



CultureShock!

A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette

Bulgaria

Agnes Sachsenroeder

CultureShock!

A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette

Bulgaria

Agnes Sachsenroeder

This 2nd edition published in 2011 by:
Marshall Cavendish Corporation
99 White Plains Road
Tarrytown, NY 10591-9001
www.marshallcavendish.us

Copyright © 2008, 2011 Marshall Cavendish International (Asia) Private Limited
All rights reserved

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner. Request for permission should be addressed to the Publisher, Marshall Cavendish International (Asia) Private Limited, 1 New Industrial Road, Singapore 536196. Tel: (65) 6213 9300, fax: (65) 6285 4871. E-mail: genref@sg.marshallcavendish.com

The publisher makes no representation or warranties with respect to the contents of this book, and specifically disclaims any implied warranties or merchantability or fitness for any particular purpose, and shall in no event be liable for any loss of profit or any other commercial damage, including but not limited to special, incidental, consequential, or other damages.

Other Marshall Cavendish Offices:

Marshall Cavendish International (Asia) Private Limited. 1 New Industrial Road, Singapore 536196 ■ Marshall Cavendish International. PO Box 65829, London EC1P 1NY, UK ■ Marshall Cavendish International (Thailand) Co Ltd. 253 Asoke, 12th Flr, Sukhumvit 21 Road, Klongtoey Nua, Wattana, Bangkok 10110, Thailand ■ Marshall Cavendish (Malaysia) Sdn Bhd, Times Subang, Lot 46, Subang Hi-Tech Industrial Park, Batu Tiga, 40000 Shah Alam, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

Marshall Cavendish is a trademark of Times Publishing Limited

IISBN 13: 978-0-7614-5877-7

Please contact the publisher for the Library of Congress catalog number

Printed in Singapore by Times Printers Pte Ltd

Photo Credits:

All black and white photos by the author. All colour photos from Photolibary except page h (Getty Images). ■ Cover photo: Photolibary

All illustrations by TRIGG

ABOUT THE SERIES

Culture shock is a state of disorientation that can come over anyone who has been thrust into unknown surroundings, away from one's comfort zone. *CultureShock!* is a series of trusted and reputed guides which has, for decades, been helping expatriates and long-term visitors to cushion the impact of culture shock whenever they move to a new country.

Written by people who have lived in the country and experienced culture shock themselves, the authors share all the information necessary for anyone to cope with these feelings of disorientation more effectively. The guides are written in a style that is easy to read and covers a range of topics that will arm readers with enough advice, hints and tips to make their lives as normal as possible again.

Each book is structured in the same manner. It begins with the first impressions that visitors will have of that city or country. To understand a culture, one must first understand the people—where they came from, who they are, the values and traditions they live by, as well as their customs and etiquette. This is covered in the first half of the book

Then on with the practical aspects—how to settle in with the greatest of ease. Authors walk readers through how to find accommodation, get the utilities and telecommunications up and running, enrol the children in school and keep in the pink of health. But that's not all. Once the essentials are out of the way, venture out and try the food, enjoy more of the culture and travel to other areas. Then be immersed in the language of the country before discovering more about the business side of things.

To round off, snippets of basic information are offered before readers are 'tested' on customs and etiquette of the country. Useful words and phrases, a comprehensive resource guide and list of books for further research are also included for easy reference.

CONTENTS

Preface	vi	What to Bring from Home	93
Acknowledgements	vii	Media	95
Map of Bulgaria	viii	Schools	96
Chapter 1		Domestic Help	98
First Impressions	1	Modes of Transport	98
My First Impression	2	Shopping	110
Chapter 2		Health Matters	119
Overview	9	Psychological Health	120
The Many-Faceted Land	10	Telecommunications	122
The Weather	11	Banking	124
The History	14	Postal Services and Customs Office	124
Present-Day Politics	27	Public Toilets	126
Chapter 3		Disposing of Rubbish	126
The Bulgarians	31	Beggars	127
Snapshot of The Average Gheorgi And Velislava	33	Stray Dogs	129
The Ethnic Groups and Their Religions	48	Noise	130
Chapter 4		Chapter 6	
Fitting In with The Bulgarians	58	Food & Drink	131
The Family Unit	60	Food	134
Basic Social Norms	61	Bulgarian Libation	138
Festivals and Customs	62	Other Bulgarian Drinks	140
How They View Foreigners	67	Imported Food Items	142
Comming to Terms with the Communist Past	74	The Various Stages of a Meal	143
Bulgarians and Russians	76	Restaurants	145
Overseas Bulgarians and Returnees	76	Snack Shops and Street Vendors	148
Prostitution	77	Dining Etiquette	149
Alternative Lifestyles	77	Chapter 7	
Open or Conservative Society	78	Culture and Leisure Pursuits	150
Chapter 5		Culture	151
Settling In	81	Festivals	155
Visas and Residency Passes	82	Leisure Pursuits	168
Accommodation	86	Sports	184
		Getting Around	187
		Escaping Abroad	188
		Social Work	189

Chapter 8**Learning the Language**

191

The Cyrillic Alphabet	194
The History	194
Cyrillic as an EU Alphabet	196
Cyrillic and Modern Technology	196
Learning Bulgarian	198
Numbers	200
Macedonian Language	200
Non-verbal Communication	200

Chapter 9**Doing Business and The Economy**

202

Attitudes and Work Culture	203
Business Etiquette	205
The Economy	209

Chapter 10**Fast Facts**

217

Famous People	222
Places of Interest	227
Culture Quiz	233
Do's and don'ts	239
Glossary	240
Resource Guide	243
Further Reading	258
About the Author	261
Index	262

I have tried to make sure that the observations in this book are common denominators distilled from as many people's opinions as possible, but ultimately they are still common denominators as I see them. We all see things differently and react in diverse ways to any one situation, so this book merely provides signposts, and each person will discover aspects of Bulgaria for himself/herself.

While every effort was made to keep the information the most up-to-date, Bulgaria is developing so quickly that between the time this book went to press and your reading it, some things, like phone numbers, websites and addresses, may have changed or new shops may have sprung up or even folded. So before you launch into any undertaking based on the information in this book, it's a good idea to just double check again, in case you dash into a dental office only to find a sex shop in its place.

Happy exploring!

Grateful thanks to the many people, both Bulgarians and expatriates, who have obligingly answered my questions. Many of them were my unsuspecting neighbours at official dinners, who had to see their food turn cold as they patiently replied to my interrogations. In order to get spontaneous answers, I never divulged why I was asking all these relentless questions in between mouthfuls. I hope I didn't spoil their enjoyment of the food too much.

I was also utterly relieved when I first arrived in Bulgaria to find that some excellent guides existed to help me navigate my way around my new host country. These are listed in the further reading section at the end of the book and I highly recommend them to all newcomers. The various news media and magazines I mentioned in this book also helped me significantly in my research.

I would not have lived in Bulgaria in the first place, if not for my husband's job posting. The nature of his job also presented me the opportunity to meet with some interesting people and experience events which I otherwise would not have.

MAP OF BULGARIA



FIRST IMPRESSIONS

CHAPTER 1



'All that we know is still infinitely less than
all that remains unknown.'

—William Harvey, English physician

MY FIRST IMPRESSION

I entered Bulgaria, not through Sofia International Airport, but across the Romanian-Bulgarian border by car. Having heard about the corruption at immigration checkpoints, I wondered what my husband and I might face, since we looked like gypsies with a car bursting at the seams with personal belongings.

‘No payment required here’ read the signs at immigration check-points on both sides of the border, in a multitude of languages. We were impressed. We encountered no problems. Perhaps the impending accession into the European Union had something to do with it.

The only unusual thing which happened was our having to drive through a shallow pool to disinfect our tyres from whatever Romanian infections. We were not required to be hosed down; I was most relieved, but wondered about the bacteria clinging to us and our belongings in the car. We drove over the (not quite blue) Danube, as it acts as a natural border between Romania and Bulgaria. I was wondering before that if the recent severe floodings would cause problems, but the bridge was way above the swollen river. A magnificent view it was, looking down at the swirling, angry river. Exactly at the mid-point of the bridge was a sign that welcomed us into Bulgaria. We had entered the country of our next posting.

Had I fallen asleep crossing the border, I would still know I was in Bulgaria the minute I opened my eyes. All the signs

were in Cyrillic. I had been frantically trying to learn the Cyrillic alphabet in the past weeks, and tried to see if I could read the signs. By the time I figured out the first two letters, we were a kilometre down the road. Then I saw one which I could read—‘PYCE’. Hurray. No wait, it wasn’t Pyce as in English, but ‘RUSE’, the name of the city on the Danube we had just passed. ‘P’ in Cyrillic is ‘R’ in Latin, ‘Y’ is ‘U’ and ‘C’ is ‘S’. But ‘E’ is also ‘E’. Sigh. I knew I had my work cut out for me in Bulgaria.

I consoled myself that I would learn the Cyrillic alphabet in good time, and decided to take in the countryside instead. It was charmingly bucolic. Occasionally, donkey and horse-carts would travel on the narrow country roads, slowing traffic down to like in a funeral procession. Some Bulgarians who appeared to be failed Formula-One drivers got the frustration off their chests by overtaking at top speed, regardless of whether there were cars coming in the opposite direction or not.



Traditional horse-drawn carts share the roads with cars, even in the capital, Sofia.

4 CultureShock! Bulgaria

We stopped at a restaurant for an input and output break. It still retained its socialist ambience, but had a good, strong espresso which perked us up. A visit to the toilet led me to take away two stars from the restaurant. It was extremely dark, and myopic me had trouble groping my way around. Entering the cubicle, I noticed the hole in the ground in time not to put my foot into it. Obviously squat toilets were still in use in the countryside.

The good thing about going into a new place by starting from outside the city is that the infrastructure only gets better. The roads improved as we neared Sofia, the capital. There were blocks of socialist-era flats but as we entered the city centre, we were met by imposing historical buildings standing among less inspiring ones. With no skyscrapers, and hardly many buildings higher than eight stories, I could catch a glimpse of the silhouette of Mount Vitosha in the distance.

We inched our car along the jammed roads. A role reversal had taken place. The cars had become pedestrians and parked themselves smugly on the sidewalk, forcing the pedestrians to pose as cars and walk on the roads. We found our hotel without too much trouble, but couldn't find a place



Views of mighty Mount Vitosha with its snow-capped peak can be seen from many parts of Sofia.

to park our car. In desperation, I hopped out and removed two pylons placed in front of the hotel on the pavement so that we could at least stop to unload our luggages.

We had opted to stay in a smaller hotel instead of one of those from an international chain. It was as four-star as it advertised itself to be—modern and cosy, with a good restaurant, and the staff were efficient.

As I got into bed that night, I had a feeling I would not have too much trouble settling into Sofia, once I got my Cyrillic alphabet in order.

Bulgaria might have been somewhat off most people's radar screen some years back, but its international profile has increased after becoming a new kid on the block in the European Union (EU) family in January 2007.

For the average John, Claus, Emile and Erik of Western Europe, Bulgarians may be either a headache or a blessing. These new European cousins could mean welcomed cheap labour, or it could mean competition in the job market. Having experienced the influx of Eastern European workers into their countries when 10 new countries joined the EU in 2004, some Western Europeans were nervous that there would another wave of 'Polish plumbers' coming their way. Many governments felt the public concern, and dutifully imposed restrictions on Bulgarian and Romanian workers.

Juan, Joao, Luigi and Odysseus of the Mediterranean countries are a little more familiar with Bulgarians. Spain, Portugal, Italy and Greece already host a significant concentration of Bulgarian migrant workers even before 2007.

Those with a longer memory might remember Bulgaria for the notorious assassination of Bulgarian dissident, Georgi Markov, in London in 1978. Markov was dramatically killed by a dart (filled with the poison ricin) fired from an umbrella as he waited at a bus-stop. Shortly before that, there was an attempt to liquidate another Bulgarian dissident, Vladimir Kostov. Kostov was hit by a similar ricin pellet, but he owed his life to a thick sweater which prevented the pellet from penetrating fully into his body.

Others might be familiar with the more recent unfortunate case of five Bulgarian nurses and a Palestinian doctor (who



was given Bulgarian citizenship in June 2007) jailed in Libya since 1999 for allegedly infecting Libyan children with HIV. After eight agonising years and difficult negotiations between the EU and Libya, they were finally freed and returned to Bulgaria on July 24 2007.

People who have been following Bulgaria's accession into the European Union will remember words and phrases like corruption, money laundering and organised crime in the European Commission's monitoring reports. In the media, one reads about the more than 120 contract killings of gangsters, a former prime minister, businessmen, bankers and football club owners between 1996 and 2006, and right through 2007 (after the country became an EU member).

From all these, one might go away with the idea that Bulgaria is a natural film set for the next James Bond or Godfather movie. But it isn't. The average expatriate who lives and works legally in Bulgaria is not likely to come across a Bulgarian Don Corleone or any of his men-in-black with dark shades. With caution and luck, foreigners might not even encounter any of the usual crimes associated with cities—mugging, burglary and pickpocketing. And the umbrellas that Bulgarians have in their hands these days are genuinely for protection against the rain, not sinister killing weapons.

The Capital Sofia*

- Capital since 1879
- Named Serdica under the Romans
- Renamed Triaditsa by Byzantines, Sredets by Bulgars
- Renamed Sofia in 1376, after St. Sophia church
- Situated 550 m (2805 ft) above sea level
- Population: 1.2 million (2008 est)
- Tallest building: Rodina Hotel (104 m/341 ft)

*pronounced Sofiya, meaning wisdom in Greek

Bulgaria managed to free itself from communism only in 1990, so there are still socialist reminders in the country. According to the World Bank, its GDP per capita (purchasing power parity) estimated for 2009 is about US\$ 12,600, putting it into the band of the poorer countries in Europe. But Bulgaria is not a decaying country in monotonous grey. On the contrary, it boasts magnificent mountain ranges with 12 National Parks. The socialist-era buildings are still there, but so are many historical monuments and archaeological sites. A real treat for history buffs. But those who prefer modern-day entertainment will be pleased to know that shopping malls, restaurants and bars and discos are mushrooming in the capital, Sofia, and major cities faster than you can say `Paris Hilton`.

Simon Anholt, a specialist in advising countries how to market themselves and author of *Competitive Identity*, has noted wryly that almost every country claims to be a crossroads or a gateway (or both) and presents itself as a `land of contrasts`. But Bulgaria can honestly make that claim with its location and its modern cities contrasted against unspoilt rustic villages and ancient sites; socialist symbols against capitalist ones; and pop culture competing with an intact wealth of traditions. Diversity is how the Bulgarian tourist industry likes to describe the country, and so it is.

How a foreigner finds Bulgaria will depend on his/her previous experiences. For those who have no experience of developing countries, they might feel some discomfort in

the beginning, while those who have a clutch of `hardship postings´ under their belt may find Bulgaria a welcome relief. To a lesser extent, who you are (your nationality, your skin colour) may also affect the ease with which you settle into Bulgaria, but more on that later in Chapter 4.

What most foreigners find daunting (unless you´re Russian, Macedonian or a language genius) is grappling with a whole new alphabet—Cyrillic. Adjusting to a new country is made so much harder by not being able to read anything at all, not even the street names. But with determination and a swig of the national spirit, *rakia*, for courage, one will manage to pick it up, if only because you do want to know which street you´re standing on and what the stuff might be before imbibing.

With Bulgaria now in the European Union, more improvements are expected in the coming years. Coming to Bulgaria now will be markedly different from what your predecessors experienced only a few years ago.

So, *Dobre Doschli!* (Welcome!)

OVERVIEW

CHAPTER 2



'The proud old Balkan Range. Above the Danube blue,
The sun is bright on Thrace. It smiles on Pirin too.

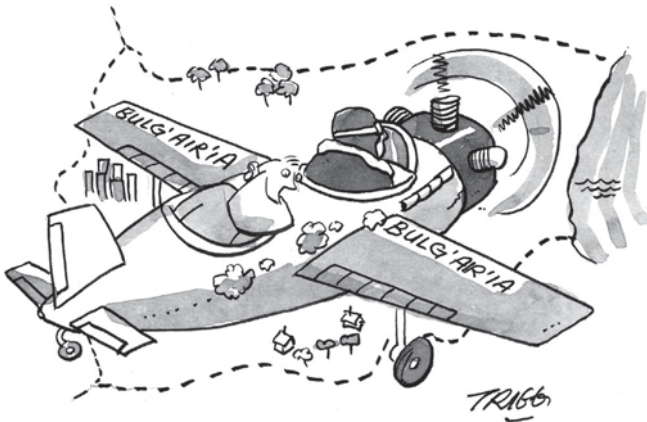
Chorus:

O Motherland most dear, you, paradise on earth,
Your beauty, your glory are endless in their birth!

—*Mila Rodino*, the Bulgarian National Anthem

THE MANY-FACETED LAND

Bulgaria is in Southeastern Europe, on the Balkan Peninsula, and to be more precise, it is located at 43'00 N and 25'00 E. That places it roughly about the same distance north of the Equator as Portland (Maine), Marseilles and Florence. Its northern neighbour is Romania, and Greece and Turkey are its southern neighbours. Bulgaria shares its western border with (the former Yugoslav states) of Macedonia, and Serbia and Montenegro. Bulgaria is saved from being landlocked by having the Black Sea on its eastern coast, which is also a generator of tourist dollars with its abundant beach resorts. The Black Sea is the country's lowest point at 0 m above sea level.



Bulgaria occupies 110, 993 sq. km (42,854 sq. miles); that is, it is slightly larger than Tennessee, Scotland or Portugal, and is home to 7,563,710 people (2009 figures, according to the National Statistical Institute). The country has seven major mountain ranges, (the highest point being Musala at 2,925 m (9,596 ft) and 12 national parks, home to historical ruins and rare flora and fauna. This means that there are great opportunities for trekking in summer for those who love burning calories outdoors (or simply picnicking for people who prefer a more sedentary lifestyle) and skiing in winter. Natural lakes can be found in the higher regions of Bulgaria and the country boasts over 500 mineral springs.

About 30 per cent of the land is arable, producing a variety of vegetables and fruits, tobacco, wine, wheat and barley and the much sought-after rose attar (rose oil) from the Valley of the Roses. Its natural resources include bauxite, copper, lead, zinc, coal and timber.

Bulgaria is one of the many countries that the River Danube meanders through. The Danube starts its journey in Germany, flows for 2,850 km (1,771 miles) through Central and Eastern Europe before serving as a border between Bulgaria and Romania and then ending in the Black Sea in Romania.

Average annual rainfall reaches almost 700 mm (27.5 inches), but in the higher regions, they average 1,000 mm (39 inches) and can reach 2,500 mm (98 inches).

THE WEATHER

Bulgaria has four distinct seasons typical of temperate countries, with hot, dry summers and cold, snowy winters. The northern part of the country has a more continental climate, while the southern parts and the coastal regions have a more Mediterranean influence. The physical relief of the country impacts on the climate and causes regional differences.

Average temperatures in summer is about 25°C (77°F) and in winter, it hovers around 0°C (32°F), although everyone familiar with temperate climate knows that it throws tantrums occasionally, so the mercury can shoot up or drop drastically away from the norm. Winter sports or *apres ski* enthusiasts will be pleased to know that snow cover in the

mountains can last for three to four months, from around mid-December to April, although with global warming, this might well decrease.

Spring

Although winter sports are still possible in spring if there has been good snow cover, spring is also a pretty time of the year down below in the lowlands with the mild temperatures, the singing birds, the new-born ducklings in the ponds and blossoming spring flowers.

Summer

Summer is typically hot, but made less unbearable by the low humidity. Sofia, with the heavy traffic and endless construction of roads and new buildings, tends to be dusty.

In August, it seems as if the Pied Piper of Hamelin has been into town and led everyone out to the Black Sea or some other holiday destination. Like their other European cousins, the city folks take their summer vacation with religious fervour. For the radicals who stay behind in Sofia, the reward is that the traffic jams miraculously disappear.

Throughout the summer, it seems as if every one of the capital's inhabitants has either gone to the Black Sea, is talking about going to the Black Sea, or is hiding in their flats in the vain hope of tricking their friends into thinking they're spending the whole of August in some idyllic beach-side cottage.

—*Sofia in Your Pocket*
(a must-have free city guide)

Autumn

In Autumn, artists and wannabes would find the landscape inspiring, as the leaves take on a golden hue. At the first sign of rain and cooler temperatures in October, don't mothball your summer clothes. The sunny days can return and the Indian summers in October are hot enough to require a sun-block. But once the sun sets, it gets chilly quickly. The temperatures in the sun can reach 22°C (72°F) , but may be as cold as 0°C (32°F) in the mornings. So don't put on your woollen underwear, but wear several layers of clothing that you can remove when it gets warm, especially in the early afternoons. Dressing like an onion is the way to go.



The Miracle of the Sun

The sun in Bulgaria works miracles. In autumn and spring, what starts out as a chilly day with 0°C (32°F) at 8:00 am can be changed into a uplifting 22°C (72°F) by noon, if the sun decides to show itself. Similarly, a winter's day in the mountains in the sunshine can get as warm as 20°C (68°F). An outdoor thermometer is very useful to help you decide how warmly to dress, although dressing in layers is usually the most practical.

Winter

If you're not from Siberia or the Nordic countries, the winter can be a real challenge. It can drop to -15°C (5°F). The first snow may fall as early as the beginning of November (which is officially still autumn). It can be a sunny 18°C (64°F) on 30 October, and 0°C (32°F) on 2 November. Winter in Sofia tends to mean weeks on end of grey fog, or with heavy snowfalls, making your way to work, school or the supermarkets a nightmare.



Although this park in Sofia looks pretty as a postcard with its light coating of snow, winter temperatures often drop drastically and make commuting a challenge for residents.

THE HISTORY

Located strategically at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, Bulgaria has found itself the centre of attention of power-hungry neighbours throughout most of its history. Through sheer determination, much of Bulgarian identity and culture survived the occupations. However, its chequered history still plays a significant role on Bulgarian's psyche and attitudes today.

Early Settlers

Archaeological explorations have found traces of human life in present-day Bulgarian lands dating back to Paleolithic times, or in common parlance, the Old Stone Age.

But a more settled population that made a mark in Bulgarian history came about in 6000 BC, where excavated Neolithic villages produced evidence of decorated pottery and clay figurines. By 4000 BC, the inhabitants were producing copper and gold objects. These original tribes of the Eastern Balkans were to later merge with migrants from Central Europe by the end of 2000 BC to become a collection of tribes known to historians as the Thracians.

The Thracians were a developed farming people, and were good at producing wine and breeding horses. They were also

skilled horsemen and archers, with a fine collection of gold and silver. They occupied an area covering most of modern Bulgaria plus parts of northern Greece and western Turkey. However, their lack of unity was their undoing; their lands changed hands constantly, from the Greeks to the Persians, the Macedonians (under Philip II and his son Alexander the Great) and then the Romans.

Fans of Stanley Kubrick's US\$ 12 million epic film, *Spartacus*, with Kirk Douglas in the lead role, might be interested to know that the Thracian, Spartacus, is said to be from the town now known as Sandanski in southwest Bulgaria. Orpheus, the musical genius from Greek Mythology, was also a Thracian.

The Slavs and the Bulgars

The Slavs, an indigenous European race, came to present-day Bulgaria around the end of the fifth Century. Historians classify the Slavs into eastern Slavs (Belarusians and Ukrainians), western Slavs (Czechs, Slovaks and Poles) and southern Slavs (Bulgarians, Croats, Macedonians, Serbs and Slovenes). By virtue of their numbers, the Slavic language and culture soon became dominant in the region.

The Bulgars (said by some to be derived from an Old Turkic word meaning one of mixed nationality) are thought to have originated from Central Asia. These nomadic tribesmen had a formidable reputation as military horsemen. As early as the second century, some tribes came down to the European continent, settling in the plains between the Caspian and the Black seas.

The different tribes were led by Khans. In 584 AD, one of these Khans, Kubrat, understood that strength laid in unity and he managed to unite the Bulgar tribes under his rule. Byzantine chroniclers referred to his military and tribal alliance as Great Bulgaria, which is said to have covered an area from the Kuban in the east to the rivers Donets and Dnieper in the north and west and to the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea in the south.

When Khan Kubrat died, his five sons went their separate ways after dividing up the people, instead of staying united together, as their father had wished.

Khan Kubrat's Lesson

According to legend, as Khan Kubrat was dying, he ordered his sons to fetch a bundle of sticks and told them to break it in two. When none of the sons managed to break the bundle, the Khan took the sticks and broke them one by one with his feeble hands. Kubrat's message to his sons was that there was strength in unity.

It was the fifth son, Asparuh, who carried the torch. He led one of the Bulgar tribes west to the Danubian delta where he laid the foundations of the Bulgarian state. The Bulgars united with the Slavs to oppose Byzantine control. By 681 Khan Asparuh had forced Emperor Constantine V to recognise the first Bulgarian state, with its capital at Pliska, which was a combination of Bulgarian political structure with Slavic linguistic and cultural institutions. Under the successors of Asparuh, the Bulgarian kingdom continued to grow in size and strength.

One of these successors, Boris, converted to Christianity in 861 and Orthodox Christianity became the state religion. An independent Bulgarian Patriarchate was founded by Boris' son, Simeon, to prevent an over-extensive Byzantine influence through the church. The conversion of the Bulgarians to Christianity was facilitated by the development of the first Slavic alphabet, Glagolitic, in 855 AD by Cyril and Methodius, two Thessaloniki-based missionaries. Glagolitic was later simplified by their disciples to become the Cyrillic alphabet. The embrace of Christianity brought Bulgaria closer to Europe.

Subsequent Bulgarian kings were called Tsars after the Byzantine tradition. Under Tsar Simeon I (893–927), the Bulgarian kingdom reached its zenith, encompassing present-day Serbia, Macedonia, Romania and northern Greece. It was a golden age of artistic and commercial development. During this period, the capital moved from Pliska first to Preslav, then to Ohrid.

After reaching its peak under Tsar Simeon, the First Bulgarian Kingdom declined in the middle of the tenth century, due to Byzantine opposition and internal weakness. By 1014 Bulgaria was under Byzantine control. For nearly two

centuries, Bulgaria was subjected to harsh Byzantine rule.

In 1185, two brothers from the nobility, Asen and Peter, led a successful revolt and established the second Bulgarian Kingdom, with its capital at Veliko Tarnovo. The brothers were later murdered by jealous competing nobility, and a younger brother, Kaloyan, took over the throne. Kaloyan successfully expanded the kingdom, before he was also murdered. A relative of his took the crown, but his incompetence caused substantial losses of his predecessors' gains, before Ivan Asen II (1218–1241) got things under control again. Under his rule, Bulgarian territories stretched from the Black Sea to the Adriatic. Access to the sea greatly increased commerce, especially with the Italian Peninsula. Tarnovo became the centre of Bulgarian culture, which enjoyed a second golden age.

After the death of Ivan Asen II, Bulgaria was considerably weakened by marauding Mongols, internal feuding, and threats from Serbia and the Ottoman Turks.



Milestones in Bulgarian History

- 6000 B.C. Neolithic settlements
- 2000 BC. Thracians inhabit modern-day Bulgaria
- 46 AD Thrace taken over by the Romans. Sofia named Serdica
- end 5th century Slavs migrate to Bulgaria
- 681 Arrival of Khan Asparuh; establishes first Bulgarian Kingdom.
- 855 Cyril and Methodius create Glagolitic, forerunner of Cyrillic
- 861 to 865 Khan Boris converts to Christianity, which was adopted as state religion
- 1014–1185 Bulgaria falls under Byzantine rule
- 1185 Peter and Asen establish Second Bulgarian Kingdom
- 1393 Bulgaria falls to the Ottoman Turks
- 1876 Revolutionaries launch unsuccessful April Uprising
- 1878 Russia liberates Bulgaria from Ottoman yoke
- March 1878 Treaty of San Stefano (TSS)
- July 1878 Treaty of Berlin overturns TSS.
- 1879 Alexander of Battenberg becomes Prince of Bulgaria. Sofia becomes capital
- 1885 Eastern Rumelia united with the Principality of Bulgaria
- 1886 Alexander Battenberg replaced by Ferdinand of Saxe Coburg Gotha
- 1908 Ferdinand declares independence and becomes Tsar Ferdinand
- 1912–1913 1st and 2nd Balkan Wars
- 1915 Bulgaria joins WWI, taking the side of the Germans
- 1941 Bulgaria enters WWII, siding with the Nazis
- 1943 Tsar Boris dies; 6-year-old Simeon ascends throne
- 1944-1946 Red Army invades Bulgaria. People's Republic of Bulgaria established.
- 1989 Fall of communism. Anti-communists create Union of Democratic Forces
- June 1990 First multi-party elections
- 2001 Ex-king Simeon returns, forms political party which wins by a landslide
- 2004 Bulgaria joins NATO
- 1 Jan 2007 Bulgaria joins the European Union

Ottoman Rule

The Ottoman Empire expanded westwards and by 1393, Bulgaria had been swallowed up as well. The 500-year rule by the Ottoman Turks is the darkest chapter in the Bulgarian collective memory. The intellectuals and the nobility were the main targets; they were killed, captured or forced to convert to Islam, although some did so voluntarily in the hope of mercy or even a retention of status. The Bulgarian Orthodox Church came under the control of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, and all ecclesiastical matters were handled by the Greek clergy. A blood tax (*devshirme*) was imposed whereby young boys were torn from their families, converted to Islam, and sent to the elite Ottoman janissary (from the Turkish words *Yeni* and *Ceri*, meaning new and soldiers) corps. Only those who voluntarily converted to Islam (the Pomaks) were exempted from this blood tax. These difficult years still weigh heavily on the minds of present-day Bulgarians and they have not been able to exorcise these demons from their souls. One hears very often this phrase “We were 500 years under the Ottomans...” as an explanation for any less than desirable state of things.

The oppressive rule was felt most strongly in towns. The centralised Ottoman authorities showed little interest in the villages, however, and they, especially the monasteries and churches there, became repositories of Bulgarian language and culture.

The National Revival and Revolts

The foundation stone for the Bulgarian National Revival is attributed to Father Paisii Hilendarski's *A Slav-Bulgarian History* in 1762 which documented the oral history of the people. Some historians (such as Ivan Ilchev) are uneasy at such a way of regarding history (through a simplified lens and seeing ‘the past personified’, in his words), but Father Paisii is definitely associated with any discussion about the Bulgarian National Revival. The book jolted the Bulgarians’

Let the Turks now carry away their abuses, in the only possible manner, namely, by carrying off themselves.

—William Gladstone, on the Ottoman Turks’ violent repression of the Bulgarian rebellion.

national pride and in the next 100 years, they went on a path of rediscovery of their language and culture. At the same time, the strength of the Ottoman Empire was waning, and the Bulgarians seized the opportunity to return to the urban areas, taking up farming and commerce again.

Apart from a rediscovery of Bulgarian culture, armed struggles started to gain momentum in the 1860s. One of the most revered revolutionary was Vassil Levski. Between 1862 and 1868, he was a central figure in armed assaults against the Ottoman Empire. In 1873, he was hanged by the Ottoman Authorities in Sofia.

Revered Freedom Fighters Against Ottoman Rule Vassil Levski (1837–1873)

Born in Karlovo as Vassil Ivanov Kunchev, he originally intended to be a priest. He became a monk 1858, but left the Church in 1861 to fulfil his revolutionary callings. In 1862, he enlisted in the Bulgarian legion in Serbia. He apparently earned his nickname, Levski (meaning like a lion) there for his bravery. Throughout the 1860s, he was active in revolutionary committees and armed assaults against the Ottomans. Caught by the Ottomans in 1872, Levski was hanged in Sofia in 1873. This Apostle of Freedom is revered by all Bulgarians (and often used by politicians of all stripes for their respective propaganda). Apart from his revolutionary zeal, Levski was also a prolific writer.

Hristo Botev (1847–1876)

Born on Christmas Day (hence his name Hristo) in Kalofer, Botev was a teacher by profession, but wrote extensively, especially revolutionary pieces. In 1874, he quit teaching to focus entirely on revolutionary work. Killed while fighting the Ottomans in 1876, Botev, together with Levski, remains a revered hero for Bulgarians even today.

In 1876, the Bulgarians revolted in the famous April Uprising, where tens of thousands of Bulgarians were massacred. Another famous revolutionary, poet and writer, Hristo Botev, led émigré young men and was