

The Archives of Bulgaria

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The World Bank

THE development of archival activities in Bulgaria is similar to that of neighboring countries, especially Serbia. Like the Serbians, the Bulgarians passed through a dark era—500 years of Turkish domination (1371-1877), which affected adversely the political and cultural development of their country.

The first group to promote an archival consciousness in the country was the Bulgarian Literary Society (Bulgarsko knizhovno druzhestvo), founded in Braila in 1869 with the same goals and purposes as the Serbian Literary Society (Društvo srpske slovesnosti) on the other side of the Rodepe and Transylvania ridges. A cultural and enlightened society, it provided for the systematic collection of old Bulgarian and foreign books, manuscripts, and medieval charters to form a special section of its library. Its organ *Periodichesko spisanie* called to the attention of all patriotic Bulgars the importance of collecting historical, folkloristic, and other materials valuable and necessary for the study of Bulgarian language, literature, and history.¹

Thus the society was able to start the first, although modest and primitive, archival depository in Bulgaria. Its holdings were mainly personal correspondence, some old manuscripts, and rare books, donated by patriots answering the appeal. Conscious of the great value of these papers, the society took good care of them. Its administrator, Todor Peev, also made copies of all records of the society, related to its annual meetings and other proceedings; these, together with Peev's copies, are still preserved. Here it should be pointed out that although Bulgarian archival materials had suffered during the era of the Turkish domination very heavy losses, just as had the archives of neighboring Serbia, they did not suffer any serious damage by acts of war after the achievement of independence in 1878. Damage that nevertheless occurred afterwards was mainly due to negligence and lack of archival consciousness.

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¹"Programa na Bulgarskoto knizhovno druzhestvo," in *Periodichesko spisanie*, 1:6 (1870).

In 1883 the Bulgarian Literary Society moved with its precious archives to Sofia, the new national capital. In the next year, under the administration of Marin Drinov and Konstantin Jireček, the society was reorganized and its new charter emphasized the manuscript collection as "an archive, primarily composed of records related to older and modern Bulgarian political and literary history." During the following years the archives were enriched with more valuable holdings, consisting of personal papers and archival material of prominent Bulgarian societies at home and abroad. After the proclamation of complete independence in 1908 the society was reorganized again, and in 1911 it became what is now known as the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (*Bulgarska akademiia na naukite*).² Its new charter again emphasized the value of archival holdings and their significance to historical research. When the wars immediately following (1912-13 and 1915-18) slowed down the rate of acquisition, so that the rather optimistic expectations were not fulfilled, preparations were made for a peacetime arrangement under which the academy acquired many personal papers of its deceased members as well as those of the historian Jireček. Many other Bulgarian scholars followed suit by bequeathing their personal papers to the academy, thus helping to preserve the special character of the archives. A considerable increase occurred also in the holdings of folkloristic material and old Slavic manuscripts, either originals or copies. An overall survey made shortly before 1941 resulted in better finding aids, not to mention a few important discoveries.³ Careful plans for the protection of holdings were prepared, and when Bulgaria became a theater of World War II the most valuable holdings were photostated and the originals were transferred to the vaults of the Bulgarian National Bank in Sofia or other, safer places outside the city. Because of these precautions, no serious losses occurred when the archives building was severely damaged during an Allied air attack on Sofia in March 1944.

The archives of the Academy of Sciences and of the former Literary Society, although the first collection of its kind in Bulgaria, remained a purely cultural and literary collection and never developed into archives of an administrative character. This was owing to the establishment in Sofia in 1879 of the National Library, which soon began to collect various archival materials. Its holdings, however, differed from those of the Academy of Sciences in that

² "Arkhipen institut pri BAN," in *Izvestiia na Arkhipniia Institut*, 1:6 (1957).

³ "Bulgarska akademiia na naukite," 1941-42, in *Letopis*, 25:18 (Sofia, 1947).

they consisted chiefly of the old Turkish administrative records, less valuable to the Literary Society but historically important—actually the most valuable primary sources for the history of the Turkish period. The National Library had the support of the Ministry of Education; and in order to promote the collecting of historical records it began to publish in 1890 an almanac of national arts, sciences, and literature.⁴ These efforts, although less successful than expected, brought enough materials for the establishment of a special Archive of the Bulgarian Renaissance (Arkhip na Vuzrazhdaneto, which became part of the Ethnographic Museum). Otherwise, the acquisitions of the National Library were slow and inadequate, chiefly because of the greater emphasis on books, which were after all “its main purpose.”⁵ More materials came to the National Library after 1900—enough to enable D. A. Ikhchev, the administrator of the Turkish archives, to begin systematically to establish the great importance of “Turkish archival materials for the history of Bulgaria”—but for some reason these holdings were not considered a part of the general archival collection, still stored in five wooden cases in the office of the librarian.⁶

The reorganization of the National Library in 1909 may be considered the beginning of an official archival organization. The law of 1909 paid special attention to the archival section of the library and also specified the groups of records that were supposed to be deposited in the library or in the Archive of the Bulgarian Renaissance, which had received a special charter in 1906. This charter is considered by Bulgarian archivists as the “first step toward the establishment of general rules, containing formal instructions for archival work.”⁷ The National Library in Sofia thus became the archival center of Bulgaria with a status of State Archives, but acquisitions until 1945 were nevertheless small and irregular, only sufficient to keep alive the archives as a section of the library.

Inexperienced and ineffective management in the National Library resulted in losses of records, but even worse were losses in the depositories maintained by various government agencies. The guards of one ministry used its older files for making fires in the stoves during cold nights. Whole groups of records were disposed

⁴ Ministerstvo na narodnata prosveta, *Sbornik za narodni umotvoreniia, nauka i knizhnina*, vols. 1-3 (Sofia, 1890).

⁵ Petur Miatev, “Arkhipnoto delo v Bulgariia ot osvobozhdenieto do suzdavane na DAF prez 1951 g.,” in *Izvestiia na Arkhipniia Institut*, 1:23 (1957).

⁶ Veliko Jordanov, *Istoriia na Narodnata biblioteka v Sofia* (Sofia, 1930).

⁷ Miatev, in *Izvestiia*, 1:25.

of as valueless because of the opinion of inexperienced government officials. The good will and zeal of a few scholars could not prevail against a lack of archival consciousness on the part of the Government. As late as 1936 Bulgaria still did not have a proper Central State Archives, and it lacked general guides and other archival finding aids and professional literature. Disposal schedules or equivalent legal provisions did not exist. Liberal disposal of records was made from time to time under government instructions. Ministerial depositories had no rules for the arrangement of their holdings.⁸

The situation changed almost suddenly after September 1944. The Communist regime immediately directed the whole life of the country toward a complete sovietization. The nationalization of private enterprises brought to archival depositories enormous quantities of records, a feat that had until then seemed almost impossible, and the archival abilities of the country were suddenly put under a tremendous strain. The nationalized records of private enterprises and religious groups were to be preserved and somehow arranged in a country where archival consciousness was virtually nonexistent.

The organizational and administrative part of the problem was not too complicated. The special law of 1951, issued by the Presidium of the National Assembly, created a single, unified state archives *fonds* (*Durzhaven arkhiven fond*). A special commission had studied the Soviet archival system and the Bulgarian archivists were expected "to bring Bulgarian archival work to the level of other peoples' democratic countries and especially of the U.S.S.R. where archival work has long since been perfected, being now a full service to the Socialist society."⁹ Under this and amending laws the administration of archives in Bulgaria has not differed essentially from other Communist patterns. All archival holdings in the country, private as well as religious, are nationalized under the control of the Ministry of the Interior. The Central State Archives in Sofia has charge of all records emanating from the activities of the State in respect to both its internal and international functions. The District Archives (*Okruzhni arkhivi*) have charge of records related to local or district business. Also, four other special archival establishments are provided:

1. Archives of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, which had to cede to the Central State Archives all records not related to its own activity or to the activities of its past or present members.

⁸ Institut International de Coopération Intellectuelle, *Guide international des archives* (Paris, 1936), chapter on Bulgaria.

⁹ Miatev, in *Izvestiia*, 1: 39.

2. Archives of the Institute for Military History of the People's Army, equivalent to the Red Army Archives in the U.S.S.R.

3. Archives of the National Library Vasil Kolarov in Sofia.

4. Archives of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party.¹⁰

This scheme clearly reveals the Soviet pattern, which is applied also to the internal work of arrangement and classification of holdings.

Reports on technical progress in these archival establishments are forthcoming only slowly. Doubtless the holdings—increased by huge quantities of private and religious records and by an unprecedented flow of documents from a government that controls every aspect of the political, cultural, and economic life of the country—are a very heavy burden on the shoulders of a few archivists and will remain so for a long time. In order to get more trained personnel the National Library in Sofia included in library science courses offered in 1949 some lectures on archival science. The few candidates who completed this course entered the archival profession “with a little theoretical knowledge and no practical experience.” The Department of History at the School of Philosophy of the State University in Sofia attempted a “thorough” program by offering courses in archival theory and practice; archeography; history and organization of archival activities in the U.S.S.R. and other countries; Slavic and Bulgarian paleography, diplomatics, heraldry, and chronology; old and modern Bulgarian language, culture, and history; and the indispensable dialectic and historical materialism, political economy, and the history of the Bulgarian Communist Party. A rather extensive and ambitious program!—which nevertheless did not appeal to the students and was criticized also because of its *École-des-Chartes* paleographic and medieval approach to archival science, “characteristic of the capitalist countries . . . except for the U. S. A., where there are no medieval archives.”¹¹ The training of archivists is handicapped not only by the lack of training facilities, urgently needed textbooks, and other professional literature, but also by the typically communist tendency toward cultural isolationism. Hence, the government “does not send to the U.S.S.R. or other countries of peoples’ democracies its own scientific workers to become specialists in archival work.” Moreover, “archival science is not too respected at the University of Sofia” and the prejudice against archivists is

¹⁰ “Zur neuordnung des Archivwissens in Bulgarien,” in *Wissenschaftlicher Dienst Suedosteuropa*, vol. 5, no. 2/3, p. 43 (Feb./Mar. 1956).

¹¹ L. Kirkova, “Za podgotovkata na arkhivistite v chuzhbina i u nas,” in *Istoricheski pregled*, vol. 13, no. 1, p. 110-120 (1957).

still very strong. The popular saying "good for the archives" has still preserved its original meaning: good for nothing.¹² The desired approach to the level of the Soviet archives seems therefore to be still a distant goal.

Little progress has been made in the field of professional literature. The *Istoricheski pregled*, published since 1945, prints only occasionally articles of archival interest. The same can also be said about the *Izvestiia na Arkhivniia Institut*, published irregularly by the Archival Institute of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences since 1957. The Archives Section of the Ministry of Interior publishes irregularly the *Izvestiia na durzhavnite arkhivi* (Reports on the State Archives). These journals, however, are more concerned with documentary publication than with the problems and questions of pure and applied archival science. In archival theory Bulgaria has produced so far only L. Duichev's lectures on archival science (*Lektsii po arkhivistika*, Sofia, 1949), although more and more detailed studies of a theoretical nature are in preparation. Bulgarian archival development is still in its first stage. Slow as it is, it is nevertheless making good progress toward better organization and training.

¹² "Arkhipen institut pri BAN," in *Izvestiia na Arkhivniia Institut*, 1:14 (1957).

"Records and tradition . . . do their work . . ."

After a careful inspection of the portrait, I am bound to say that the signs of age are absent from the surface, and I should therefore conjecture that it is a copy of a portrait of the time of Francis Pourbus, to whom we are indebted for the portrait of George Buchanan, which I believe is in the possession of the Royal Society.

My opinion is in favour of the Somerville Portrait being of [John] Knox. Strongly marked features like those were not likely to be confounded with any other man's. The world has a way of handing down the lineaments of great men. Records and tradition, as experience has shown me, do their work in this respect very effectively.

—HENRY MERRITT to THOMAS CARLYLE, Jan. 9, 1875, as quoted in Carlyle, *The Early Kings of Norway: Also an Essay on the Portraits of John Knox*, p. 256 (New York, 1875).