

ITINERANT SUSPICIONS:
RUSSIAN ICON TRADERS IN THE MACEDONIAN HINTERLAND
THROUGH THE EYES OF GREEK CONSULS AND AGENTS

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Itinerant Russian icon traders, colloquially known as *afenya*, were one of the three main channels, together with official donations and Greek emigration to Russia, through which various objects of Russian religious art found their way to the Ottoman-dominated Balkans from sixteenth to the early twentieth centuries. A collateral by-product of the mass production of cheap popular icons in the region around Vladimir and Suzdal on a protoindustrial scale, this line of commerce was equal at least in volume and social impact to the other two channels, although it left far fewer traces than they did in the historical literature, mostly because of its low-profile nature.¹

Traditional Greek historiography on the Eastern and Macedonia Questions has treated the *afenya* phenomenon in a very different light, however. Considering the nineteenth-century Bulgarian national revival (and its expansion into the Slav-speaking Macedonian hinterland from the late 1850s onwards) as nothing more than a by-product of Russian propaganda seeking to restrict Greek influence over those same lands, the first generation of writers that set the canon for subsequent nationalist historians saw those itinerant traders as the spearhead of a Pan-Slavist thrust designed to hit Hellenism's soft religious underbelly. As late as 1975, such claims were summarized by a semi-official manual on Greece's "Macedonian Struggle" in the following way:

Russian propagandists, disguised as monks or pretending to be traders, craftsmen, peddlers or venders, begun travelling around Bulgaria, Eastern Rumelia and Macedonia and conducting propaganda, offering as a bait to the peasants holy icons and other small objects, like sickles, pruning hooks, combs, toys for children and so on. Those agents of the [Pan-Slavist] Committee suggested to the Macedonian peasants that "they were Bulgarians" and "had ancient and inalienable rights over Eastern Rumelia, Macedonia and Thrace" [...]. Apart from their propagandist actions, the same propagandists in disguise also organized intelligence networks and collected precious information that was transmitted to the local Russian consulates. It came out that many among those propagandists in disguise

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¹ Yuliana Boycheva, "The Transfer of Russian Icons in Greece (16th-19th Centuries) and the Example of Patmos," in Yuliana Boycheva, ed., *Routes of Russian Icons in the Balkans (16th - Early 20th Centuries)* (Seysssel: La Pomme d'Or, 2016), 105-132, especially 120-122.

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were in fact officers of the Tsarist army, Russian functionaries or volunteer intellectuals.²

Available historical sources on the presence of *afenya* in late Ottoman Macedonia, when that region was transformed into a political battlefield between rival Balkan nationalisms contending for the hearts and minds of the local Christian population, are not so abundant as one might expect after so emphatic an allegation. On the contrary, concrete evidence about the activities of such itinerant traders in the Macedonian hinterland during the second half of the nineteenth century is rather scarce. As a rule, they are mentioned in diplomatic or intelligence reports only in cases of local tension, when their appearance had been perceived as a potential destabilizer of the delicate balance of forces between the opposing national parties. Even when the suspects were finally absolved from any explicit political motive, however, a close examination of the available material indicates that Russian icon trading, by humble seasonal breadwinners sharing the same Orthodox denomination as their local Christian clients, was no longer a phenomenon devoid of collateral national meanings and side-effects.

The apple of discord claimed by the main rivals for Ottoman Macedonia throughout the second half of the nineteenth century – that is, Greek and Bulgarian nationalism³ – had been the loyalty of the Slavs, who constituted the bulk of the Christian population in the region's larger part (in today's North and Pirin Macedonia, as well in the northern half of today's Greek Macedonia). Although the respective configurations at the local level, broadly known as the Greek and Bulgarian *parties* (ελληνικόν και βουλγαρικόν κόμμα, българска и грчка партия) were organized as an expression of (and capitalizing on) a large spectrum of social conflicts and ideological differences, the decisive point of contention between them was the linguistic cleavage separating Greeks and Slavs. This cleavage focused on the language to be used in church and at school, visually crystalized in the adoption of the respective alphabets: Greek or Cyrillic.⁴ Switching over from one party (and national church) to the other was

² Pavlos Tsamis, *Μακεδονικός Αγών* [Macedonian Struggle] (Thessaloniki: Society for Macedonian Studies, 1975), 25. The writer, a retired Greek Army brigadier and the nephew of a Greek agent murdered by IMRO in 1906, served as the head of the "Centre for Macedonians Abroad," an agency established by the Greek Foreign Ministry in order to conduct state-sponsored propaganda among the Macedonian Diaspora, from the Centre's inception in 1966 until his death in 1975. The publishing house has been the principal semi-official outlet for nationalist propaganda on the Macedonian Question since 1939.

³ Serb nationalism was actually a newcomer in the field (from the 1880s onwards), as it lacked any institutional cover for its school networks before 1893 in the vilayet of Skopje and 1897 in those of Monastir and Salonica.

⁴ For a comprehensive survey of the national party system and rivalry in late Ottoman Macedonia, see my PhD dissertation: Tasos Kostopoulos, "Εθνικά κόμματα και πρώιμος μακεδονισμός. Η πολιτική και κοινωνική διάσπαση της εθνικής διαπάλης στην ύστερη

often followed by changes not only in school textbooks but also in the local church's iconography, as far as the alphabet used in both frescoes and portable icons was concerned.⁵ In this framework, Russian icons were no longer considered an exotic curiosity whose "occidental" or "naturalist" artistic style simply deviated from traditional Byzantine art;⁶ they were portrayed as a subversive expression of the Pan-Slav conspiracy, whose goal had been to undermine the religious roots of Hellenism within its Macedonian folk. What mattered was their Slavonic, non-Greek inscriptions – a feature that allowed no distinction between Russian and Bulgarian (or other South Slavic) pieces of ecclesiastic art. In more vulgar instances of nationalist propaganda, such an argumentation could of course be pushed even further: "Schismatics [i.e., adepts of the Bulgarian Exarchate] may build their own churches," we read in a Greek pamphlet printed in 1905 in the Macedonian-Slav language with Greek characters, "but we don't allow them to have any icons of Saints, because all the Saints are Greek."⁷

In the following pages we shall examine two emblematic incidents involving Russian icon traders in Macedonian towns during the second half of the nineteenth century, through the lens of Greek diplomats and their agents. Our sources have been retrieved from the archives of the Greek Foreign Ministry (Ιστορικό Αρχείο Υπουργείου Εξωτερικών, ΙΑΥΕ) and those of the Association for the Dissemination of Greek Letters (Σύλλογος προς Διάδοσιν των Ελληνικών Γραμμάτων, SDEG). The latter was created in 1869 as an unofficial outlet of the former, entrusted with setting up and running a network of teachers and local agents in the Ottoman regions that were considered Greek irredenta (mostly in Macedonia and Epirus).⁸

οθωμανική Μακεδονία" [National Parties and Early Macedonism. The Political and Social Dimension of National Strife in Late Ottoman Macedonia] (University of the Aegean, Mytilene, 2018).

⁵ Kostopoulos, "Εθνικά," 899-900, for a number of such incidents.

⁶ On this perception, see Nicholaos Graikos, "Russian Icons in Churches in the Hellenic Area in the Late 18th - early 20th Centuries: Cultural and Iconographic Interpretations," in Boycheva, ed., *Routes*, 176-189.

⁷ *Προκλαμάτσια να Ελληνομακεντόνσκη Κομιτέτ οτ Αθηνα Ζα νάσητε μπράτε Μακεντόντση* [Proclamation by the Greek Macedonian Committee from Athens for Our Macedonian Brothers], s.l., s.n. [Salonica, 1905], 5. The pamphlet repeatedly equated Russians with Bulgarians, all of them allegedly "pig-faced and always drunken," as Slavs and common enemies of the Greeks; England was, on the contrary, lauded as a protector of Hellenism. On its circulation in the hinterland of Salonica, see: A. Shopov to Gr. Natchovits, Salonica 24.4.1905, no. 787, in Velitchko Georgiev and Staiko Trifonov, eds., *Гръцката и сръбската пропаганди в Македония (краят на XIX – началото на XX век)* [The Greek and Serbian Propagandas in Macedonia (Late 19th – Early 20th Century)] (Sofia: Makedonski Nautchen Institut, 1995), 54.

⁸ *Sylogos pros Diadosin ton Ellenikon Grammaton* [SDEG], *Η δράσις του Συλλόγου κατά την πρώτην εκατονταετίαν* [The Activity of the Association During Its First 100 Years] (Athens, 1969), 68-92; Lydia Papadakis, *Teaching the Nation. Greek Nationalism and Education in*

Tasteless locals and the beef's tongue

The first set of documents, held in the SDEG archives, deal with the presence of itinerant Russian icon traders in the Macedonian hinterland in the Spring of 1871, at a crucial juncture for the development of the Slav-Bulgarian national movement and the Greek efforts to repel it. In February 1870, the Ottoman government had officially recognized an independent Bulgarian Church (Exarchate) and nationality (*millet-i Bulgar*). According to its founding imperial decree (*firman*), the new Church could incorporate any Christian Orthodox diocese whose flock decided so by a majority of two thirds if “legally examined and verified.”⁹ Such referendums (*istilam*) would be carried out in the following years in the Macedonian dioceses of Skopje (1872), Ohrid (1872), Polyani (1895) and Debar (1875), with a clear victory for the Exarchate as an outcome in all of them.¹⁰ In the meantime, the Constantinople Patriarchate had excommunicated its rival on 16 September 1872, declaring it “schismatic” on the argument that its “phyletism” constituted an anti-Orthodox dogmatic offense.¹¹

In April 1871, an informant from the Greek-speaking West Macedonian town of Siatista warned the Association for the Dissemination of Greek Letters in Athens that a number of Russian monks were selling huge numbers of icons with Slavonic inscriptions. Following the usual procedure under such circumstances, the Association’s president (and professor of history at the University of Athens), Konstantinos Paparrigopoulos, turned to the Greek Consulate in Salonica seeking further information. In his reply, the Greek consul Konstantinos Vatikotis confirmed the presence of itinerant Russian icon traders in the Macedonian hinterland, albeit putting it in its true proportions. His report deserves to be reproduced here in its entirety, as a primary source on the *afenya* phenomenon:

The news transmitted to you from Siatista, about some Russian monks who sold around 200 of loads of icons in Macedonia, seems to me very inflated. It is a fact that Russian icon traders have been seen in the Meconian hinterland, but they were not numerous, [they were] neither Russian monks, nor did they sell so many icons at low prices. According to my

Nineteenth Century Macedonia (Thessaloniki: Institute for Balkan Studies, 2006); Sofia Vouri, *Πηγές για την Ιστορία της Μακεδονίας. Πολιτική και εκπαίδευση, 1875-1907* [Sources on the History of Macedonia. Politics and Education, 1875-1907] (Athens: Paraskinio, 1994), 17-39.

⁹ French translations of the 1870 *firman* in Victor Bérard, *La Turquie et l’Hellénisme contemporain* (Paris: Felix Alcan, 1893), 184-187, and Atanas Schopoff, *Les réformes et la protection des Chrétiens en Turquie, 1673-1904* (Paris: Plon, 1904), 134-137.

¹⁰ Kostopoulos, “Εθνικά,” 345-354.

¹¹ For an excellent analysis of the developments which led to the 1872 schism, see: Paraskevas Matalas, *Έθνος και Ορθοδοξία. Από το “ελλαδικό” στο βουλγαρικό σχίσμα* [Nation and Orthodox Christianity. From the “Hellenic” to the Bulgarian Schism] (Irekleio: Panepistimiakes Ekdoseis Kritis, 2002).

information, they were Russian icon traders from Bessarabia, Moldavian subjects, wearing their usual attire that is somehow similar to that of the monks. It seems that very few of them passed through Salonica, while many more have descended from Moldavia through Ruchtchuk and Bulgaria. Two of them have stayed for almost one month at Serres during the local trade fair, selling their icons in the market, but not very cheaply. Two others have been met between Sofia and Dupnitcha, each of them steering a load of icons, on their return from Sofia. Two others have been met by someone else near Kastoria, on their road to Kastoria. The last ones were travelling on foot, driving big packhorses similar to those of Transylvania, loaded with icons, but their manners and character betrayed that they were men of a higher social class.

The fact that they were of a higher social class than ordinary itinerant traders meant that the persons in question were indeed suspect as probable propagandists or spies. The consul, therefore, took the appropriate measures to check such an eventuality:

As a result of your letter, I asked for information from many people here, but no one knew anything about them. We wrote to various people living in the hinterland, [asking] that they inform us more reliably about this subject; in due course, I shall pass to you any information I gather.¹²

Two weeks later, with a number of reports from his local agents at his disposal, Vatikiotis was ready to pass a more explicit judgement on the whole affair:

All the replies I have received until now from the hinterland about the Russian icon traders confirm that those people, according to my correspondents, are just traders of cheap icons and nothing more. Instead of inserting here some passages from all the letters I have received on that, or reproducing them in full, I attach herein only parts of a letter from Mr Sakellaropoulos of Voden, because he explains more extensively what the whole thing is about [...]. From Siatista, too, Dimitriadis, the retired officer who is well known to you, wrote almost the same about the Russians, attaching to them no importance at all. From Strumica province I haven't received any reply yet. Moreover, I am informed that such icon traders were also travelling around in Thrace; random people, dealing only with their trade. Nevertheless, I shall go on paying attention on this topic. As I have already drawn the attention of our friends in the hinterland, I hope that they will not fail to notice any hidden plans, if such plans really exist.¹³

Epameinondas Sakellaropoulos (Vonitsa, 1843 - Athens, 1896) was a Greek doctor from Southern Greece, the son of a prosperous family of Agrinio

¹² Konstantinos Vatikiotis to SDEG, Thessaloniki, 21 April 1871, no. 304, f.E/7/485/962-963, SDEG Archive.

¹³ Konstantinos Vatikiotis to SDEG, Thessaloniki, 5 May 1871, no. 356, f.E/7/485/964-965, SDEG Archive.

and a future Mayor of Vonitsa, Prefect of Attica and Member of Parliament (1887-1890 and 1895-1896). In 1868 he had settled in the Slav-speaking Macedonian town of Voden (today Edessa, in Greek Macedonia) – as a doctor and, unofficially, as a Greek agent. He stayed there until 1874, when his deteriorating health made him leave for his hometown. He returned to Macedonia in early 1876 and was appointed as an agent in Strumica, where the former bishop of Voden, a personal friend of his, had in the meantime been transferred. His second term, however, proved very short-lived, as he was arrested by the Ottoman authorities and expelled to Greece immediately after the Bulgarian revolution of that year.¹⁴ The archives of both the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs and SDEG contain dozens of his reports, dealing with virtually every aspect of the infighting between the rival Greek and Bulgarian political apparatuses or their local followers. His description of the Russian icon traders who visited Voden in the spring of 1871 provided Vatikiotis with a lot of information about their manners, external features and daily behavior. The bulk of all those details seemed to verify the non-political nature of the target's travel. They are also, however, very useful as a historical source about the professional habits of *afenya* – and the difficulties they confronted when they found themselves in the midst of local nationalist struggles. We therefore find it appropriate to quote its content on the question of the icon traders in full:

Two Russians came indeed more than one month ago, carrying with them icons for sale. Always being suspicious of such kinds of people, I spied on them and investigated them. I managed to discover nothing worth mentioning at all, as they restricted themselves exclusively to their job, without coming into any questionable contact with the inhabitants. Nevertheless, after you mentioned to me that elsewhere such people have aroused more reasonable suspicions, I sought to get more information, in order to make a correct judgment of them and to get as close to the truth as possible.

Both of them were members of a certain company made up of eight persons who follow this profession; they come from Moscow and during the last few years have been travelling around Macedonia annually, selling icons. Last year there had been more of them, they stayed in Gogo's hotel and sold icons; the ones who came again this year were among them. Neither their faces nor their manners betrayed they were people of good breeding; on the contrary, they seemed very cold and bad-mannered. This year, the rest of the company headed for other places, but those two came

¹⁴ Konstantinos Vatikiotis to MFA, Thessaloniki, 16 May 1876, no. 458, 1876/99.1/3440-3459, IAYE, and to the Greek Embassy in Constantinople, Thessaloniki, May 18 and 22, 1876, nos. 474 and 494; Edessaios, “Εδεσσα (τέως Βοδενά)” [Edessa (Formerly Voden)], *Μακεδονικόν Ημερολόγιον* 1 (1908): 220; Vouli ton Ellinon, *Μητρώο βουλευτών και γερουσιαστών, 1822-1935* [Inventory of Members of Parliament and Senators, 1822-1935] (Athens: Greek Parliament, 1986), 159.

[to Voden] and put up at a hotel close to the market and run by Michail Stefou, a young fellow who is a Vlach-speaker from his mother's side and has recently offered great services to the ecclesiastic status quo. The relations of two persons were rather like those between a master and his servant. The first, a dark-haired bearded man, spoke only Russian; the second was very blonde, short and fat, who also spoke Bulgarian, serving as a translator to the other. Both of them were old enough. They carried with them quite a few icons, but not so many; it is also true that they were selling them at a low price, but anyone having the least sense of beauty would not buy them even for one kuruş each, because they were made by a hand not at all accustomed to painting. Nevertheless, it seems that they [the traders] knew very well the level of the inhabitants' good taste, because any icons of a better quality would not be sold so easily. It is needless to say that those icons bore Slavonic inscriptions. They [the traders] did not develop close relations with anybody; but a new painter, a fanatic Bulgariser [φανατικός βουλγαριστής]¹⁵ often came and talked with them in secret. One night, when the second one [of the Russians] was asked by a [local] Bulgariser which tongue is the best, he replied laughingly that he personally loved more than anything else the tongue of beef, cooked in a certain way described by him; he translated then his reply to his comrade and both of them burst into laughter. This episode implies that they either completely ignored what was going on around them, or were completely indifferent to it, or are too intelligent and secretive. Whenever the Bulgarian-speaker of them tried to converse with those present at the hotel or with the locals outside it, the other prevented him or even made him withdraw, sometimes forcibly. When they were asked about their country, they did not mention it, saying only that it is very far away. When a hint was dropped on the Bulgarian troubles and the transformation of a factory into an [Exarchist] church,¹⁶ they condemned the Bulgarisers, sometimes

¹⁵ "Bulgarisers" (βουλγαριστάι) was a term coined by the Greek nationalist terminology of those years, in order to denote the activists or supporters of the Bulgarian national movement among the Slav-speaking Christian Macedonians; their counterparts on the Greek side were usually called just "ours" (ημέτεροι). On the diachronic evolution of this terminology, see Tasos Kostopoulos, "Naming the Other: from 'Greek Bulgarians' to 'Local Macedonians'," in Alexandra Ioannidou and Christian Voss, eds., *Spotlights of Russian and Balkan Slavic Cultural History* (München, Berlin: Verlag Otto Sagner, 2009), 97-120.

¹⁶ After a number of futile attempts to occupy the local church of Agioi Anargyroi / Sveti Vratch, the Bulgarian party of Voden established, in late March 1871, the town's first Exarchist chapel in the premises of a silk factory run by its leader, Georgi Gogov (Titos Karantzalis and Dimitrios Gonis, *Κώδιξ της αλληλογραφίας του Βοδενών Αγαθάγγελου* [Codex of the Correspondence of Agathangelos, Metropolitan of Voden] (Thessaloniki: Society for Macedonian Studies, 1975), 105-106; Ep. Sakellaropoulos to Vatikiotis, Voden, 5 May 1871, 1871/76.1/351, IAYE). The coveted church was finally occupied by the Bulgarian party in July 1872 ([Ep. Sakellaropoulos to Vatikiotis], Voden, 9 July 1872, 1872/76.1/854-861, IAYE) and kept by it until the Balkan Wars of

calling them Catholics. They had come here after travelling around the countryside; they left from here for Yenice and Goumendje, whence I ignore where they headed for.

That's all the news about them. It is almost certain that they are not missionaries of any ideal, because they did not develop any relationship either with the elders or with the people, unless we imagine that they communicated with the Bulgarisers through that young painter; anyway, it is clear that they are not among the instigators of the Bulgarian movement. Therefore, they are either men travelling around for commercial reasons, earning their living thanks to the other people's simplicity, with no hidden goal beyond disseminating icons with Slavonic inscriptions; or they are agents of the Russian government, entrusted with the sole duty to survey the region from a geographical point of view. [...] As far as I am concerned, I have no clues to pass judgment with any certainty.¹⁷

On the delicate meaning of icons

The second case involving itinerant Russian icons traders, two-and-a-half decades later, was substantially different. Bulgaria was now an autonomous (in fact, independent) Balkan state and had been since 1878; the Exarchate remained a Constantinople-based national religious grouping, with its flock split into two different constituencies ("free" and "unredeemed"), its bishops gone from Macedonia and its activities under strict surveillance by the Ottoman authorities. In the Spring of 1885, Russian protection was however still felt to be the sole support on which the local *Bulgarian parties* (or what had remained of them, after the tumultuous late 1870s) could fall back in a difficult moment.¹⁸ From the point of view of the Greek statesmen, consuls and agents, Russian presence in the Macedonian hinterland was on the other hand perceived, more than ever before, as the main threat to the interests of Hellenism in that region.

No wonder, therefore, that even mere commerce in Russian icons in a Slav-speaking Macedonian town was considered a trespassing of the not-so-well protected Greek irredenta by an enemy force, as the Greek consul in Monastir

1912-1913 (E. Stougiannakis to St. Dragoumis, Edessa, August 1, 1913, no. 32, fol. 120, Stefanos Drafoumis Archives).

¹⁷ Ep. Sakellaropoulos to Vatikiotis, Voden, April 25, 1871, f.E/7/485/966-971, SDEG Archive.

¹⁸ For a detailed narrative of the Exarchate during those years from a Bulgarian nationalist point of view, see: Kiril Patriarch Bălgarski, *Българската Екзархия в Одринско и Македония след освободителната война 1877-1878* [The Bulgarian Exarchate in the Region of Andrinople and Macedonia after the Liberation War of 1877-1878] (Sofia: Sinodalno Izdatelstvo, 1969-1970). For assessments of the situation in Macedonia by leading figures of Greek nationalism during the same period, see: Vouri, *Πηγές*, 36-121; Christos Kardaras, *ΙωακείμΓ' - Χαρ. Τρικούπης. Η αντιπαράθεση* [Ioakeim III – Charilaos Trikoupis. The Confrontation] (Athens: Trohalia, 1997); Spyros Karavas, *“Μακάριοι οι κατέχοντες την γην”. Γαιοκτητικοί σχεδιασμοί προς απαλλοτρίωση συνειδήσεων στη Μακεδονία* [“Blessed are the Possessors of the Earth.” Real Estate Planning in Search of Soul-Buying in Macedonia] (Athens: Vivliorama, 2010), 38-134 and 249-296.

(today Bitola), Konstantinos Panourgias, explained to his superiors in Athens, on August 13, 1885:

Last winter, a Russian visited Florina in order to sell icons. The kaymakam of Florina suspected of him of being an apostle of a Pan-Slavist Committee and expelled him from the town, preventing him from selling his icons. The Russian came directly to the Russian Consulate here, he complained of the kaymakam and the Russian Consulate made a complaint to the Vali against this obstruction by the kaymakam, asking for an indemnity for it. The whole question has remained unresolved ever since, but the Russian Consulate never stopped asking for this indemnity. Last week, the Vali accepted in principle the Russian Consulate's demand for indemnity, if an investigation proves that the kaymakam had acted beyond the law.

Needless to say that the Russian Consulate accepted immediately the Vali's proposal, asking for the removal of the kaymakam from Florina during the investigation, in order that his presence would not leave its mark on the inquiry. The Vali did not accept this and after a long discussion it has been decided that the kaymakam will not be removed from there, but the investigation will be carried out jointly by the first interpreter of the vilayet together with the interpreter from the Russian Consulate. When I learned this, I mobilized the Ottoman elders here, who exert a lot of power and influence upon the Vali, in order to have the Vali's decision called off, because this success of the Russian Consulate would make the local schismatics very insolent towards our people and will encourage them in their activities.

Judging from the results, I can say that my actions have been successful. The Vali did not give up his decision, the commission was finally sent and, reaching the conclusion that the kaymakam had indeed prevented the selling of icons, the interpreter of the vilayet called him to pay an indemnity of six Ottoman pounds. Yet, on the interpreter's private advice, the kaymakam refused to pay the sum in question, arguing that if he had done anybody wrong, the offended party could go to court and assert his rights; but nobody could force him to pay an indemnity by administrative means. The kaymakam was so advised by the interpreter of the vilayet, according to our recommendations and instigation. The interpreter in question is closely related to the interpreter of my Consulate, who saw him repeatedly and suggested all this to him.

As a result of the kaymakam's refusal, the actions thus far of the Russian Consulate have been frustrated. The whole issue will of course will be referred to Istanbul, where such cases are settled neither so easily nor so fast.¹⁹

Cooperation between Ottoman officials and the Greek Consulates against the common Slav threat was not at all a rare phenomenon in those days,

¹⁹ K. Panourgias to the Greek MFA, Bitola, 13 August 1885, no. 478, 1885/AAK/IB/32-35, IAYE.

in the aftermath of the Great Eastern Crisis of 1876-1878—especially at a lower, more informal level.²⁰ In June 1885, the same Vali had asked Panourgias to provide him with information about the actions of pro-Bulgarian propagandists (and anybody else “working against the regime”), in order that they could be immediately repressed.²¹ The same applied to the sympathies often shown by powerful Ottoman civilians, big landowners and town elders, towards the leaders of the long-established *millet-i Rum* but also towards the envoys of the Greek nation state. It was an attitude mostly based on class solidarity in the face of a Slav-speaking peasantry, whose ominous emancipation made the Greek-speaking urban middle-classes seem the lesser of two evils. The secret duel between Bitola’s Russian and Greek Consulates, described in Panourgias’s report, was thus decisively supported by the local Muslim power holders, a factor that could not but be taken into consideration by an official temporarily appointed in their city, whatever his grade.

Far less clear is another aspect of the same story, explained briefly by Panourgias to his superiors in another of his reports, one month later. According to this account, the Russian icon trader in question did not sell (only?) religious items, but also a much more compromising stock. There is an obvious word play with the double meaning of the Greek word *εικόνας*, a word that may denote both “icons” and “pictures”:

In addition to the information submitted to the ministry in my report no. 478, on the indemnity demanded by the Russian Consulate from the kaymakam of Florina, I let you know that, during the investigation in situ, the interpreter of the vilayet gathered the pictures sold by the Russian, which represent various battles and victories by the Russians and the Bulgarians against the Turks. When he came back, he submitted them – together with his report – to the Vali, who sent to the Russian Consulate a *takrir* [memorandum] on the basis of the report, making an analysis of the goals served by the selling of such pictures, endorsing the actions of the kaymakam and rejecting the claim of the Russian Consulate for indemnity. The Russian Consulate has not yet given any reply to all that.²²

The follow-up of the story remains unclear. There are some questions arising, however, from this sudden twist of things, if we take into consideration that no hint at all of “pictures” (or their provocative content) had been given in the earlier report. It is possible that this argument was invented *ad posterio*, playing with the fact that the word “*image*” denotes both “icons” and “pictures,” not only in Greek but also in the French vocabulary then in use – the standard

²⁰ Kostopoulos, “Εθνικά,” 928-936.

²¹ K. Panourgias to the Greek MFA, Bitola, 25 June 1885, no. 311, 1885/AAK/IB/131-133, IAYE Archive.

²² K. Panourgias to the Greek MFA, Bitola, 10 September 1885, no. 523, 1885/AAK/IB/36-37, IAYE Archive.

idiom, that is, of the diplomatic transactions of those years.²³ On the other hand, a mixed trade in both low-quality icons and popular engravings by Russian subjects was not a rare phenomenon in the European hinterland of the Ottoman Empire during the second half of the nineteenth century. In early 1871, for example, a report by the Bulgarian-born Vice-Consul in Philippopolis (today Plovdiv), Nayden Gerov, to the Russian Embassy in Constantinople, dealt with the recent detention in Eski Zagara (today Stara Zagora) of four *afenya* from Vladimir province who, together with their strictly religious stock, were also selling engravings depicting the Russian imperial family and the Russian Army crossing the Danube.²⁴ Such pictures, as well as their counterparts from Greece, were of course considered seditious and therefore not permitted by the Ottoman authorities.²⁵ Whatever the truth about the 1885 incident in Florina, it is of course highly improbable that a Russian itinerant trader in Ottoman Macedonia was selling only compromising “pictures” and no icons at all, even if the latter served as a convenient cover for his less law-abiding (but equally popular) trade. A definite answer may be given only by the traces of this story probably left in the archives of the Russian Consulate that undertook to defend the trader’s rights before the Ottoman authorities.



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²³ See, for example, the reports of Catholic missionaries established at that time in Macedonia or elsewhere in the Ottoman Empire: *Annales de la Congrégation de la Mission* 30 (1865): 20; 49 (1884): 62, 64, 76, 77, 82, 167, 182, 193 and 239; 50 (1885): 31, 69 and 380.

²⁴ Nayden Gerov to Count Ignatiev, Philippopolis, 1 February 1871, in M. Popruzhenko, ed., *Архив на Найден Геров 1856-1876* [Archive of Naiden Gerov, 1856-1876], vol. II (Sofia: Dărzhavna Petsatnitsa, 1932), 4-5. The source has been tracked down by Angel Nikolov, in the framework of his research for the *RICONTRANS* Project.

²⁵ SDEG President K. Paparrigopoulos and secretary I. Zolotas to MFA A. Kontostavlos, Athens, October 27, 1884, No. 1512, 1885/B1/262-263, IAYE.