

Historiography 1918-Today: Bulgaria (South East Europe)

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Summary

The Bulgarian historiography of World War One can be divided into three periods: a period between the two world wars, a period of ideological interpretation (1944-1989, though a tendency toward objective research and new areas of study was already visible during the 1970s) and a period of new approaches (after 1989). Overall, Bulgarian researchers have dealt with a limited set of questions concerned with Bulgaria's role in World War One. This gives rise to opportunities for further research and inquiry into considerable quantities of unprocessed documents.

Table of contents

- [1 Introduction](#)
- [2 Bulgarian Historiography between the Two World Wars](#)
 - [2.1 Political Research](#)
 - [2.2 Military-Historic Research](#)
- [3 Bulgarian Historiography under Ideological Pressure \(1944-1989\)](#)
 - [3.1 Bulgarian Historiography from 1944 until the Early 1970s](#)
 - [3.2 Bulgarian Historiography from the mid-1970s to 1989](#)
- [4 Bulgarian Historiography in the Last Two Decades](#)
- [Notes](#)
- [Selected Bibliography](#)
- [Citation](#)

Introduction

For almost one century Bulgarian historians have researched, analyzed and interpreted the role of [Bulgaria](#), its neighbor states and its allies in the First World War. Bulgarian historiography, torn between objectivity and [nationalism](#), was colored by ideological pressure until it adopted a new and modern view of the Great War in recent decades.

Bulgarian Historiography between the Two World Wars

After the end of the First World War contemporary historians made the first attempts at an analysis of the conflict. Politically motivated evaluations crossed paths with objective

evaluation. Various factors such as intensified political fervor due Bulgaria's defeat and a lack of documents influenced the quality of the studies produced. Part of the publications concerned with the war from this period can be characterized both as first-hand sources of information and also as historical research. This is due to the fact that many researchers were witnesses or participants in the events of the war.

Two areas of study were a priority for the researchers in the 1920s and 1930s. These were: those responsible for Bulgaria's defeat in the First World War (referred to as the Second National Catastrophe in Bulgaria)¹ and the Bulgarian army's role in the conflict. Research regarding the first issue was conducted by political and military figures and humanities scholars.² The second issue was mainly tackled by military historians, who were considered the main experts on military issues in the Bulgarian historical science during this period.³ The primary research topics were the consequences of the Thessaloniki Armistice and the [Peace Treaty of Neuilly](#), the history of the Bulgarians and the Bulgarian territories left outside the borders of the country and the reasons for Bulgaria's participation in the war. According to the treaty, Bulgaria ceded lands to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (called [Yugoslavia](#) since 1929); South Dobrudzha was confirmed in Romanian possession. West Trace came under the control of the Allies and was transferred to [Greece](#) in 1920. Consequently Bulgaria lost its access to the Aegean Sea. In history research, legal terms and political, demographic, economic and geographic arguments were used to emphasize the unjust treaty obligations and the reasons to revise them. Due to the political realities of the post-war period, these studies can be characterized as politically motivated or propagandist. Other source material for this time period includes memoirs, research from other countries translated into Bulgarian, political propaganda and trial records.

Political Research

A group of authors during the interwar years studied the Entente's breakthrough on the Macedonian Front near Dobro Pole during the second half of September 1918 which led to the signing of the Thessaloniki Armistice on 29 September, 1918 and the end of Bulgaria's participation in the war. As could be expected, these were rarely unbiased and seldom attempted to be so. The state courts sentenced "scapegoats," leading political and military figures, journalists and common people, to prison. The content of the research being done at this time was shaped more by this political context than the pursuit of more "objective" historical facts. The authors who dealt with these issues were largely political activists rather than historians, who tried to pursue their own political agenda, thus assigning "war guilt" to their opponents.

Three arguments were advanced to explain Bulgaria's defeat in World War One. The first implicated [Ferdinand I, Tsar of Bulgaria \(1861-1948\)](#) and [Vasil Radoslavov's \(1854-1929\)](#) government. The coalition government of [Alexander Malinov \(1867-1938\)](#) and [Stoyan Kosturkov \(1866-1949\)](#) which ruled Bulgaria after 1918 could be placed in the same category. The corrupting propaganda and activities within the Agrarian Union and left-wing socialists were likewise blamed. The third object of criticism was [Germany](#), indicted for not fulfilling the responsibilities of alliance and for gradually withdrawing a big part of its army from the Macedonian front. Bulgaria was also at odds with Germany with regards to the status of Northern Dobrudzha during the peace negotiations with Romania and the exploitation of Bulgarian resources by the Germans such as the unregulated export of foods, etc.⁴

Military-Historic Research

Before the start of the First World War, a cohesive military history of Bulgaria was only just emerging. Until 1914, research on military history was infrequent, not institutionally bound and focused on issues mostly related to the Bulgarian armed resistance against the Ottoman rule and the Russo-Turkish War 1877-1878. The formation of the Military-Historic Committee at the Army Headquarters coincided with the beginning of the war. In 1915 the committee stopped work because of Bulgaria's expected participation in military actions. On 16 June 1917, a historical department with a military museum was formed as a part of the Army Headquarters. After the end of the First World War, the department was demobilized and only in 1921 did the Military-Historic Committee start functioning again. Despite its limited staff (according to clauses of the Peace Treaty of Neuilly, Bulgaria was only allowed to support a minimal number of army staff), the committee was very active and in the next decade it built up a solid foundation for the study of military history in Bulgaria. From 1927 onwards a prestigious *Military-Historic Digest* (*Voennoistoricheski sbornik*) was published by the Committee. Military-historic research was also published in other journals such as *The Military Journal* (*Voenen Zhurnal*), *Our Cavalry* (*Nashata kavaleriya*), *Artillery Review* (*Artileriyski pregled*) and *The Engineers' Library* (*Voennoinzhenerna biblioteka*). The pages of the *Bulgarian Economic Union's Journal* were full of articles describing the agricultural side of the war, its logistics, the building and maintenance of railway tracks, etc. Finally, a memorial digest called *The Epic of the Bulgarian Warrior* (*Epopeya na bŭlgarskiya voyn*) was published in 1926 as well as others which marked the anniversary of the Peace Treaty of Neuilly.

During the period between the two wars, researchers worked mainly on writing regimental histories as well as studies of Bulgaria's participation in the Great War as a whole. Military research was also published, based on experience gained during the First World War. The subjects of the publications included tactics, strategy, operational concepts, development of military technology and their role in the First World War and in a future war.

In 1936, the first volume of the multipart publication *The Bulgarian Army in the World War* (*Bŭlgarskata armiya v Svetovnata vojna*) was published.⁵ In the next decade, nine volumes (the last was issued in 1946) were also published. This major work remained unfinished as some volumes dedicated to the military campaigns at the Macedonian front in 1916, 1917 and 1918 were not published, supposedly due to financial and organizational reasons, related to the outbreak of the Second World War.

After the mid-1930s there were an increased number of publications in Bulgarian historiography which focused on Bulgarian-German military cooperation during the Great War and the implications of the Peace Treaty of Neuilly. The fate of the Bulgarian population left outside the country's borders, the history of Bulgaria's territories and the status of [refugees](#) have been analyzed in various publications. However, apart from some lampoons, brochures and other similar printed media with political and propagandist inclination, there was no trend towards radicalization of opinion nor was there any propaganda for territorial revisionism.

Bulgarian Historiography under Ideological Pressure (1944-1989)

The establishment of a pro-Soviet regime after 1944 affected Bulgarian historiography in two ways: historic research was infused with ideology and the dogmas of Marxism and Leninism were entrenched in historiography. Historic research about the First World War was reduced to a minimum and for a long time interpretations did not go beyond cliché descriptions of the imperialistic nature of the war.

In the 1970s there was a partial change in the historical research of that generation which, combined with changes in state politics, related to the emerging new generation in the ruling communist party, a partially reappraisal of past politics and a limited opening up towards the West, led to a particular "opening" of history to new topics and new interpretations of events. Therefore, the period from 1944 to 1989 should be divided in two: up to the middle of the 1970s when ideology dominated historic science and after, when historic research took a new direction.

Bulgarian Historiography from 1944 until the Early 1970s

After 9 September 1944, the First World War became a forbidden topic in Bulgarian historiography. This model was dictated by the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences' official publication, a journal called *Historic Review* (*Istoricheski pregled*). There was published an article from [Khristo Kabakchiev \(1878-1940\)](#) called "Bulgaria during the First Imperialistic

War (1915-1918) [Bŭlgariya v Pŭrvata imperialisticheska vojna (1915-1918)]”⁶ Specialized research (mostly in the form of articles) was allowed for publication only for those loyal to the communist party. The labour and anti-war movement, the history of communist party, the influence of the [Russian revolutions](#) on Bulgarian society and soldiers and the Soldiers’ Uprising of September 1918 were prioritised. Conversely, certain fields of research were completely forbidden, such as the [Brest-Litovsk](#) and the Bucharest Peace Treaties.

In 1946 the Military-Historic Committee was transformed into a unit whose research was under strict control. Research priorities were the anti-fascist struggle, the partisan movement and the so-called Patriotic War (1944-1945). However, certain articles about the First World War made it into the pages of the periodical publication *News: Military-historic digest* (*Voennoistoricheski sbornik*), *Historic Review* (*Istoricheski pregled*) and *News of the military history association*, (*Izvestiya na voennoistoricheskoto druzhestvo*).

Some successful attempts were made to shake off the ideological frame of the period, not so much in relation to interpretation but in using new sources of information. The most significant move in this direction was made in 1957 by Tushe Vlachov who returned to researching Bulgaria’s relations with its allies.⁷ At this time some documents which did not fit into traditional Marxist historiography also became public such as [Mikhail Sarafov’s \(1854-1924\)](#) diary about the signing of the Peace Treaty of Neuilly published in 1951.⁸ In 1973 an Institute of Military History was formed. It was in a way an independent scientific unit, which meant that it had more freedom to pay attention to the First World War, ideological context permitting.

Bulgarian Historiography from the mid-1970s to 1989

The first steps toward a new interpretation of the First World War were made in relation to the Bulgarian national question and were undoubtedly connected with a change in state policy and the communist party. The initial breakthrough was made in the research of the Balkan policy of the so-called capitalist countries and the two-sided relationships between Bulgaria and some of the Great Powers or the Balkan countries. Research by Simeon Damyanov⁹, Ivan Ilchev¹⁰ and Milcho Lalkov¹¹ in particular avoided a political-ideological bias. The authors included new edited documents, partially from West European archives, thus drawing novel conclusions which were previously uncommon for Bulgarian historians. Additionally, the research in foreign archives and the editing of unpublished documents from Bulgarian archives advanced further research on the First World War. The first complete and analytical study of the [Paris Peace Conference](#) and the Treaty of Neuilly, Khristo Khristov’s monograph *Bulgaria, the Balkans and the Peace* [Bŭlgariya, Balkanite i mirŭt],¹² was also

published at this time. A true revolution in research, however, was achieved with respect to the study of Thrace, [Macedonia](#), Dobrudzha and the Western Bulgarian Outlands (territories which had been included within the Yugoslavian/Serbian borders after 1918). Historians such as Stayko Trifonov¹³, Dimitŭr Gotsev¹⁴ and Petŭr Todorov¹⁵ published important works on these topics. A timid attempt to research topics forbidden during the earlier communist period was also made.

Military historiography also went through a kind of a Renaissance at this time. Even though a complete monograph for Bulgaria's participation in the First World War had not yet been written, the true achievement was connected with the writing of a history of the different branches of the army¹⁶.

During the period between 1944 and 1989, one can see the following tendencies in the Bulgarian historiography concerning the First World War:

1. There is a clear distinction between the period from 1944 to the early 1970s and from the early 1970s to 1989, mainly related to the development of the country and its political ideology as a whole;
2. The quantity of research closely connected to the First World War is limited. The main stress falls on the problems related to class war and the history of the communist party;
3. Although there was a transformation in the ideological frame after the mid-1970s, the bulk of the more modern research was published only during the second half of the 1980s. Bulgarian historic science was stunted in its research methodology and limited itself to a small set of thematic questions.
4. Despite the fact that Bulgaria's political situation changed after 1944, there was a particular continuity with the historiography from the interwar period. This was very clearly visible in research dedicated to the Bulgarian national question after the mid-1970s as well as in research on military history.

Bulgarian Historiography in the Last Two Decades

Some attempts at writing a complete history of Bulgaria's participation in the First World War were made at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century. Georgi Markov reviews in two volumes the main facts and events connected with Bulgaria's participation in the First World War.¹⁷ Topics considered forbidden in the transitional period after the war are now being researched: Bulgaria's attempts to sign a separate peace treaty during the war,

problems connected with the Brest-Litovsk and Bucharest peace treaties, Bulgaria's occupation of parts of Macedonia during the war, the Danube problem, [Russia's](#) role in the Balkans, Russian immigration in Bulgaria, etc. There are now also numerous publications on the Treaty of Neuilly, Bulgarian [prisoners of war](#), the Entente occupation of the country after the Thessaloniki Treaty and Bulgarian war [propaganda](#). Bulgaria's relations with the [Ottoman Empire](#) and [Austria-Hungary](#) are well researched, though its relations with Germany have not yet been completely analyzed. A small number of publications deal with the so-called social history of the war. Nevertheless, the medical implications of the [war in the Balkans](#) remain unstudied. There are only a few publications which deal with relationships between military and political allies, the character of the coalition war as a whole, Bulgaria's economy and the logistics of the Bulgarian and allied armies.

Finally, the series called *The Bulgarians in the Northern Black Sea Region [Bŭlgarite v Severnoto Prichernomorie]* and "Dobrudzha" [Dobrudzha] along with other monographs, collective works and documentary evidence connected with the Macedonian Question and the war at the Macedonian front have been published. These publications include the most recent researches on the Bulgarian national politics during the First World War, discussions on historiography and new edited documents. There has also been considerable progress in the publication of primary source documents related to Bulgaria's participation in the Great War including diaries, memoirs and [letters](#).

The systematization of information about the condition of contemporary Bulgarian historiography leads to the following findings. Firstly, in the last twenty years, there has been a considerable qualitative and quantitative leap in the research of the First World War. There has been a widening of the thematic scope of research, mainly in the research of the Bulgarian national question and the political history of the war. There still is a lack of general history about the war written by Bulgarian authors. Secondly, there are a lot of urgent tasks for Bulgarian historiography and many research areas to be explored, leading to new possibilities for individual historians and scientific teams.

2015 will see the 100th anniversary of Bulgaria's entry into the First World War. This milestone is an opportunity for research on the Great War divested of national and political aims to come to the fore within a wider European and world historical context.

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Notes

1. There was a perception that three national catastrophes had been imposed on Bulgaria

in the 20th century. The first was a result of the country's involvement in the Second Balkan War in 1913 when attempts at national unity resulted in failure. The second was connected with Bulgaria's defeat in the First World War and the third with the defeat in the Second World War. Even now the sense of these events as externally imposed catastrophes is present in Bulgarian social consciousness as well as Bulgarian historiography. [↑](#)

2. See, e.g.: Noykov, Stefan: *Zashto ne pobedichme 1815-1918* [Why we did not win 1915-1918], Sofia 1922; Maleev, Luka: *Prinos kŭm istinata za katastrofata na Bŭlgariya prez septemvri 1918 g. Dokumenti, fakti i spomeni iz dnevnika na adyutanta na glavnokomandvashtiya Deystvashtata armiya* [Contribution to the truth about the catastrophe of Bulgaria in September 1918. Documents, facts and memoirs from the Commander-in-Chief's adjutant's diary], Sofia 1921. [↑](#)
3. See, e.g.: Khristov, Atanas: *Istoricheski pregled na Obshtoevropeyskata voyna i uchastieto na Bŭlgariya v neya* [A historic review of the all-European war and Bulgaria's participation in it], Sofia 1925. The history of the wars, led by Bulgaria in the first decades of the 20th century, were research topic only for military historians, who generally used the chronological approach. The historians at the University of Sofia, at that time the only educational institution in Bulgaria to offer courses and research on history, did not work on topics related to the First World War. [↑](#)
4. On these issues see: Minkov, Stefan: *Der Status der Nord-Dobrudscha im Kontext des deutsch-bulgarischen Verhältnisses im Ersten Weltkrieg*, in: Angelow, Jürgen/Gahlen, Gundula/Stein, Oliver (eds.): *Der Erste Weltkrieg auf dem Balkan. Perspektiven der Forschung*. Berlin-Brandenburg 2011, pp. 241-255. [↑](#)
5. *Bŭlgarskata armiya v Svetovната voyna, T. I-IX* [The Bulgarian Army in the World War 1915-1918. Volume I-IX, Sofia 1936-1946], Sofia 1936-1946. [↑](#)
6. Kabakchiev, Khristo: *Bŭlgariya v pŭrvata imperilisticheska voyna (1915-1918)* (Bulgaria in the First Imperialistic War) in: *Istoricheski pregled* 1 (1947), pp. 40-56. [↑](#)
7. Vlahov, Tushe: *Otnosheniyata mezhdu Bŭlgariya i Tsentralnite sili po vreme na voynite 1912-1918* [The relations between Bulgaria and the Central Powers during the wars 1912-1918], Sofia 1957. [↑](#)
8. Khristov, Khristo: *Dnevnikŭt na Mikhail Sarafov za sklyuchvane na mirniya dogovor v N'oy prez 1919 g.* [Mikhail Sarafov's diary on the Peace Treaty of Neuilly in 1919], in: *Izvestiya na Instituta za bŭlgarska istoriya*, Volume V, 1951, pp. 314-365. Mikhail Sarafov is a Bulgarian revolutionary and politician. He was minister in several Bulgarian cabinets in the late 19th and early 20th century, the Bulgarian ambassador in Vienna and Istanbul, as well as a participant in the Bulgarian delegation which signed the Peace Treaty of Neuilly 1919. [↑](#)
9. Damyanov, Simeon: *Bŭlgariya i balkanskite strani po vreme na voynite 1912-1918*

- [Bulgaria and the Balkan countries during the wars of 1912-1918], Sofia 1986 [↑](#)
10. Ilchev, Ivan: Iz istoriyata na bŭlgarskata propaganda v Shweytsariya po vreme na Pŭrvata svetovna vojna I Parizhkata mirna konferentsiya 1919 g. [Excerpts from the history of Bulgaria's propaganda in Switzerland during WW1 and the Paris peace conference in 1919], in: Voennistoricheski sbornik 1 (1984), pp. 115-133; Angliyskata vŭnshna politika I misiyata na bratya Bŭkston v Bŭlgariya prez esenta na 1914 g. [England's foreign policy and the Buxton brothers' mission in Bulgaria in the autumn of 1914], in: Voennistoricheski sbornik 6 (1986), pp. 31-47; Bŭlgariya v strategicheskite planove na Velikobritaniya na Balkanite (Oktomvri 1915-Septemvri 1918) [Bulgaria in Great Britain's strategic plans in the Balkans (October 1915-September 1918)], in: Voennistoricheski sbornik 2 (1981), pp. 30-48. After the transformations of 1989, Ilchev published a monograph which interpreted problems not yet researched by other Bulgarian historians. What is more important in this case is Ilchev's new approach without ideological bias. See: Ilchev, Ivan: Bŭlgariya i Antantata prez Pŭrvata svetovna vojna [Bulgaria and the Entente during the First World War], Sofia 1990. [↑](#)
 11. Lalkov, Milcho: Balkanskata politika na Avstro-Ungariya 1914-1917 [The Balkan policy of Austria-Hungary, 1914-1917], Sofia 1983. [↑](#)
 12. Khristov, Khristo: Bŭlgariya, Balkanite i mirŭt 1919 g. [Bulgaria, the Balkans and the peace of 1919] Sofia 1984. [↑](#)
 13. See, e.g.: Trifonov, Stayko: Antantata v Zapadna Trakiya (1919-1920) [The Entente in Western Thrace (1919-1920)], Sofia 1989. [↑](#)
 14. See, e.g.: Gotsev, Dimitŭr: Natsionalno-osvoboditelnata borba v Makedoniya [The national-liberation struggle in Macedonia (1913-1915)], Sofia 1981. [↑](#)
 15. See, e.g.: Todorov, Petŭr: Ideyni techeniya i borbi v dobrudzhanskoto natsionalnoosvoboditelno dvizhenie do 1919 g. [Ideological trends and struggles in the national-liberation movement in Dobrudzha until 1919], in: Izsledvaniya po bŭlgarska istoriya, Volume VIII. Bŭlgarskiyat natsionalen vŭpros sled Berlinskiya kongres (1878-1944) [Research on the history of Bulgaria. Volume VIII. The Bulgarian national question after the Congress of Berlin (1878-1944)], Sofia 1986, pp. 111-165. [↑](#)
 16. Khristo Khristov (ed.): Istoriya na bŭlgarskata artileriya [History of the Bulgarian artillery], Sofia 1977; Ivan Dobrev (ed.): Istoriya na Bŭlgarskiya voennomorski flot [History of the Bulgarian Navy], Sofia 1989; Dimitŭr Angelov (ed.): Istoriya na voennata aviatsiya v Bŭlgariya 1888-1945 [History of the air force in Bulgaria 1888-1945], Sofia 1991. [↑](#)
 17. Markov, Georgi: Golyamata vojna i bŭlgarskiyat klyuch kŭm evropeyskiya pogreb 1914-1916 g. [The Great War and the Bulgarian key to the European ammunition dump 1914-1916], Sofia 1995. Markov, Georgi: Golyamata vojna i bŭlgarskata strazha mezhdu Sredna Evropa i Orienta 1916-1919 g. [The Great War and the Bulgarian guard

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Key Person(s)

[Malinov, Alexander](#); [Kosturkov, Stoyan](#); [Kabakchiev, Khristo](#); [Sarafov, Mikhail](#); [Ferdinand I, Tsar of Bulgaria](#); [Radoslavov, Vasil](#)

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