: 22–24). Under these circumstances, even a reprint of Tomov and Skulev's translation of the Qur'ān would have counted as an insult to party authority, not to mention the prospect of undertaking a new translation.

Even though relentlessly endorsed, the party-sponsored atheistic policies failed to gain traction among Bulgaria's Muslims. Acknowledging the persistent influence of local religious authorities (*hojas*), two participants in the meeting of the Communist Party Central Committee's Department for Work with the Religious Minorities, held on 21 July 1959, noted that a translation of the Qur'ān could aid atheistic propaganda in the country's regions populated by Muslims. Hristo Trendafilov, secretary of the regional party committee in Dobrich, pointed out that neither the *hojas* nor their Muslim audience knew Arabic, leading to a mystical relationship between the believers and Allah through the incomprehensible language of ritual. Trendafilov called for translating the Qur'ān into Turkish or Bulgarian, following the lead of the Soviet comrades, who had printed a translation in Azerbaijan. Trendafilov believed that such a translation would expose Bulgarian Turks to what he described as *silly things found in this Qur'ān* (Central Committee Department 1959: ff. 4–5; noted in brief by Nazarska 2022: 118). Trendafilov's suggestion was welcomed by Redžep Kyuchukov, but the meeting's chairman and Central Committee functionary, Ivan Gospodinov, ended the discussion, warning that the proposed translation might cause more harm than benefit (Central Committee Department 1959: f. 22). Trendafilov's mention of the Soviet Qur'ān, which he likely envisaged as a possible source for the Bulgarian edition, was unsurprising in both ideological and practical terms. In the Bulgarian academia of the 1940s and 1950s, there were no Arabists capable of handling the linguistically demanding task of translating the Qur'ān from the Arabic original.

The scholarly landscape began to change when the first group of Bulgarian students of Arabic received their training in Iraq. In the wake of 'Abd al-Karīm Qāsim's overthrow of the Iraqi monarchy in 1958 and the Iraqi government's subsequent alignment with the Soviet Union and its allies, several Bulgarian youths set off to study Arabic at Baghdad University. One of them was Penka Samsareva, who was awarded a BA degree in Arabic philology in 1964. In the same year, Samsareva began to teach Arabic at Sofia University, and in 1965 she was appointed an assistant professor. Nine years later, she played a pivotal role as one of the founding members of

the Program of Arabic Studies within the Department of Eastern Languages (Center for Oriental Languages and Cultures since 1985) at Sofia University of St. Kliment Ohridski. In 1979, the Program of Arabic Studies was joined by Tzvetan Theophanov, who had graduated a year earlier from the Department of Arabic Philology at Baghdad University.

As Samsareva was beginning her academic work, the Bulgarian intellectuals' surging interest in the matters of religion found a curious expression in a letter written by Borislav Georgiev (1928–2003). A Classicist renowned for his translations from Ancient Greek and a devout follower of the spiritual way of Petar Danov (1864–1944), Georgiev was convicted in a 1964 show trial against a group of homosexual individuals (Gruev 2009). On 11 January 1967, Georgiev wrote to his friend Halil Ibrahim Halilov that after a long period of preparation, he felt ready to embark on the translation of the Qur'ān into Bulgarian. Georgiev hoped to complete the translation within *a few years*, whereupon the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences could publish the text (Georgiev 1967: f. 4; noted in brief by Nazarska 2022: 118). It is unclear whether Georgiev had a formal arrangement with the Academy. We can only speculate about the language from which he was going to translate. Georgiev had taken courses in Hebrew, but Arabic was not part of his enviable linguistic competence. There is no evidence for the progress Georgiev made on the project, leaving the impression that his intention did not materialize in a publishable text. In 1979, Georgiev emigrated to France, where he died in 2003.

Around the time of Georgiev's emigration, the idea of translating the Qur'ān into Bulgarian was brewing in the minds of state security officers. Their interest in the Islamic scripture was driven by internal politics and international affairs. Internally, the Communist state persistently attempted to force upon Muslims Bulgarian names, as part of building a *unified socialist nation*. This essentially nationalist policy was not without precedent. During the period 1942–1944, the society *Rodina* heralded the efforts to change the names of Pomaks from Turco-Arabic to Bulgarian convention, but their push had only limited success (Gruev & Kalyonski 2008: 18–19). Another campaign, now more forcible, was launched in 1964 in the Blagoevgrad region, Southeastern Bulgaria, but it stumbled upon the revolt of Pomaks in the village of Ribnovo (Gruev & Kalyonski 2008: 49–56). After a six-year lull, in 1970 the Bulgarian Communist Party issued a new directive to change the names of Pomaks. By the end of 1973, the party initiative had accomplished its goals, despite active protests in several regions (Gruev & Kalyonski 2008: 67–87). Having succeeded with Pomaks, Bulgaria's totalitarian regime turned its attention to the country's Turkish-speaking population. As noted by Gruev and Kalyonski (2008: 115), the 1970s witnessed *a renewed onslaught against Islam in accordance with the [so called] "socialist civil*

rituals and traditions.” The use of Bulgarian was promoted, at the expense of Turkish. Under these circumstances, the Communist authorities conceived of what they called the *Revival Process*, whose goal was to change the names of Bulgarian Muslims of Turkish origin and, ultimately, to obliterate their linguistic and cultural identity.

Whereas the preparation for the so-called Revival Process could have provided the internal-political reasons for circulating a Bulgarian translation of the Qur’ān, global events involving Islam at the end of the 1970s served as another catalyst. This is clear from a secret report by the Sixth Department of Bulgarian State Security, which was responsible for counter-subversive measures and played a leading role in suppressing political opposition to the Communist regime. On 27 May 1981, Gen. Petar Stoyanov, head of the Sixth Department, informed the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party that the Islamic Revolution in Iran and especially the *events in Afghanistan* (a Communist newspeak euphemism for the Soviet invasion of the country) had spurred *an increased interest from several Islamic countries and organizations towards Bulgarian Turks, descendants of Islamized Bulgarians (another euphemism, this time for Pomaks), and Gypsies* (Stoyanov 1981: 197). To counter this interest, which involved *the use of Islamic tenets for ideological subversion of our country by Turkey, the Libyan Jamahiriya, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, etc.* (Stoyanov 1981: 198),¹⁹ Stoyanov proposed a number of measures, at the head of which he requested,

The Institute for Balkan Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences should undertake a translation, including a critical commentary, of the Qur’ān. It should be printed in a limited issue and distributed for use by the regional committees of the Bulgarian Communist Party in the regions with compact Bulgarian Turkish population, as well as by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. (Stoyanov 1981: 198)

To understand why the State Security requested a translation of the Qur’ān, seemingly going against the grain of state-sponsored atheism, we should focus on Stoyanov’s expression *critical commentary*. One may safely assume that Stoyanov did not refer to grammatical or legal exegesis of the Qur’ān, since he was hardly aware of its textual intricacies. By *critical commentary*, he meant ideological glosses debunking basic teachings of Islam and helping party functionaries to launch a propaganda onslaught against a perceived ideological subversion from abroad. For

¹⁹ Note that Stoyanov includes in the list of unfriendly countries the Libyan Jamahiriya, whose regime headed by Muammar Gaddafi, had received support from the Communist bloc. Despite this, Qaddafi was eager to show political independence from his Communist benefactors, and in 1972 he started a campaign in support of the Bulgarian Muslims’ rights (Filipova 2017: 89–92).

another reason, one has to read between the lines of Stoyanov's report. Without explicitly calling for the substitution of Bulgarian for Turkish, it implies such a process by suggesting that outstanding representatives of Muslim intelligentsia should be encouraged to publish *impactful works in Bulgarian, in which they lay bare Islamic conservatism in everyday life and its harmful effects on our socialist society*. A similar implication is found in Stoyanov's request to switch to civic funerary rituals—outside mosques, and to prevent the use of Arabic and Turkish on gravestones (Stoyanov 1981: 199–200). In the same vein, even if published in a limited issue for use by regional party officials, a Bulgarian translation of the Qur'ān would be an effective tool for spreading the country's official language among Turkish-speaking audience.

The Communist Party's reaction to Stoyanov's report may be inferred from a Politburo directive adopted on 08 May 1984. The directive frequently displays language similar to that in Stoyanov's report and dwells on the need for promoting the Bulgarian language among Turks.²⁰ Counterintuitively, the document does not mention the translation of the Qur'ān. One of the reasons that stood in the way of Stoyanov's initiative may have been Politburo's fear that such a translation might boost religious zeal among Bulgarian Muslims. On several occasions, the directive condemns the uncontrolled and widespread staging of Islamic rituals; in a separate speech before the secretaries of the regional party committees, devoted to the directive's implementation, Georgi Atanasov, a member of the Communist Party's Central Committee, expressed his dismay at the large-scale observance of Muslim holidays and the mass attendance of prayers in the mosque. He was also alarmed by the spread of circumcision and the popularity of traditional Turkish clothes (Politburo 1984: f. 209).²¹ In this ideological context, local party officials could have hardly benefited from a translated Qur'ān. *Stepped-up atheistic propaganda* was the party's preferred ideological medicine (Politburo 1984: f. 206). Be that as it may, the Communist Party's policy towards Bulgarian Muslims of Turkish origin culminated in the

²⁰ Similarly to Stoyanov's report, the Central Committee directs that only such candidates should be appointed as imams who have proven their patriotism and loyalty to Bulgaria (Politburo 1984: f. 36), children and youth should be discouraged from participation in Islamic rites, and the religious content of some rituals should be suppressed (Politburo 1984: f. 27). The directive prohibits the building of new mosques (Politburo 1984: f. 36) and orders the reduction of the number of mosques protected as cultural-heritage monuments (Politburo 1984: f. 37). Apart from this, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences was asked to intensify its study of the Bulgarian Turks (Politburo 1984: f. 29), Bulgarian teachers had to be dispatched to the regions populated by Turks, while teachers who lack a good command of Bulgarian had to be dismissed from their positions (Politburo 1984: f. 34), Muslim clerics had to master Bulgarian (Politburo 1984: f. 36), the language of the Bulgarian Turks had to be imbued with *Bulgarian specificities regarding the new political, geographic, and scientific terms* (Politburo 1984: f. 39), and microtoponymy had to be switched to Bulgarian names (Politburo 1984: f. 42).

²¹ Incidentally, Atanasov called for a *comprehensive study of Bulgarian by all Bulgarian Turks* (Politburo 1984: f. 205).

notorious Revival Process. Unleashed in December 1984, it forced hundreds of thousands of them to change their names from Turkish-Muslim to Bulgarian ones. Many victims of the Revival Process preferred emigration to neighboring Turkey to the ignominy of losing their names as important signs of cultural identity.

The Revival Process faced mounting international criticism and marred Bulgaria's reputation in the Muslim world. As part of the measures to contain the damage, party officials came back to the idea of translating the Qur'ān into Bulgarian. Yordan Peev recalls that after the Revival Process had begun, that is, in 1985, he received an invitation from Mariya Boykikeva, who headed the Philosophy Section at the state-owned Nauka i Izkustvo publishing house. Boykikeva asked Peev to translate the Qur'ān, stating that the request had come from the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party, but Peev declined the offer, pointing out that Tzvetan Theophanov was better qualified for the task.²² Theophanov accepted the offer immediately, and *overconfidently* – in his own words – signed an agreement with Nauka i Izkustvo.²³

The examination of Nauka i Izkustvo's archives from 1981, when Gen. Stoyanov filed his report to the Central Committee, to 1988, the year of Boykikeva's retirement from the publishing house, reveals no information about a proposed translation of the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān does not feature in the publisher's plans, nor is it discussed by the editors in relation to submitted works or intended publications. According to the outlined plans, one publication dedicated to the Revival Process was scheduled for 1987 and five for 1988 (Nauka i Izkustvo 1987: f. 5; Nauka i Izkustvo 1988: f. 5). In the latter instance, the editors considered monographs on Ottoman history that hardly had a bearing on the Revival Process, without any mention of the Qur'ān. Similarly, in an editor's report dated 13 November 1987, Boykikeva expressed disappointment over the lack of publications devoted to the Arab World, but did not explicitly reference the Qur'ān (Nauka i Izkustvo 1987: f. 8). The absence of Boykikeva's conversations with Peev and Theophanov in Nauka i Izkustvo's publishing plans is striking. An ideologically laden undertaking, such as the Qur'ān's translation, could not have been an informal initiative. Anyone who experienced the totalitarian dictatorship in Bulgaria knows that circulation of religious literature was strictly controlled by the Communist Party and State Security, and no party functionary or publishing-house editor would conceive of such an action (which could imperil their career and freedom) on their own accord.

²² I am grateful to Professor Peev for this information (personal conversation on 10.01.2024), which was confirmed by Professor Theophanov (e-mail message, 19.02.2024).

²³ I am grateful to Professor Theophanov for this information (e-mail message, 19.02.2024).

The Communist Party Central Committee's involvement in Boykikeva's initiative is remembered by Peev; the same is suggested by Theophanov in a 2022 press interview: *During the Revival Process, obviously on the [Communist] party's request, Nauka i Izkustvo publishing house decided to publish the Muslims' Holy Book* (Theophanov 2022a). Another, possibly independent, factor of influence upon the Central Committee's decision to translate the Qur'ān is found in an undated *Opinion* filed by T. Ganchev, deputy head of the Central Committee's Department for Ideological Policies. Written in response to a UNESCO proposal to finance a Bulgarian edition of the Qur'ān, Ganchev's *Opinion* calls for such an edition to be sponsored by the Grand Mufti's Office instead of UNESCO.

Ganchev presents three arguments in support of publishing the Qur'ān in Bulgarian. Firstly, Muslim clerics did not know Arabic but needed to possess copies of the Qur'ān; secondly, Bulgarian academic institutions needed a Bulgarian version of the Qur'ān; and thirdly, printed in Bulgarian in 1921 (sic!), the Qur'ān had become a bibliographical rarity. Ganchev proposed to print 2 000 copies of the Qur'ān (Ganchev 1985?). The *Opinion's* matter-of-fact wording, free from ideological clichés that permeated the earlier party discussions on Islam and its scripture, suggests that Ganchev was writing during Michail Gorbachev's reforms, that is, in 1985 or later. This chronology lines up with Theophanov's description of the official measures that were aimed at containing the ideological fallout of the Revival Process.

It seems surprising that, while discussing the UNESCO request to publish the Qur'ān in Bulgarian, Ganchev did not refer to similar proposals by other institutions, which could have bolstered his arguments. Although he singles out the Grand Mufti's Office as the potential sponsor for the edition, he does not specify who would carry out the translation and subsequent publication, giving the impression that he might be unaware of Nauka i Izkustvo's project and the Central Committee's involvement in it. However, his silence should not be overstated, as it does not rule out the possibility that Ganchev's undated *Opinion* dovetailed with other Central Committee discussions on the Qur'ān, traces of which might become evident through future archival research.

The connection between Gen. Stoyanov's 1981 report, UNESCO's request for a Bulgarian edition of the Qur'ān, the party Ideological Department's response, and Nauka i Izkustvo's 1985 initiative must remain conjectural until possibly confirmed by new document finds. At the present level of our knowledge, these developments may have been interconnected or separate, driven by different political impulses. Stoyanov was worried by the rising religious consciousness among Bulgarian Muslims in the wake of the Iranian revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Four years later, the Central Committee reacted to the untoward international repercussions of the Revival Process. At the same time, Ganchev might have filed an ad-hoc reply to the UNESCO request, which was routed through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs rather than the Central Committee.

As the Communist Party's Central Committee, State Security, and Nauka i Izkustvo were contemplating the possibility of translating the Qur'ān, an actual translation did appear, although in a way that was illegal from the standpoint of Communist authorities. A samizdat translation, produced on a typewriter, was circulated by Mehmed Tabakov (1937–2010), writing under the pseudonym Shaykh Mohammed Shemsuddin (Qur'ān 1986–1989). Born into a poor Pomak family in Birkova village located 26 km east of Velingrad in Southwestern Bulgaria, Tabakov was a devout Muslim. He dedicated his efforts to educating children, but they quickly clashed with the Communist policies aimed at suppressing religious denominations in Bulgaria. Tabakov's opposition to the 1970 campaign to change the Pomaks' names led to his imprisonment in the Belene camp, where he stayed until 1977 (Ahmedov 2015: 58–59, citing Tabakov 2011).

In 1980, Tabakov started a project titled *Awakening of Muslims (Ikazul moslimine)*,²⁴ which he envisaged as a collection of essential legal and moral norms, and historical facts to be used by ordinary Muslims, who lacked other channels of learning the basic tenets of Islam (Tabakov 2011: 39.40–44.30). According to Tabakov, upon finishing the collection, he undertook to translate the Qur'ān. However, the chronology of this translation is not entirely clear. On the title page of Tabakov's 'edition', we read, *Korani Kerim, second edition, 1986–1989*, which leaves the impression that the typescript appeared in 1989. Two pages later, what seems to be a second title page is found, stating *Awakening of Muslims (Ikazul moslimine), 1983–1986*. Although no reference to the edition is made here, one may assume that this is the title page of the first edition, which, consequently, should have been finished in 1986.

The supposed appearance of Tabakov's translation in 1986 is contradicted by the shaykh's introductory statements denouncing the 1990 Bulgarian translation of Süleyman Çelebi's (1351–1422) *Mevlidi Sherif* as *incompetent*. Accordingly, 1990 may be interpreted as the actual 'publication' date for the entire text. On the other hand, Tabakov may have inserted the introductions several years after the initial circulation of the typescript, in response to a translation of *Mevlidi Sherif* that he deemed inadequate. Against this possibility, one notes that the *Mevlidi Sherif* issue is mentioned only in passing. Other matters, such as the excellences of the Qur'ān and the translator's controversial decision to include his photograph at the beginning

²⁴ A Turkified form of the Arabic expression *iqāz al-muslimīn*.

of the text, are central to the introductions, indicating that they were part of the original ‘publication’. Moreover, the presence of Tabakov’s photograph possibly implies that he was not anticipating persecution by State Security, which, if true, would point to a circulation date either shortly before the fall of the totalitarian regime in 1989 or sometime thereafter.

In both introductions, the shaykh points out that the Qur’ān *may not be translated by an infidel*. Without going into details, he states that *before 1944, [the Qur’ān] was translated by some Christian atheists* – words of censure that undoubtedly assail Hoppe’s translation. Tabakov, therefore, sought not only to counter the Revival Process but also to provide Bulgarian Muslims with the first translation of the Islamic scripture accomplished by a Muslim.

According to the first edition’s title page, Tabakov translated the Qur’ān from Arabic and Turkish; the second edition’s title page mentions only Arabic. Shinikov has provided many examples showing that Tabakov’s statement is true only in its part referring to Turkish. The translation is replete with Turkish words, which indicates that, contrary to his claim, Tabakov relied on a Turkish translation of the Qur’ān (Shinikov 2018b). While Tabakov acknowledges that he possessed a basic knowledge of Arabic and used Arabic dictionaries and Qur’ān commentaries for the translation, the original text’s complexity makes it doubtful that he could come to grips with the grammatic and semantic nuances, even with the aid of dictionaries. Additionally, he may have feasibly accessed these resources only after the fall of Communism, when acquiring religious literature was no longer a punishable offence.

Even if the stated chronology of Tabakov’s translation raises questions, and may be possibly deferred to 1989, it stands out as the sole Bulgarian translation of the Qur’ān carried out during the Communist era. Moreover, being the first translation from Turkish, it marks an important shift in the priorities of those rendering the Qur’ān into Bulgarian. In contrast to Hoppe, who wanted to propagate knowledge of the Bulgarian language among Muslims with the intention to win them over to Christianity and assimilate them into the unitary Bulgarian nation, and unlike the Communist State Security, which pursued a tacit nationalistic agenda essentially similar to Hoppe’s stated goals, Tabakov was concerned with preserving the identity of Bulgarian Muslims. To that end, he supplied them with the first Muslim translation of the Qur’ān²⁵ that he believed was free from intentional alterations and distortions that plagued Hoppe’s project.

²⁵ Pace Yakubovych 2024: 52, who considers Nedim Gendzev’s 1993 edition as *the first Muslim translation of the Qur’an in Bulgarian*.

IN PURSUIT OF CANONICITY (1989–2019)

With the fall of the Communist regime in Bulgaria on 10 November 1989, censorship was abolished, while the state relinquished its monopoly on book printing and distribution. The newfound freedom fostered a surge in the publication of religious literature, which had been heavily restricted for forty-five years. Unsurprisingly, the holy scriptures became highly sought after by the adherents of various denominations and the general public alike. Responding to this interest, the Den publishing house in Gabrovo released a phototype of Tomov and Skulev's Qur'ān translation in 1991. The same year saw the publication by Jamā't-i Aḥmadiyya (the Aḥmadiyya Movement in Islam) of another translation, presenting the Bulgarian and Arabic texts side by side (Qur'ān 1991a). Although the source language for the translation and the translator's details were not disclosed by the publisher, the book's bibliographical information, specific textual elements, and verse numbering provide the essential evidence that it draws on Mawlawī Sher 'Alī's 1955 English translation of the Qur'ān.²⁶ This pathfinding edition was crafted to spread the Aḥmadi teaching among Bulgarian Muslims. Thus, the Aḥmadi commentator interprets *Sūrat al-Jumu'a* (Q. 62) as prophesying both the arrival of the Great Successor to the Holy Prophet and the latter's Second Advent, two roles that are attributed to Mīrzā Ghulām Aḥmad.

In 1991, Shefket Chapadziev, a Bulgarian Muslim residing in Chicago, sponsored the publication of a volume titled *Qur'ānic Commentaries in Dispute with Christian and Jewish Religion* (Qur'ān 1991b).²⁷ Including the first seven *sūras* of the Qur'ān, the volume is based, according to the publisher's statement, on the 1934 English translation and commentary by Yūsuf 'Alī. Chapadziev did not complete his edition, which remained limited to this first volume.

The next Bulgarian translation of the Qur'ān was published in 1993 by the International Islamic Foundation King Fahd ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz. Just like the Aḥmadi translation, the editors of the King Fahd translation did not disclose the original language from which it was carried out.

²⁶ Sher 'Alī translates Q. 3:55, which he numbers 3:56, in the following manner, *When Allāh said, 'O Jesus, I will cause thee to die a natural death' for idh qāla l-lāhu yā 'Isā innī mutawaffi-ka*. The Bulgarian translation preserves the verse numbering as well as the expression *natural death*, which is not present in the Arabic original. On Sher 'Alī's translation, see Burhani 2015: 257–259. Another outstanding point in the Bulgarian translation is the use of terminal *hā'* in the words ending on *tā' marbūṭa* (e.g., *al-Baqarah*, *al-Mā'idah*, and *al-Qiyāmah*). Terminal *hā'* was not part of the Bulgarian Arabists' convention before 1991, but it is a feature of Sher 'Alī's translation.

²⁷ The volume referred to in this paper does not include bibliographical information; the above cited details about its publisher and year of publication are taken from the Bulgarian National Library's catalog (<https://plus.cobiss.net/cobiss/bg/bg/bib/1102628580#full>, accessed 28.12.2023).

The edition includes an Arabic foreword penned by al-Fātiḥ ‘Alī Ḥasanayn, the Executive Director of the Eastern European Muslim Council, based in Vienna.²⁸ According to Ḥasanayn, the translation was accomplished by a team of *translators, editors, and typesetters in close coordination with the Grand Mufti’s Office and thanks to the commendable efforts of the former Grand Mufti, Dr. Nadīm Ḥāfiẓ Ibrāhīm [Gendzev]* (Qur’ān 1993: *Bi-smi l-Lāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm*). Ḥasanayn describes this translation as *experimental*, paving the way for an *original edition*, but this ambitious plan has never come to fruition.

In a second foreword written in Bulgarian, Nedim Gendzev addresses two important questions for the text’s Muslim recipients. Firstly, he justifies the translation of God’s miraculous word into languages other than Arabic, and, secondly, he dismisses Tomov and Skulev’s translation as *utterly bad and useless for Muslims* (Qur’ān 1993: 5). Gendzev also tells the reader that this translation of the Qur’ān was entrusted to a committee of translators, who began work in 1990 (Qur’ān 1993: 5).

Although comprehensive, Gendzev’s foreword does not mention the language from which the translators worked. However, as noted by Yordan Peev (2022: 648), the translation incorporates Turkish terms, which allows us to conclude that, similarly to Shemsuddin, the Grand Mufti’s Office promulgated a translation based on a Turkish version of the Qur’ān. This is further supported by the involvement in the translation committee of Professor Ivan Dobrev, a Turkologist with no expertise in Arabic.²⁹ In 2009, Dobrev released his own translation, which in his words is an *organic synthesis* of two earlier translations, namely, the Russian translation by Krachkovsky, and several unspecified Turkish translations (Qur’ān 2009: 13–14). Yakubovych (2024: 52) has identified Ali Özek’s 1982 Turkish translation as the original source for Gendzev’s 1993 edition.

Supervised by a committee of academic and religious authorities, who worked in coordination with the Grand Mufti’s Office, the 1993 translation sought to provide Bulgarian Muslims with a canonical version of the Qur’ān accurately representing the original’s meanings. *Canonical* and *canonization* refer to the textual closure and exclusivity, that is, the circulation of a fixed text that commands religious authority among a community of recipients (believers) to the exclusion of other texts of a similar nature. To elevate a text to a canonical status, a decision by a canonizing agency would usually be required.³⁰ In the history of the Qur’ān, the

²⁸ For more on Ḥasanayn, see Yakubovych 2024: 51–52.

²⁹ Apart from Dobrev, the committee included Gendzev and Dr. Muḥammad Rabī‘a Salāma, representative of Muslim World League.

³⁰ On canon and canonicity, see Burton 1996: 70; al-Azmeh 1998: 198–205; Brown 2007: 20–46.

canonization of the Arabic original had an important theological corollary. By the middle of the third century Hijra/ninth century CE, most Muslims regarded the Arabic Qur'ān as an embodiment of God's uncreated speech, whose divine excellence is inimitable by any created being. The latter conception, known as *i'jāz al-Qur'ān*, introduced a theological barrier to translating the Qur'ān into another language. No human being can compose an equally consummate text by way of translation, and, even if ventured, such a linguistic contrivance would be of limited utility. It may serve as a commentary attached to the original text but not as its substitute for ritual purposes (e.g., the recitation of Qur'ānic passages during prayer).³¹

Instead of proceeding with Gendzev and Ḥasanayn's project, the Grand Mufti's Office enlisted the expertise of Tzvetan Theophanov. A professional Arabist who graduated in Arabic Philology at Baghdad University, Theophanov was best suited for tackling the grammatical and semantic complexities of the Arabic original. According to Theophanov, he began to translate the Qur'ān in the mid-1980s, commissioned by Nauka i Izkustvo publishing house (Theophanov 2005: 88; cf. Novkov 2001). His words likely refer to his 1985 meeting with Nauka i Izkustvo's editors. Theophanov recalls that he worked on the translation for several years, but after the fall of Communism in 1989, Nauka i Izkustvo went bankrupt, and the manuscript remained unpublished (Theophanov 2005: 88).³²

Undismayed by the collapse of Nauka i Izkustvo's initiative, Theophanov continued to improve his translation of the Qur'ān. He acknowledges the attendant difficulties in the following manner, *I translated it completely at least three times, lamenting my inability to render into Bulgarian its depth and excellence* (Theophanov 2022b). In 1993, the Grand Mufti's Office in Bulgaria began to support Theophanov's efforts. On 03 July 1993, a special commission was set up to oversee the translation. Apart from Theophanov, it included Ali Khayreddin, the regional

³¹ The aim of this paper is not to explore the evolution and nuances of the teaching of the Qur'ān's inimitability, which developed in close relationship with the doctrinal debate about the createdness of God's speech in the first half of the third century Hijra/ninth century CE. Suffice it to say, that Abū Ḥanīfa (699–767 CE), the eponym of the Ḥanafī school in Sunni jurisprudence, who died half a century before the doctrine of createdness was promulgated by the caliph al-Ma'mūn (r. 786–833 CE), spurring a fierce opposition on behalf of leading Sunni scholars, held that those parts of the Qur'ān that are used for ritual purposes could be translated into languages other than Arabic. For more on the issue, see Zadeh 2012: 178–252.

³² Nauka i Izkustvo was founded in 1948 as a state-owned publishing house specialized in translating and publishing scholarly literature. In 1990, it transitioned into a state-owned company. By 1993, Nauka i Izkustvo became a personally owned limited liability company (PLLC) and four years later underwent another transformation of ownership, becoming a collectively owned LLC. While there are no records documenting Nauka i Izkustvo's bankruptcy, the shifts in ownership from a state-owned entity to a private LLC, along with the corresponding changes in editorial and publication policies, might have fostered the perception of bankruptcy.

mufti of Sofia, Aleksander Vesselinov, a professional Arabist and assistant professor at the Center for Oriental Languages and Cultures, and Bāsim Ḥusayn Qarā ‘Alī, a student of medicine from Lebanon.

During the next two and a half years, the commission reviewed the text, suggesting corrections and improvements based on comparisons with several medieval and modern Arabic commentaries, and Turkish, English, Spanish, and Russian translations of the original (Qur’ān 1997: 3–5; see also the unpaginated Arabic introduction to the same translation). Eventually, in 1997 Theophanov’s translation was published by *al-Ṭayba al-Khayriyya* publishing house, which was owned by the Saudi *Irshād* Charity Foundation. As the first translation to be accomplished by a professionally trained Arabist working from the Arabic original, this publication became a landmark in the history of the Bulgarian Qur’ān. Theophanov’s careful academic rendition of the text is one of a kind. Yordan Peev justly praised it as *bearing witness to Theophanov’s profound familiarity with the Arabic language, literary gift, and pursuit of excellence* (2022: 649). Simeon Evstatiev described it as *a unique event in Bulgarian culture* (Novkov 2001), while Shinikov (2018b) lauded it as *an academic paragon*.

The translation’s indubitable qualities led to its frequent reprints: By 2005, it underwent five prints, three of which were revised and corrected by Theophanov (Theophanov 2005: 88). Later, at least seven more prints were carried out, including a 2017 edition by the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*) (Qur’ān 2006; Qur’ān 2008; Qur’ān 2015, repr. 2019, 2023; Qur’ān 2017, repr. 2022). Theophanov regards the *Diyanet* edition as the most accomplished one, reflecting his fourth and most thorough revision of the text.³³ In the large Turkish mosques, the Diyanet distributes free copies of the Qur’ān for foreign tourists, which makes it reasonable to expect that apart from the 2017 and 2022 issues, it reprinted Theophanov’s translation on several other occasions.

The sheer number of new editions and reprints of Theophanov’s translation is impressive. By 2017, when the fourth revised and augmented edition was published by the *Diyanet*, the text had attained its final form, which allows us to consider it closed. It was also endorsed by two institutions, namely, the Grand Mufti’s Office in Bulgaria and the *Diyanet* in Turkey, to the exclusion of all other Bulgarian translations of the Qur’ān. As a closed text partaking of authoritative sanction and exclusivity, Theophanov’s translation has attained a degree of recognition that may be described as canonicity. That said, Arabic is still used for ritual recitation, and one can hardly imagine Bulgarian superseding it as the language of prayer

³³ I am grateful to Professor Theophanov for this information (e-mail message, 19.02.2024).

and other observances. In that respect, the Qur'ānic language remains a paragon of divine excellence, which cannot be rendered at the same level of holiness into an idiom other than Arabic. Referring to the Islamic conception of inimitability of the divine speech, in the introduction to the 2019 edition, the Grand Mufti, Mustafa Hadzhi, states, *[t]he translation, being a human work, cannot be said to be free from error* (Qur'ān 2015, repr. 2023: 4). In other words, the canonicity of the Bulgarian text does not enshrine the faultless holiness inherent in the Arabic original. Subject to the vicissitudes of academic, confessional, and political circumstances, Theophanov's translation is a momentous but by no account final stage in the history of the Bulgarian Qur'ān.

CONCLUSION

Bulgarian translations of the Qur'ān passed through three distinct stages, coinciding with three historical periods after the reestablishment of Bulgaria's statehood in 1878. The initial phase (1900–1944) saw the appearance of Nikola Litsa's partial translation in 1902–1905 and Ernst Max Hoppe-sponsored full translation in 1930. Although twenty-five years apart, Litsa's and Hoppe's initiatives have two important features in common: (1) they were carried out by members of the Protestant clergy, (2) who utilized George Sale's English translation. Litsa did not specify the motives behind his undertaking, but the fact that he and Hoppe shared a common source and confessional affiliation allows us to assume with reasonable certainty that Hoppe's stated and implied objectives aligned with Litsa's earlier goals. Both translations sought to equip Protestant missionaries with a useful tool for propagating Christianity among Bulgaria's Muslim population. These missionaries would present the Bulgarian text as faithfully mirroring the stylistic footprint and contents of the Arabic original. Insofar as the translation also resembles the language of the Bible, it would suggest to the Muslim reader – aided by their missionary mentors – that the Qur'ān is formally and thematically dependent on the Christian scripture. This line of reasoning was anticipated to lead many Muslims to abandon Islam in favor of Christianity. Towards the end of the 1930s, Hoppe's translation proved useful for Bulgarian nationalists seeking to instrumentalize it for promoting Bulgarian language among Turkophone Muslims and even for supplanting Arabic in the Islamic ritual.

For nearly four decades after the Communist-led coup in 1944, Bulgarian party and government officials were disinclined to think about translating and disseminating the Qur'ān. Their policy was focused on suppressing religious sentiments across different confessions rather than fostering them. It was not until 1981 that Gen. Petar Stoyanov of State Security called for a

Bulgarian translation of the Qur'ān. His rationale was twofold: to subvert foreign influence among Bulgarian Muslims and to advance a carefully articulated nationalist agenda. Stoyanov's proposal remained unfulfilled, but four years later, as the controversial policy of changing the names of the Bulgarian Turks gained traction and accrued international condemnation, the idea of translating the Qur'ān surfaced again. This time, it was conceived of as a witness to the regime's religious tolerance. Despite the efforts by Nauka i Izkustvo publishing house and the beginning of Tzvetan Theophanov's work on an actual translation from the Arabic original, the project failed to materialize before the Communist regime's downfall in November 1989. A samizdat translation of the Qur'ān from Turkish by Mehmed Tabakov (Shaykh Mohammed Shemsuddin) may have appeared as early as 1986, but the chronology of this informal work is far from being an academically settled question.

During the third stage, which has been ongoing since 1989, most translations of the Qur'ān have been made from Turkish, English, and Russian. The only exception from this trend, predicated on the translators' linguistic proficiency, is Theophanov's academic translation from Arabic. Supervised and authorized by the Grand Mufti's Office in Bulgaria and endorsed by the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs, Theophanov's translation has become the standard Bulgarian version of the Qur'ān. What is more, it may be described as canonical, with two important qualifications. Firstly, the miraculous nature of the Arabic text believed to incorporate God's uncreated speech was not transferred into the Bulgarian version. Consequently, it is unsuitable for ritual purposes. Secondly, although fixed at present, the current Bulgarian canon is not carved in stone as is the Arabic original. This allows for the pursuit of a better Bulgarian rendition to continue.

Several issues relating to the history of the Bulgarian Qur'ān require further research. Future combing of the sources may reveal significant details about Nikola K. Litsa's death date and his reasons for translating the Holy Book of Islam, which, in the present paper, were inferred from Hoppe's aims, as outlined in the foreword to his sponsored translation. More research is needed regarding the Communist period. The archives may hold clues as to how the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party reacted to Gen. Stoyanov's initiative and answer the question of whether it influenced the 1985 undertaking, formally led by the Nauka i Izkustvo publishing house. The timeline of the latter events, including Mariya Boykikeva's conversations with potential translators and UNESCO's request to publish a Bulgarian edition of the Qur'ān, remains unclear. One also wonders whether Borislav Georgiev followed through on his intention to translate the Qur'ān, partly or in full. The identity of Georgiev's correspondent in their letters,

Halil Halilov, remains an unsolved biographical challenge. A still uncharted field of study is the informal translation by persons who were familiar with either the Arabic original or its Turkish translations. Field research among Bulgaria's Muslims may offer a path to unexplored reincarnations of the vernacular Qur'ān.

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PAVEL PAVLOVITCH (ПАВЕЛ ПАВЛОВИЧ), PROF. DSC

Sofia University of St. Kliment Ohridski

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6725-5302>

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