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The Assimilation of Turks in Bulgaria

The paper analyses the causes of the one of the most extreme nationalist undertakings in Eastern Europe in the 1980s – the Bulgarian government's attempt to change the names of nearly one million Turks in the space of a few weeks in 1984-1985. The paper, drawing on a very wide range of new primary sources from the Bulgarian archives, argues that the assimilation campaign emerged as a result of a combination of threats and opportunities on a number of levels. Domestically, the failure of alternative strategies of dealing with the ethnic minorities created a temptation to resort to a radical solution, whilst the political and economic resources which the communist leadership commanded and which reached their high point in the mid-1980s gave it the means to undertake such a policy. Internationally, the Soviet Union, Bulgaria's main strategic ally, was powerful enough to protect it against possible Turkish and Western reprisals, but not strong enough to impose its own more tolerant nationalities policy on Bulgaria. Turkey, the perceived patron of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria, was seen as both posing a threat to Bulgaria after the invasion of Cyprus, and as suffering from weaknesses which would prevent it from undertaking serious counteractions. There thus existed in 1984-1985 a false 'window of opportunity' which allowed the Bulgarian communist leadership to adopt a highly repressive approach to dealing with ethnic diversity, an approach that proved to be fundamentally flawed and was to fail within a few years.