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## A Brief Overview of the History of Journalism in Bulgaria (1878-1944)

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**Abstract:** *The article provides a brief overview of the history of journalism in Bulgaria in the so-called first Bulgarian capitalism (1878-1944). In the post-liberation decades until the end of the 19th century, the press played a vital role in Bulgaria’s domestic political life. As the country sought to establish itself as an independent nation, the press became a platform for political interaction, perception moulding, and the expression of various ideologies. The paper aims to chronologically present significant events during the designated period and scrutinize the interconnectedness between journalism and politics, the press and statehood, media and its powerful role in shaping public opinion.*

**Key words:** Journalism, Bulgaria, Bulgarian Capitalism, Press, Politics

### Introduction

Journalism in Bulgaria has always been not only a means of mass information but also a powerful tool for preparing, forming, directing and expressing public opinion. This has explained the desire of the ruling circles to control and regulate the printed press in particular and the media in general. For the two post-liberation decades until the end of the 19th century, the two main political parties, liberals and conservatives, which made up the Constituent Assembly (1879), disintegrated and regrouped into a dozen political formations, which, due to their not always clear programs and political ideas, turned out to be more recognizable through the names of their leaders – Stambolovists, Karavelists, Tsankovists, Radoslavists, Tonchevists, etc. This confusion had a natural projection in Bulgarian journalism as well. Each party published one or more party newspapers, in which sharply polemical articles predominated, often with extremely unrestrained tone and language. Researchers of

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the problem claim it is interesting that in our country the caustic, malicious and sometimes even sarcastic interpretation of events and processes still passes for good journalism. It is accepted as an axiom that a good journalist must necessarily be a good polemicist, behave provocatively, passionately stick to their theses, and have a position to defend pathetically, sometimes without this position being assaulted. A good journalist is usually said to have a sharp pen.<sup>1</sup> It seems that the reason for this is a revival and post-renaissance momentum from the end of the 19th century, when many of the Bulgarian newspapers were fraught with malicious and unrestrained polemics, often beyond decency.

### The Beginning

The occurrence of the periodical press in Bulgaria in the middle of the 19th century was a crucial milestone in the country's history, contributing to the preservation of Bulgarian identity, the dissemination of knowledge, and the progress towards liberation. It was the impulse that, after *Istoriya Slavyanobolgarskaya* (*Slavonic-Bulgarian History*) of Paisius of Hilendar<sup>2</sup> and the subsequent educational efforts of early Renaissance figures such as Dr. Petar Beron, Neofit Bozveli, Hilarion of Makariopolis, Vasil Aprilov, Rayno Popovich and many others herald progress and outline the modern perspective for Bulgarian society. The first Bulgarian magazine *Lyuboslovie* (*Love of Words*) (1842) edited by Konstantin Fotinov and the first Bulgarian newspaper published by Ivan Bogorov *Balgarski orel* (*Bulgarian Eagle*) (1846)<sup>3</sup> and the newspapers of P.R. Slaveykov mark an already intensified process of cultural and spiritual unification, which after the Crimean War found new horizons for development in the editions of Rakovski, in the newspapers of the Bulgarian emigrant circles in Bucharest and Brăila, and reached its peak in the publications of Lyuben Karavelov's *Svoboda* (*Freedom*) (1869-1872) and *Nezavisimost* (*Independence*), and also in Hristo Botev's *Duma na bulgarskite emigranti* (*Word of the Bulgarian*

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<sup>1</sup> Borislavov, 2010a.

<sup>2</sup> Saint Paisius of Hilendar was an important figure in Bulgarian history and literature. He was born in 1722 in Bansko, a town in present-day southwestern Bulgaria. Paisius was a Bulgarian monk, scholar, and writer, and he is best known for his significant contribution to the Bulgarian National Revival. Paisius of Hilendar played a crucial role in the preservation and revitalization of Bulgarian national identity during a time when the Bulgarian lands were under Ottoman rule. His most famous work, *Istoriya Slavyanobolgarskaya*, which he completed in 1762, played a pivotal role in fostering national consciousness and unity and influenced the development of modern Bulgarian literature and language; see: Zatylnyy, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> The first Bulgarian information and education newspaper published in Leipzig. During that time lots of newspapers were printed abroad. The first newspaper issued in Bulgaria was *Vitoshka* newspaper (1879) which was published in Sofia.

*Emigrants*) (1871), *Zname (The Banner)* (1874-1875) and *Budilnik (Alarm clock)* (1873).<sup>4</sup>

The achievements of the Bulgarian press during the Renaissance prepared its development in the conditions of the newly liberated Bulgarian bourgeois state. The content of the newspapers and magazines comprised various information – descriptions of places in Bulgaria and Europe, especially Slavic ones; history of Bulgaria from its glorious years; encouragement of the creation of new schools and how to better operate them; trading tips and economic news as well as reviews of new books. The first Bulgarian newspaper followed the fashion of the “information” newspapers that were flooding Western Europe at the time. However, Bogorov’s idea was for the publication to be political because it aimed at Bulgarians to rise for freedom, to have their own language, church, and not to forget that they were Slavs.<sup>5</sup> It is essential to note that the Bulgarian language (like Polish, Czech, Slovak, Slovenian, etc.) belongs to the Slavic branch of the Indo-European language family.<sup>6</sup>

It should also be noted that due to the specifics of the development of the Bulgarian Renaissance press (published mainly in Turkey and Romania), most authors for this period combine chronological with geographical criteria.<sup>7</sup>

## **The Awakening**

The beginning of Bulgarian journalism set by Konstantin Fotinov and Ivan Bogorov was this incentive that helped Bulgarians feel like the other European peoples since they could read in their own language and become more united thanks to speech. These early periodicals<sup>8</sup> faced numerous challenges, including censorship and restrictions imposed by the Ottoman authorities. Despite these obstacles, the Bulgarian press persevered and continued to grow, expanding its coverage to include political, social, and economic matters.<sup>9</sup> Newspapers and magazines not only provided a platform for intellectual discussions and the exchange of ideas but also played a significant role in shaping public opinion and mobilizing the population during the struggle for liberation from the Ottoman Empire. Periodicals, which were 107 during the Renaissance, reached the impressive number of more than 10200<sup>10</sup> after the Liberation in 1878 until 1944. Each of them played a fundamental role in the cultural awakening of the people, fostering a sense of identity and unity<sup>11</sup> among the Bulgarian people. The press was

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<sup>4</sup> Borislavov, 2010a.

<sup>5</sup> Tomov, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Karamian & Maksymiuk, 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Borislavov, 2010b.

<sup>8</sup> See: Borshukov, 1976 for more details about the history of Bulgarian journalism.

<sup>9</sup> Brodel, 1988.

<sup>10</sup> Konstantinova, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Ivanchev, 1962-1969.

an expression of the people's will<sup>12</sup> and the onset of developing education, implementing political aims as well as statehood since one of the most important functions of the newspapers was the different points of view.

### **The Tarnovo Constitution**

The principle of freedom of the press is a product of bourgeois revolutions. The practical meaning of freedom of speech and the press is reduced to the possibility of freely disseminating ideas, views, news, thoughts, messages, etc. in contrast to medieval censorship. One of the essential provisions of the Tarnovo Constitution,<sup>13</sup> which characterizes it as the most democratic for its time, is the one that proclaims freedom of the press (Article 79).<sup>14</sup>

Freedom of the press is generally expressed in the prohibition of censorship and the absence of administrative restrictions on the publication of printed works. According to Article 79 of the Tarnovo Constitution: "The press is free. No censorship is allowed, nor is any deposit required from writers, publishers and printers. When the writer is known and lives in the Principality, the publisher, printer and distributor will not be prosecuted".<sup>15</sup>

In practice, however, the periodical press proved to be poorly prepared for the trials that life in the young state would put before it. The diverse cultural and political ideas, mainly from Russia and France and to a lesser extent from Austria and Germany, which exerted the strongest influences in the formation of the Bulgarian Renaissance intelligentsia, after the Liberation proved to be a source of irreconcilable political passions and partisan feuds regarding the structure and governance of the Principality. Very soon after the Constituent Assembly and the election of Alexander of Battenberg as a Bulgarian knyaz (prince),<sup>16</sup> the picture of socio-political life in our country would illustrate how the Tarnovo Constitution and the principle of pluralism enshrined in it failed to reliably guarantee public order and the integrity of the nation. Only two years after the Liberation, the constitution itself already had its zealous detractors and defenders, with the newspapers in the Principality of Bulgaria becoming the main field for their battles.

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<sup>12</sup> Nikolov, 1932.

<sup>13</sup> The Tarnovo Constitution is the first constitution of Bulgaria. It was adopted on April 16, 1879, by the Constituent National Assembly in Tarnovo. The Tarnovo Constitution aims to legally consolidate the socio-economic and political changes in Bulgarian society after the Liberation in 1878.

<sup>14</sup> Bratanov, 2003.

<sup>15</sup> Tŭrnovska konstitutsiya, 1879; See also Hertslet, 1891.

<sup>16</sup> Alexander of Battenberg's election as a Bulgarian knyaz took place by a mutual agreement of the Great Powers according to the Treaty of Berlin, but Russia played a leading role.

## Journalism and Politics

Between 1878 and 1885 well-known politicians, journalists and writers such as Stefan Stambolov and Zahariy Stoyanov contributed immensely to the press. After Alexander of Battenberg's coup in 1881,<sup>17</sup> which overthrew the government of Petko Karavelov and suspended the Tarnovo Constitution, the weekly newspaper *Svoboden pechat* (*Free Press*), published in 1881 in Tarnovo was one of the unmuffled voices of justice and dignity in the Principality. Stoyanov wrote an article asking whether there should exist Rumelia<sup>18</sup> in several issues of *Borba* (*Fight*)<sup>19</sup> newspaper (June-August 1885). He was undoubtedly the most noteworthy phenomenon of this period in Bulgarian journalism. Canonized as a classic of Bulgarian literature mainly because of *Memoirs of the Bulgarian Uprisings*, Stoyanov also left behind a very bright, expressively talented, albeit at times contradictory, journalism. His name is associated with one of the rare (if not the only) examples in recent Bulgarian history of how a large-scale political act, such as the Unification of the Principality of Bulgaria with Eastern Rumelia, can be carefully prepared and implemented through the media. The successful act of Unification was the most significant political achievement of the Bulgarian society after the Renaissance, and Bulgarian journalism, in the person of Zahariy Stoyanov, contributed to this.

It is worth noting that politics and journalism went hand in hand, which is visible from the first significant newspapers that included clashes of political views. The first thing political leaders such as Grigor Nachovich (conservative) and Petko Slaveykov (liberal) did was make newspapers. Todor Ikononov was another politician who was also a writer and publisher. The word was the new modern and powerful weapon that was used to attack and attract the attention of foreign journalists.<sup>20</sup> For example, James David Bourchier, who was *The Time*'s intermediary between the Balkan states during the Balkan Wars (1912-1913), lived in Sofia for more than 20 years<sup>21</sup> witnessing various events in our country.

On the eve of the wars, the figure was impressive – over 1,700 titles per year in a very wide thematic range: social science, religious, philological, historical and

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<sup>17</sup> The coup was led by pro-Russian Bulgarian Army officers.

<sup>18</sup> “Tryabva li da sashtestvuva Rumelia?”; Eastern Rumelia was an autonomous province of the Ottoman Empire, established in Southern Bulgaria according to the Treaty of Berlin of 1878 and existed until the union with the Principality of Bulgaria in 1885.

<sup>19</sup> Due to the immigration flow in 1904 *Borba* (*Fight*) was the first Bulgarian newspaper in Chicago, USA. Then periodicals spread to New York, Washington, Los Angeles, etc.

<sup>20</sup> The external information dimension is manifested through the Bulgarian Telegraph Agency (BTA), established in 1898. At the beginning of its activity, BTA regularly informed about the life of the royal and imperial courts in Europe. Criminal messages also prevailed. Almost all issues contained commercial telegrams. In 1912-1913 (in connection with the wars) interest in events in the Balkans grew. The agency increased the amount of information about abroad. This necessitated the expansion of BTA's services.

<sup>21</sup> *Zhurnalistika i darzhavnost 1878-1944 g.*, 2024.

geographical literature, as well as works on legal, economic, pedagogical, medical and agricultural issues of a popularizing, reference and research nature. Publishing activity was concentrated mainly in the capital – 49% of books and 48% of periodicals were printed there. Two crucially important factors, a consequence of the already mentioned socio-economic, political and cultural changes, determined the dynamics in the development of the Bulgarian periodical press – the growth of literacy and the development of urban culture. The intensity of these processes during the Revival and in the post-liberation period was completely different.<sup>22</sup>

How influential the press was during the following years, which included the outburst of World War I, was visible in publications in newspapers like *Mir* (*Peace*) and *Razvigor*, especially in 1923 when the 9 June coup d'état took place. Aleksandar Stamboliyski's elected government was overthrown and replaced by the one led by Aleksandar Tsankov. One should not overlook the fact that there was censorship imposed by the ones ruling the country. There were attempts to control and manipulate public sentiment through the press. However, this tendency was not present only in Bulgaria. Politicians who later became prime ministers started their careers as journalists. It was thanks to the press that one could say what they think and express ideas freely. Moreover, philosophers, historians, writers, poets, jurists, etc., all of whom were authority figures, published their works in newspapers and magazines. Bulgarian journalist and translator Joseph Herbst's *A. B. V.* (*A. B. C.*) newspaper, Danail Krapchev's *Zora* (*Sunrise*), one of the biggest daily newspapers between the two world wars, and Geo Milev's *Plamak* (*Flame*) magazine,<sup>23</sup> are only a few instances that fostered national consciousness and raised awareness about the social, cultural and political issues faced by Bulgarians.<sup>24</sup> Humour was not neglected either. *Shturets* (*Cricket*) newspaper's main topic was the domestic political life in Bulgaria. It published cartoons, rhyming satires, humorous miniatures and feuilletons. A large part of them was the work of Rayko Aleksiev.

After the St. Nedelya Church assault on April 16, 1925, which was a terrorist act, by a group of far-left activists of the Military Organization of the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP), there were attempts to impose a total monopoly on journalism. Yet, there were illegal prints and private publishing houses that continued to disseminate information.

In 1934 there was a coup d'état carried out by the Political Circle "Zveno" and the Military Union with the help of the army. The new government headed by Kimon Georgiev repealed the Tarnovo Constitution, dissolved the National Assembly, and banned political parties and revolutionary organizations. It led to media being

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<sup>22</sup> Borislavov, 2010b.

<sup>23</sup> Regarding the focus on political topics in periodicals, Geo Milev spoke about "one new party – the whole people".

<sup>24</sup> See also Panayotov, 1982, 1999.

controlled by the state power and pluralism being abused. Party newspapers were also banned. However, *Mir (Peace)* continued to be published because since 1923 it was no longer a party-oriented newspaper and it is very often called *the Bulgarian Times*.<sup>25</sup>

In an attempt to finally subjugate the printed media, in July 1938, Prime Minister Georgi Kyoseivanov submitted a bill on the press to the National Assembly. The sharp reaction against the bill on the press forced the government to abandon it, but censorship remained. From the rostrum of the National Assembly, MP Grigor Vasilev assessed it by claiming that the government maintained an impossible, shameful, disgraceful, disgusting censorship because it knew that it could not live without censorship. The whole intelligentsia along with artists, composers and other prominent figures united themselves against it. Therefore, there was a constant relation between politics and media.

The inherent modernization processes of the pre-war period were then experiencing new developments, manifested in the continuous emergence of specialized publications, the growth of the provincial press, as well as the so-called “Americanization” of the press through large-format photographs and advertisements, informative headlines, and brief genre forms. An essential aspect of the modernizing tendencies was the emergence of radio, first as a public institution<sup>26</sup> (*Rodno radio*, 1930) and then as a state media after March 31, 1935.<sup>27</sup>

Due to the global economic crisis in the first half of the 1930s, the media tycoon Atanas Damyanov took urgent measures to successfully emerge from the crisis. The real peak in the development of Atanas Damyanov’s newspaper empire was during the years of World War II. The more the war deepened, the more the interest of readers in the news published in the daily newspapers *Utro (Morning)*, *Zarya (Dawn)* and *Dnevnik (The Diary)* enhanced. The increased circulation of the three newspapers brought huge profits. *Utro (Morning)* was a mass newspaper intended for the broad masses. *Dnevnik (Diary)* was written to the taste of readers with right-wing beliefs. *Zarya (Dawn)* was not only oriented towards people with left-wing views but was also written by left-wing intellectuals. With each passing day, the circulation of the newspaper *Utro (Morning)* grew and it would become the most widely circulated daily newspaper in Bulgaria. Its peak circulation reached 320,000 copies, but it was actually read by over a million readers.<sup>28</sup>

After September 9, 1944, Atanas Damyanov’s newspaper empire collapsed. The new ruling circles not only immediately closed the newspapers *Utro (Morning)* and *Dnevnik (Diary)* but the printing house was also occupied. On December 30, 1944, the newspaper *Zarya (Dawn)* also ceased publication. Damyanov was arrested hours

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<sup>25</sup> Konstantinova, 2008.

<sup>26</sup> For more information on state institutions, see: Metodiev & Stoyanov, 1987.

<sup>27</sup> Borislavov, 2010b.

<sup>28</sup> See: Georgiev, 2014.

after the coup d'état. In 1943 and 1944, Sofia and other towns were bombed by Anglo-American aircraft. A number of editorial offices and printing houses were affected and destroyed, leading to the closure of many newspapers.

Overall, the period from 1919 to 1944<sup>29</sup> was a time of catastrophic results of the wars that sharply changed the political, social and cultural context in Bulgarian society. The country experienced a crisis that was not only economic but also spiritual. Political life was dominated by a sharp opposition of extreme left and right totalitarian ideologies.<sup>30</sup>

## Conclusions

Bulgarian journalism, for the most part, during the period 1878-1944, repeated the European tradition in journalism – every event and fact, in most cases, was viewed from a certain point of view. Party-oriented newspapers in our country defended their political ideas and trends, instilling and propagating among the readership patterns of thinking, feelings and social behavior.

As in other countries, in Bulgaria, numerous attempts were made to limit the freedom of the press. This was precisely the main reason for the state's interference in it. However, experience shows that the periodical press should follow the interests and needs of society as a whole, its values, norms and expectations.

Without a doubt, it could be concluded that the modern Bulgarian state was shaped by the journalism and the press during the period of the so-called first Bulgarian capitalism (1878-1944). Thanks to the efforts of publishers, editors, authors and many others, the press had its glorious results, but shameful consequences either, which shows the great impact and responsibility media had and continues to have a long-lasting effect on shaping not only the minds of Bulgarian people but also the Bulgarian nation itself.

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<sup>29</sup> See also Indzhov, 2022.

<sup>30</sup> Borislavov, 2010b.

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