

# ESSENTIAL HISTORY OF BULGARIA

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Sofia, March 2007

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## XLVI Century BC — I Century AD



Thracians inhabited what is now Bulgaria in antiquity. They were divided in numerous tribes until, following a few decades of Persian domination under Darius I the Great and Xerxes I of Persia, King Teres united most of them around 480 BC in the Odrysian Kingdom, which flourished under Sitalkes and Cotys I. Thrace was conquered by Philip II of Macedon and his son Alexander the Great, but regained independence under Seuthes III. A Celtic kingdom with capital Tylis (present Tulovo near Kazanlak in central Bulgaria) existed on Thracian soil in the 3rd century BC. The Romans invaded Thrace in the 2nd century BC, and the ensuing wars continued until 46 AD when Thrace became a Roman province.

Dionysus, the god of wine worshiped by the Greeks and the Romans; Orpheus, the great poet and musician of antiquity; and Spartacus, a distinguished Roman military leader and folk hero – they are all among the mythical or historical Thracian personalities.

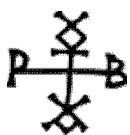
While the Thracians left no written records, their legacy survives in numerous tombs and treasures to reveal the amazing civilization of people rather more sophisticated than the “savage, blood-thirsty warriors” described by Herodotus.

There are some 60,000 Thracian tumuli in the country, known to contain 2,000 undeveloped archeological sites. Most significant among the Thracian monuments are the Tombs of Sveshtari and Kazanlak, the Starosel Mausoleum, the capital town of Seuthopolis, and the Tatul and Perperikon Shrines. More than 80 Thracian treasures have been unearthed in Bulgaria too, including the famous Panagyurishte, Rogozen, and Valchitran treasures. Most of the gold is dated to 5<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC, although the Valchitran treasure is eight centuries older than that, while the pre-Thracian Varna gold is dated more than 4,500 years BC — the oldest gold in the world. A number of artifacts including the golden mask of King Teres were found in the Rose Valley in central Bulgaria, branded ‘Valley of the Thracian Kings’ for that. The Thracian gold is gaining stunning popularity worldwide.

### VII Century BC — VII Century AD



 Old Great Bulgaria



During the early medieval Great Migration of peoples the Balkan Peninsula was invaded by a number of Germanic, Bulgar, Hunnic and Slavic tribes, with some of them staying for longer periods of time or remaining permanently to blend into the local populace. In particular, in the mid-4th century a group of Goths settled in the region of Nikopolis ad Istrum (present Nikyup near Veliko Tarnovo in northern Bulgaria), where their leader Bishop Wulfila (Ulfilas) invented the Gothic alphabet and translated the Holy Bible into Gothic to produce the first book written in Germanic language.

The ancient Bulgars are believed to have been of mixed stock themselves, originally Eastern Iranian (and thus 'cousins' to present Afghanistan and Iranian people), with later Ugric and Turkic influence. They came to Europe from their old homeland, the Kingdom of Balhara situated in Mount Imeon area (present Hindu Kush in northern Afghanistan), and built their cities of stone in Northern Caucasus. According to the 7<sup>th</sup> century chronicle 'Name List of Bulgarian Khans', the early European state of the Bulgars was established by Khan Avitohol in 165 AD. However, even shortly BC some Bulgars migrated across the Caucasus to establish the Principality of Vanand in Armenia, leaving a few centuries of recorded presence in Armenian history. During the 4<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries the Bulgars raided Central and Eastern Europe, and were known as fearsome warriors respectful of law and justice. In the 7<sup>th</sup> century they settled in Italy, Bavaria, Pannonia (present Hungary), Macedonia, and Volga Bulgaria (present Chuvashia, Tatarstan, Samara, and adjacent territories in Russia). Bulgar golden treasures were found at Nagyszentmiklós (Hungary), Vrap (Albania), and Mala Pereshchepina (Ukraine), the latter being Khan Kubrat's burial hoard.

In 632 AD Khan Kubrat united most Bulgar lands – by that time part of a wider Avaro-Bulgar federation stretching to the Alps in the west – in the independent state of Great Bulgaria ('Old Great Bulgaria' in Roman chronicles), situated north of Black Sea and bounded by the Carpathian Mountains, the Caucasus, and Volga River. The Eastern Roman Empire (called Byzantium by modern historians) recognized the new state in 635 AD. Kubrat's successor Khan Asparuh expanded Great Bulgaria on the Balkan Peninsula, conquering the Byzantine territories of Moesia and Scythia Minor (present Miziya and Dobrudzha – the lands between the Balkan Mountains, the Danube, and Black Sea). A 681 peace treaty with Byzantium, and the establishment of the new capital Pliska south of the Danube River is considered the beginning of the First Bulgarian Empire.

## VII Century AD — XI Century AD



First Bulgarian Empire



In the early 8<sup>th</sup> century the Arabs tried to invade Europe via the Balkans, but were defeated by the allied forces of Khan Tervel of Bulgaria and Byzantine Emperor Leo III in 717-18 AD. That victory was a milestone in European history that turned back the tide of Muslim incursions from the east for more than 600 years, until the 14<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman invasion.

Khan Krum the Horrible conquered Serdica (present Sofia) and the Struma Valley in 809 AD, enabling the Bulgarian state in Macedonia established by Khan Kuber in 685 AD to merge with the First Bulgarian Empire. In Central Europe, Khan Krum's Bulgaria bordered the Frankish Empire of Charlemagne. That territorial consolidation of Bulgaria as one of the principal European states

of the Middle Ages went in parallel with a process in which the Bulgars amalgamated with the local Slavs, and Slavicized, Hellenized, and Romanized Thracians and other indigenous people. The Bulgars contributed their statesmen culture, while the common language of the country evolved from Slavonic. (Slavonic had the unique *lingua franca* advantage of being familiar to the native speakers of other major languages in the now dominant Balkan part of the country – notably the Bulgars, who used to cohabit with Slavs in Great Bulgaria before, and the Romanized and Hellenized indigenous people.) The formation of the new Bulgarian nation was completed by the Christianization of Bulgaria in 865 AD, which provided a common state religion.

By creating Great Bulgaria and the First Bulgarian Empire, the Bulgars introduced a new model of nation-state building in Eastern Europe. Until then, the multiethnic Byzantine Empire claimed universality as a unique Earthly projection of the Celestial Kingdom. Following their long tradition of statehood however, the Bulgars denied that claim to establish a state of their own that successfully survived all the ups and downs of history to follow.

Besides breaking the ‘political monopoly’ of Byzantium in Eastern Europe, Bulgaria broke also the monopoly of Latin, Greek and Hebrew as the exclusive ‘holy languages’ of Christendom. Along with introducing Christianity as a common religion shared with Byzantium and Rome, Knyaz Boris I the Baptist ensured the approval by both the Pope and the Patriarch of Constantinople that the Church language in Bulgaria would be the spoken language of the country. In Western Europe the holy books became accessible to the common people much later, with Martin Luther’s 1534 Bible in German, and the 1611 King James Version of the Bible in English.

Boris commissioned the creation of the Cyrillic alphabet, together with setting up schools of higher education in Preslav and Ohrid run by St. Naum and St. Kliment respectively, where church books were rendered in Bulgarian, and clergymen were educated for the country’s 20,000 churches. Thus in the 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries, and especially during the so called ‘Golden Age of Bulgarian culture’ under Boris and his son Tsar Simeon I the Great, Bulgaria became the cradle of Cyrillic alphabet and Bulgarian Slavonic culture that in the next centuries spread to Byzantium, Serbia, Bosnia, Croatia, Transylvania, Walachia and Moldavia, as well as to Kievan Rus and the Principality of Moscow (predecessors of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus).

## **XI Century AD — XV Century AD**



Second Bulgarian Empire




Following a period of Byzantine domination in 1018-1165, Bulgaria regained her independence and role of major regional power in rivalry with the Kingdom of Hungary and the Byzantine Empire, the latter in turn overtaken by the Crusader Latin Empire of Constantinople in 1204-61. Bulgaria extended to Black Sea, Aegean Sea, Adriatic Sea, Bosnia, Hungary, and the Carpathian Mountains. The Second Bulgarian Empire prospered under Tsar Kaloyan and his successors Ivan Asen II and Svetoslav Terter, to enjoy under Ivan Alexander a period of cultural renaissance known as ‘the Second Golden Age of Bulgarian culture’. The capital Tarnovo became a political, economic, cultural and religious center seen as ‘the Third Rome’ in contrast to Constantinople’s decline after the Byzantine heartland in Asia Minor was lost to the Turks during the late 11<sup>th</sup> century. A number of

monasteries and churches were built or renovated, literary activities flourished, and Bulgarian artists started to create realistic images – as those of Boyana Church in Sofia – already in the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century, well before Giotto and the early Italian Renaissance.

The Balkan history took a new turn with the Ottoman conquest, which was facilitated by a feudal fragmentation plaguing the region in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century. In particular, Bulgaria split into the Tsardoms of Tarnovo and Vidin, the Principality of Dobruzha, the vassal Principalities of Walachia and Moldavia (which remained autonomous under the Ottomans), and several smaller feudal possessions in Macedonia. The last Bulgarian state to fall was the Vidin Tsardom in 1422.

### **XV Century AD — XIX Century AD**



 Bulgarian ethnic territory in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century (1876 Constantinople Conference)



During more than four centuries of Ottoman domination the Bulgarians fought back as guerilla fighters ('haydut', pl. 'hayduti') and rebels. The liberation attempts included the Tarnovo Uprisings in 1598, 1686 and 1835; Chirpovtsi Uprising in 1688; Karposh Uprising in 1689; Nish Uprisings in 1737 and 1835-41; Znepole Uprising in 1830; Vidin Uprising in 1850 etc.

The Bulgarians were treated as second-class citizens under the Ottoman system, and forced to pay higher taxes than the Muslims. Nevertheless, despite the oppression, and the Bulgarian aspirations for liberation, the ethnic Bulgarians and the Bulgarian Turks developed a strong tradition of mutual ethnic and religious tolerance that survived occasional deviations (most recently the coercive renaming campaign carried out by the communist regime in the 1980s). As the national hero and leader of the liberation movement Vasil Levski preached, his struggle was for "a pure and sacred republic" in which "Bulgarians, Turks, Jews and others will enjoy equal rights in every aspect".

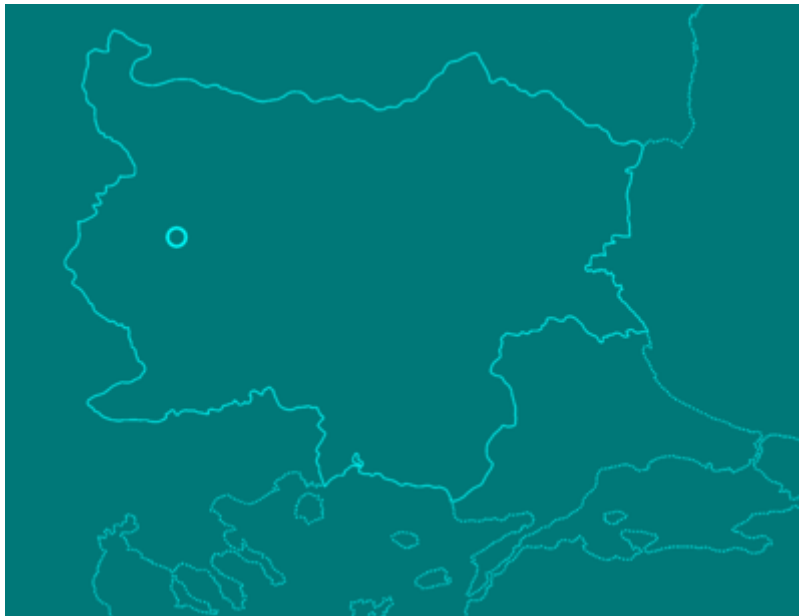
In the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries the Bulgarian lands experienced a period of economic and cultural boom known as 'the Bulgarian Revival'. The Bulgarians were enterprising and industrious, selling their handicraft and industrial products throughout the Empire, and buying land to sustain the family owned farming that formed the nation's backbone. An autonomous Bulgarian education system was developed too, first with church-sponsored 'cellar schools' providing basic literacy, later with more advanced community-owned secular schools, along with the uniquely Bulgarian community cultural centers ('chitalishte', pl. 'chitalishta').

On the geopolitical side, the Bulgarians faced some disadvantages vis-à-vis other Balkan nations seeking to overthrow the Ottoman rule. Occupying the central area of the Peninsula, with their southeast extremity so close to the Imperial capital Istanbul (former Constantinople), the Bulgarian lands were naturally the last ones the Ottomans would be prepared to lose. Furthermore, the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century territorial appetites of certain major European countries had negative repercussions on the Bulgarian interests. Britain took over Cyprus; Italy annexed the Dodecanese Islands; Austria-Hungary possessed Transylvania and annexed Bosnia; Russia annexed eastern Moldavia (Bessarabia and Budzhak) to deprive Romania of her access to Black Sea north of the Danube, offering a sea outlet in Bulgarian Dobrudzha instead. Thus Greece, Serbia, and Romania were motivated to seek expansion in predominantly Bulgarian ethnic territories. In

addition, Britain and other West European powers disfavored the restoration of a large Bulgarian state, fearing (quite wrongly, as the subsequent Bulgarian-Russian relations would prove) that it may serve Russia's ambition of taking over the strategic Black Sea Straits.

The political emancipation of the Bulgarians within the Ottoman Empire started by ridding the Bulgarian Church of its dependence to a Greek-dominated Patriarchate of Constantinople. Namely, a Bulgarian Exarchate was decreed by the Sultan in 1870 to include all the Bulgarian majority bishoprics in the Empire; in particular, the bishoprics of Skopje and Ohrid joined after plebiscites won with over 90% of the popular vote. The Exarchate played an important role in fostering Bulgarian interest, national awareness and education.

### **XIX Century AD — XX Century AD**



Kingdom of Bulgaria



A decisive step towards Bulgaria's independence was the so called 'April Uprising' of 1876, which provoked the 1876 Constantinople Conference of the then Great Powers of Europe: Britain, Germany, Austria-Hungary, France, Italy, and Russia. The conference determined that, as of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Bulgarian ethnic territory extended to Tulcha (present Tulcea in Romania) and the Danube delta in the northeast, Ohrid and Kostur (present Kastoria in Greece) in the southwest, Lozengrad and Odrin (present Kırklareli and Edirne in Turkey) in the southeast, and Leskovets and Nish (now in Serbia) in the northwest. Furthermore, the Great Powers elaborated in detail the form of government for that territory, which was to be incorporated in two autonomous Bulgarian provinces of the Ottoman Empire: Eastern, with capital Tarnovo, and Western, with capital Sofia.

The Ottoman Government refused to implement the decisions of the Constantinople Conference, triggering the 1877-78 Russo-Turkish War that ended disastrously for Turkey. As a result, the preliminary Peace Treaty of San Stefano signed on 3 March 1878 stipulated the restoration of Bulgaria's statehood (because of which 3 March is the country's National Day). The subsequent Berlin Congress however amended the San Stefano provisions to postpone a comprehensive settlement, thus creating a Pandora box of future conflicts. In particular, the Bulgarian populace was split in five: present northern Bulgaria, and the region of Sofia formed an all but independent Principality of Bulgaria; northern Thrace became the autonomous Ottoman province of Eastern Rumelia with capital Plovdiv; the Bulgarian lands in Macedonia and southern Thrace remained under direct Turkish rule; the valley of Bulgarian (or South) Morava River went to Serbia; and Northern Dobruzha went to Romania.

The struggle for reunification of Bulgarian people remained the core of Bulgaria's national doctrine until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, involving diplomacy, organized resistance, one major uprising, and no less than five wars in sixty years. That struggle would prove successful, albeit partly, and at a high price. Bulgaria lost 140,000 troops killed in the 1912-13 Balkan Wars and WWI alone. A great many ethnic Bulgarian refugees fled their home places to settle in free Bulgaria, especially after the 1903 Ilinden-Preobrazhenie Uprising in Turkish-held Macedonia and Thrace (120,000 refugees), after the 1912-13 Balkan Wars and WWI (350,000), and in 1940 (67,000 from Northern Dobruzha). In the opposite direction, ethnic Turks and Greeks emigrated to Turkey and Greece respectively.

After the unification with Eastern Rumelia and a victorious war with Serbia in 1885, the Principality of Bulgaria was proclaimed a fully independent Kingdom

in 1908, during the reign of Tsar Ferdinand I of Bulgaria. The unified country became a leading military power on the Balkans in a series of three wars to follow.

The First Balkan War took place in 1912-13, followed immediately by the 1913 Second Balkan (or Inter-Ally) War. In the former, Bulgaria, Serbia, Greece, and Montenegro defeated Turkey. In the latter, Bulgaria lost against Greece, Serbia, Montenegro, Turkey, and Romania. As a result, the Turkish territories of Pirin Macedonia, the Rhodopes Mountains, and the Mediterranean coast of Thrace between Mesta River and Maritsa River were ceded to Bulgaria, which in turn ceded Southern Dobrudzha to Romania.

During World War I, Bulgaria sided with the Central Powers. The war effort was enormous; having a population of 4.5 million people, Bulgaria fielded a 885,000 army. However, despite the generally superior performance of the Bulgarian forces against those of Britain, France, Russia, Romania, Serbia and Greece, the country could hardly succeed with her allies Germany and Austria-Hungary lessening their effort on the Balkan Front in 1918. The defeat led to the loss of Tsaribrod, Bosilegrad, and Strumitsa districts to Serbia, and the Bulgarian Mediterranean coast to Greece. Those boundary changes were followed in 1940 by the negotiated recuperation of Southern Dobrudzha from Romania, which completed the formation of Bulgaria's modern territory.

## **XX Century AD — XXI Century AD**



Republic of Bulgaria



Bulgaria sided with Germany again during World War II, a choice that had as much to do with telling the ‘lesser evil’ between Stalin and Hitler as with pursuing territorial ambitions. The country sent no troops to the Russian Front but facilitated the German invasion of Yugoslavia and Greece, and was entrusted the administration of territories with an area of 42,466 sq. km (16,396 sq. mi) and 1.9 million inhabitants comprising the Mediterranean coast between Struma River and Enos Gulf; Vardar Macedonia (present Republic of Macedonia), excepting the Albanian-populated western districts given to Italy; and part of Morava Valley in Serbia. Bulgarian authorities functioned in those territories in 1941-44, with citizenship granted to all ethnic Bulgarians (2/3 of the population), and to others who wished so. Nowadays, that WWII status is being used by tens of thousands of people from the Republic of Macedonia to obtain Bulgarian citizenship.

The Jews were excluded though, being subject to German extermination policies: 11,363 of them were deported. Moreover, Hitler put strong pressure on Tsar Boris III of Bulgaria to send to Germany the 50,000 Jews of Bulgaria proper. Tsar Boris refused, supported by the Parliament (Deputy Speaker

Dimitar Peshev played a leading role), the Orthodox Church, and the general public. The Bulgarian Jews remained safe, and after the war were permitted to emigrate to Israel, which most of them did.

Bulgaria provided several divisions for the occupation of Serbian and Greek territory under direct German control, thus relieving German troops for the front line. In December 1941 the country declared war on Britain and the USA (but not Russia). The hostilities were confined to air combat, with 168 Bulgarian settlements bombed, 2,434 buildings destroyed, 1,290 Bulgarians killed, and 117 Allied planes shot down. Near the end of WWII Bulgaria changed sides to fight the German army all the way to Austria, losing 30,000 troops killed.

The Soviet troops entered Bulgaria in September 1944, prompting a regime change that placed the country under Russian domination endorsed by a Churchill-Stalin agreement on the division of the Balkans. Within few years the country was transformed from monarchy into 'people's republic', the industry was nationalized, and the political power privatized by the Communist Party. In 1954 the party's (and thus country's) leadership was assumed by Todor Zhivkov, who stayed in power until the end of the communist project in 1989.

Despite some initial progress in economy, health care and education, already by the late 1970s the communist system had hit the limits of its sustainability, within a decade went bankrupt, and collapsed in Bulgaria as it did throughout Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

The last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the time of transition back to democracy and free market, which took place in the framework of Atlantic and European integration. Together with Romania, Bulgaria joined NATO in 2004 and EU in 2007.

NATO, the USA and the European Union provided guidance, support and incentives for Bulgaria's political and economic reforms; more than that, they helped put the regional relations in an entirely new perspective. For the first time in modern history the Balkan nations came to share common goals and common vision. Traditionally negative attitudes among the Balkan people are diminishing, and the Balkan identity is becoming a source of pride.

Nowadays Bulgaria is a vibrant liberal economy with robust public finances and low unemployment. Having lost some 800,000 people in emigration since 1989, today the country is increasingly attracting immigrants from Western Europe and North America, the Balkans, ex-Soviet, Asian and African states.

## **Links:**

Richard Crampton

A Concise History of Bulgaria

[http://www.amazon.com/Concise-History-Bulgaria-Cambridge-Histories/dp/052156719X#\\_](http://www.amazon.com/Concise-History-Bulgaria-Cambridge-Histories/dp/052156719X#_)

Sofia – The History of Europe (documentary)

<http://www.omda.bg/engl/common/history.htm>

U.S. Department of State Background Note – Bulgaria

<http://www.infoplease.com/country/profiles/bulgaria.html>

Bulgaria a brief history outline – by Dimiter Markovski

<http://www.digsys.bg/books/history/>

Bulgarian History: Sofia, Plovdiv etc.

<http://vlib.iue.it/history/europe/bulgaria.html>

The Virtual Jewish History Tour – Bulgaria

<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/vjw/bulgaria.html>

Britannica Online Encyclopedia – Bulgaria – History:

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/84090/Bulgaria/129471/History>

Countries and Their Cultures – Bulgaria

<http://www.everyculture.com/Bo-Co/Bulgaria.html>