

THE NEW MARTYRS OF BATAK

Sparks Amidst the Gloom

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Dedicated to the One-Hundred-Thirtieth Anniversary of the Martyric Exploits of the New Martyrs of Batak and to all Orthodox Bulgarians who suffered at the hands of the Hagarians for the sake of their Christian Faith in the year 1876.

FROM TIME IMMEMORIAL, the seeds of suffering have been sown in the cornfields of Bulgarian history: "...[M]an is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward" (Job 5:7). Biblical history reveals to us that departure from God is always followed by suffering, so that the People of God should not perish in the gloom of the forgetfulness of God. Six centuries ago, darkness fell over the Bulgarian Kingdom. Fortress after fortress fell; our lands were filled with fire, smoke, and wails. Our people fell under the yoke of invaders, so that they might remember their Holy Faith and their Heavenly Father; that they might bring forth fruit meet for repentance; and that new lambent stars—the New Martyrs of Bulgaria under the Turkish Yoke—might cover the heavenly firmament of our Holy Church. The fetters chime and the sparks shine amidst the gloom! Tears begin to flow, and light calms the Christian soul, labor-worn and heavy-laden! Deluded offspring begin to seek the righteous ways of their holy Forefathers, and the "three chains of thralls" become the army of Christ's servants, returning to their true Homeland. There stretch forth long centuries of trials for God's chosen ones—for gold is tested in the flame: Centuries in which "the imperfect branches" were broken off, that "the strong in God should be purged with care by the Vine-grower, so that they might bring forth more fruit" (see St. John 15:1-6). For "no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby" (see Hebrews 12:11).

An ancient proverb says that the gloom is heaviest immediately before the dawn. Indeed, in the history of Bulgaria, the year 1876 was seemingly one of the gloomiest eras, filled with bloodshed, suffering, and horrors. Why? "When the fruit is brought forth," the (Heavenly) Farmer "immediately...putteth in the sickle, because the harvest is



The New Martyrs of Batak. Painted at the Icon Studio of the Convent of St. Elizabeth the Grand Duchess of Russia in Etna, CA. Presented as a gift to His Eminence, Bishop Photii, First Hierarch of the Old Calendar Orthodox Church of Bulgaria, in October, 2005, by the American Exarchate of the Orthodox Church of Greece, Synod in Resistance, in honor of His Eminence, Metropolitan Cyprian, President of the Holy Synod, and in preparation for the upcoming Glorification of the New Martyrs of Batak by the Old Calendar Orthodox Church of Bulgaria on May 4 (Old Style)/May 17 (New Style), 2006, at the Cathedral of the Dormition in Sofia.

come” (St. Mark 4:29). A Russian newspaper thus wrote the following, with regard to this fateful year: “Recently, in neighboring Bulgaria, a pogrom has been underway against the Christians, which—in the words of one of our Hierarchs—has taken us back to the times of

the ancient Christian martyrs. Hundreds of Bulgarian towns and villages are in throes and have been drowned in blood. Thousands of men, tens of thousands of old people and women, maidens and children, have been slaughtered, burned alive, or taken into captivity as slaves. Many of the enslaved were forcefully converted to Islam, though not a few preferred death to Islam. In the monasteries and convents, monks and nuns have been cut to pieces; on the roads innocent children are murdered only for having crossed themselves as Orthodox Christians; virgins are raped and burned alive at the stake; unborn babies are cut out of their mothers' bellies with the sword; and infants are slashed in two or impaled on the *yataghan*; those whose Bulgarian Faith has remained ineradicable are uprooted from amongst the living."

From amongst the unknown Martyrs for Faith and kin in 1876, a lustrous constellation shines over the land of Bulgaria even to this day: that of Batak, a name both dear and unforgettable for every Bulgarian Christian soul!

The duration of the Batak massacre was but several days. On the night of May 1, 1876 (Old Style), Batak shone forth like a new sun from the conflagration of the Bashibazouks' vengeance, illuminating henceforth and for all ages, by its martyrdom, our Christian history.

The Batak Golgotha began from the lower end of the village—from the Martyrs in Bogdan's house. Disarmed by means of deception, the citizens of Batak, lively at the outset, now become Christ's lambs, doomed to slaughter. Only those children who immediately agreed to accept Islam, upon being asked, were spared their lives. The torturers took even the last shirt or chemise from the Martyrs' backs, as though to let their souls fly toward the heavens unburdened of all earthly weight. And, by God's Grace, moments before their demise, heavenly peace descended into the souls of these sufferers (who until then had been weeping and screaming), by their firm decision to be faithful to Christ unto death. One by one, they went to the chopping block in silence. Some pressed their necks tightly to the block, so that the blow might more definitely separate their souls from the flesh. A few mothers pushed their own children forward to be slain before they themselves were killed, so as to be assured that their children would not be taken into Moslem households and lose their Faith, together with their souls. When attempts were made to ravish them moments before their deaths, the maidens of Batak resisted like lionesses, so as to preserve their virginal purity to the last breath. Thus, they were slashed into pieces. At one side of the chopping block rose mountains of martyred bodies, swimming in pools of blood; and separately, on the other side, lesser mountains, consisting of the martyrs' heads, with their eyes half-open, as if looking up towards Heaven itself.

The massacre and murder continued in the streets of Batak. Some

of the citizens saved themselves by flight. Very few saved themselves by accepting Islam. What lurked within the bosom of the rest of those who were slaughtered, minutes before their death, is attested by the following moving incident:

When the young Batak villager, Angel Chaúshev, after having left the village churchyard, finally managed to get to the hill of St. Athanasios, under the protection of a Pomak, he found Ismail-*hodja* from the village of Rakitovo—a Moslem of Bulgarian origin, with a noble heart—bowing to the ground and praying to Allah to forgive the sins of his co-religionists, who were butchering the citizens of Batak. Upon seeing the young man, the *hodja* began to weep, and then embraced him, asking where his kinfolk were. When he learned that they had been killed, and that still others would be killed, he immediately put his turban on Angel's head, dressed him in his own *achma-dolama*, gave him his rifle, and took him along to search for them. On the way, the *hodja* helped save the chastity of a Batak woman. In the village, they were able to find one of Angel's brothers and a sister. Ismail-*hodja* suggested that they follow him, assuring them that he was not going to convert them to Islam. But they did not believe him and said that they preferred to die Christian. Indignant that their brother had supposedly become a Turk, they fled. Later they were killed.

Together with their rational flock, both the priests of Batak lay down their souls for the sake of Christ. With extraordinary cruelty, the Moslems tormented the Priest Neych. Before his eyes, one by one, all of his seven daughters were beheaded; and each time he was asked: "The turban or the axe?" The Hieromartyr replied with silence. His last child having been put to death, the torturers plucked out the Priest's beard, pulled out his teeth, gouged out his eyes, cut off his ears, and chopped his body, already lifeless, into pieces. This happened within the edifice of the village school, which shortly after, blazed up into flames. About two hundred martyrs were burned alive, having hidden themselves in the one meter-high crawl space between the ground and the wooden floor of the school.

The most heartrending event in this tale of terror was the martyrdom of the village elder, Trendafil Kerelov. On one of the highlands surrounding the village, this Great Martyr of Batak suffered the pangs of the ancient Christian Martyrs, having been impaled. His daughter-in-law, Bosilka, who saw old Trendafil's suffering with her own eyes, relates the following: "They took off his garments, plucked out his eyes, pulled out his teeth, and slowly impaled him on a post until it came out through his mouth. Then they roasted him, while still alive, on a fire."

Even today, in the middle of Batak, the village church of St. Nedelya (Kyriaki)—a "Citadel" of Faith—still stands staunchly. The foundations of this church rest now on the relics of New Martyrs, and

the church itself resembles a ship, anchored in a sea of martyric blood. In its churchyard—one of the holiest sites in Bulgaria—we should step with great awe; for there, our feet are treading on soil which is sanctified by the blood and bones of thousands of Christian Martyrs!

At first, the Bashibazouks penetrated into the churchyard, which had up to then been shielded by the “Citadel” (thus the people of Batak called the high and strong stone wall around the Church). The massacre here was horrid: the shrieks, moans, and wails of the victims mingled with the beastly roars of their slaughterers and the death-rattle of those who were not fully dead. The bones of the Martyrs made crunching sounds, as they were broken by the *yataghans* and by the axes, the air vibrating with the sound of slashed flesh. Here, too, as during the massacre in Bogdan’s house, the Bashibazouks carried out orders, such that they were to plunder even the last shirts of their victims. Chopping blocks were set in place. The new converts to Islam were taken aside, while the disobedient “infidels” were beheaded instantly. The Martyrs who had locked themselves in the church commiserated with their brothers and sisters outside, and in fearful tremor they awaited their own end.

Those who had taken refuge in God’s church suffered from the intolerably foul air and the squeeze, since four or five times the number of people that the church could normally accommodate were hiding inside. For this reason, many of the little children and some Christians of frailer stature perished in the church. But even the strong among them had become faint from three days of starvation; and the foul air kindled in them such a thirst, that some would moisten their cracked lips with the blood of the slain and others with Holy Oil from the oil lamps on the *Templon* (*Iconostasion*). In the North-Western part of the church, in the narthex, the much-suffering mothers, using their last strength, started digging a well to find water for their dear little ones; however, even at the depth of two meters there was not a drop of water. Some of the mothers even put sand in the mouths of their children, so as to soften their insufferable thirst. The Bashibazouks’ bullets incessantly flew in from the windows, mowing down several souls at a time. Soon after, the Hagarians also threw some skeps with agitated bees into the church, so as to make the deadly agony of the captives even more bitter. Then the torturers began to throw burning rags and straw inside, until several Christians—unable to endure this any longer—released the door bolt, begging for mercy.

Completely exhausted after standing for three days without sleep, famished and parched with thirst, the sufferers were taken out, into the churchyard. Before they were barely able to breathe in some fresh air, another massacre began. Once again, after loud wails and weeping, deep silence grasped all: one by one, the souls of the New Martyrs—renewed in their horrible sufferings—were being readied for the

Heavens. When the Bashibazouks beheld with what meekness the lambs of Christ, who were doomed to be slaughtered, stepped up to the chopping blocks, they took to depriving them of the last shirt from their backs, so that this new loot would not be smeared by the gushing blood. Several pregnant women were shred apart alive, and their Christian infants were born, not on the maternal bed, but on the blades of bayonets and *yataghans*, flying away instantly, like scintillating sparks, towards the Sun of righteousness, *Christ*.

On May 4, the leader of the Bashibazouks, Ahmed-aga, from the village of Barutino, issued an order that the massacre be stopped. He was reticent about what to do with the survivors, and thus sent an urgent inquiry to the *bey* [governor] of Tatar-Bazardjik. The reply he received was: "The root of the *giaours* [*infidels*] must be eradicated!" Thus, a new massacre began; in this instance, however, the women were partially spared. A few men, wearing female attire, were also saved. But some of them were again exposed by deception. Under the pretense of wishing to list all of the surviving male villagers, so that the Empire could allegedly grant them some means to rebuild their burned-down homes and to take care of the orphans and widows of Batak, these men were enticed into revealing themselves. Some three hundred were thus entrapped, as they became aware of what was awaiting them. The Turks put a chopping block on the wooden bridge opposite the burned-down school. The doomed gathered closer to each other in a group, some crying out a moan, full of pain, as if imploring something. Others crossed themselves and then, quietly and calmly, bowed their heads before their approaching deaths. And again, Christian blood gushed forth and the Old River started flowing crimson.... In this fashion, three hundred more Batak martyrs were put to death, in the sight of their mothers, wives, and sisters. Lest their children become Turks, or be slain during this last massacre, some of the mothers cast them into the river. Possessed by bestial desires, the Bashibazouks came down upon the surviving women of Batak. Once more, New Martyrs—maidens and brides—were readied for Heaven.

Finally, after all of these massacres, one of the *hodjas* climbed up into a tree in the churchyard, and over the thousands of martyred bodies he proclaimed that there existed no other god but Allah and that Mohammed was his prophet. Another *hodja* clambered onto a bale of straw on a hill near the village—the Beglik Stackyard—and from there declared to the surviving Christians that their time was now over, that no living *giaour* could be found on the earth, and that on the spot of the burned and ruined Batak, barley would be grown for the horses of the Mohammedans.

A vain hope! From the Martyrs' blood, crying aloud unto God, there grew not barley for the horses of the Mohammedans, but the golden wheat of our homeland's liberty, as compensation for the cen-

turies-long yoke of Moslem occupation.

So that this word-woven wisp from the glades of Batak might become even more aromatic, we shall relate a most touching event, which took place in the village of Batak in that same year, several months after the massacres. It is associated with a benefactress of Batak—an Englishwoman, Lady Strangford, who, as early as the Autumn of 1876, came to the devastated village in order to help the distressed. She erected a hospital where some of the survivors and returnees—worn out and ailing from all of the horrors they had experienced—were accommodated. The nobility and self-denial of this high-born Englishwoman deeply touched the simple-hearted villagers. Not long after she had settled in Batak, Protestant missionaries also appeared, desiring to take advantage of the amity of these sufferers toward their English benefactress. In many of the neighboring villages, this mission did reap certain fruits. But in the villages that had suffered (*viz.*, where the Orthodox Christians had suffered), and in Batak particularly, the protestant missions failed. On the Feast of the Nativity, the ill patients from Batak who were in Lady Strangford's hospital refused to take food. All of them, exhausted and feeble in body, declared unanimously: "What the Turks could not take from us by the *yataghan*—how are we to sell it now for a piece of bread?"

Soon the Englishwoman and the missionaries, in a haste of sorts, left the country.

Extolling the feat of Her Martyrs, the Holy Orthodox Christian Church calls their sufferings "precious." The land of Bulgaria is so sanctified by the precious blood of innumerable Martyrs, that there is probably not a single nook in it where some Bulgarian soul—devoted to God—did not suffer for the sake of Christ's righteousness. We do not know where the bones of these hosts of sufferers were buried; only here and there has a faint remembrance been preserved in the name of a town, river, brook, glen, spring, or some cliff; and with this, the memory of many of our distinguished forefathers, fathers, and mothers runs short. Yet, their immortal souls are still alive, and those among them who have been granted special Grace by God to intercede for their descendants will never abandon us—their prodigal children—, as long as the world shall last.

From the ecclesiastical Glorification of the New Martyrs of Bulgaria, by the prayerful remembrance of their sufferings and their enormous patience and humility, our souls shall always be warmed by an ineffably deep feeling: that we belong to a martyred people, who have infused into the Holy Orthodox Church, not only the life-giving streams of Slavic letters, but also rivers of the sanctifying blood of a huge host of Christian Martyrs, in whose midst—like a brilliant constellation—shine our dear New Martyrs from Batak. Through their holy prayers, Christ God, have mercy on us and save us!

