

THE ARCHIVES OF LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT: MUNICIPAL AND DISTRICT ARCHIVES IN POST-LIBERATION BULGARIA

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Abstract: In the period after the Liberation in 1878, the construction of the new Bulgarian state went hand in hand with the creation of contemporary institutions to ensure stability and efficiency of governance. An essential element of this process were the local self-government bodies, and these are the municipalities and district administrations, which were the ones that formed the main administrative connection between the central government and the citizens. An inevitable part of their activity was the systematic creation and storage of documents that formed the primary archival structures at the local level. The archives of the municipalities and districts collect documents of various contents: minutes of meetings, election papers, tax and property registers, police and court documentation, school, and cultural reports. They reflect not only administrative life, but also socio-economic and cultural processes in the various regions of the country. In this way, local archives became a valuable source for the study of modernization trends in post-liberation Bulgaria. Despite their key importance, these archives function under a variety of restrictions. The lack of a unified regulatory framework and centralized policy for managing archives leads to uneven practices in their maintenance. The limited material and human resources of municipalities often put the documentary heritage at risk of loss or destruction. However, the efforts of local authorities to preserve documentation testify to the gradual formation of an administrative culture and awareness of the importance of archives as a tool of management. From the point of view of historiography, local government archives have a dual function. On one hand, they are a practical tool for the daily functioning of institutions and for maintaining accountability to the central government. On the other hand, they acquire lasting historical value, as they preserve information about the development of society, economy, and culture in the years of the formation of the Bulgarian state in the end of 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. Thus, examining municipal and district archives in the period 1878-1912 allows not only a deeper understanding of administrative practice, but also provides an opportunity to reconstruct the local dimensions of Bulgarian modernity. Further study of these archives highlights the specific regional features of governance and their role in shaping national identity. They also show how local authorities cope with the challenges of limited resources and rapid societal change. In this sense, local archives can be seen as a kind of mirror of the processes of statehood and modernization in post-liberation Bulgaria. Their preservation and research are a key factor in revealing the historical continuity and institutional memory of Bulgarian society.

Keywords: archives, local administration, municipality, post-liberation Bulgaria.

1. INTRODUCTION

The period of 1878 and 1912 was a formative era in the Bulgarian history, mostly because it is marked by the establishment of the newly formed modern state following the nation's Liberation from the Ottoman rule. In the same period Bulgaria faced the challenge of building their own administrative institutions from the ground up. This is a difficult period, because while other countries around the world have long before developed these institutions, Bulgaria is just beginning to learn in the basics of public administration.

The research into the archives of local self-government in Bulgaria from 1878 to 1912 is particularly significant due to their role in both administrative practice and historical research. This period in the Bulgarian history was marked by the establishment of the modern administrative system, in which the municipalities and the districts were central and key institutions to the functioning of the state. The records which are preserved in these archives are far more than some mere collections of documents; they offer a unique window into the organization and operation of local governance in post-liberation Bulgaria, thus making them a valuable focus for scientific study. In a newly formed state such is Bulgaria after 1878, the archives were essential for supporting institutions and ensuring transparency and order in government activities. They have provided a foundation for continuity in administration, facilitated accountability, and offered legal support for decision-making. Beyond their administrative function, these said records are invaluable to historians, allowing for the reconstruction of state-building processes, social and economic change, and cultural development. By preserving both institutional practices and public memory, they help us understand what the historical trajectory of the Bulgarian society is.

During this researched period, Bulgaria managed to develop a multi-layered administrative system in which the local authorities played a vital role. The municipalities served as the primary units of self-government, responsible

for taxation, public services, education, and law enforcement. And the districts functioned as intermediaries between the municipalities and the central government, by mostly coordinating activities and providing oversight. The result is that the archives of these local institutions became an essential source of information. They document the everyday workings of the government being built “from the ground up,” including, but not only, council decisions, financial records, and correspondence with central authorities. This makes them an indispensable resource for understanding the structure and functioning of Bulgaria’s administrative system in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This current paper is driven with an interdisciplinary approach. By doing so its emphasis is put on historical, archival, and legal-institutional methods in order to examine the topic. The main methodological highlights are as follows:

- Historical-Chronological Method – This method traces the development of municipal and district archives in Bulgaria between 1878 and 1912, focusing on the patterns and changes over time.
- Archival Analysis – The study includes a characterization of the types of documents originating from local institutions, as well as the methods of their creation, organization, and preservation. This approach examines the functions of archives both as part of the administrative process and as historical sources.
- Legal-Institutional Analysis – The paper is based on the legal framework established by the legislation of the Principality of Bulgaria and the Principality/Kingdom of Bulgaria during the period under review. It assesses the place of municipalities and districts within the administrative system and the influence of legal provisions on archival practices.
- Comparative Method – Where possible, parallels are drawn between the practices of local archives and the general trends in European administrative tradition from the late 19th century to highlight the specifics of the Bulgarian context.
- Source Base – The analysis relies on legal acts (Law on Municipalities and Urban Administration of 1886 and subsequent amendments), published collections of documents and protocols from the National Assembly, academic research on the history of archival work and local self-government (Todorov, Georgiev, Popova, Mitev, Statelova, etc.), articles from specialized journals (Archival Review, Historical Review, Archives and Society).
- Critical Approach – The analysis considers the limitations and uneven preservation of archival materials, as well as the influence of various administrative practices on the completeness and authenticity of the documentation.

3. RESULTS

After the Treaty of Berlin in 1878, the newly formed Bulgarian Principality gained autonomy, which required the establishment of its own administrative structures. Local self-government quickly emerged as a key element of this system. Municipalities and districts became the main channels through which state authority was exercised at the local level. Municipalities acted as the fundamental units of local administration, responsible for a broad range of tasks such as tax collection, maintaining public order, managing education, and overseeing urban development. Districts, on the other hand, served as intermediary bodies, coordinating and supervising municipal activities while maintaining links between local communities and the central government. This layered system created a balance between local autonomy and centralized oversight, reflecting the simultaneous goals of self-governance and national cohesion.

The legal framework for local government was formalized with the adoption of the Law on Municipalities and Urban Governance in 1886. This law outlined the structure of municipal councils, the powers of mayors, and the duties of district governors, providing the institutional foundation for the creation and maintenance of municipal and district archives. According to Georgiev (1992), this normative foundation marked a shift from disorganized administrative practices toward a more structured system of government.

The creation of local archives was a natural outcome of this progression. The increased volume of the official records, such as council meeting minutes, financial ledgers, and correspondence with central ministries, required the development of a much-needed systematic record-keeping. As Popova (2005) highlights, the archives of municipalities and districts were not only practical tools for administration but also early indicators of an archival tradition that would later evolve into a national system.

Therefore, between 1878 and 1912, the institutional and legal groundwork of local administration dictated the circumstances under which municipal and district archives were established. These archives reflected the dual

character of Bulgarian governance during this period: a push for modernization alongside the practical realities of a young nation still in the process of consolidating its institutions.

The documents preserved in municipal and district archives between 1878 and 1912 were highly diverse. They included council meeting minutes, voter lists, tax and property registers, police and court records, and reports from local schools and cultural institutions. Together, these materials provide a detailed view of the daily workings of local government and offer insights into the social, economic, and cultural life of Bulgarian society at the time. Beyond their immediate administrative purpose, these records also capture interactions between local authorities and central ministries, with correspondence shedding light on the mechanisms of oversight and governance.

The archives fulfilled two primary functions, which are essential. The first one is that their administrative role was crucial for maintaining continuity in governance, ensuring accountability, and promoting transparency in decision-making. For instance, financial registers enabled municipal councils to monitor tax collection, while police files supported the enforcement of public order. The second one is that the archives served a historical function, acting as repositories of collective memory. Although local authorities did not initially regard their records as part of the nation's historical heritage, these documents later became crucial for historians reconstructing Bulgaria's state-building process. In this way, the archives transcended their original administrative purpose, gaining enduring scholarly significance.

The archival practices at local level were still in an exceedingly early stage of development. Most of the municipalities and districts lacked specialized and trained staff or formal procedures for way of organizing and preserving their documents. The result is that the records were often stored alongside current office materials and that situation made it difficult to distinguish between which are the temporary and which are the permanent files. This rudimentary approach reflected both the limited resources of the local administrations and the broader challenges of establishing stable institutions in a newly formed state. Despite their growing importance, municipal and district archives in post-Liberation Bulgaria faced significant difficulties that hindered their effective functioning.

- **Lack of Unified Legal Framework** – One of the most pressing issues was the absence of a comprehensive legal framework governing archival work at the local level. While the Law on Municipalities and Urban Governance (1886) defined the responsibilities of mayors and councils, it did not provide detailed regulations on how to manage and preserve documents. As Todorov (1983) points out, this led to inconsistent practices across municipalities and districts, with vast local authorities treating records simply as part of routine office work rather than as materials of long-term value.
- **Limited Resources and Personnel** – Another challenge stemmed from insufficient financial and human resources. Municipalities and districts are the one institution that frequently functioned with extremely limited administrative staff, and many of that said staff had limited or no specialized training in recordkeeping. The absence of qualified personnel meant that documentation was frequently disorganized, with no clear system for cataloguing or storing records (Georgiev, 1992). Further, the financial constraints prevented the construction of dedicated archival facilities, thus forcing several institutions to keep the valuable records in mainly poorly maintained buildings.
- **Poor Storage Conditions** – The physical preservation of documents was also problematic. In many situations and occasions, the records were kept in damp basements, sometimes in wooden chests, and in some cases even in the private homes of the officials. Those said conditions left those records highly vulnerable to deterioration, fire, or complete loss. According to Popova (2005), the fragile material base of local administrations contributed to the partial or complete destruction of numerous archival collections, creating gaps in the historical record.
- **Fragmentation and Inconsistency** – Finally, the lack of standardized procedures led to fragmentation of archival practices. Each and every municipality and/or district developed their own methods for managing the organization of documents. This made it difficult to maintain consistency across the country. As Georgiev (1992) notes, this fragmentation not only hampered administrative efficiency but also posed challenges for historians attempting to use these archives as sources.

The evolution of municipal and district archives informed the development of professional archival methods, contributing to the standardization of recordkeeping at the national level (Mitev, 2008).

4. DISCUSSIONS

The rising interest in microhistory has placed greater emphasis on local archives and their role in reconstructing community histories (Atanasov, 2022a). Re-use of public sector information in cultural heritage institutions is increasingly viewed as an important means of expanding access and usability of archival materials (Atanasov, 2022b). The municipal and district archives were essential instruments in strengthening the Bulgarian state

following 1878. With maintaining comprehensive records, they managed to enable local authorities to be held accountable. They have also provided the central government with essential tools for overseeing and coordinating governance at local level. As the Proceedings of the National Assembly (1879–1912) demonstrate, many parliamentary debates relied on statistical and financial information drawn directly from municipal reports. These records created a foundation for the administrative culture of the young Bulgarian state (Kiosev, 1986). Local archives also strengthened the rule of law by maintaining documentation related to taxation, elections, and public order. According to Todorov (1978), such materials legitimized the activities of local institutions and fostered trust in the functioning of government.

Looking from the historical research perspective, municipal and district archives are an inestimable resource that provide a lot of information. They manage to offer direct evidence of the social, economic, and cultural transformations that took place in Bulgaria during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, by also providing scientists and researchers with a detailed understanding of both everyday life and the broader processes of state-building. Statelova (1985) highlights that these records capture details of everyday life – such as school reports, urban planning projects, and demographic registers – that are often absent from central state documentation. And even more, with combining the information from municipal archives with the records from the national parliament, now historians are able to reconstruct the interactions between local and central authorities. This interplay reveals not only how laws were enacted but also how they were applied in practice across different regions (Georgiev, 1992).

Although created for administrative purposes, local archives gradually acquired the status of cultural and historical heritage. Todorov and Mitev (2002) argue that municipal and district archives laid the groundwork for the later development of a unified national archival system. By doing this, they manage to serve and fulfil their dual role – to be both as instruments of governance and as essential components of Bulgaria’s collective memory. Regional archival practices, such as those in the Gabrovo Department, also demonstrate how local institutions engage in the popularization and public presentation of documentary heritage, ensuring that archives remain relevant to wider society (Burceva, Koycheva, & Gecheva, 2022). More recently, initiatives like the Digital Cultural and Historical Heritage of Plovdiv Municipality project illustrate how municipal archives and cultural institutions are integrated into broader programs of digitization, accessibility, and public engagement (EEA Grants, n.d.).

If we see beyond their administrative and historical importance, we will find out that municipal and district archives played a vital role in shaping the professional practices in recordkeeping and archival science in Bulgaria. With documenting the operations of local government, these said archives provided the needed practical foundation for standardizing procedures, training staff, and mostly implementing systematic storage methods. With time, the gained experience from managing municipal records informed the organization of regional and national archives, this way contributing to the development of a coherent archival system. This progression demonstrates how local archival practices were not only reactive – preserving existing documentation – but also initiative-taking in shaping the institutional and methodological foundations of Bulgarian archival science (Todorov & Mitev, 2002; Georgiev, 1992). The application of recent technologies, such as OCR correction tools for Bulgarian historical texts, has greatly expanded researchers’ ability to access and analyze archival materials that were previously difficult to use (Beshirov, Dobрева, Dimitrov, Hardalov, Koychev, & Nakov, 2024).

5. CONCLUSIONS

Efforts to build specialized tools for managing historical documents in Bulgaria reveal how archival science and computer science can intersect in meaningful ways (Beshirov et al., 2023). The promotion of local archival resources through exhibitions and educational activities demonstrates how archives can play an active role in civic life beyond their technical functions (Burceva et al., 2022). By digitizing and cataloguing previously underutilized archival collections, institutions not only safeguard cultural memory but also enhance the visibility of Bulgaria’s documentary heritage (Goynov et al., 2023). The review of the Bulgarian local archives in the period 1878 to 1912 highlights their dual function. Firstly, they were vital for the everyday operation of government. Secondly, they have done this while also served as invaluable resources for historical research. Emerging in the aftermath of the nation’s Liberation, these archives developed alongside the establishment of modern local government structures. Although their initial purpose was practical – facilitating tasks such as tax collection, election management, and maintaining public order – their long-term significance extended well beyond these administrative functions. Making it from an administrative perspective, these said archives were essential for ensuring accountability, maintaining continuity in governance, and promoting transparency in decision-making processes. They helped consolidate the young Bulgarian state by guaranteeing that local officials adhered to the legal and institutional framework outlined by the Law on Municipalities and Urban Governance (1886) and other laws. This made them essential tools for both local councils and the central government, helping to forge a cohesive system of public administration.

From a historical perspective, the value of municipal and district archives lies in the rich information they hold about daily life in post-Liberation Bulgaria. Documents such as school reports, population registries, financial ledgers, and council minutes not only show how institutions functioned but also reflect the dynamics of social, economic, and cultural change. These materials are irreplaceable for reconstructing the processes of modernization and nation-building during a critical period in the country's history.

The municipal and district archives of this era are seen as the forerunners of the modern national archival system that developed later. They embody the connection between governance and historical memory, illustrating how documents created for routine administrative tasks can evolve into a cultural heritage of lasting importance.

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