

# How an ethnic minority was Bulgarised

What's in a name?  
Something people have  
died for, writes  
**HARVEY  
BROADBENT**, if you  
are part of the Muslim  
Turkish minority in  
Bulgaria.

**W**HEN Bulgarian weightlifter Naum Shalamanov last came to Australia, in 1985, he was known as Naim Suleimanov. This time when he came, complete with a new name, he defected to Turkey with the assistance of Australian authorities. This latest defection with an Australian connection has had the effect of focusing world attention on a political pot that has been simmering for more than two years. That is, the Bulgarian Government's campaign to Bulgarise the Muslim Turkish minority in Bulgaria.

Late last year stories appeared in Europe of human rights violations by Bulgarian authorities against the country's ethnic Turks. There were reports of ethnic Turks being forced to change their names from Islamic Turkish names to Slavic, the banning of the Turkish language in schools, work and public places, attendance at mosques being banned, and even deaths of ethnic Turks who resisted the assimilation process.

By the middle of 1986 some Western diplomats and Amnesty International

had started to investigate the situation. In March, Amnesty International reported the names of more than 100 ethnic Turks who had been killed in clashes with police during the 1985 name-changing campaign. They further reported that hundreds of people had been arrested and the homes of some families who refused to co-operate were bulldozed. There were some reports of people being deported to remote islands on the Danube.

Western press reports began to appear in April and the *Washington Post's* Jackson Diehl filed a report from the town of Kurdzhali in Bulgaria, a town of about 40,000 mainly ethnic Turks about 50 kilometres north of the Bulgarian-Greek border. Diehl reported guards at roadblocks turning back foreigners, residents threatened with imprisonment for communicating with the outside world, and individually named citizens such as Mehmet — a young man who has been forced to change his name to Miliev.

In March this year *The Islamic World Review* journal published copies of official Bulgarian documents which detailed some of the orders issued to carry out the suppression of the ethnic identity of the Turkish minorities.

... on August 3, 1984, the mayor of the Communal Council of Stambolovo issued the following order addressed to the village of Gledka: "In conformity with Ordinance No. 1 of the Commune Council, and the order of its president concerning the wearing of shalvar [national costume] by the Turkish population and the use of the Turkish language, I prohibit the wearing of the shalvar in the streets, offices and public institutions at any hour of the day. Persons wearing shalvar and speaking

Turkish shall not be served in commercial premises. Everyone shall speak only Bulgarian in kindergartens. Appropriate measures shall be taken against all those who violate this order."

In June, The Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly discussed the status of Turks in Bulgaria, assessing statements from witnesses who had managed to leave Bulgaria, and concluded that Bulgaria was ignoring the Human Rights Charter which it had signed.

The main problem faced by many of these emigres who now live in Turkey is gaining reunification with members of their families still in Bulgaria. One example is that of Fatma and Salih Ozgur who left Bulgaria for Turkey as tourists in 1983 without their daughter Aysel to whom the Bulgarian authorities would not issue a passport as a guarantee of their return. They resorted to a hunger strike at Mudanya in July after many applications, including one in November 1985 from the Turkish Foreign Affairs Department, to have their daughter sent to them in Turkey.

Bulgarian authorities have consistently maintained over the last two years that the ethnic Turks are in fact Bulgarians and have voluntarily joined the so-called process of revival of their Slavic roots. Name-changing and replacement of Turkish as the mainstream language of the minorities are only part of the process. It is obvious from the reports of journalists and individuals such as Suleimanov and the Ozgurs that the voluntary nature of the Bulgarisation campaign is, at best, wishful thinking on the part of the Bulgarians.

The origin of the problem, as often in

such cases, lies well back in history. For nearly 500 years from the 14th century, Bulgaria was part of the Ottoman Empire. Within the Ottoman Empire, which at its greatest extent stretched from Egypt to the gates of Vienna and the borders of India, there were frequent movements of populations, both ethnic Turkish and non-Turkish. Many ethnic Turks, prior to the conquest of Bulgarian areas, moved into the Balkan territories, and more followed after conquest. Some Bulgarians adopted Islamic culture and, as in many parts of the Empire, a multi-racial, multicultural character developed.

The Ottoman Empire finally crumbled by the beginning of the 20th century and Bulgaria gained its full sovereignty after the Balkan Wars in 1913. The Turkish Republic was newly established in 1923 and some attempts to exchange ethnic populations were made, but only proved marginally practicable. Since the 1920s the ethnic Turkish minority has co-existed in the Bulgarian State without gross harassment, but with the emergence of the post-World War II Eastern European Bloc, the trend to assimilation of minorities has been marked.

The apparent reason for such assimilative policies seems to be a desire of national regimes to create a single ethno-centric unified state. In Bulgaria this policy has only recently gained serious expression. The Institute of Strategic Studies in London has published a report in which it identifies a drastic change in Bulgarian policy towards the large Turkish minority of 1,500,000, or 10 per cent of the population, and thus a sharp reversal of all previous official views regarding the

existence of ethnic Turkish people in Bulgaria. The Report states: "This forcible assimilation of the Bulgarian Turks was only the most unpleasant and spectacular example of a process going on in other parts of Eastern Europe where large minorities existed

... On the bumpy road towards the proclaimed goal of a unitary state of the Bulgarian regime, either by statistical sleight of hand or by physical compulsion, had already integrated the Macedonian minority, the Pomaks (descendants of Bulgarians converted to Islam during Ottoman rule) and the gypsies. Finally the biggest and toughest nut of all, the Turkish minority had to be cracked. Neither Romania nor the Slovak authorities dared proceed as Bulgaria did; nonetheless, they thoroughly supported the Bulgarian aim."

The Turkish Government has called for a dialogue with Bulgaria on the issue but has so far been told that it is a domestic matter. Recent events may now precipitate the issue beyond that stage.

Naum Shalamanov has been received in Turkey as a hero and has undergone a third transformation of identity. Now he is Naim Suleymanoglu pronounced with a soft 'g' (which means Naim, son of Suleyman), Turkish citizen. He will represent Turkey in world championship weightlifting at the next Olympics and he can look forward to life as a superstar in that country. For many of his fellow Bulgarian Turks, the future looks far less rosy.

Harvey Broadbent is a broadcaster and student of Turkish affairs.