

## ST GEORGE THE NEW OF SOFIA: A MARTYR FOR THE FAITH BURNED BY THE TURKS FOR REFUSING TO ADOPT ISLAM<sup>1</sup>

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### **Abstract:**

The article talks about the Bulgarian youth George, executed by the Turks in 1515 in Sofia for refusing to accept Islam. His veneration quickly spread to the Balkans and just as quickly spread on Russian territory by word of mouth. Just a quarter of a century later Athonite monks Prokhor and Mitrophan spoke about the tragic death of the Martyr in Novgorod to Archbishop Macarius, and he told the priest of his home Church, hieromonk Eliyah to make a *Life of George the New* using the information gathered from the strangers. Ten years later, this Martyr of Sofia was canonized as an all-Russian Saint at the Moscow Church Council in 1549, and in this regard, the Pskov hagiographer Vasily-Varlaam wrote a short Life and service to the sufferer. The cult of George the New was extremely widespread in Russian lands, comparable in scale to the cults of other famous South Slavic saints, the hermit John of Rila and Archbishop Sava of Serbia.

### **Keywords:**

The Balkans, religious assimilation, martyrdom, St George the New, Bulgarian and Russian versions of lives and services, features of the cult, exceptional fame in Russia.

**Аннотация:** И.И. КАЛИГАНОВ. «Св. Георгий Новый Софийский — мученик, сожженный турками в Софии за отказ принять ислам».

В статье рассказывается о болгарском юноше Георгии, казненном турками в 1515 г. в Софии за отказ принять ислам. Его почитание быстро распространилось на Балканах и столь же быстро проникло в русские земли посредством устной передачи сюжета: всего лишь через четверть века афонские монахи Прохор и Митрофан рассказали о трагической гибели мученика новгородскому архиепископу Макарию, и тот повелел священнику своей домово́й церкви, иеромонаху Илье составить житие Георгия Нового, используя сведения странников. Спустя 10 лет этот софийский мученик был канонизован как общероссийский святой на московском Церковном Соборе 1549 г., и в этой связи псковский агиограф Василий-Варлаам написал проложное житие и службу страдальцу. Культ Георгия Нового получил исключительно широкое распространение в русских землях, сравнявшись по своему масштабу с культами других известных южнославянских святых, пустынножителя Ивана Рильского и архиепископа Саввы Сербского.

### **Ключевые слова:**

Балканы, религиозная ассимиляция, мученичество, Георгий Новый, болгарская и русская версии житий и служб, особенности культа, исключительная известность в России.

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**St** George the New is a Great martyr who was burned by the Turks on 11 February 1515 in the Bulgarian city of Sredets (Sofia) for refusing to accept Islam, and became widely known not only in the Slavic Orthodox south but also in the Russian lands.

The appearance of hagiographic works dedicated to this martyr is connected with the Athos-Constantinople martyrological tradition of glorifying martyrs who suffered for their faith at the hands of the Turkish conquerors. The last tried to force the representatives of the enslaved Christian peoples in the Balkans to convert to Islam from the end of the 15th century until the 19th century. One such martyr was George the New of Sofia. The story of the life and martyrdom of this hero was described in detail and quite realistically by the Sofia presbyter Peyo, who wrote the *Life of the ascetic* and composed his service. According to the scribe, George was born in the Macedonian town of Kratovo, lost his father early and decided to look for happiness in Sofia, hoping to survive and make a living thanks to his beloved profession as a “goldsmith”, i.e., jeweler. Peyo

sheltered the young man and became his spiritual father. All was going well, but suddenly misfortune struck. Young George was extraordinarily handsome, and the Turks of Sofia started to try to persuade him to accept Islam. It was precisely because of this and the threat of being taken as a janissary that he fled from his native town to Sofia, but a similar danger awaited him there, too. Strengthened in his faith by his spiritual father, George repulsed all attempts by the Turks to seduce him with the imaginary virtues of the creed of Mohammed in comparison with that of Christ. However, they then decided to achieve their goal through violence. They slandered the youth in front of a Muslim judge, and George was sentenced to torture on the basis of a false accusation of vilifying Mohammed. For several days the interrogations and torture of the young man proceeded, which he could have avoided had he accepted Islam. However, George stood firm in Christ, preferring terrible torment and cruel execution over rejecting his native faith.



*St George the New of Sofia,  
fresco at the Serbian  
Patriarchate of Pech,  
1561*

His fortitude was strengthened by his spiritual father, the author of the Life, the presbyter Peyo. In violation of the traditions of hagiographic works, he plays the most active role in his work: he persuades a Muslim judge to show leniency to George, urges his spiritual son not to succumb to the persuasions of the Mohammedans to change his faith and to suffer for Christ. Peyo's role in the work does not weaken throughout the narration. He infiltrates a crowd of "Saracens" leading George, who had been sentenced to death, to the place of burning, organizes the theft of the martyr's remains from under the noses of the sleeping Turkish guards, and cunningly gains a Muslim judge's permission for their solemn burial in the cathedral church of St Marina, where he served. In describing these events, Peyo provides in the text of his Life many realistic details that authors usually omit in hagiographies. To achieve greater reliability of the narrative, he seeks to convey the logic of the characters' actions and reinforce it with truthful, vital details. For example, Peyo conducted his mentoring talks with the young man in the house of a prison guard whom he knew well and whom he persuaded to organize these meetings, and the theft of the young man's remains in exchange for a bribe was carried out on his behalf by a certain nameless Christian who lived near the place of the ascetic's execution. In some of the episodes of the Life, Peyo uses elements of naturalism that make a strong impression on the reader: for example, before finally throwing George into the fire, the Turks thrice subjected the martyr to the heat of the flames, until his entire body was covered with blisters from burns.



*The Turks take the Christians into captivity,*  
engraving of the 18th century

George the New of Sofia quickly became one of the most popular martyrs for the faith in the Balkans, having suffered at the hands of the Turks for refusing to convert to Islam. The Life and service to St George the New written by the presbyter were distributed in 15 copies between the 16th and 19th centuries, not only in Sofia, but also in the martyr's hometown of Kratovo, Belgrade, Sarayevo and the Mt. Athos Monastery of Hilandar. Parts of the relics of the young sufferer were kept in shrines in Sofia, the Dragalevtzi Monastery, in the Serbian monasteries of Studenitsa, Great Remeta and Dechany. Numerous icons and murals of George the New appeared in the Balkans in that period, the oldest of which date from the fourth decade of the 16th century and are located in the church of St Nicholas in Toplitsa, the Athos Hilandar Monastery, the Patriarchate of Pech, the cloisters of Studenitsa and Lomnitsa.

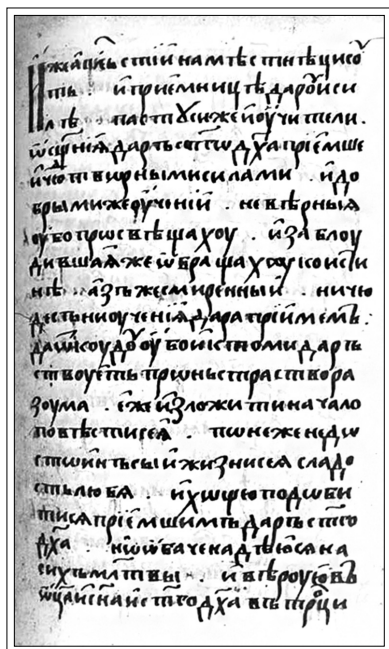
The news of the burning of the Sofia ascetic was brought to Russia a quarter century after his death by the monks Presbyter Prokhor and Mitrophan, inhabitants of the Zograph Monastery of St George the Victorious on Mount Athos. They arrived in the Russian lands in 1539 "for the sake of alms" (that is, to collect donations) and, having visited Novgorod and Pskov, spoke about the martyrdom of George the New to the Novgorod Archbishop Macarius, the future Metropolitan of Moscow and mentor of Ivan the Terrible. This story aroused his genuine interest, and he ordered the presbyter of his family chapel, the hieromonk Elijah, to compile a Life based on the oral information of the Athos monks. Unfortunately, the Life he created cannot be considered a reliable historical source. Prokhor and Mitrophan, traveling on their way to the Moscow state, were clearly in Sofia for a short time, they were not the witnesses of the death of George the New and had only the information that they could glean from the local Sofia laymen and hierarchs. It was at that time that confusion arose in their minds concerning the real facts about the life and execution of St George the New with the similar facts connected with another local namesake martyr, who later was called George the Newest. This ascetic probably died in the mid-1530s, shortly before the appearance of the Athos wanderers, Prokhor and Mitrophan, in Sofia. A Life and service were not compiled for him — it was possible to learn about him only from local conflicting legends.

It is probably for this reason that many facts about the life and death of George the New in the Lives of the two presbyters — the Sofia Peyo and Novgorod Elijah — so strikingly fail to coincide. In the first, the parents of George were Dimitry and Sarah, in the second John and Mary. Peyo testifies that the martyr was born in Kratovo, and Elijah says that Sofia was George's birth place. In the first work it is stated that the young man died at the age of 18, and in the second that he was seven years older. The two authors also differ in the days and months of the ascetic's suffering: Peyo reports that it was in the winter — 11 February, and Elijah writes about the end of spring — 26 May. Lacking accurate background data on the life of the Sofia martyr, the Russian author filled in the lack of an actual narrative with hagiographic topics and selected

as a literary sample one of the rhetorical works of the famous Bulgarian writer Gregory Tsamblak: the *Life of John the New of Belgorod*, a Greek merchant who died at the hands of Tatar pagans in the 14th century in Ackerman (the former name of Belgorod-Dniestrovsky, a city and port situated on the right bank of the Dniester liman in the southwestern Ukraine). Elijah borrowed from it many passages, inserting them into the text of his work in suitable places, especially when he experienced difficulties because of his ignorance of specific facts about the life of George the New. However, this cannot be blamed on the author; compilation practices during the work of medieval hagiographers were very common and were not considered shameful but commendable, especially if the passages were borrowed from respected wordsmiths.

Despite the seemingly small value of the work of presbyter Elijah, due to the abundance of material compiled and the factual inaccuracies in it, underestimating it as a very important document of Russian history and literature would be unfair. Firstly, it is an important historical source about the situation of the southern Slavs under a foreign yoke during the reign of Turkish sultan Selim I (1512–20), nicknamed by his subjects “Yavuz”: Cruel, Terrible. Information about this is contained not in the main text of the *Life*, but in its introductory part, in which, according to the Athos monks, Elijah spoke in detail about the forcible levies on the strongest and most handsome boys in the Janissaries in the Slavic south, about circumcision being performed on them, of their being educated in the spirit of Muslim fanaticism and their transformation into becoming the main striking force of the sultan’s troops, used to conquer Christian Europe. In addition, in the Moscow state George the New became the main symbol of Balkan martyrdom, executed by the Mohammedans for refusing to accept Islam. His story was close and understandable in Russian lands, from which tens of thousands of people were taken during Tatar raids from Kazan, Astrakhan and Crimea, many of whom were converted to Islam. At the *Stoglavy Sobor* (“Hundred Chapter Synod”) in 1551, a poll tax was adopted for the ransom of Russian prisoners from captivity. At almost the same time, the *Life of the Russian martyr Ivan* was created, who was taken by the Tatars to Kazan and killed there for his steadfastness to Christ and unwillingness to convert to Islam. It was the similarity of the situations in the Balkans and the Slavic East that made the literary memorials created in honor of George the New so extraordinarily popular in Russia.

In addition to the *Life of George the New* by the presbyter Elijah, the well-known Pskov hagiographer Vasily-Varlaam wrote his service and a brief *Life*, in connection with the Church Councils of 1547 and 1549 and the official canonization of the martyr in Russia. In the service, as well as in the lengthy *Life* by the presbyter Elijah, there are numerous compilations from a work of a similar genre in honor of John the New of Belgorod, written by Gregory Tsamblak. Separate chants from the service to George the New in the late 1550s — early 60s were sung by Russian singers; the texts were provided with “znamenny” (musical) notation.



*The oldest handwritten text  
of the Russian Life of St George  
the New of Sofia.*

Autograph of the Novgorod  
presbyter Elijah,  
1539

In general, the Russian manuscript tradition of the memorials to St George the New of Sofia during the 16th–19th centuries turned out to be much richer than the similar tradition in the Balkans. It contains more than 30 copies of the lengthy Life by Elijah, 17 copies of the brief Life by Vasily-Varlaam, six excerpts from it, one copy of a brief anonymous edition of the memorial, 15 copies compiled by Vasily-Varlaam of the service to the Sofia martyr and numerous sticheras and glories from it, placed in 11 singing collections with notation. Various versions of the Russian Life of Saint George the New were included in the largest Russian manuscript vaults of the 16th–17th centuries: the tsarist set of the Great Menaion Reader by Metropolitan Macarius and in the menology of the priest Ivan Milyutin, which he composed together with his sons in 1646–54. The increasing fame of the Sofia martyr in Russia occurred after the inclusion of the 1622 service of George the New in the Moscow old-print editions of service menologies and the inclusion of the brief Life of the martyr in the old-printed Prologues, which began to be published in Moscow from the 1640s. The latter

was also included in the largest old-printed non-liturgical publication, the *Book of the Lives of the Saints* by Metropolitan Dimitry of Rostov, which was carried out in the printing house of the Kiev-Pechersk Lavra in 1689–1705 and then repeatedly reprinted.

George the New of Sofia's fame in the Russian lands approached that of the other most revered South Slavic ascetics: John of Rila and Sava of Serbia, whose cults penetrated the Slavic northeast much earlier. Relatively little is known about the images of the martyr: the oldest of them are located on the "tablet" icons (small, usually two-sided icons on a canvas) of the 1560s and 1570s and on murals of the Resurrection Cathedral in the Volga city of Borisoglebsk in the second half of the 17th century. Grains of the relics of St George the New, brought to Moscow from Mount Athos or the Slavic south at the end of the 16th and early 17th century, received more veneration in Russia. They were placed in three reliquary crosses that were the work of Kremlin masters and were intended for the Church of the Annunciation, the Kremlin family chapel of the Russian tsars, and as gifts to the tsar's son, Alexey Mikhailovich, on the occasion of his baptism on 22 March 1629 in the Kremlin Monastery of Miracle ("Chudov").

The last two crosses were made at the order of his father, Tsar Mikhail Fyodorovich, and his grandmother, Grand Princess Marfa Ivanovna, and were precious works of art.

The names of George the New and his tormentor, “the godless sultan Selim the Turkish”, and the name of the Bulgarian city of Sredets (Sofia), in which the martyr was burnt, resounded during divine services in Novgorod and Pskov, Moscow and Yaroslavl, in the Russian North, the distant Solovetsk Islands, in Siberia and other corners of the Russian lands. This caused the parishioners to think about the southern Slavs languishing in Turkish captivity, filled the hearts of the worshipers with sympathy for them, and suggested the idea that the slaves should be freed.

*Translated by the author*

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