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Ferdinand I, Tsar of Bulgaria

By [Stefan Marinov Minkov](#)

Sachsen-Coburg und Gotha, *Ferdinand* Maximilian Karl Leopold Maria von Knyaz (prince regent) of Bulgaria, 1886–1908; tsar of Bulgaria, 1908–1908
Born 26 February 1861 in Vienna, Austria-Hungary
Died 10 September 1948 in Coburg, Germany

Tsar Ferdinand I of Bulgaria undoubtedly contributed to the modernization of the country. His name, however, is linked to two national catastrophes: Bulgaria's participation in the Second Balkan War, and the failure of Bulgarian national ideals during the First World War.

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Biography and Family Tree

Ferdinand I, Tsar of Bulgaria's (1861-1948) mother's side of the family was linked to two French dynasties, the House of Bourbon and the House of Orléans, and his father's side can be traced back to the Coburgs and the old Hungarian family of the Koháry. His father, [August von Saxe-Coburg-Gotha and Koháry \(1818–1881\)](#), was a general in the Austrian army. Ferdinand, however, was

influenced to a greater extent by his mother, [Clémentine of Orléans \(1817–1907\)](#), the daughter of [Louis Philippe I, King of the French \(1773–1850\)](#). Clémentine transferred her own political ambitions to her son; from a very early age, Ferdinand was taught how to rule. He inherited the military profession as well, graduating from cadet school and serving in the Austrian and Hungarian Hussar regiments.

Ferdinand I of Bulgaria: Monarch, Statesman, and Politician

After the abdication of [Alexander von Battenberg \(1857-1893\)](#), the first prince regent of [Bulgaria](#), Ferdinand was elected prince of Bulgaria by the Bulgarian parliament in July 1887. Ferdinand's reign was characterized by constant and decisive intervention in domestic policy, as well as strong direction of the country's foreign policy. Ferdinand gradually figured out how to rule the country, following the liberal constitution while simultaneously concentrating enormous power in his own hands. He contributed to the development of Bulgarian culture, science, and education and also paid special attention to the Bulgarian army and its rearmament.

In 1908, Ferdinand announced the independence of Bulgaria, which, up until then, had been a feudatory principality of the [Ottoman Empire](#). He proclaimed himself "tsar" which revived a medieval tradition of the Bulgarian Empire. One of Bulgarian society's national ideas was to build a Great Bulgaria, that is a Bulgaria that existed according to the borders set by the preliminary Russo-Turkish treaty signed in San Stefano in the spring of 1878. Ferdinand accepted, as one of his main objectives, that he would find a solution to this Bulgarian national question. In the [Second Balkan War of 1913](#), Bulgaria lost most of the territory gained in the First Balkan War and was forced to cede additional territory to [Romania](#). The outbreak of the First World War offered Bulgaria new opportunities to solve the national question.

Ferdinand and the First World War

Bulgaria's Interference in the War

Bulgaria's strategic position and efficient army made the country a desirable ally for both coalitions. After the interference of the Ottoman Empire on the side of the Central Powers in the fall of 1914, an alliance with Bulgaria became even more necessary in order to provide a land connection between [Germany](#), [Austro-Hungary](#) and the Ottoman Empire. On the other side, an alliance between the Entente and Bulgaria could lead to the defeat of the Ottoman Empire as well as access to the Straits to provide supplies to the poorly-equipped Russian army. Ultimately, Tsar Ferdinand and Bulgarian Prime Minister [Vasil Radoslavov \(1854-1929\)](#) determined how Bulgaria would orient itself during the war.

At the beginning of the First World War, Bulgaria declared its [neutrality](#), but Tsar Ferdinand closely followed the course of military activities and awaited offers from the two warring coalitions. There is ongoing debate in Bulgarian [historiography](#) about whether Ferdinand and Radoslavov had already

determined that Bulgaria would ally with the Central Powers or whether they waited, and based their decision on the proposals from the warring coalitions and the military developments.

Earlier historical research deemed Tsar Ferdinand "an agent of German imperialism"^[1] because he received personal financial compensation for his involvement in the war. Bulgaria's [decision to join the war](#) on the side of the Central Powers, however, was the result of a few factors. One factor was the offers of territorial compensation, primarily concerning [Macedonia](#). Germany also offered its assistance with the correction of Bulgaria's borders with the Ottoman Empire and possible territorial gains, mainly at the expense of [Greece](#) and Romania. On the other side, the Entente, particularly the Russian army, suffered considerable losses; on top of that, in the spring of 1915, their Dardanelles operation failed.

Towards late summer 1915, the Bulgarian choice to join the Central Powers in the First World War was made by the Bulgarian monarch. The role of the government in the decision-making process was supportive, as Tsar Ferdinand always had the power to cause a governmental crisis by installing a like-minded government at the head of the country. At the beginning of September, two treaties and a convention were signed: an allied agreement for the involvement of Bulgaria on the side of the Central Powers, a Bulgarian-Turkish agreement for rectification of the border, and a military convention setting up the parameters of the Bulgarian military intervention. On 14 October 1915, Bulgaria declared war on [Serbia](#) and officially entered the war.

Tsar Ferdinand and the Bulgarian Participation in the Great War

With the beginning of military action, the Bulgarian monarch gradually took a secondary position. His function continued to be primarily political. In his throne speech in front of the National Assembly on 27 December 1915 he greeted the victorious Bulgarian armies, and only a month later he met [Wilhelm II, German Emperor \(1859–1941\)](#) in Nish, Serbia. The relationship between the two could not be characterized as friendly, as the emperor had expressed his contempt for the Bulgarian monarch on more than one occasion, but the war and the alliance forced them to behave within the bounds of decorum. The emperor awarded Ferdinand an iron cross and a Prussian field-marshal's scepter.

The first conflict among the allies related to the economic exploitation of the occupied territories, and the relationships suffered further as a result of the status of Northern Dobruzha after the defeat of Romania. The government and the king laid claim to Northern Dobruzha, saying it should be included in the territory of Bulgaria. The Ottoman government made a claim against Bulgaria for compensation in Thrace because of the participation of Turkish armies in the war against Romania. The coalition was faced with an internal conflict that threatened its very existence. It is not clear, however, whether Tsar Ferdinand was aware of the diplomatic efforts of the government regarding the country's withdrawal from the war; the same investigation was carried out simultaneously with the new Austro-Hungarian emperor [Charles I, Emperor of Austria \(1887–1922\)](#). During the *Kaiser's* visit to Cernavoda, Romania on 21 September 1917, Tsar Ferdinand became, through Wilhelm II's

actions, an object of humiliation. The Bulgarian monarch was passed by with neglect, "as if he was not a monarch, the ruler of this country, but a member of the suite of the Kaiser!"^[2] According to [Luka Maleev \(1888–1976\)](#), aide-de-camp to General [Nikola Zhekov \(1865–1949\)](#), the chief commander of the Bulgarian army: "the face of the tsar was greenish-yellow with strain and spite."^[3] In October 1917, Kaiser Wilhelm II paid a visit to Bulgaria, and this time his attitude was completely different. With generous promises he managed to stabilize the shaky position of Radoslavov's government, which was considered the main supporter of German influence in Bulgaria. However, the Bulgarian monarch was disappointed with Germany's policy; the peace treaty with Romania left Northern Dobruzha under the joint government of the four allied countries, but the German rule, according to the Bulgarians, favored Romanian interests. In June 1918, Tsar Ferdinand received the resignation of Vasil Radoslavov's government. The new cabinet was led by [Aleksandŭr Malinov \(1867–1938\)](#), who was known for his preference for the Entente. Bulgaria, however, remained loyal to the alliance and did not take any actions towards signing a separate peace.

In mid-September 1918, the armies of the Entente launched an offensive on the Macedonian front and managed to break through the Bulgarian defense. The government, led by Malinov, made overtures for the country's withdrawal from the war. The Armistice of Thessaloniki was signed on 29 September 1918. There was no article in the armistice requesting Tsar Ferdinand's abdication. The Bulgarian monarch made a final, unsuccessful, attempt to save his position and the alliance with Germany and suggested that General [Aleksandŭr Protogerov \(1867–1928\)](#) organize a front along the Balkan Mountains. This was a desperate move which did not receive the support necessary, and on 3 October 1918, Tsar Ferdinand abdicated in favor of his son [Boris III, Tsar of Bulgaria \(1894–1943\)](#). Ferdinand left the country by train and headed to his estates in Austro-Hungary. At the station in Budapest, however, he was met by the town-major who explicitly informed him that he had an order to not allow him to reach his estates. The former monarch personally met Count [Leopold Berchtold \(1863–1942\)](#), who insisted that Ferdinand leave the country. Ferdinand arrived in Coburg, Germany on 7 October 1918 and remained there until his death in 1948.

Assessment of his Reign

The assessment of Tsar Ferdinand's reign as controversial is due to his ambiguous role in Bulgarian politics. He was blamed for two mistakes, characterized by some historians as fatal, which brought two national catastrophes upon Bulgaria: the Second Balkan War of 1913, and the defeat in the First World War on the side of the Central Powers. The image of Tsar Ferdinand in Bulgarian public consciousness is contradictory. Bulgarian historiography has not made an attempt to free Ferdinand's image from ideological and emotional deposits by writing a comprehensive biography of the Bulgarian monarch.

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Notes

1. † This view on the role of Tsar Ferdinand in the Bulgarian history seems surprisingly resistant, see Berov, Lyuben: Novi dannii za Ferdinand kato agent na germanskiya imperealizŭm [New information on Ferdinand as an agent of the German imperialism], in: Istoricheski pregled, 6 (1968) and Andreev, Georgi: Koburgite i katastrofite na Bŭlgariya [The Coburgs and the debacles of Bulgaria], Sofia 2005, p. 42.
2. † Maleev, Luka: Shestte mi sreshti s kayzer Vilkhelm II, [My six meetings with Emperor Wilhelm II], Sofia 1993, p. 55.
3. † Maleev, Luka: Shestte mi sreshti s kayzer Vilkhelm II, [My six meetings with Emperor Wilhelm II], Sofia 1993, p. 55.

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