

## The Cathedral of St Alexander Nevski in Sofia

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**B**uilt to celebrate the liberation of Bulgaria from centuries of Ottoman domination, the Cathedral of St Alexander Nevski in Sofia has aroused scant interest among art historians both inside and outside Bulgaria.<sup>1</sup> This lack of interest is reflected by the fact that this historic monument, which is the foremost symbol of Bulgaria's national and religious identity, as well as of the independence gained after some five centuries of Turkish oppression, has never been the subject of serious in-depth study. Among the few catalogues produced to provide summary information for the tourist or casual visitor, and which are no longer on sale, the most complete from a historical and descriptive point of view was written by the Bulgarian academic Nikolai Nacov on the occasion of the consecration of the cathedral in 1924.<sup>2</sup>

In later years, the general disinterest surrounding this monument can be ascribed to the political climate that reigned in Bulgaria after the Second World War; for almost half a century the militant atheism of the Communist regime stifled the religious feelings of the Bulgarian people, forcing believers underground. Consequently, under pressure from the regime, religious works of art and places of worship fell into neglect. It was a period in which no cultural debate or artistic creation was permitted without the seal of approval of the Communist government.<sup>3</sup>

At the present time, Bulgaria is going through a delicate period of political and economic transition in which the country is searching for its identity. In spite of the many pressing problems to be tackled, a deeper and less ideologically loaded awareness of the nation's historical, artistic and cultural heritage is developing.

Over the years the cathedral has attracted some interest.<sup>4</sup> One day in 1954, while shopping at the fruit and vegetable market in Sofia, the Bulgarian scholar Liuben Stoichev Karavelov spotted a stall-holder wrapping vegetables in some rather unusual sheets of paper. These turned out to be nothing less than fragments of the original blueprint of the cathedral drawn by the Russian architect Professor Alexander Nikanorovich Pomeranchev! Other fragments had presumably met a similar fate. This episode prompted Karavelov to start his research. The sketches he had rescued were placed in the cathedral archives, where he subsequently unearthed other material: sketches of the facades, diaries, rough drafts of the blueprint, cost estimates and so on. Karavelov undertook to organise this muddle of documents and, as a result of his work, was able to write *The History of the Paintings in Alexander Nevski Cathedral*, in 1962.<sup>5</sup> In addition to attributing the paintings to the various artists, this volume describes how plans for the pictorial decoration of the church developed and were brought to fruition. Unfortunately, however, apart from this precious description, Karavelov's research did not yield any further documentation.

In view of this void, the aim of this article is to document as completely as possible all the various aspects of the Cathedral of St Alexander Nevski. In doing so, the history of Bulgaria is of particular interest, especially the period of

the Bulgarian Renaissance, which led the country to freedom from the Turkish Empire and then to independence.<sup>6</sup> St Alexander Nevski Cathedral, which was built to celebrate this glorious event, symbolises the nation's hard-won freedom after 482 years of oppression.<sup>7</sup>

The idea of building this monument materialised soon after the Russian-Turkish war in 1877-1879. On 13<sup>th</sup> April 1879, the first National Assembly met in Tarnovo, then Bulgaria's capital.<sup>8</sup> The future Prime Minister, Petko Karavelov, first proposed to build a monument dedicated to Alexander Nevski in Tarnov to commemorate the country's liberation. This proposal was greeted enthusiastically, and all agreed that it should take the form of a church, which would embody the Christian Orthodox faith that was common to both the Bulgarian and Russian peoples.<sup>9</sup> It was subsequently decided that this church should be built in the newly designated capital, Sofia.

Although one of the most ancient cities in Bulgaria, Sofia had a population of only 20,856 at that time.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, during the centuries of Ottoman domination, many large cities in Bulgaria fell into decline or were destroyed.<sup>11</sup> Totally bereft of urban planning, Sofia was, for the most part, a haphazard labyrinth of streets and winding alleys.<sup>12</sup> Once the Turks had been driven out, in 1878, Sofia underwent intensive urbanisation.<sup>13</sup> By 1888, the city had rail links to the nearest cities in Europe. In 1881, Bulgarian architects, with the help of some Viennese colleagues, drew up plans for the new Bulgarian capital, which was to be laid out in a radial and annular pattern.<sup>14</sup> Owing to the dearth of architects and engineers in Bulgaria in the first few decades after liberation, the country relied heavily on foreign specialists, who came in mainly from St Petersburg, Moscow, Prague, Vienna and Berlin.<sup>15</sup> Although these foreign influences brought Bulgarian architecture in line with the latest European trends, they inevitably engendered an eclectic style which undermined the local tradition.<sup>16</sup> The Russian architectural motifs brought in by architects from Russia, were justified by references to the communion of destinies between the two Slav peoples and by the role played by the Russians in helping to liberate their Bulgarian brothers.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the architectural works carried out by Russian architects in those early years are mainly monuments celebrating liberation.<sup>18</sup> This was the case not only in St Alexander Nevski Cathedral, but also with St Nicholas' Church in Sofia, which was designed by the St Petersburg architect Preobrazenski.<sup>19</sup>

The foundation stone of St Alexander's was laid on 19<sup>th</sup> February 1882 and the first architect commissioned to design the cathedral was chosen the following year.<sup>20</sup> Before this selection was made, the Bulgarian Minister for public works wrote to the Mayor of St. Petersburg asking him to nominate potential candidates for the job. At the same time, a competition was held in Russia for the erection of a monument to Tsar Alexander II on the spot where he had been assassinated. The Mayor of St. Petersburg sent photographs of five of the projects from this competition, including the winning project. The final choice was made by the Bulgarian Prince Alexander of Battenberg,<sup>21</sup> who opted for a project by the Russian architect Ivan Semenovitch Bogomolov.<sup>22</sup>

After examining the site where the cathedral was to be built in the centre of Sofia, Bogomolov simplified some parts of his project so as not to

exceed the stipulated overall cost of two million *leva*, and the contract was signed.<sup>23</sup> Unfortunately, after completing his project towards the end of 1886, the architect suddenly died.<sup>24</sup> His successor was not appointed until 1895.<sup>25</sup>

In the interim, however, the city grew both in size and in population. Consequently, it was decided that the original project should be extended. The Minister of public works and two officials of the Building Commission therefore set out for Russia in search of an architect who could take charge of building the cathedral. The Mayor of St Petersburg proposed Alexander Nikanorovich Pomeranchev, Professor of Architecture at St Petersburg's Imperial Academy of Art.<sup>26</sup> Himself a graduate of the Imperial Academy, Pomeranchev had enjoyed a brilliant career, crowned in 1882 by the construction of the Upper Commercial Lodge, now the department store Gum, in Moscow's Red Square,<sup>27</sup> a project for which he was awarded the titles of Professor of Architecture and Member of the Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg.<sup>28</sup>

The new designs differed in many respects. The architecture of the cathedral follows the typical pattern of Byzantine architecture, which flourished on the shores of the Eastern Mediterranean during the Justinian era, that is to say, in the sixth century A.D.<sup>29</sup> The cathedral is built in the shape of a Greek cross and is surmounted by a dome. The *naos*, or liturgical nucleus, is formed by a square in which another square is inscribed, the latter being delimited at the corners by the four pillars supporting the dome. The nave of the seventy-metre-long building is twelve and a half metres wide and the aisles are half as wide. At the east end of the nave and aisles, there are three altars: north, central and south, dedicated to Sts. Cyril and Methodius, Alexander Nevski and King Boris I, respectively. The apses are separated from the rest of the church by three iconostases. The vestibule at the west end of the cathedral is composed of two altars, one dedicated to Alexander Nevski, and the other to King Boris I. Above the vestibule, stands the domed belfry. The main entrance to the cathedral is constituted by three imposing doors standing under a portico, outside the vestibule, at the top of a broad flight of steps.

The interior of the cathedral is adorned with marble and paintings. In Eastern Orthodox churches, paintings had served a precise purpose ever since the time of the Byzantine Empire, representing the cosmos ruled over by the divinity.<sup>30</sup> This symbolism is also seen in the circular domes of the Eastern churches.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the Orthodox Christian liturgy is viewed as a collective act and the dome represents the heavenly vault dominated by the figure of Christ the Almighty, Lord and Redeemer of the universe. In St. Alexander's, an original variant of this theme is seen: the Saviour holding the child Jesus on his knee, surrounded by the heavenly hosts.<sup>32</sup> The Last Judgement is depicted on the west wall, while the rest of the ceiling and walls are decorated with scenes from Bulgarian and Byzantine history, as well as from the Old and New Testaments. This pictorial arrangement, in which the image of the Saviour stands triumphant, conforms to the tenets of Orthodox doctrine.

The frescoes, mosaics and oil paintings in the cathedral were the work of thirty one artists, seventeen Russian and fourteen Bulgarian.<sup>33</sup> Of the Russian artists, the most noteworthy is Viktor Michailovich Vasnechov, one of the best

representatives of the so-called new Russian style, which appeared in Russia at the end of the nineteenth century and was a reworking of the Russian-Byzantine tradition with the introduction of some new elements. Vasnechov's work can be seen in the main paintings on the central iconostasis. With regard to the Bulgarian artists involved in the project, it should be pointed out that the first exhibitions of works by foreign-trained Bulgarian painters had been held in the early years following liberation. Subsequently, the first associations of artists were founded, such as the Union for the Promotion of Art in Bulgaria (1895 – 1897), directed by Ivan Vaclav Markvicka and Anton Stefanov Mitov, who, in different periods, also directed the Academy of the Fine Arts.<sup>34</sup> Their paintings can be seen on the north and south iconostases in the cathedral.

In Eastern churches, much greater use is made of paintings and mosaics than of sculpture, and St. Alexander's is no exception.<sup>35</sup> The cathedral's marble decorations were designed by the Russian architect A.A. Jakovlev, who was a member of Professor Pomeranchev's team of specialists. The marble used came from Carrara and Siena, while the onyx and alabaster came from Brazil. These materials were used to make the three iconostases, the Royal Throne and the Metropolitan Throne, the balcony, the steps leading to the crypt, and the entire floor of the cathedral. The great variety of colour and style yielded by the use of some nineteen types of marble and numerous early Christian symbols reveals how much the Byzantine Orthodox world was influenced by coeval Italian art. The two thrones, which recall the thirteenth-century ciborium of Arnolfo di Cambio in the church of Santa Cecilia in Rome, are a case in point.

The space under the entire area of the cathedral floor is occupied by the crypt, which has a three and seventy five metre vaulted ceiling. An art gallery since the 1960s, it houses paintings, icons and prints from the fourteenth to the nineteenth century.

The external architecture of the cathedral best reveals how the building differs from Bogomolov's original project. Bearing in mind the main features of his predecessor's design, Pomeranchev enlarged the cathedral to accommodate five thousand six hundred people rather than the original one thousand two hundred. Moreover, Pomeranchev placed the central dome and that of the steeple at approximately the same height, while Bogomolov had envisioned the steeple as being one-third higher than the rest of the building. The doors are also differently positioned in the main façade, and in Pomeranchev's project there are more windows, which play a decorative as well as a functional role. Both architects envisioned a granite wainscot around the outside of the building, but the walls above this were to have been made of red sandstone according to Bogomolov's project, instead of Pomeranchev's white calcareous stone. Pomeranchev also gilded the copper sheets covering the central dome and that of the steeple, a feature which characterises the building.

In general, however, the two projects are fairly similar. Bogomolov's, with its high steeple, long nave and doors set only in the main façade, more closely resembles the design of Western Christian churches. By contrast, Pomeranchev's compact pyramidal figure, made up of domes and half-

domes arranged stepwise, without soaring verticals, and standing on the plan of a Greek cross, is inspired by the original Eastern Christian tradition.<sup>36</sup>

The desire to revive this tradition is also seen in the decision to dedicate the cathedral to Alexander Nevski. This Russian hero, who lived in the twelfth century and was canonised in 1547, had always been popular in the Russian and Slav Orthodox world.<sup>37</sup> As Prince of Novgorod, he symbolises Eastern Christian resistance to the Papacy's aims of reunification and the expansionist ambitions of the Western powers.<sup>38</sup> In the course of history, the myth of Alexander Nevski was revived by Peter the Great, who also had to fight the Swedes. Indeed, it was Peter's crucial victory at Poltava over the forces of Charles XII that finally put an end to Sweden's incursions into Russian territory. It was on the Neva, where Alexander Nevski had defeated the Swedes, that the Tsar founded his new capital, St. Petersburg.<sup>39</sup> From the Bulgarian point of view, dedicating the cathedral to Alexander was a sign of recognition of the liberating role of Russia and was to seal the pact of brotherhood between the two countries.<sup>40</sup> However, what mainly prompted the Bulgarians to honour the Russian hero was the similarity between his exploits and Russia's contribution to Bulgarian independence.<sup>41</sup> By defeating the Swedes and the Teutonic Knights, Prince Alexander not only ensured the independence of his people, but also preserved them from interference by Western Catholicism. Similarly, through the 1877-1878 war of liberation, Bulgaria not only gained independence from the Turks, but also achieved religious freedom.<sup>42</sup>

The rhetoric surrounding Prince Alexander was also exploited to the full in the USSR at the time of Stalin. In that period, the long-time Teutonic enemy took the form of Hitler's Germany, which made no secret of its expansionist ambitions towards the east. The epic figure of Alexander was tinged with the sacred in Sergei Eisenstein's film *Alexander Nevski* (1938), for which Sergej Prokofiev composed the music, and which was nothing less than a hymn to patriotism and a testimony to the process of russification undertaken by the Georgian dictator.

Today, the cathedral of St. Alexander Nevski in Sofia has regained the role for which it was originally conceived, that of a symbol of the Bulgarian people's restored spirituality.<sup>43</sup> The austere solemnity of the religious services celebrated within its walls testifies to the mystical fervour that has imbued Eastern Christianity since the golden age of the Byzantine Empire.<sup>44</sup> I hope that this study will shed a glimmer of light on this splendid building and help to stimulate interest in Bulgaria's artistic heritage.

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- <sup>3</sup> V. Quilici, 'L' attuale momento dell'architettura sovietica', in A. Samonà and C. Doglio, *Oggi, l' architettura*, Milan 1970.
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- <sup>5</sup> L.S. Karavelov, *The History of Paintings in the Cathedral of St Alexander Nevski*, Sofia 1962 (in Bulgarian).
- <sup>6</sup> V. Diamante, *Bulgaria: Storia, Vita, Folclore*, Florence 1975, F. Guida, *La Bulgaria dalla guerra di liberazione fino al trattato di Neuilly (1877-1919)*, Rome 1984.
- <sup>7</sup> F. Guida, *Storia della Bulgaria*, Rome, 1982.
- <sup>8</sup> 'Report of the Central Commission during the Management of the Building of the Cathedral of St Alexander Nevski', in *Archives of the Cathedral of St Alexander Nevski*, Sofia, Ms. 1892 (in Bulgarian).
- <sup>9</sup> *Encyclopaedia of the Figurative Arts in Bulgaria*, Sofia 1984, 21-3, 409 (in Bulgarian).
- <sup>10</sup> *Bulgarian Encyclopaedia*, Sofia 1974 (in Bulgarian).
- <sup>11</sup> N. Kirilov, *Bulgaria*, Sofia 1967 (in Bulgarian), N. Zapenko, *Bulgarian Architecture*, Milan 1990 (in Bulgarian).
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- <sup>18</sup> G.N. Baranovskij, *Encyclopaedia of Architecture of the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century*, St Petersburg 1902, Vol. 1 (in Bulgarian), L. Tonini, 'L' esposizione Panrusa di Niznij Novgorod', in *Ricerche di storia dell' arte* 39, 1989, 27-38.
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- <sup>25</sup> C. Steward, *Serbian Legacy*, London 1959 (in Bulgarian).
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