

## **A Short Presentation of the History of Bulgarian lands**

*(a bit longer version)*

*A long time ago, in a peninsula far far away...*

The territory of modern Bulgarian state has been populated and traces of human habitation can be found as far back as the Upper Palaeolithic Period (around 40, 000 BC), as has been indicated by excavations of caves near Pleven (in the Danubian plain in northern Bulgaria) and in the Balkan Mountains.

The land gave birth to many well-known legendary and historical figures like Orpheus and Spartacus. It has been invaded, conquered and settled by Greeks, Scythians, Romans, Byzantines, Turks being at the crossroad of civilizations, all of whom left their indelible marks on the cultural landscape of today's country and people. Bulgaria's medieval 'Golden Age', when the Bulgarian Khans and Tsars ruled over one of the largest empires in Europe, was bright and well-kept in nation's memory.

The local population called Thracians lived in parts of what is now Bulgaria. They were the first people to leave cultural heritage throughout the Balkan region. Their origin remains obscure. It is generally proposed that a proto-Thracian people developed from a mixture of indigenous peoples and Indo-Europeans from the time of Proto-Indo-European expansion in the Early Bronze Age (around 1500 BC). Thracian craftsmen inherited the skills of the indigenous civilizations before them, especially in gold working.

The social structure of Thracian tribes was not of centralized character, but they had an advanced culture despite the lack of own their own proper script, and gathered powerful military forces when their divided tribes formed unions under the pressure of external threats. They never achieved any form of unity beyond short, dynastic rules at the height of the Greek classical period. Similar to the Celtic tribes, most Thracians are thought to have lived simply in small fortified villages, usually on hilltops. Although the concept of an urban center wasn't developed until the Roman period, various larger fortifications which also served as regional market centers were numerous. Yet, in general, despite Greek colonization over the Black sea coasts, in such areas as Byzantium, Apollonia and other cities, the Thracians avoided urban life. The first Greek colonies in Thrace were founded in the 8th century BC.

Thracian tribes remained divided and most of them fell under nominal Persian rule from the late 6th century till the first half of the 5th century, until King Teres united most of them in the Odrysian kingdom around 470 BC, probably after the Persian defeat in Greece, which later peaked under the leadership of King Sitalces (431–424 BC) and of Cotys I (383–359 BC). Thereafter the Macedonian Empire incorporated the Odrysian kingdom and Thracians be-

came an inalienable component in the extra-continental expeditions of both Philip II and Alexander III (the Great).

In 298 BC, Celtic tribes reached what is today Bulgaria and clashed with the forces of Macedonian king Cassander in Mount Haemos (Stara Planina). The Macedonians won the battle, but this did not stop the Celtic advancement. Many Thracian communities, weakened by the Macedonian occupation, fell under Celtic dominance.

In 279 BC, one of the Celtic armies, led by Comontorius, attacked Thrace and succeeded in conquering it. Comontorius established the kingdom of Tylis in what is now eastern Bulgaria. Cultural interactions between Thracians and Celts are evidenced by several items containing elements of both cultures, such as the chariot of Mezek and almost certainly the Gundestrup cauldron.

Tylis lasted until 212 BC, when the Thracians managed to regain their dominant position in the region and disbanded it. Small bands of Celts survived in Western Bulgaria. According to one of the hypothesis, one such tribe were the serdi, from which Serdica - the ancient name of Sofia - originates. Even though the Celts remained on the Balkans for more than a century, their influence on the peninsula was modest. By the end of the 3rd century, a new threat appeared for the people of the Thracian region in the face of the Roman Empire.

In 188 BC, the Romans invaded Thrace, and wartime continued until 46 AD when Rome finally conquered the region. In 46 AD, the Romans established the province of Thracia. By the 4th century AD, the Thracians had a composite indigenous identity, as "Christian" Romans who preserved some of their ancient pagan rituals. Thraco-Romans became a dominant group in the region, and eventually yielded several military commanders and emperors such as Galerius and Constantine I the Great. Urban centers became well-developed, especially the territories of what is today Sofia due to the abundance of mineral springs. The influx of immigrants and the dislocation of Roman legion from around the empire enriched the local cultural landscape; temples of Mithra, Osiris and Isis have been discovered in different places of modern Bulgaria.

When in the late first century AD the Bulgarian lands became part of the territory of the Roman Empire, a large-scale construction began; new towns appeared in place of the old Thracian settlements. Many architectural and archaeological monuments from this period are preserved –the ancient Roman theater and stadium in Plovdiv, the ruins of the Roman towns Ulpia Oescus, Novae, Nicopolis ad Istrum, Nicopolis ad Nestum, Augusta Trayana, Abritus, Deultum and others.

After the collapse of the Roman Empire, the present-day Bulgarian lands were included to the territory of the Byzantine Empire.

Due to the rural nature of the local population, Roman control of the region remained weak. In the 5th century, Attila's Huns attacked the territories of today's Bulgaria and pillaged

many Roman settlements. By the end of the 6th century, Avars organized regular incursions into northern Bulgaria, which were a prelude to the en masse arrival of the Slavs.

During the 6th century, the traditional Greco-Roman culture was still influential, but Christian philosophy and culture were dominant and began to replace it. From the 7th century, Greek became the predominant language in the Eastern Roman Empire's administration, Church and society, replacing Latin.

The Slavs emerged from their original homeland (most commonly thought to have been in Eastern Europe) in the early 6th century and spread to most of eastern Central Europe, Eastern Europe and the Balkans, thus forming three main branches – the West Slavs, the East Slavs and the South Slavs. The easternmost South Slavs settled on the territory of modern Bulgaria during the 6th century.

Most of the Thracians were eventually Hellenized or Romanized, with the last remnants surviving in remote areas until the 5th century. A portion of the eastern South Slavs assimilated most of them, before the Bulgar élite incorporated this people into the First Bulgarian Empire (Tsardom).

The Bulgars (also Bolgars or proto-Bulgarians) were a semi-nomadic people, originally from Central Asia, who from the 2nd century onwards dwelled in the steppes north of the Caucasus and around the banks of river Volga (then Itil). A branch of them gave rise to the First Bulgarian Empire. The Bulgars were governed by hereditary rulers (khans). There were several aristocratic families whose members, bearing military titles, formed a governing class. Bulgars were polytheistic, but chiefly worshiped the supreme deity Tangra.

Khan Asparukh, after a successful war with Byzantium in 680, conquered initially Scythia Minor and his khanate was recognized as an independent state under the subsequent treaty signed with the Byzantine Empire in 681. That year is usually regarded as the year of the establishment of present-day Bulgaria and Asparukh is regarded as the first Bulgarian ruler. Another Bulgar branch, led by Asparukh's brother Kuber, came to settle in Pannonia and later into Macedonia.

During the late Roman Empire, several Roman provinces covered the territory that comprises present-day Bulgaria: Scythia (Scythia Minor), Moesia (Upper and Lower), Thrace, Macedonia (First and Second), Dacia (Coastal and Inner, both south of Danube), Dardania, Rhodope (Roman province) and Haemimontus, and had a mixed population of Byzantine Greeks, Thracians and Dacians, most of whom spoke either Greek or variants of Vulgar Latin. Several consecutive waves of Slavic migration throughout the 6th and the early 7th centuries led to a dramatic change of the demographics of the region and its almost complete Slavicisation.

In the beginning of 8th century Byzantine emperor Justinian II asked Khan Tervel to create a union against Arabs invading from the south. The union defeated the Arabs and Khan Tervel received the Byzantine title "khesar" (from Lat. Caesar). Under the warrior Khan Krum (802–814) Bulgaria expanded northwest and south, occupying the lands between the middle Dan-

ube and Moldova rivers, all of present-day Romania, Serdica (Sofia) in 809 and Adrianople in 813, and threatening Constantinople itself. Krum implemented law reform intending to reduce poverty and strengthen social ties in his vastly enlarged state.

Later, under Boris I (852–889), Bulgarians became Christians, and the Ecumenical Patriarch agreed to allow an autonomous Bulgarian Archbishop at Pliska. Missionaries from Constantinople, Cyril and Methodius, devised the Glagolitic alphabet, which was adopted in the Bulgarian Empire around 886. The alphabet and the Old Bulgarian language gave rise to a rich literary and cultural activity centered on the Preslav and Okhrid Literary Schools established by order of Boris I in 886.

In the early 9th century, a new alphabet — Cyrillic — was developed at the Preslav Literary School, adapted from the Glagolitic alphabet invented by Saints Cyril and Methodius. An alternative theory is that the alphabet was devised at the Okhrid Literary School by Saint Climent of Okhrid, a Bulgarian scholar and disciple of Cyril and Methodius.

By the late 9th and early 10th centuries, Bulgaria extended to Epirus and Thessaly in the south, Bosnia in the west and controlled all of present-day Romania and eastern Hungary to the north. A Serbian state came into existence as a dependency of the Bulgarian Empire. Under Tsar Simeon I of Bulgaria (Simeon the Great), who was educated in Constantinople, Bulgaria became again a serious threat to the Byzantine Empire. His aggressive policy was aimed at displacing Byzantium as major partner of the nomadic polities in the area. By subverting the principles of Byzantine diplomacy and political culture, Simeon turned his own kingdom into a society-structuring factor in the nomadic world.

Simeon hoped to take Constantinople and become emperor of both Bulgarians and Greeks, and fought a series of wars with the Byzantines through his long reign (893–927). At the end of his rule the front had reached the Peloponnese in the south, making it the most powerful state in contemporary Eastern Europe. The capital Preslav was said to rival Constantinople, the new independent Bulgarian Orthodox Church became the first new patriarchate besides the Pentarchy and Bulgarian translations of Christian texts spread all over the Slavic world of the time.

After Simeon's death, Bulgaria was weakened by wars with Croats, Magyars, Pechenegs and Serbs and the spread of the Bogomil heresy. Two consecutive Rus' and Byzantine invasions resulted in the seizure of the capital Preslav by the Byzantine army in 971. Under Samuil, Bulgaria somewhat recovered from these attacks and managed to conquer Serbia and Duklja.

In the late 10th century Bulgaria declined. In 971 the Byzantines took the capital Preslav along with a large part of eastern Bulgaria. Finally in 1014 after the battle of Belasita the Byzantines captured 15,000 Bulgars. Out of every 100 men 99 were blinded and one was left with one eye to lead the others home. In 1018 Bulgaria became part of the Byzantine Empire.

In 1185 Peter and Asen led a revolt against Byzantine rule and Peter declared himself Tsar Peter II. The following year, the Byzantines were forced to recognize Bulgaria's independence.

Resurrected Bulgaria occupied the territory between the Black Sea, the Danube and Stara Planina, including a part of eastern Macedonia, Belgrade and the valley of the Morava. It also exercised control over Wallachia and Moldova. Tsar Kaloyan (1197–1207) entered a union with the Papacy, thereby securing the recognition of his title of "Rex" although he desired to be recognized as "Emperor" or "Tsar" of Bulgarians and Vlachs. He waged wars on the Byzantine Empire and (after 1204) on the Knights of the Fourth Crusade, conquering large parts of Thrace, the Rhodopes, as well as the whole of Macedonia.

In the Battle of Adrianople in 1205, Kaloyan defeated the forces of the Latin Empire and thus limited its power from the very first year of its establishment. The power of the Hungarians and to some extent the Serbs prevented significant expansion to the west and northwest. Under Ivan Asen II (1218–1241), Bulgaria once again became a regional power, occupying Belgrade and Albania.

The Bulgarian Orthodox Patriarchate was restored in 1235 with approval of all eastern Patriarchates, thus putting an end to the union with the Papacy. Ivan Asen II had a reputation as a wise and humane ruler, and opened relations with the Catholic west, especially Venice and Genoa, to reduce the influence of the Byzantines over his country. Tarnovo became a major economic and religious center—a "Third Rome", unlike the already declining Constantinople. As Simeon the Great during the first empire, Ivan Asen II expanded the territory to the coasts of three seas (Adriatic, Aegean and Black), annexed Medea - the last fortress before the walls of Constantinople, unsuccessfully besieged the city in 1235 and restored the destroyed since 1018 Bulgarian Patriarchate.

The country's military and economic might decline after the end of the Asen dynasty in 1257, facing internal conflicts, constant Byzantine and Hungarian attacks and Mongol domination. Tsar Theodore Svetoslav (reigned 1300–1322) restored Bulgarian prestige from 1300 onwards, but only temporarily. Political instability continued to grow, and Bulgaria gradually began to lose territory.

A weakened 14th-century Bulgaria faced a new threat from the south, the Ottoman Turks, who crossed into Europe in 1354. By 1371, factional divisions between the feudal landlords and the spread of Bogomilism had caused the Second Bulgarian Empire to split into three small tsardoms—Vidin, Tarnovo and Karvuna—and several semi-independent principalities that fought among themselves, and also with Byzantines, Hungarians, Serbs, Venetians and Genoese.

The Ottomans faced little resistance from these divided and weak Bulgarian states. In 1362 they captured Philippopolis (Plovdiv), and in 1382 they took Sofia. The Ottomans then turned their attentions to the Serbs, whom they routed at Kosovo Polje in 1389. In 1393 the

Ottomans occupied Turnovo after a three-month siege. In 1396 the Tsardom of Vidin was also invaded, bringing the Second Bulgarian Empire and Bulgarian independence to an end.

A Polish-Hungarian crusade commanded by Władysław III of Poland set out to free the Bulgaria and the Balkans in 1444, but the Turks emerged victorious at the battle of Varna.

The new authorities dismantled Bulgarian institutions and merged the separate Bulgarian Church into the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople (although a small, autocephalous Bulgarian archbishopric of Ohrid survived until January 1767). Turkish authorities destroyed most of the medieval Bulgarian fortresses to prevent rebellions. Large towns and the areas where Ottoman power predominated remained severely depopulated until the 19th century.

The Ottomans did not normally require the Christians to become Muslims. Nevertheless, there were many cases of forced individual or mass islamization, especially in the Rhodopes. Bulgarians who converted to Islam – the Pomaks – retained Bulgarian language, dress and some customs compatible with Islam.

The Ottoman Empire began declining by the 17th century and at the end of the 18th had all but collapsed. Central government weakened over the decades and this had allowed a number of local Ottoman holders of large estates to establish personal ascendancy over separate regions. During the last two decades of the 18th and first decades of the 19th centuries the Balkan Peninsula dissolved into virtual anarchy.

Bulgarian tradition calls this period the *Kurdzhaliistvo*: armed bands of brigands called *Kurdzhalii* plagued the area. In many regions, thousands of peasants fled from the countryside either to local towns or (more commonly) to the hills or forests; some even fled beyond the Danube to Moldova, Wallachia or southern Russia. The decline of Ottoman authorities also allowed a gradual revival of Bulgarian culture, which became a key component in the ideology of national liberation.

Conditions gradually improved in certain areas in the 19th century. Some towns — such as Gabrovo, Tryavna, Karlovo, Koprivshitsa, Lovech, Skopie — prospered. The Bulgarian peasants actually possessed their land, although it officially belonged to the sultan. The 19th century also brought improved communications, transportation and trade. The first factory in the Bulgarian lands opened in Sliven in 1834 and the first railway system started running (between Rouse and Varna) in 1865.

Bulgarian nationalism was emergent in the early 19th century under the influence of western ideas such as liberalism and nationalism, which trickled into the country after the French Revolution, mostly via Greece. The Greek War of Independence against the Ottomans which began in 1821 also influenced the small Bulgarian educated class. But Greek influence was limited by the general Bulgarian resentment of Greek control of the Bulgarian Church and it was the struggle to revive an independent Bulgarian Church which first roused Bulgarian nationalist sentiment.

In 1870, a Bulgarian Exarchate was created by a Sultan edict and the first Bulgarian Exarch, Antim I, became the natural leader of the emerging nation. The Constantinople Patriarch reacted by excommunicating the Bulgarian Exarchate, which reinforced their will for independence. A struggle for political liberation from the Ottoman Empire emerged in the face of the Bulgarian Revolutionary Central Committee and the Internal Revolutionary Organization led by liberal revolutionaries such as Vasil Levski, Hristo Botev and Lyuben Karavelov.

In April 1876, the Bulgarians revolted in the April Uprising. The revolt was poorly organized and started before the planned date. It was largely confined to the region of Plovdiv, though certain districts in northern Bulgaria, in Macedonia, and in the area of Sliven also took part. The uprising was crushed by the Ottomans, who brought in irregular troops (bashi-bazouks) from outside the area. Countless villages were pillaged and tens of thousands of people were massacred, the majority of them in the insurgent towns of Batak, Perushtitsa, and Bratsigovo, all in the area of Plovdiv.

The massacres aroused a broad public reaction among liberal Europeans such as William Gladstone, who launched a campaign against the "Bulgarian Horrors". The campaign was supported by many European intellectuals and public figures. The strongest reaction, however, came from Russia. The enormous public outcry which the April Uprising had caused in Europe led to the Constantinople Conference of the Great Powers in 1876–77.

Turkey's refusal to implement the decisions of the conference gave Russia a long-awaited chance to realize her long-term objectives with regard to the Ottoman Empire. Having its reputation at stake, Russia declared war on the Ottomans in April 1877. The Bulgarians also fought alongside the advancing Russians. Russia established a provisional government in Bulgaria. The Russians decisively defeated the Ottomans at Shipka Pass and Plevna. By January 1878 they had liberated much of the Bulgarian lands.

The Treaty of San Stefano was signed on 3 March 1878 and set up an autonomous Bulgarian principality on the territories of the Second Bulgarian Empire, including the regions of Moesia, Thrace and Macedonia, though the state was de jure only autonomous but de facto functioned independently. However, trying to preserve the balance of power in Europe and fearing the establishment of a large Russian client state on the Balkans, the other Great Powers were reluctant to agree to the treaty.

As a result, the Treaty of Berlin (1878), under the supervision of Otto von Bismarck of the German empire and Benjamin Disraeli of Britain, revised the earlier treaty, and scaled back the proposed Bulgarian state. The new territory of Bulgaria was limited between the Danube and the Stara Planina range, with its seat at the old Bulgarian capital of Veliko Turnovo and including Sofia. This revision left large populations of ethnic Bulgarians outside the new country and defined Bulgaria's militaristic approach to foreign affairs and its participation in four wars during the first half of the 20th century. Everyone had assumed Bulgaria would become a Russian ally. To the contrary, it became a bulwark against Russian expansion, and cooperated with the British. . Following the Russo-Turkish War (1877-78) and the Treaty of

Berlin (1878), Bulgaria gained some autonomy under the Ottoman Empire, but complete independence was not recognized until 1908.

Bulgaria entered a war against Serbia in 1885, only seven years after its restoration. The war resulted in a Bulgarian victory and incorporation of the semi-autonomous Ottoman territory of Eastern Rumelia into the Principality.

Bulgaria emerged from Turkish rule as a poor, underdeveloped agricultural country, with little industry or tapped natural resources. Most of the land was owned by small farmers, with peasants comprising 80% of the population of 3.8 million in 1900. Agrarianism was the dominant political philosophy in the countryside, as the peasantry organized a movement independent of any existing party. In 1899, the Bulgarian Agrarian Union was formed, bringing together rural intellectuals such as teachers with ambitious peasants. It promoted modern farming practices, as well as elementary education.

The government promoted modernization, with special emphasis on building a network of elementary and secondary schools. By 1910, there were 4,800 elementary schools, 330 lycées, 27 post-secondary educational institutions, and 113 vocational schools. From 1878 to 1933, France funded numerous libraries, research institutes, and Catholic schools throughout Bulgaria. In 1888, a university was established. It was renamed the University of Sofia in 1904, where the three faculties of history and philology, physics and mathematics, and law produced civil servants for national and local government offices. It became the center of German and Russian intellectual, philosophical and theological influences.

The first decade of the century saw sustained prosperity, with steady urban growth. The capital of Sofia grew by a factor of 600% – from 20,000 people in 1878 to 120,000 in 1912, primarily from peasants who arrived from the villages to become laborers tradesman and office seekers. Macedonians used Bulgaria as a base, beginning in 1894, to agitate for independence from the Ottoman Empire. They launched a poorly planned uprising in 1903 that was brutally suppressed, and led to tens of thousands of additional refugees pouring into Bulgaria.

During the first half of the 20th century, Bulgaria was marred by social and political unrest. Bulgaria participated in the First and Second Balkan Wars (1912 and 1913) and sided with the Central Powers, and later the Axis Powers, during the two World Wars. Although allied with Germany during World War II, Bulgaria never declared war on Russia.

Tsar Simeon II assumed control of the throne in 1943 at the age of 6 following the death of his father Boris III. Following the defeat of the Axis Powers in World War II, communism emerged as the dominant political force within Bulgaria. Simeon was forced into exile in 1946 and resided primarily in Madrid, Spain. By 1946 Bulgaria had become a satellite of the Soviet Union, remaining so throughout the Cold War period. Todor Zhivkov, the head of the Bulgarian Communist Party, ruled the country for much of its time under communism, and during his 27 years as leader of Bulgaria, democratic opposition was crushed, agriculture and

industry were nationalized, and the Bulgarian Orthodox Church fell under the control of the state.

In 1989 Zhivkov relinquished control, and democratic change began. The first multi-party elections since World War II were held in 1990. The ruling communist party changed its name to the Bulgarian Socialist Party and won the June 1990 elections. Following a period of social unrest and passage of a new constitution, the first fully democratic parliamentary elections were held in 1991 in which the Union of Democratic Forces won. The first direct presidential elections were held the next year.

In the last years of the 20th century Bulgaria began opening up, and is one of the newest members of NATO (2004) and EU (since January 2007).

Having in mind the above short historical presentation, it is no wonder, then, that Bulgarians are so passionate about preserving their history and their culture, which has survived so often against all odds.