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Pomaks, Revival Process and the Distorted Gravestones

Pomaks are Slavic speaking Muslims that are concentrated chiefly in the Bulgarian Rhodope Mountains. The highly accepted view in the literature of Pomaks in Bulgaria defines Pomaks as Bulgarian speaking, therefore ethnic Bulgarians, but forcefully Islamised during the Ottoman era. Pomaks are considered to be part of the nation due to their ethnolinguistic affinities with the majority but have come to be left outside of it due to their adherence to Islam. Since the Balkan Wars, they periodically faced proselytizing and name-changes attempts by the consecutive Bulgarian regimes. Consequently, several segments of the Pomak community began embracing Bulgarian, Turkish, Arab and pre-Turkish myths of origin and defining itself as Bulgarian, Muslim, Turk and Pomak as a distinct ethnic group both different than Bulgarians and Turks. This paper, based on the field research conducted in southwest Rhodopes, Bulgaria, in September 2018, presents an analysis of forceful name changes that took place during the revival process in Communist Bulgaria in the 1970s and 1980s. It gives a particular emphasis on the gravestones in the cemeteries of Pomak villages in the southwest Rhodopes that still carry the traces of that era in terms of vandalism, and (re)naming marks on the stones both in Communist and post-Communist era.