

Version 1.0 | Last updated 08 January 2017

Zhekov, Nikola

By [Deniza Petrova](#)

Zhekov, *Nikola* (генерал Жеков (Bulgarian))
Military officer and commander-in-chief of Bulgarian army
Born 06 January 1865 in Sliven, Bulgaria
Died 01 November 1949 in Füssen, Germany

Nikola Zhekov was a Bulgarian infantry general, the Bulgarian minister of war from August through October 1915, and commander-in-chief of the Bulgarian army during the First World War, from 1915 to 1918.

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1. Family Background and Military Service before the First World War

Nikola Zhekov (1865–1949) was the eldest son in a Bulgarian merchant family. He received basic education in his hometown, Sliven, and later he graduated from the Academic High School for Boys in Sofia. In 1883, Zhekov enrolled in the Military School in Sofia. He volunteered and served in the Serbo-Bulgarian War of 1885. In 1898 he graduated from the Italian *Scuola di Guerra*, the military

academy in Turin, Italy. Starting in 1901 Zhekov gave lectures at the Military School in Sofia and became its director in 1912. During the [First Balkan War](#) in 1912, he served as the Second Bulgarian Army's chief of staff. After the Balkan Wars Zhekov became the deputy chief of staff for the Bulgarian army, and he was also the commander of the 8th [Infantry](#) Division.

2. Military Service during the First World War

2.1. The Serbian Campaign of 1915

In August 1915 Zhekov became minister of war, as the country worked its way towards entering the First World War^[1] on the side of the Central Powers. [Bulgaria](#) and [Serbia](#) had waged war with one another twice before: the Serbo-Bulgarian War in 1885 and the Second Balkan War in 1913. In the latter conflict, Bulgaria suffered territorial losses, which led them to enter the First World War on the Central Powers' promises of regaining said territory. With the declaration of war against Serbia in October 1915, Zhekov was appointed commander-in-chief of the Bulgarian army.

In the Serbian Campaign (July 1914–November 1918, with Bulgaria joining the Central Powers on 14 October 1915) the Bulgarian First Army was attached to [August von Mackensen's \(1849–1945\)](#) German Army Group on the [Balkan Front](#). After the combined attack of [Germany](#), [Austria-Hungary](#), and Bulgaria, the Serbian forces retreated through [Albania](#) to the Adriatic Sea. The [Macedonian](#) front was then established, as a result of the Allies' attempt to aid Serbia. Zhekov had to cooperate with Bulgaria's dominant senior ally, Germany, which barely left him room for strategic initiatives in joint operations. Despite that constraint, he had the Bulgarian Second Army under his command and managed to throw back the Allied offensives in Macedonia from 1916 to 1917.

The Serbian Campaign, initially a success for the Central Powers, turned into a military disaster for the Central Powers in autumn 1918. With [Greece](#) entering the war on the side of the Entente, the Macedonian front weakened, and the Germans pulling most of their troops towards the [Western front](#), there was little chance for the Bulgarian High Command to motivate its exhausted and demoralized soldiers to hold their positions. After the Allies had a breakthrough at Dobro Pole, Bulgaria requested an armistice, signed on 29 September 1918.

Zhekov himself had left Bulgaria for Vienna due to an illness a few days before the Bulgarian military collapse, passing the command of the army to the deputy commander-in-chief, General [Georgi Todorov \(1858–1934\)](#). In the [Bulgarian historiography](#) and in the war memories of Bulgarian high-ranking officers, there is a controversy over his abandonment of the commander's post in a very critical situation for Bulgarian troops. However, as commander-in-chief, Zhekov struggled in the last two years of the war with the Bulgarian government over the limited army supplies.^[2] He also engaged in diplomatic missions during this period, trying to get German reinforcement for the Macedonian front.

2.2. The Romanian Campaign, 1916–1917

After [Romania's](#) entry into the war, German and Austro-Hungarian commanders demanded that the Danube Army, under August von Mackensen, cross the Danube river towards Bucharest. Zhekov gained acceptance for the Bulgarian plan: Mackensen's troops would attack the Romanian province of Dobrudzha.^[3] Bulgaria declared war on Romania on 1 September 1916.

Bulgaria had lost Southern Dobrudzha to Romania in the Second Balkan War in 1913, so Zhekov's proposal reflected not only military concerns, but also Bulgaria's original war aim to regain the lost territories. Using the balance of power in the military coalition, Zhekov managed to maneuver himself into a proper position to press for Bulgaria's [war aims](#) to be accepted by his allies.^[4] Nevertheless, disagreements over the occupation of Dobrudzha remained a point of conflict within the coalition until the end of the war.

3. Later Life

After the war Zhekov lived in exile in Germany. He returned to Bulgaria in October 1921 to defend his politics, as the post-war government of the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union brought the wartime ministers to trial, accusing them of being bellicists. He received a ten-year prison sentence. In June 1923 the government was overthrown by a military coup. Zhekov was granted amnesty in 1924 after nearly three years in prison.

In the following years Zhekov wrote several books on military science and his memories of war. He also held lectures at the Military Academy in Sofia. From 1940 to 1944 he patronized [nationalistic](#) causes, and soon his political interests turned pro-German and [anti-Semitic](#). He was eventually invited to meet [Adolf Hitler \(1889-1945\)](#) in Paris, following the defeat of France during World War II. In 1942 he was granted 500,000 *Reichsmark* by the Nazi regime for his merits during the First World War. He donated the money to an education fund for Bulgarian officers.

In early September 1944 Zhekov fled to Germany, fearing political repression by the newly established pro-Soviet government. In February 1945 he was sentenced to death in absence by the communists' so-called People's Court. He died on 1 November 1949 in Füssen, Germany. In 1992, after the breakdown of the communist regime, his remains were returned to Bulgaria and interred in the Military Mausoleum in Sofia.

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Notes

1. † Noykov, Stefan: *Zashto ne pobedichme 1915-1918 [Why we did not win 1915-1918]*, Sofia 1922, pp. 19, 29.
2. † Noykov, *Zashto ne pobedichme 1915-1918 [Why we did not win 1915-1918]*, p. 32.
3. † Ministry of War/General Staff of the Bulgarian Army/Commission for Military History: *Bŭlgarskata armiya v Svetovната voyna 1915-1918. Voynata sreshtu Romŭniya prez 1916. Podgotovkata na voynata i Tutrakanskata operatsiya [The Bulgarian Army in the First World War 1915-1918. The Campaign against Romania in 1916]*, Vol. 8, Sofia 1939, pp. 60–67.
4. † Ministry of War/General Staff of the Bulgarian Army/Commission for Military History: *Bŭlgarskata armiya v Svetovната voyna 1915-1918. Voynata sreshtu Romŭniya prez 1916. Podgotovkata na voynata i Tutrakanskata operatsiya [The Bulgarian Army in the First World War 1915-1918. The Campaign against Romania in 1916. The war preparation and the Tutrakan operation]*, Vol. 8, Sofia 1939, pp. 16, 68–69.

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Citation

Petrova, Deniza: Zhekov, Nikola , in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2014-10-08. **DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10095**.

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