

ARCHIVAL WORK IN BULGARIA (1878–1951): BETWEEN CHAOS AND INSTITUTIONALIZATION

Arsini Kolev

University of Library Studies and Information Technologies, Bulgaria, a.kolev@unibit.bg

Abstract: This article examines the development of archival work in Bulgaria during one of the most dynamic periods of national history – from the Liberation in 1878 to the establishment of the centralized State Archival Fund in 1951.

The aim of the study is to trace the institutional and legislative efforts that shaped the Bulgarian archival system and to analyze the tension between the aspiration to preserve documentary heritage and the simultaneous practice of destroying it.

The research is based on a methodology that combines historical-legal and comparative analysis, focusing on legislative acts published in the State Gazette, archival materials, and relevant scholarly works.

A chronological approach is applied to outline the main stages and turning points in archival development, while a critical reading situates Bulgarian processes within broader European practices.

The study demonstrates that, from its earliest years, the Bulgarian administration relied heavily on external models—initially Russian-Prussian, and later Soviet—without developing a coherent national tradition in archival policy. Particularly significant are the legislative acts of 1888 and 1890, which introduced the classification of “antiquities” and declared them state property. At the same time, the contradictory regulations of 1903, which simultaneously mandated rules for preservation and a law on the destruction of documents, illustrate the lack of strategic vision and institutional consistency.

Special emphasis is placed on the contributions of intellectuals such as Ivan Shishmanov, Vladimir Dyakovich, Toma Vasilov, and Ivan Bogdanov, who repeatedly stressed the necessity of creating a national archive and suggested concrete steps toward this goal. However, their visionary proposals remained unrealized due to wars, political instability, and the absence of material resources. The article also highlights the role of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, which, particularly from the 1930s onward, sought to provide an institutional framework for archival work and to integrate Bulgarian practice into both European and Soviet models.

The analysis of the period 1878–1951 reveals that, although archival work in Bulgaria developed in a fragmented and chaotic manner, a series of legislative measures and civic initiatives gradually prepared the ground for the establishment of a centralized system.

The Soviet model, especially after 1944, exerted a decisive influence, shaping both institutional structures and conceptual approaches. Thus, the creation of the State Archival Fund by Decree No. 515 in 1951 can be seen as the culmination of decades of efforts, representing not only an administrative reform but also a key moment in the consolidation of national archival policy.

Keywords: archival work, Bulgaria, Liberation 1878, legislation, State Archival Fund

1. INTRODUCTION

The Liberation of Bulgaria from Ottoman rule in 1878 marked the beginning of the creation of a modern national state. This was a state striving to justify and defend its identity, while simultaneously demonstrating its affiliation with the Christian world and with European cultural values. The comprehension of historical memory and cultural-historical heritage became one of the priorities of the cultural policy of the young state. New philosophical, legal, political, social, and cultural trends exerted their influence on the documentation of governance and on the preservation of antiquities. Yet, although after 1878 Bulgaria appeared on the political map of Europe, it lacked traditions in state and social organization (Denchev & Vasileva, 2006).

2. RESULTS

During the Temporary Russian Administration, the rules of Russian chancellery practice were imposed, which themselves were borrowed from the Prussian system of office work. As a starting point, one can cite Orders No. 7, No. 16, and No. 82 of 1878 of the Temporary Russian Administration. These regulated the organization of documents in the newly created Bulgarian institutions—introducing record books (registers) as well as inventories of files. With the construction of an administrative apparatus, the creation of various normative documents regulating its structure and activity also began, including the organization and preservation of documents (Neikova, 2007).

Ten years after the Liberation of Bulgaria, the “Temporary Rules for Scientific and Literary Enterprises” were published in the State Gazette (No. 31, 19 March 1888). According to these, all newly discovered or undiscovered antiquities, as well as documents belonging to the state, could not be exported abroad. For the first time, the notions of “movable” and “immovable” antiquities were introduced, as well as regulation of their export outside Bulgaria. It follows that these were preventive measures to protect documents from possible encroachments (Temporary Rules for Scientific and Literary Enterprises, 1888).

In 1890, the Law on the Search for Antiquities and for Supporting Scientific and Literary Enterprises was drafted. It emphasized several core provisions: the official recognition of the need for such activities in post-Liberation Bulgaria; the adoption of direct, targeted financial support for designated literary activity, including the collection of historical evidence.

This law placed all activities related to historical research under state protection. It envisaged that such undertakings would be supported by the state and the Ministry of Education. Cultural and historical values of national importance were declared state property (Law on the Search for Antiquities and the Support of Scientific and Literary Enterprises, 1890).

In the rapidly developing Bulgarian state, the serious problem was not the antiquities, but the ever-increasing volume of current institutional documentation.

The first institution to face this problem was the judiciary. For this reason, it was the first to undertake the “purging” of documents no longer needed for operational work, establishing in 1898 a special commission to study the legislation of various European countries concerning the destruction of archives in state institutions, and in particular in the courts.

In 1903, the State Gazette (No. 281, 18 December) published the “Rules for the Preservation and Destruction of Old Files and Papers in Judicial Institutions,” and somewhat earlier, the Law on the Destruction of Old Documents and Papers Verified by the Supreme Audit Office (State Gazette, No. 63, 20 March). These acts introduced requirements for courts to systematize the documents they created through inventories and alphabetical indexes, and to deliver them for safekeeping. Formally, the texts guaranteed that documents of historical value were not to be destroyed, but they did not contain provisions on what should be done with them or where they should be preserved. In practice, the emphasis was thus on freeing up space through the disposal of documents rather than on building sustainable archival structures (Kuzmanova, 1966; Savov, 1991).

In the same year, 1903, as Minister of Public Education, Prof. Ivan Shishmanov undertook to implement the idea of creating an archival collection on the Bulgarian National Revival within the National Museum in Sofia. Later, it passed to the Ethnographic Museum, and afterwards to the National Library (Petkova, 2011).

In 1909, the Law on Public Education was adopted (State Gazette, No. 49, 5 March). The National Library was tasked with collecting and preserving all documents directly related to Bulgaria’s past. The law stated that it must “collect, classify, and study letters and documents concerning the spiritual and political revival of our people, as well as its relations with neighboring and other nations.” However, the necessary conditions for fulfilling this mission were not created, and thus the National Library was unable to perform the functions of a national archive (Law on Public Education, 1909).

In 1911, the Law on Antiquities was promulgated. The protection of antiquities was established as an activity of high public importance, requiring the creation of administrative structures guaranteed by the state. The law stipulated that all movable and immovable antiquities and documents from the earliest times up to the Liberation of 1878 fell under the supreme supervision of the Ministry of Public Education. Among the key contributions of this law were: the expansion of the concept of “antiquity”; the broadening of the classification of antiquities; the expansion of the scope of activities and responsibilities for their preservation; the creation of inventories of antiquities; the establishment of administrative structures for their protection; and the assumption of state responsibility for safeguarding cultural heritage (Law on Antiquities, 1911).

However, documents created after 1878 were not considered at all—neither in terms of evaluating their value, nor in establishing repositories to which historically significant parts might be transferred, nor in setting general requirements for institutions creating corresponding documentary funds.

In 1910, the XIV Ordinary National Assembly, by electing a 16-member commission to draft civil service staffing, created some opportunity to discuss these issues. In connection with the appointment of staff to work with archival documentation, two of the members of the commission—Vladimir Dyakovich and Toma Vasilev—made proposals for a radical resolution of archival problems. From the historical reference provided by V. Dyakovich, it is clear that “the archive is in a very deplorable condition, unsystematized, fragmented, destroyed, and probably plundered.” He reproached the authorities for having failed for 33 years to take any care of such valuable documents, scattered in the basements of various institutions. He was precise in his proposal to establish a State Archive under the Council of Ministers as an autonomous institution, with its own building and sufficient staff. Toma Vasilev made analogous

proposals, insisting that “a special building be erected for the state archive, where after the expiration of a certain number of years all important papers of historical or other value would be transferred.” The well-argued proposals remained on paper and were not implemented due to the outbreak of wars (Kuzmanova, 1966; Petkova, 2011).

In 1912, the manual by Dutch archivists Samuel Muller, Johan Feith, and Robert Fruin on the classification and description of archives was published in Bulgarian—a classical work of European archival science. Originally published in Europe in 1898, it had already been translated into German, Italian, and French, making Bulgarian one of the earliest additional translations. The translation was carried out under the explicit instruction and with the financial support of Hristo Chakalov, then governor of the Bulgarian National Bank—a man of remarkable intellect with a Western European education and outlook. Perhaps he foresaw and hoped that the young Bulgarian state would also align itself among the countries with organized archival practice. The manual itself discussed concrete measures and tasks for organizing archival fonds, which served as a safeguard against neglect and destruction (Muller, Feith & Fruin, 1912).

In 1934, another commission was appointed, including people who understood the importance of archives for the development of the state. Prof. Spiridon Kazandjiev had the opportunity to chair this commission. It included members such as P. Mutafchiev, G. Katsarov, and St. Romanski—all professors from Sofia University. The aim of the commission was to conduct the necessary study for the establishment of a State Archive, with the adoption of the required special law by the National Assembly.

In 1939, a draft of a new Law on Antiquities was developed. Article 4 stated: “The National Library in Sofia shall care for manuscripts, archival documents, photographs, and lithographs representing historical figures and events of the Revival, as well as for the private libraries and archives of deceased prominent Bulgarian scholars and cultural figures.” All antiquities were placed under the supreme supervision of the Ministry of Public Education (Savov, 1991).

From the Liberation in 1878 until the beginning of organized archival work in Bulgaria in 1951, numerous writers and public figures published appeals for the creation of an archive, for organized work with documents, and for an end to their scattering and destruction. T. Borov, in his 1931 article “On the Bulgarian Archive,” indignantly observed that even after the solemn celebration of the 50th anniversary of the modern Bulgarian state, during which many sensible proposals were made, no Bulgarian minister took care to establish an archive and safeguard valuable documents. He rightly defined the complete neglect of this issue as “a crime committed by us contemporaries against the Bulgarian nationality and against future generations of Bulgarians” (Petkova, 2011).

On the occasion of the official opening of the Sofia City Archive on 1 December 1941, the literary critic, lawyer, and archivist Ivan Bogdanov organized a two-month course in archival studies for the employees of the Sofia Library. In his lectures, he emphasized the importance of the principle of provenance (respect for the fonds) and introduced into Bulgarian archival practice the terms “archival fonds,” “creator of fonds,” and “archival unit.” Together with archivists, he developed classification schemes and questionnaires for collecting documents and testimonies from figures important to national culture and history. At the end of 1944 and the beginning of 1945, Bogdanov prepared a draft “Decree-Law on the Bulgarian National Archives,” which represented a significant attempt to create a modern regulatory framework but remained unrealized (Mintsev, 1997).

The events of 9 September 1944 found Bulgaria without organized archival work and without an Archives Law. A secular political and economic model was imposed throughout public life, necessitating a reinterpretation of the historical past on new ideological foundations. However, no archival institutions existed, and documentary sources and evidence were lacking.

In the spring of 1945, an exhibition on the resistance movement was prepared in the country. Materials were collected, which later laid the foundations of the Museum of the Revolutionary Movement in Bulgaria. In February 1946, a Party Archive was established under the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party. It was managed by the Party Secretariat, thus marking the beginning of an archive. In gathering documents, neither methods nor resources were spared. In 1949, a Law on the Collection of Documents on the Resistance Movement was published. The Party Archive became the Central Archive of the BCP, whose main task was to collect documents on the history and activities of the Party, both before and after 9 September 1944.

In the first years after World War II, the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (BAS) struggled for recognition as the foundation of a future National Archive. A small collection of personal documents of BAS members grew into an archive for documents of cultural and scientific institutions within BAS, as well as the personal fonds of its members. Prof. Spiridon Kazandjiev, as Scientific Secretary of BAS, prepared a report with a proposal to establish a State Archive to be submitted to the Council of Ministers. This echoed his 1934 proposal, already discussed earlier.

In 1949, the BAS Governing Council decided that its archive be transformed into an Archival Institute tasked with searching, collecting, processing, and providing access to archival documents. Additionally, it was to study the main principles for the scholarly processing of archival materials; ensure their publication; monitor the development of

archival science, diplomatics, and other auxiliary historical sciences worldwide, particularly in the USSR; adopt foreign experience while building Bulgarian archival science; and provide theoretical and practical guidance to all institutions in the country engaged in archival work, “unifying the basic principles of their organization, so as to avoid the existing chaos and lack of any system in both archival management and the publication of collections and individual documents” (Petrova, 2011).

In March 1946, by decree of the Presidium of the National Assembly, the archival fonds of Prof. Ivan Shishmanov were transferred from the “City Archive” to BAS. This legislative act demonstrated the pressing need for the organization of archives, with which the state had long delayed.

In 1948, General Blagoy Penev (Director of the People’s Militia) was sent to Moscow to study archival practices in the Soviet Union. As a result of this mission, he prepared a detailed report proposing the establishment of a Bulgarian State Archive modeled on the Soviet system.

During this period, the collecting activity of archival structures within the National Library, Sofia Municipality, BAS, and others expanded considerably. During the purging of old documents in 1945 and 1948 (when paper shortages necessitated recycling for administrative needs), significant quantities of valuable documents were gathered, mainly personal fonds. The collection of Ottoman documents in the National Library also grew, and with the intervention of the Ministry of the Interior, the export and destruction of archives by emigrants to Turkey was halted.

In 1951, on the proposal of Prime Minister Valko Chervenkov, a commission was appointed under the chairmanship of Acad. D. Kossev to draft an archival law. The commission included specialists in law, literature, history, archival and library science, as well as senior officials from the Ministry of the Interior—K. Kalaidjieva, St. Tyutyundjieva, Yar. Radev, A. Todorov, E. Savova, and two representatives of the Ministry. As a consultant on archival issues, Deputy Head of the Archival Directorate of the USSR, N. Prokopenko, was invited.

On 10 October 1951, by Decree No. 515 of the Presidium of the National Assembly, the State Archival Fonds was established. This decree marked the beginning of centralized archival work in Bulgaria (Decree 515, 1951; Anchova, Piskova & Todorakova, 2021).

For a number of objective and subjective reasons, Bulgaria was slow to realize the need for a legal framework for archives. Following the Liberation from Ottoman rule, during the Temporary Russian Administration, the foundations of administrative practice and culture in the newly created institutions were laid. Mandatory rules for working with documents and archives were introduced. The Russian model was imposed on the administration, which in practice reflected Prussian office practices.

From the Liberation until the end of World War II, work with documents and archives was chaotic, fragmented, and dependent on the discretion of individual heads of institutions or clerks. Attempts by prominent public figures and cultural leaders to develop legal frameworks in this area came to nothing. Provisions for the protection of “antiquities” in several normative acts were not implemented due to a lack of material resources, personnel, and funding. Most often, normative acts focused on purging institutional archives, since the volume of documents in each institution grew rapidly.

3. CONCLUSION

Analyzing this period (1878–1951), one clearly observes the tension between the desire to build a modern state and the lack of institutional capacity to organize and preserve the documentary heritage. Bulgarian administration adopted external models (Russian-Prussian, and later Soviet), but long remained without its own sustainable traditions in archival work. It is telling that normative acts more often focused on “purging” and destroying documents rather than on preserving them. The efforts of individuals such as Ivan Shishmanov, Vladimir Dyakovich, Toma Vasilev, and Ivan Bogdanov testify to a recognized need for the creation of a national archive, but political and social circumstances hindered the realization of these initiatives.

In conclusion, it may be said that Bulgarian archival work underwent a long and difficult path from the Liberation to the establishment of a centralized structure in 1951. The lack of consistent state policy, shortage of qualified personnel, and insufficient material base delayed the institutionalization of archives. Nevertheless, legislative attempts, along with the contributions of individual scholars and public figures, prepared the ground for the emergence of the State Archival Fonds. This development was not only an administrative achievement but also a crucial step in preserving national memory and building modern Bulgarian identity.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This paper is the result of research conducted under the project “The Institution of the Archive in the Governance Model of Bulgaria in the Period 1878–1912,” No. KII-06-M85/2 of 05.12.2024, funded by the Bulgarian National

Science Fund at the Ministry of Education and Science, within the framework of the 2024 competition for Fundamental Scientific Research for Young Scholars and Postdoctoral Researchers.

REFERENCES

- Anchova, K., Piskova, M., & Todorakova, M. (2021). Arhiv na balgarskite arhivi. T. 2, 70 godini ot sazdavaneto na darzhavnite arhivi. Sofia, Avangard prima.
- Bogdanov, I. (2014). Arhivologia, NBU.
- Denchev, St., & Vasileva S. (2006). Darzhavna politika za kulturno-istoricheskoto nasledstvo na Bulgaria 1878 g. S: "Za bukvite – O pismenehy".
- Darzhaven vestnik, br. 31, 1888 g. – Vremenni pravila za nauchnite i knizhovni predpriyatia.
- Darzhaven vestnik, br. 63, 1903 g. – Zakon za unishtozhavane na starite dokumenti i knizha, provereni ot Varhovnata smetna palata.
- Darzhaven vestnik, br. 281, 1903 g. – Pravila za zapazvane i unishtozhavane na starite dela i knizha v sadebnite uchrezhdenia.
- Darzhaven vestnik, br. 49, 1909 g. – Zakon za narodnoto prosveshlenie.
- Darzhaven vestnik, br. 37, 1911 g. – Zakon za starinite.
- Darzhaven vestnik, br. 13, 1890 g. – Zakon za izdirvane na starini i spomagane na nauchni i knizhovni predpriyatia
- Ukaz № 515 ot 10 oktombri 1951 g. na Prezidiuma na Narodnoto sabranie – za sazdavane na Darzhaven arhiven fond.
- Kamburova, I. (2023). Arhivno-dokumentalnoto nasledstvo na profesor Todor Borov: elektronno predstavayane na lichnia mu arhiv v Natsionalnata biblioteka "Sv. sv. Kiril i Metodiy" : disertatsionen trud, Sofia.
- Kolev, A. (2024). Darzhavno-pravnata problematika v obuchenieto na balgarskite arhivisti prez 50-te – 80-te godini na HH v. V: Arhivno delo. Uchebno sadarzhanie i metodi na obuchenie v spetsialnost arhivistika i dokumentalistika, Sofia, Za bukvite – O pismenehy.
- Kuzmanova, M. (1966). Istoria na arhivite i organizatsia na arhivnoto delo v Bulgaria. S: Nauka i izkustvo.
- Mintsev, D. (1997). Novi dannii za arhivnoto zakonodatelstvo v Bulgaria // APr, № 1-2.
- Myuler, S., Y. Feyt, R. Fruin. (1912). Rakovodstvo za klasirane i opisane na arhivite. S: Pechatnitsa "Nadezhda".
- Neykova, Andr. (2007). Arhivi i obshtestvo. S: Sofia R.
- Nikolova, I. (2024). Arhivite na BTA ot nachaloto do sega. V: Arhivno delo. Uchebno sadarzhanie i metodi na obuchenie v spetsialnost arhivistika i dokumentalistika, Sofia, Za bukvite – O pismenehy.
- Petkova, St. (2011). Uvod v arhivoznaniето. V. Tarnovo: UI "Sv. sv. Kiril i Metodiy".
- Petkova, St. (2020). Razbiraneto za arhiv dnes, i malko po-nazad vav vremeto. V: Arhivi i istoria: vzaimodeystvia, perspektivi. Sofia, SU „Sv. Kliment Ohridski“.
- Petkova, St. (2021). Lektsii i izsledvania na arhivisti za istoriyata na darzhavnite institutsii v Bulgaria. Izvestia na darzhavnite arhivi, kn. 121.
- Petrova, Evd. (2011). Sazdavane na darzhavnite arhivi v Bulgaria // IDA, kn. 101.
- Savov, N. (1991). Kam istoriyata na balgarskata arhivistika. Balgarskata obshtestvenost i dokumentalnoto ni nasledstvo. S: BAN.