

The **history of Bulgaria** can be traced from the first settlements on the lands of modern Bulgaria to its formation as a nation-state and includes the history of the [Bulgarian people](#) and their origin. The earliest evidence of human occupation discovered on what is today Bulgaria date from at least 1.4 million years ago.^[1] Around 5000 BC, a sophisticated civilization already existed and produced some of the first pottery and jewelry in the world. After 3000 BC, the [Thracians](#) appeared on the Balkan peninsula. In the late 6th century BC, most of what is nowadays Bulgaria came under the [Persian Empire](#).^[2] In the 470s BC, the Thracians formed the powerful [Odrysian Kingdom](#), probably after the [Persian defeat](#) in Greece,^[3] which subsequently declined and Thracian tribes fell under [Macedonian](#), [Celtic](#) and [Roman](#) domination. This mixture of ancient peoples was assimilated by the [Slavs](#), who permanently settled on the peninsula after 500 AD.

Meanwhile, in 632 the [Bulgars](#) formed an independent state north of the [Black sea](#) that became known as [Great Bulgaria](#) under the leadership of [Kubrat](#). Pressure from the [Khazars](#) led to the disintegration of Great Bulgaria in the second half of the 7th century. One of the [Kubrat's](#) successors, [Asparukh](#), migrated with some of the Bulgar tribes to the area around the [Danube delta](#), and subsequently conquered [Scythia Minor](#) and [Moesia Inferior](#) from the [Byzantine Empire](#), expanding his new kingdom further into the Balkan Peninsula.^[4] A peace treaty with Byzantium in 681 and the establishment of a permanent Bulgarian capital at [Pliska](#) south of the Danube mark the beginning of the [First Bulgarian Empire](#). The new state brought together Thracian remnants and Slavs under Bulgar rule, and a slow process of mutual assimilation began. In the following centuries Bulgaria established itself as a powerful empire, dominating the Balkans through its aggressive military traditions, which led to development of distinct ethnic identity.^[5] Its ethnically and culturally diverse people united under a common religion, language and alphabet which formed and preserved the Bulgarian national consciousness despite foreign invasions and influences.

In the 11th century, the First Bulgarian Empire collapsed under Rus' and Byzantine attacks, and became part of the **Byzantine Empire until 1185**. Then, a major uprising led by two brothers - Asen and Peter of the [Asen dynasty](#), restored the Bulgarian state to form the [Second Bulgarian Empire](#). After reaching its apogee in the 1230s, Bulgaria started to decline due to a number of factors, most notably its geographic position which rendered it vulnerable to simultaneous attacks and invasions from many sides. A peasant rebellion, one of the few successful such in history, established the swineherd [Ivaylo](#) as a Tsar. His short reign was essential in recovering - at least partially - the integrity of the Bulgarian state. A relatively thriving period followed after 1300, but ended in 1371, when factional divisions caused Bulgaria to split into three small Tsardoms. By **1396, they were subjugated by the Ottoman Empire**. The Turks eliminated the Bulgarian system of nobility and ruling clergy, and Bulgaria remained [an integral Turkish territory](#) for the next 500 years.

With the decline of the Ottoman Empire after 1700, signs of revival started to emerge. The Bulgarian nobility had vanished, leaving an egalitarian peasant society with a small but growing urban middle class. By the 19th century, the [Bulgarian National Revival](#) became a key component of the struggle for independence, which would culminate in the failed [April uprising](#) in 1876, which prompted the [Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78](#) and the subsequent [Liberation of Bulgaria](#). The initial [Treaty of San Stefano](#) was rejected by the Western Great Powers, and the following Treaty of Berlin limited Bulgaria's territories to [Moesia](#) and the region of Sofia. This left many ethnic Bulgarians out of the borders of the new state, which defined Bulgaria's militaristic approach to regional affairs and its allegiance to Germany in both World Wars.

After World War II, Bulgaria became a [Communist state](#), dominated by [Todor Zhivkov](#) for a period of 35 years. Bulgaria's economic advancement during the era came to an end in the 1980s, and the collapse of the Communist system in Eastern Europe marked a turning point for the country's development. A series of crises in the 1990s left much of Bulgaria's industry and agriculture in shambles, although a period of relative stabilization began with the election of [Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha](#) as prime minister in 2001. Bulgaria joined [NATO](#) in 2004 and the [European Union](#) in 2007.

Roman period [\[edit\]](#)



Roman mosaics in [Villa Armira](#) near [Ivaylovgrad](#).

In 188 BC, the [Romans](#) invaded [Thrace](#), and warfare continued until 46 AD when Rome finally conquered the region. In 46 AD, the Romans established the province of [Thracia](#). By the 4th century, the Thracians had a composite indigenous identity, as [Christian "Romans"](#) who preserved some of their ancient pagan rituals. [Thraco-Romans](#) became a dominant group in the region, and eventually yielded several military commanders and emperors such as [Galerius](#) and [Constantine I the Great](#). Urban centers became well-developed, especially the territories of what is today Sofia due to the abundance of mineral springs. The influx of immigrants from around the empire enriched the local cultural landscape; temples of [Osiris](#) and [Isis](#) have been discovered near the Black Sea coast.^[33]

Sometime before 300 AD, [Diocletian](#) further divided [Thracia](#) into four smaller provinces. Later in the 4th century, a group of [Goths](#) arrived in northern Bulgaria and settled in and around [Nicopolis ad Istrum](#). There the Gothic bishop [Ulfilas](#) translated the [Bible](#) from Greek to Gothic, creating the [Gothic alphabet](#) in the process. This was the first book written in a [Germanic language](#), and for this reason at least one historian refers to Ulfilas as "the father of Germanic literature".^[34]

Due to the rural nature of the local population, Roman control of the region remained weak. In the 5th century, [Attila's Huns](#) attacked the territories of today's Bulgaria and pillaged many Roman settlements. By the end of the 6th century, [Avars](#) organized regular incursions into northern Bulgaria, which were a prelude to the *en masse* arrival of the Slavs.

During the 6th century, the traditional Greco-Roman culture was still influential, but Christian philosophy and culture were dominant and began to replace it.^[35] From the 7th century, Greek became the predominant language in the [Eastern Roman Empire's](#) administration, Church and society, replacing Latin.^[36]

Dark Ages [\[edit\]](#)

The Slavs [\[edit\]](#)

Main article: [South Slavs](#)

The Slavs emerged from their original homeland (most commonly thought to have been in [Eastern Europe](#)) in the early 6th century and spread to most of eastern [Central Europe](#), Eastern Europe and the Balkans, thus forming three main branches - the [West Slavs](#), the [East Slavs](#) and the [South Slavs](#). The easternmost South Slavs settled on the territory of modern Bulgaria during the 6th century.

Most of the Thracians were eventually Hellenized or Romanized, with the last remnants surviving in remote areas until the 5th century.^[37] A portion of the eastern [South Slavs](#) assimilated most of them, before the Bulgar élite incorporated these peoples into the First Bulgarian Empire.^[38]

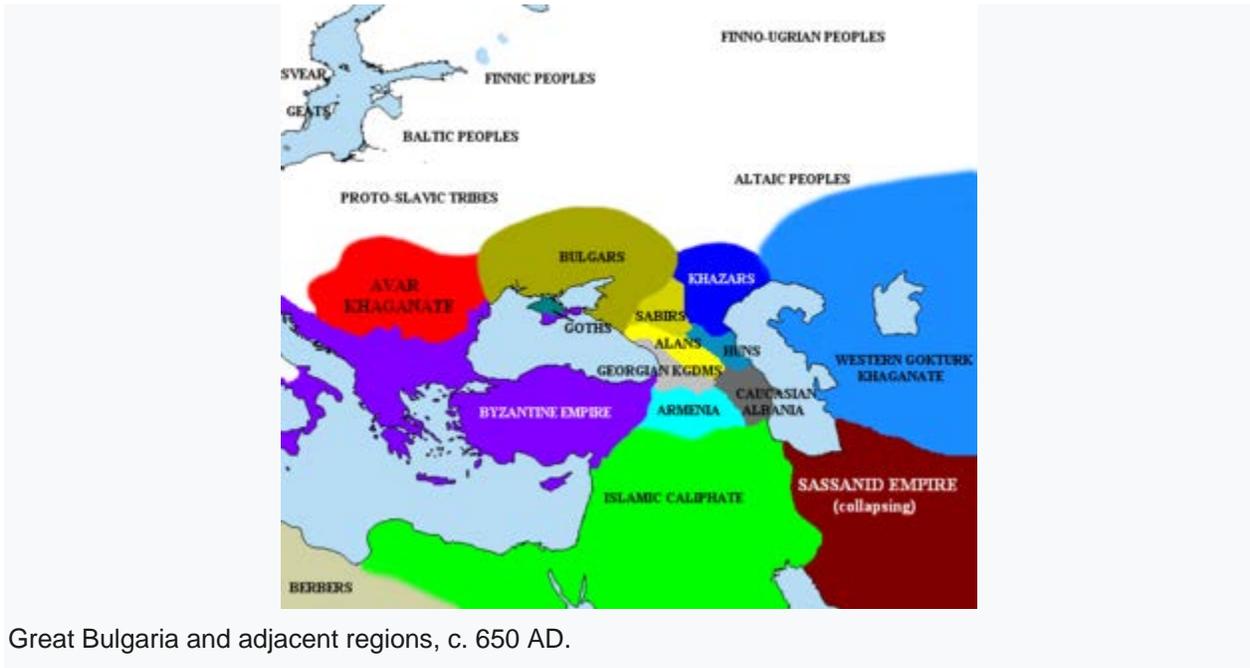
Bulgars^[edit]

Main article: [Bulgars](#)

The **Bulgars** (also *Bolgars* or *proto-Bulgarians*^[39]) were a semi-nomadic people of [Turkic peoples](#) descent, originally from [Central Asia](#), who from the **2nd century** onwards dwelled in the [steppes](#) north of the [Caucasus](#) and around the banks of river [Volga](#) (then Itil). A branch of them gave rise to the [First Bulgarian Empire](#). The [Bulgars](#) were governed by hereditary [khans](#). There were several aristocratic families whose members, bearing military titles, formed a governing class. Bulgars were [polytheistic](#), but chiefly worshiped the supreme deity [Tangra](#).

Old Great Bulgaria^[edit]

Main article: [Old Great Bulgaria](#)



Great Bulgaria and adjacent regions, c. 650 AD.

In 632, [Khan Kubrat](#) united the three largest Bulgar tribes: the Kutrigur, the Utugur and the Onogonduri, thus forming the country that now historians call [Great Bulgaria](#) (also known as [Onoguria](#)). This country was situated between the lower course of the [Danube](#) river to the west, the [Black Sea](#) and the [Azov Sea](#) to the south, the [Kuban](#) river to the east and the Donets river to the north. The capital was [Phanagoria](#), on the Azov.

In **635**, **Kubrat** signed a peace treaty with emperor **Heracilius of the Byzantine Empire**, expanding the Bulgar kingdom further into the Balkans. Later, Kubrat was crowned with the title

Patrician by Heraclius. The kingdom never survived Kubrat's death. After several wars with the Khazars, the Bulgars were finally defeated and they migrated to the south, to the north, and mainly to the west into the Balkans, where most of the other Bulgar tribes were living, in a state vassal to the Byzantine Empire since the 5th century.

One of the successors of Khan [Kubrat](#), [Kotrag](#) led nine Bulgar tribes to the north along the banks of the river Volga in what is today Russia, creating the Kingdom of the Volga Bulgars in the late 7th century. This kingdom later became the trade and cultural center of the north, because it stood on a very strategic position creating a monopoly over the trade among the Arabs, the Norse and the Avars. The Volga Bulgars were the first to ever defeat the Mongolic horde and protected Europe for decades, but after countless Mongol invasions the Kingdom of the Volga Bulgars was destroyed and most of its citizens slaughtered or sold as slaves in Asia.

Another successor of Khan Kubrat, [Asparuh](#) (Kotrag's brother) moved west, occupying today's southern [Bessarabia](#). After a successful war with [Byzantium](#) in 680, Asparuh's khanate conquered initially [Scythia Minor](#) and was recognised as an independent state under the subsequent treaty signed with the [Byzantine Empire](#) in 681. That year is usually regarded as the year of the establishment of present-day [Bulgaria](#) and Asparuh is regarded as the first Bulgarian ruler. Another Bulgar horde, led by Asparuh's brother [Kuber](#), came to settle in [Pannonia](#) and later into [Macedonia](#).^{[40][41]}

First Bulgarian Empire (681–1018) [edit]

Main article: [First Bulgarian Empire](#)

During the late [Roman Empire](#), several [Roman provinces](#) covered the territory that comprises present-day Bulgaria: [Scythia](#) (Scythia Minor), [Moesia](#) (Upper and Lower), [Thrace](#), [Macedonia](#) (First and Second), [Dacia](#) (Coastal and Inner, both south of Danube), [Dardania](#), [Rhodope \(Roman province\)](#) and Haemismontus, and had a mixed population of [Byzantine Greeks](#), [Thracians](#) and [Dacians](#), most of whom spoke either [Greek](#) or variants of [Vulgar Latin](#). Several consecutive waves of [Slavic](#) migration throughout the 6th and the early 7th centuries led to a dramatic change of the demographics of the region and its almost complete [Slavicisation](#).

In the beginning of 8th century Byzantine emperor [Justinian II](#) asked Khan Tervel for assistance in recovering his throne, for which Tervel received the Byzantine title "[Caesar](#)". Tervel later aided Emperor [Leo III the Isaurian](#) in repelling the [Second Arab Siege of Constantinople](#). Under the warrior Khan [Krum](#) (802–814) Bulgaria expanded northwest and south, occupying the lands between the middle Danube and [Moldova](#) rivers, all of present-day [Romania](#), [Sofia](#) in 809 and [Adrianople](#) in 813, and threatening [Constantinople](#) itself. Krum implemented law reform intending to reduce poverty and strengthen social ties in his vastly enlarged state.

During the reign of Khan [Omurtag](#) (814–831), the northwestern boundaries with the Frankish Empire were firmly settled along the middle Danube. A magnificent palace, pagan temples, ruler's residence, fortress, citadel, water mains and baths were built in the Bulgarian capital [Pliska](#), mainly of stone and brick.

Christianization[edit]

Under Boris I, Bulgarians [became Christians](#), and the [Ecumenical Patriarch](#) agreed to allow an autonomous Bulgarian Archbishop at Pliska. Missionaries from Constantinople, [Cyril and Methodius](#), devised the [Glagolitic alphabet](#), which was adopted in the Bulgarian Empire around 886. The alphabet and the [Old Bulgarian](#) language that evolved from [Slavonic](#)^[42] gave rise to a

rich literary and cultural activity centered around the [Preslav](#) and [Ohrid Literary Schools](#), established by order of Boris I in 886.



Ruins of Pliska, capital of the First Bulgarian Empire from 680 to 893.

In the early 9th century, a new alphabet — [Cyrillic](#) — was developed at the Preslav Literary School, adapted from the [Glagolitic alphabet](#) invented by [Saints Cyril and Methodius](#).^[43] An alternative theory is that the alphabet was devised at the Ohrid Literary School by Saint [Climent of Ohrid](#), a Bulgarian scholar and disciple of Cyril and Methodius.

By the late 9th and early 10th centuries, Bulgaria extended to [Epirus](#) and [Thessaly](#) in the south, [Bosnia](#) in the west and controlled all of present-day Romania and eastern Hungary to the north. A Serbian state came into existence as a dependency of the Bulgarian Empire. Under Tsar [Simeon I of Bulgaria](#) (Simeon the Great), who was educated in Constantinople, Bulgaria became again a serious threat to the Byzantine Empire. His aggressive policy was aimed at displacing Byzantium as major partner of the nomadic polities in the area. By subverting the principles of Byzantine diplomacy and political culture, Simeon turned his own kingdom into a society-structuring factor in the nomadic world.^{[44][45]}

Simeon hoped to take Constantinople and become emperor of both Bulgarians and Greeks, and fought a series of wars with the Byzantines through his long reign (893–927). At the end of his rule the front had reached the [Peloponnese](#) in the south, making it the most powerful state in contemporary [Eastern Europe](#).^[45] Simeon proclaimed himself "[Tsar](#) (Caesar) of the Bulgarians and the Romans", a title which was recognised by the Pope, but not by the Byzantine Emperor. The capital [Preslav](#) was said to rival [Constantinople](#),^{[46][47]} the new independent [Bulgarian Orthodox Church](#) became the first new [patriarchate](#) besides the [Pentarchy](#) and Bulgarian translations of [Christian](#) texts spread all over the [Slavic](#) world of the time.^[48]

After Simeon's death, Bulgaria was weakened by wars with [Croats](#), Magyars, [Pechenegs](#) and [Serbs](#) and the spread of the [Bogomil heresy](#).^{[49][50]} Two consecutive [Rus'](#) and Byzantine invasions resulted in the seizure of the capital [Preslav](#) by the Byzantine army in 971.^[51] Under [Samuil](#), Bulgaria somewhat recovered from these attacks and managed to conquer Serbia and [Duklja](#).^[52]

In **986**, the **Byzantine emperor Basil II** undertook a campaign to conquer Bulgaria. After a war lasting several decades he inflicted a decisive defeat upon the Bulgarians in 1014 and completed the campaign four years later. In 1018, after the death of the last Bulgarian Tsar - [Ivan Vladislav](#), most of Bulgaria's nobility chose to join the Eastern Roman Empire.^[53] However, Bulgaria lost its independence and remained subject to Byzantium for more than a century and a half. With the collapse of the state, the Bulgarian church fell under the domination of Byzantine ecclesiastics who took control of the Ohrid Archbishopric.^[54]

Byzantine rule (1018–1185)^{[[edit](#)]}



Administrative divisions of the [Byzantine Empire](#) in the Balkans c. 1045.

No evidence remains of major resistance or any uprising of the Bulgarian population or nobility in the first decade after the establishment of Byzantine rule. Given the existence of such irreconcilable opponents to the Byzantines as [Krackra](#), [Nikulitsa](#), Dragash and others, such apparent passivity seems difficult to explain. Some historians^[55] explain this as a consequence of the concessions that [Basil II](#) granted the Bulgarian nobility to gain their allegiance.

Basil II guaranteed the indivisibility of Bulgaria in its former geographic borders and did not officially abolish the local rule of the Bulgarian nobility, who became part of [Byzantine aristocracy](#) as [archons](#) or [stratego](#)i. Secondly, special charters (royal decrees) of Basil II recognised the [autocephaly](#) of the [Bulgarian Archbishopric of Ohrid](#) and set up its boundaries, securing the continuation of the [dioceses](#) already existing under Samuil, their property and other privileges.^[56]

After the death of Basil II the empire entered into a period of instability. In 1040, [Peter Delyan](#) organized a large-scale rebellion, but failed to restore the Bulgarian state and was killed. Shortly after, the [Komnenos dynasty](#) came into succession and halted the [decline of the empire](#). During this time the Byzantine state experienced a century of stability and progress.

In 1180 the last of the capable Komnenoi, [Manuel I Komnenos](#), died and was replaced by the relatively incompetent [Angeloi](#) dynasty, allowing some Bulgarian nobles to organize an uprising. In 1185 Peter and [Asen](#), leading nobles of supposed and contested Bulgarian, Cuman, Vlach or mixed origin, led [a revolt against Byzantine rule](#) and Peter declared himself Tsar [Peter II](#). The following year, the Byzantines were forced to recognize Bulgaria's independence. Peter styled himself "Tsar of the Bulgars, Greeks and [Wallachians](#)".

Second Bulgarian Empire (1185–1396)^[edit]

Main article: [Second Bulgarian Empire](#)



[Ivan Asen II](#).

Resurrected Bulgaria occupied the territory between the [Black Sea](#), the [Danube](#) and [Stara Planina](#), including a part of eastern [Macedonia](#), [Belgrade](#) and the valley of the [Morava](#). It also exercised control over [Wallachia](#) and [Moldova](#).^[57] Tsar [Kaloyan](#) (1197–1207) entered a union with the [Papacy](#), thereby securing the recognition of his title of "[Rex](#)" although he desired to be recognized as "[Emperor](#)" or "[Tsar](#)" of Bulgarians and Vlachs. He waged wars on the [Byzantine Empire](#) and (after 1204) on the Knights of the [Fourth Crusade](#), conquering large parts of [Thrace](#), the [Rhodopes](#), as well as the whole of [Macedonia](#).

In the [Battle of Adrianople](#) in 1205, Kaloyan defeated the forces of the [Latin Empire](#) and thus limited its power from the very first year of its establishment. The power of the Hungarians and to some extent the Serbs prevented significant expansion to the west and northwest. Under [Ivan Asen II](#) (1218–1241), Bulgaria once again became a regional power, occupying [Belgrade](#) and [Albania](#). In an inscription from Turnovo in 1230 he entitled himself "In Christ the Lord faithful Tsar and autocrat of the Bulgarians, son of the old Asen".

The Bulgarian Orthodox [Patriarchate](#) was restored in 1235 with approval of all eastern Patriarchates, thus putting an end to the union with the [Papacy](#). Ivan Asen II had a reputation as a wise and humane ruler, and opened relations with the [Catholic](#) west, especially [Venice](#) and [Genoa](#), to reduce the influence of the Byzantines over his country. Turnovo became a major economic and religious center—a "[Third Rome](#)", unlike the already declining Constantinople.^[58] As [Simeon the Great](#) during the first empire, Ivan Asen II expanded the territory to the coasts of three seas ([Adriatic](#), [Aegean](#) and [Black](#)), annexed [Medea](#) - the last fortress before the walls of [Constantinople](#), unsuccessfully besieged the city in 1235 and restored the destroyed since 1018 [Bulgarian Patriarchate](#).

The country's military and economic might declined after the end of the Asen dynasty in 1257, facing internal conflicts, constant Byzantine and Hungarian attacks and [Mongol domination](#).^{[58][59]} Tsar [Theodore Svetoslav](#) (reigned 1300–1322) restored Bulgarian prestige from 1300 onwards, but only temporarily. Political instability continued to grow, and Bulgaria gradually began to lose territory. This led to a peasant rebellion led by the swineherd [Ivaylo](#), who eventually managed to defeat the Tsar's forces and ascend the throne.

Ottoman incursions^[edit]

A weakened 14th-century Bulgaria faced a new threat from the south, the [Ottoman Turks](#), who crossed into Europe in 1354. By 1371, factional divisions between [the feudal landlords](#) and the spread of Bogomilism had caused the Second Bulgarian Empire to split into three small

tsardoms—[Vidin](#), [Tarnovo](#) and [Karvuna](#)—and several semi-independent principalities that fought among themselves, and also with Byzantines, Hungarians, Serbs, [Venetians](#) and [Genoese](#).

The Ottomans faced little resistance from these divided and weak Bulgarian states. In 1362 they captured Philippopolis ([Plovdiv](#)), and in 1382 they took Sofia. The Ottomans then turned their attentions to the Serbs, whom they routed at [Kosovo Polje](#) in 1389. In 1393 the Ottomans occupied [Tarnovo](#) after a three-month siege. In 1396 the Tsardom of [Vidin](#) was also invaded, bringing the Second Bulgarian Empire and Bulgarian independence to an end.

Bulgaria under Ottoman rule (1396–1878)^{[[edit](#)]}

Main article: [Ottoman Bulgaria](#)

In 1393, the Ottomans captured Tarnovo, the capital of the Second Bulgarian Empire, after a three-month siege. In 1396, the Vidin Tsardom fell after the defeat of a Christian [crusade](#) at the [Battle of Nicopolis](#). With this the Ottomans finally subjugated and occupied Bulgaria.^{[[37](#)]}^{[[60](#)]}^{[[61](#)]} A [Polish-Hungarian](#) crusade commanded by [Władysław III of Poland](#) set out to free the Bulgaria and the Balkans in 1444, but the Turks emerged victorious at the [battle of Varna](#).



The Battle of Varna by Stanislaw Chelebowski.

The new authorities dismantled Bulgarian institutions and merged the separate [Bulgarian Church](#) into the [Ecumenical Patriarchate](#) in [Constantinople](#) (although a small, autocephalous Bulgarian archbishopric of [Ohrid](#) survived until January 1767). Turkish authorities destroyed most of the medieval Bulgarian fortresses to prevent rebellions. Large towns and the areas where Ottoman power predominated remained severely depopulated until the 19th century.^{[[62](#)]}^{[[page needed](#)]}

The Ottomans did not normally require the Christians to become Muslims. Nevertheless, there were many cases of forced individual or mass islamization, especially in the [Rhodopes](#). Bulgarians who converted to Islam, the [Pomaks](#), retained Bulgarian language, dress and some customs compatible with Islam.^{[[37](#)]}^{[[61](#)]}^{[[page needed](#)]}.

Ottoman governance^{[[edit](#)]}

The Ottoman system began declining by the 17th century and at the end of the 18th had all but collapsed. Central government weakened over the decades and this had allowed a number of local Ottoman holders of large estates to establish personal ascendancy over separate regions.^{[[63](#)]} During the last two decades of the 18th and first decades of the 19th centuries the Balkan Peninsula dissolved into virtual anarchy.^{[[37](#)]}^{[[64](#)]}

Bulgarian tradition calls this period the *kurdjaliistvo*: armed bands of Turks called *kurdjali* plagued the area. In many regions, thousands of peasants fled from the countryside either to local towns or (more commonly) to the hills or forests; some even fled beyond the [Danube](#) to [Moldova](#), [Wallachia](#) or southern [Russia](#).^{[37][64]} The decline of Ottoman authorities also allowed a gradual [revival of Bulgarian culture](#), which became a key component in the ideology of national liberation.



[Vasil Levski](#), key figure of the revolutionary movement and national hero of Bulgaria

Conditions gradually improved in certain areas in the 19th century. Some towns — such as [Gabrovo](#), [Tryavna](#), [Karlovo](#), [Koprivshitsa](#), [Lovech](#), [Skopie](#) — prospered. The Bulgarian peasants actually possessed their land, although it officially belonged to the sultan. The 19th century also brought improved communications, transportation and trade. The first factory in the Bulgarian lands opened in [Sliven](#) in 1834 and the first railway system started running (between [Rousse](#) and [Varna](#)) in 1865.

Bulgarian nationalism was emergent in the early 19th century under the influence of western ideas such as [liberalism](#) and [nationalism](#), which trickled into the country after the [French Revolution](#), mostly via [Greece](#). The Greek revolt against the Ottomans which began in 1821 also influenced the small Bulgarian educated class. But Greek influence was limited by the general Bulgarian resentment of Greek control of the Bulgarian Church and it was the struggle to revive an independent Bulgarian Church which first roused Bulgarian nationalist sentiment.

In 1870, a [Bulgarian Exarchate](#) was created by a Sultan edict and the first Bulgarian Exarch, [Antim I](#), became the natural leader of the emerging nation. The Constantinople Patriarch reacted by [excommunicating](#) the Bulgarian Exarchate, which reinforced their will for independence. A struggle for political liberation from the Ottoman Empire emerged in the face of the [Bulgarian Revolutionary Central Committee](#) and the [Internal Revolutionary Organisation](#) led by liberal revolutionaries such as [Vasil Levski](#), [Hristo Botev](#) and [Lyuben Karavelov](#).