

THE LEGACY OF THE MONARCHY IN POST-COMMUNIST BULGARIA

Aneta MIHAYLOVA*

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Abstract: The 1946 referendum marked a turning point in Bulgarian political development, replacing a constitutional monarchy with a Soviet-aligned communist republic. Decades later, the collapse of the communist regime in 1989 reopened public discussion about the monarchy's historical significance and legacy—topics that had been suppressed, ignored, or denigrated under socialism. The fall of communism throughout Eastern Europe, including the Balkans, also reignited interest in monarchies as political institutions. Bulgaria stands out in this context, as it witnessed the active political return of its former monarch, Simeon II, who came back from exile and eventually became prime minister. This article examines the legacy of the Bulgarian monarchy after 1989, tracing its historical foundations, its representation in contemporary political discourse and historiography, and the unprecedented political trajectory of Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha.

Keywords: Bulgaria; monarchy; post-communism; Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha; collective memory; historiography; public discourse

It is widely recognized that transformations of political regimes are often accompanied by shifts in the interpretation of national history. The collapse of communism in Bulgaria not only initiated a new framework for re-reading the past but also a heightened public interest in themes and figures whose historical assessment had long been constrained by the ideological imperatives of the communist regime. Among these, the topic of the monarchy holds particular significance. With the adoption of the Tarnovo Constitution on 16 April 1879, the modern Bulgarian state was established as a hereditary constitutional monarchy with popular representation. It functioned as such up until 8 September 1946, when a referendum formally abolished the monarchy, forcing the nine-year-old Simeon II into exile. Under the communist regime, the monarchy was systematically discredited, depicted as a reactionary and authoritarian institution responsible for the hardships endured by the Bulgarian

* Institute of Balkan Studies & Centre of Thracology “Prof. Alexander Fol,” Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. ganeta.mihaylova@balkanstudies.bg

people. The political changes of 1989 prompted a thorough reassessment of the national past, focusing particularly on the period before the establishment of communist rule. This revision was accompanied by heightened scholarly and public interest in the monarchy, and notably in the life and reign of Tsar Boris III. At the same time, the fall of communism across Eastern Europe, including the Balkans, inspired many people to look to the monarchy not only as a political institution but also as a powerful symbol of national identity. In this context, Bulgaria offers one of the most remarkable monarchist stories in the region—after decades in exile, former monarch Simeon II returned home in 1996, founded a political party, and went on to serve as prime minister from 2001 to 2005. This study seeks to explore the legacy of the Bulgarian monarchy in the post-communist period by examining its historical foundations, the way it is portrayed in political discourse and historiography since 1989, and the political re-emergence of Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha as a significant actor in Bulgaria's democratic transition.

Delegitimizing the Crown: The Representation of the Monarchy in Bulgarian Communist Historiography

Following the communist takeover in Bulgaria, the monarchy was not only abolished, but there was a deliberate effort to erase its legacy from the nation's collective memory. The new regime actively sought to eradicate the monarchy's influence, labelling it as a relic of a "reactionary" and "bourgeois" past incompatible with the emerging socialist identity. The People's Court, established shortly after September 9, 1944, was tasked with prosecuting individuals linked to Bulgaria's wartime alliances, but its role extended further—it became a platform for publicly denouncing the previous order. In this process, the monarchy became a prime target for both legal and symbolic delegitimization, reinforcing the communist state's new ideological narrative.

The new authorities moved swiftly to eliminate all vestiges associated with the monarchy. Thus, for instance, in an article titled "The Shadow of Coburg," leftist writer Lyudmil Stoyanov used highly charged rhetoric to denounce the dynasty, portraying it as having inflicted immense suffering upon the Bulgarian people. He expressed vehement indignation that the symbols of this dynasty, "whose shadow hovers invisibly over our country like the shadow of a bat, a vampire that for years has sucked the blood of its victim", remained visible throughout the nation. Within this framework, Tsar Boris III, the last reigning Bulgarian monarch (1918-1943), was depicted as the "chief culprit, a crowned murderer and sworn enemy of the Bulgarian people," accused of carrying on his father Ferdinand's policy of aligning Bulgaria with German expansionist ambitions. The author further lamented that the last Coburg had not lived to receive a summons from the People's Court. These arguments were used to justify the removal of a small bust of Tsar Boris III in the town of

Popovo, turning what was once a modest tribute into a flashpoint in the campaign to discredit the monarchy and erase its memory from public life¹.

After the referendum of September 8, 1946, which officially ended the monarchy in Bulgaria, the new communist government launched a determined campaign to erase all traces of the royal past from public memory. Monarchical property was nationalized, palaces and estates were either converted for state use or left to decay, and in that same year, the Battenberg Mausoleum in Sofia—built in 1898 for Prince Alexander I—was closed to visitors. The crown that once adorned the building was also removed, further wiping away the monarchy's visible legacy. These actions were part of a broader effort to reshape Bulgarian public life and identity in line with the ideals of the new republic. But the abolition of the monarchy in 1946 went beyond changing the nation's political structure—it paved the way for a far-reaching rewriting of history under communist rule. In this new version of events, the monarchy was portrayed as the very opposite of socialism: reactionary, oppressive, and unworthy of remembrance. This image became crucial for legitimizing the new regime and discrediting all that came before.

Within this new narrative, Prince (Knyaz) Ferdinand I², who reigned from 1887 to 1918, was cast as the main scapegoat for Bulgaria's troubles. Communist historians blamed him for major national defeats and depicted him as an ambitious outsider serving foreign interests. His foreign background was highlighted to distance him from Bulgarian identity, while his accomplishments—such as the 1908 declaration of independence and support for modernization—were largely overlooked. In fact, this selective focus or deliberate neglect regarding Ferdinand's reign began after World War I. Under communist rule, authorities reinforced this perspective by strictly controlling scholarship and public discussion about his era, making sure that more nuanced or positive interpretations of his legacy remained marginalized. Ultimately, Ferdinand became a convenient symbol of a discredited era, leaving little space for a balanced assessment of his legacy. In 1973, the memoirs of Dobri Ganchev, Ferdinand's Bulgarian-language tutor, originally written in 1923, were published. The book offered a sharply critical portrayal of the ruler, providing detailed insights into his character, all presented in a negative light³. Its release generated significant public interest and prompted a second edition. Later, in 1980, Ivan Iovkov's book "The Coburg" became the only comprehensive Bulgarian study dedicated to Ferdinand. Consistent with prevailing

¹ *Народен съд*, бр. 4, 24 януари 1945.

² Upon the proclamation of Bulgaria's national independence in 1908, he received the title of Tsar.

³ Ганчев, Д. *Спомени за княжеското време* (София: Отечествен фронт, 1973).

historiographical trends, Iovkov's work reinforced the established narrative of criticism and disapproval that surrounded the former monarch⁴.

In the case of Boris III, the construction of a negative public image proved much more difficult. This was largely because a strong cult of personality had formed around him during his reign, reinforced by his sudden and mysterious death. The Bulgarian press and publications of the time consistently portrayed the tsar in a positive light, turning him into a symbol of lasting significance and even mythic status—a powerful asset for wartime propaganda. Even after the communist takeover, these favourable views did not simply vanish. Instead, they continued to circulate unofficially, passed along through underground networks and remaining outside the reach of official historical accounts⁵.

After Tsar Boris III's death, the communist regime portrayed him as an enemy of the state. His grave at Rila Monastery, which had become a site of public reverence, was viewed as problematic by the authorities, who moved his remains to Vrana Palace and placed them under strict government control. His wife, Tsaritsa Joanna, later built a small chapel at this new location, but even this sanctuary was short-lived—by the 1950s, the site was destroyed, and the final whereabouts of Boris's remains are still a mystery. Over time, the regime dismantled the royal cult and replaced it with a narrative of “monarcho-fascist dictatorship,” blaming the monarchy for Bulgaria's political setbacks and policy failures⁶. This one-sided portrayal of Boris III—as the so-called “Tsar-Führer”—became the dominant interpretation in Bulgarian historiography for decades.

Meanwhile, Boris III's son, Simeon II, lived under constant surveillance by the Bulgarian State Security during his years in exile. A 1998 investigative report in the Bulgarian daily “24 Chasa” revealed that from 1946 to 1967, Simeon, together with his mother Tsaritsa Joanna, his sister Maria Luisa, and his aunt Evdokia, was systematically monitored under the codename “Paraziti” (“Parasites”). Authorities paid close attention to Simeon's connections with the Bulgarian émigré community, keeping track of his activities abroad and his communications with what they labelled the “enemy emigration.” The earliest documented evidence of this surveillance is a report on the royal family's departure for Egypt. The operation intensified on June 25, 1957, when the surveillance was formalized as an official case. In July 1974, a new file, codenamed “Dvora” (“The Court”), was opened, marking a shift to an even more focused intelligence effort. The main concerns of State Security included Simeon's interactions with the émigré community, his international contacts,

⁴ Йовков, И. *Кобургът* (София: Партиздат, 1980).

⁵ Поппетров, Н., “Образът на цар Борис III в дневният ред на българското общество (1918-1944),” *Исторически преглед*, кн.1-2, 2002, 44-74.

⁶ Даскалов, Р. *От Стамболов до Живков. Големите спорове за новата българска история* (София: ИК“Гутенберг“, 2009), 213-227.

any indications he intended to return to Bulgaria, and his presence in foreign media⁷.

Post-communist Reassessment and Historiographical Legacy

The fall of communism in Bulgaria brought a profound shift in the interpretation and discussions on the national history. Topics and personalities that had previously been viewed solely through rigid ideological lens began to attract renewed interest from both scholars and the general public. Many turned their attention to the recent past, especially the years leading up to communist rule—periods previously shaped by selective narratives and omissions. During this period of transition, the monarchy underwent a moral and symbolic rehabilitation as part of an overall reappraisal of the pre-communist past. The Tarnovo Constitution once again became a symbol of democratic ideals, and the legitimacy of the 1946 referendum abolishing the monarchy was increasingly questioned. The monarchy itself emerged as a focal point in debates about historical justice and national identity. For some, it represented stability, a European perspective, and a sense of dignity lost under communism; for others, it remained linked to authoritarianism and controversial wartime alliances. These contrasting views reflected the broader struggle over how Bulgarians interpret and come to terms with their twentieth-century history.

After 1989, Tsar Boris III emerged as a central figure in both public and scholarly discussions. The legend that began to form around him immediately after his death was revitalized and expanded in the post-communist period. His enduring image is defined by three major motifs: “the tsar saviour,” “the tsar unifier,” and “the people’s tsar.” These narratives have left a lasting mark on the collective memory, reinforcing his mythic status in Bulgarian history. Boris’s untimely death played a significant role in his near-canonization as both a national saviour and martyr⁸. Actually, the true cause of Boris’s death remains unresolved, with suspicions of poisoning lingering for decades—some claim Hitler ordered his assassination after Boris refused to send Bulgarian troops to the Eastern Front, while others point to various external interests that may have benefited from his death. The theory that the Soviet Union intervened to prevent Boris from aligning with the western powers was largely confined to émigré communities during the communist period, but after 1989, it gained much broader attention within Bulgaria itself. His family has consistently rejected the official explanation of natural causes. As early as the 1980s, his son,

⁷ Димитрова, А. *Тайните досиета на царя. Секретните документи за Симеон Сакскобургготски, писани и събирани от Държавна сигурност от 1946 до 1993 г* (София: 24 часа, 1994). See also: Ангелов, В., ”Държавна сигурност по следите на Симеон II (1957-1967),“ *Исторически преглед*, кн.1-2, 2002, 176-187.

⁸ Лалков, М., ”Цар Борис III в народната памет,“, *Балканистичен форум*, 1, 1997, 113-122.

Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, cast doubt on the official account, suggesting that “not the Nazis, but other Great Powers might have had an interest in the death of my father.” In the years following 1989, Simeon continued to voice these suspicions publicly, further fuelling the enduring mystery and legend surrounding Boris III⁹.

In post-communist Bulgaria, an attempt was made to present Boris III as a martyr who sacrificed his life for the nation and was later vilified by the communist regime. Acts of symbolic violence against his memory, such as the removal of his remains from Rila Monastery in 1946 and the destruction of the chapel at Vrana Palace five years later, became focal points in this narrative. Speculation about his death in August 1943, particularly the theory that he was poisoned by Soviet agents, further reinforced his martyrdom. The reburial ceremonies were seen as attempts to restore his dignity and correct past wrongs. On August 28, 1993, the elderly Tsaritsa Joanna attended a memorial service at Rila Monastery, led by Patriarch Maxim and attended by hundreds of Bulgarians. Shortly before, Boris’s heart had been reinterred in his restored grave.

In the early 1990s, several émigré biographies of Boris III, originally published abroad, were translated into Bulgarian. These works often presented the tsar in a positive, sometimes romanticized light, emphasizing his democratic values, diplomatic skills, and efforts to keep Bulgaria out of war. Among them, Stephan Gruev’s “Crown of Thorns,” written by the son of Boris’s wartime chief of staff, gained particular popularity¹⁰. Alongside these biographies, a wave of memoirs by individuals from the monarch’s immediate circle and an increasing number of newspaper articles often shifted the interpretive emphasis to the opposite extreme. Rather than offering critical analysis, these narratives tended to construct an idealized and at times overtly mythologized image of the tsar¹¹. At the same time, the publication of documentary evidence and accounts from members of Boris III’s entourage contributed to a more nuanced and comprehensive portrayal of the Bulgarian monarch¹². A significant personal testimony of the period and the personality of Boris III are the memoirs of

⁹ Димитрова, А., “Смъртта на цар Борис: още мълчат само архивите на Москва,” в. *24 часа*, 234, август 27, 2003, с. 17.

¹⁰ Димитров, П. *Борис III Цар на България (1894-1943). Труженик, гражданин, цар* (София: УИ”Св. Климент Охридски”, 1990); Груев, С. *Корона от тръни. Царуването на Борис III, 1918-1943* (София: Български писател, 1991); Николаев, Н. *Четири ескиза от едно царуване*, (София: ИК”Православие“, 1993).

¹¹ See, for example: Илиев, Н. *Цар Борис III. Биографични бележки* (София: Българска история, 2018).

¹² Лулчев, Л. *Тайните на дворцовия живот. Дневник (1938-1944)* (София: СК „Веселие“, 1992); Шарланов, Д., П. Мешкова, *Съветниците на цар Борис III. Народен съд. Дознания* (София, 1993); Скутунов, К. *Бурни времена* (София: Българска история, 2020).

Tsaritsa Joanna, which were published for the first time in Bulgarian translation in 1990¹³.

Historians swiftly responded to the surge of public interest in Bulgaria's last monarch. In the years that followed, scholars undertook efforts to reassess and reinterpret both the character and political role of Boris III. Subsequently, deliberate attempts were made to adopt a more balanced perspective in evaluating the monarch, illuminating his personality as well as the context behind his decisions¹⁴. Over time, the question of Tsar Boris III's role in determining the fate of the Jewish population in Bulgarian-administered territories during the Second World War has become central to his historical assessment, especially regarding his responsibility for Bulgarian Jews¹⁵. Public discourse in Bulgaria has often taken the form of defensive exceptionalism, epitomized by the widely circulated claim that "Bulgaria is the only country in the world to have saved all of its Jews." Yet this narrative systematically overlooks responsibility for the 11,363 Jews from Vardar Macedonia and Aegean Thrace who perished in Nazi extermination camps in Poland. The core argument supporting this view maintains that Bulgaria merely "temporarily administered" these territories, thus shifting primary responsibility for the deportations onto German authorities. As a result, two parallel narratives emerged in Bulgaria: one celebrating the "saved" Jews and another addressing the "unsaved" or "sacrificed" Jews—narratives that remain largely incompatible within a unified historical account¹⁶.

The debate became highly politicized, reflecting the complexities of Bulgaria's early post-communist transition. As sociologist Lilyana Deyanova observed, the narrative surrounding the rescue of the Jews remained shaped by current political events within the broader "civil war of memories" that followed the collapse of the party-state's official narrative. This polarization was

¹³ Царица Йоанна, *Спомени*. (София: УИ"Св. Климент Охридски", 1990). The memoirs of Tsaritsa Joanna were published for the first time in 1964 in Italy: Giovanna di Bulgaria, *Memorie* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1964).

¹⁴ Леверсон, А. *Щрихи към портрета на цар Борис III. Щаб в сянка*, Кн.1-2 (Пловдив, 1992); Лалков, М. „Борис III – между признанието и отрицанието“ in Ангелов, П., Лалков М. *Страници от българската история: събития, размисли, личности*, т. 1 (София: Просвета, 1993), 143-174; Даскалов, Д. *Цар Борис - познатият и непознатият* (София: Агато, 2001); Недев, Н. *Цар Борис III. Биография* (София: Хераклит, 1997); Ibid., *Цар Борис III. Дворецът и тайният кабинет* (София: Хермес, 2013).

¹⁵ See, for example: Барух, Н. *Откупът. Цар Борис и съдбата на българските евреи* (София, 1991); Ардити, С. *Човекът, който изигра Хитлер. Цар Борис III - гонител или приятел на българските евреи* (Русе, 2008); Бар-Зоар, М. *Извън хватката на Хитлер: героично спасяване на българските евреи*, (София, 2011).

¹⁶ For an in-depth analysis of this debate, refer to: Nadège Ragaru, *Bulgaria, the Jews, and the Holocaust: On the Origins of a Heroic Narrative* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2023).

evident in the early 1990s press: *Duma*, the Socialist Party's paper, emphasized the tragedy of the "unsaved" Jews and linked the deportations to Bulgaria's "fascist" past, while portraying the anti-communist elite as heirs to that legacy. In contrast, *Demokratiya*, aligned with the Union of Democratic Forces, downplayed the fate of the "unsaved" and instead challenged the communist narrative that credited Zhivkov and the Communist Party with the rescue, assigning primary credit to Tsar Boris III and highlighting the Bulgarian people's support as the context for his decisive actions¹⁷.

Assessments of Tsar Boris III's historical role differ significantly among members of the Jewish community, both in Bulgaria and among Bulgarian Jewish émigrés in Israel. In 1952, Benjamin Arditi published a book in Tel Aviv that sought to rehabilitate the monarch's image by portraying him as a "saviour" of Bulgarian Jews, while attributing responsibility for the deportations from the "new lands" to Alexander Belev and the occupying German authorities¹⁸. In post-communist Bulgaria, this tendency to credit Tsar Boris III with the rescue of Bulgarian Jews—while absolving him of responsibility for the fate of the "unsaved"—was especially evident in the works of émigré writers like Samuel Arditi (Benjamin Arditi's son) and Michael Bar-Zohar¹⁹. At the same time, other authors have questioned or criticized Tsar Boris III's role, highlighting his involvement in antisemitic legislation and the deportations from annexed territories²⁰.

These historiographical debates were echoed in the media, which often adopted highly polarized and extreme stances. In her article "An Apocryphon on Tsar Boris III," Lea Cohen categorically denied the tsar's involvement in the rescue of Bulgarian Jews, depicting him as a collaborator with Hitler and even suggesting he was "a candidate for the status of a war criminal," whose early death was "an invaluable service rendered by fate."²¹ Similarly, Angel Wagenstein—a Holocaust survivor and former resistance member—consistently condemned Boris III, holding him responsible for the fate of Jews from Bulgaria's "new territories" during World War II. While acknowledging the complexities of the era and the non-deportation of Jews from prewar

¹⁷ See: Деянова, Л. "Посткомунистическият негационизъм" in: Деянова, Л. *Очертания на мълчанието: Историческа социология на колективната памет* (София: Критика и хуманизъм, 2009), 161-165.

¹⁸ Ардити, Б. *Ролята на цар Борис III при изселването на евреите от България* (Тел Авив, 1952).

¹⁹ Ардити, С. *Човекът, който изигра Хитлер. Цар Борис III - гонител или приятел на българските евреи* (Русе, 2008); Бар-Зоар, Извън.

²⁰ See, for example: Барух, *Откупът*; Нисим, Г. *Човекът, който спря Хитлер: историята на Димитър Пешев, спасил евреите на една нация* (София: ИК "Иван Вазов", 1999); Коен, Л. *Спасение, гонения и холокост в царска България (1940 – 1944)* (София: Ентусиаст, 2022).

²¹ Коен, Л., "Апокриф за цар Борис III", сп. *Биограф*, кн. 2, 2011.

Bulgaria, Wagenstein rejected portrayals of the tsar as a benevolent protector or passive figure constrained by German pressure²².

The debate over Tsar Boris III's historical responsibility was further intensified by the decision of the Arbitration Commission of the Jewish National Fund on 16 July 2000 to remove a commemorative plaque dedicated to the monarch. The plaque, originally erected by the Bulgarian community in Israel in the Bulgaria Forest near Jerusalem, became a focal point of contention after sustained protests by a small group of surviving Jews from Macedonia and Thrace and their descendants, who held Boris III centrally responsible for their deportation to Nazi extermination camps in Poland. The removal of the plaque sparked widespread discussion in both the media and the Bulgarian National Assembly. For many, the decision was seen as a direct challenge to national dignity and collective self-perception, while advocates for the plaque's removal were often accused of undermining national interests²³.

After the collapse of communism, Bulgarian historiography began to reassess also the historical role of Boris's predecessor, Tsar Ferdinand I. The rigid, one-dimensional narrative propagated during the socialist era gradually gave way to more nuanced interpretations, aiming to capture the complexities of his personality and to re-evaluate his political, cultural, and state-building contributions that had previously been overlooked or marginalized. Translations of scholarly and biographical works originally published abroad played a significant role in shaping post-communist perceptions of Ferdinand I. For example, "Foxy Ferdinand" by Bulgarian-born British journalist Stephen Constant provides a detailed and vivid portrait of the monarch, blending political history with perceptive and often witty insights into his character. In contrast, German historian Joachim Königslöw's "Ferdinand of Bulgaria" focuses primarily on the first decade of Ferdinand's reign, offering a consistently positive view and highlighting his achievements in state-building and diplomacy²⁴. Some of the most colourful depictions of Bulgaria from that era, and the most authentic glimpses into Ferdinand's character, can be found

²² „Един „рубладжия“ за срама си от Борис III“, *Клуб Z*, 27 юли 2015, accessed November 27, 2025, https://clubz.bg/23904-edin_rubladzhiya_za_srama_si_ot_boris_treti.

²³ Benatov, J., "Debating the fate of Bulgarian Jews during World War II," in *Bringing the Dark Past to Light. The Reception of the Holocaust in Postcommunist Europe*, eds. John-Paul Himka, Joanna Michlic (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 120-125.

²⁴ Констант, С. *Фердинанд Лисицата* (Интерфед, Вис Виталис, 1992); originally published: Constant, St. *Foxy Ferdinand, 1861-1948, Tsar of Bulgaria* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1979); Кьонигслёв, Й. *Фердинанд Български (от началото на кандидатурата за трона до признаването от Великите сили, 1886-1896)* (София: Гал-Ико, 1998); originally published: Königslöw, J. *Ferdinand von Bulgarien (vom Beginn der Thronkandidatur bis zur Anerkennung durch die Grossmächte 1886 bis 1896)* (München: Verlag R. Oldenbourg, 1970).

in the letters of Court Marshal Count Robert de Bourboulon to his mother, which cover much of the prince's peaceful reign²⁵.

The historiography of Ferdinand I is marked by sharply opposing views. Royalist authors present him as a responsible and capable ruler who accepted responsibility for national crises, abdicated in 1918, and lived in exile in Coburg, dedicating himself to scientific and intellectual pursuits while remaining deeply attached to Bulgaria²⁶. In contrast, historians like Tsocho Bilyarski uphold the negative image shaped during the communist era, portraying Ferdinand in a highly unfavourable light, as reflected in the very title of Bilyarski's work, "Tsar Ferdinand: Cynic, Deceiver, and Hypocrite."²⁷

The first systematic attempt to present a comprehensive account of Ferdinand I's personality and political activities after 1989 was made by Zhoro Tsvetkov, whose work was introduced at a ceremony marking the 150th anniversary of Ferdinand's birth. Tsvetkov's study draws on archival materials belonging to Ferdinand, which were donated to Bulgaria in 2006 by Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha and his sister, Maria Luisa²⁸. Also noteworthy is Rostislav Botev's research, which delves into Ferdinand's personal life to deepen scholarly understanding of a figure whose legacy remains highly contested. Botev's book highlights Ferdinand's passion for the natural sciences and strives to offer a balanced portrait, acknowledging both his achievements and the more problematic aspects of his character²⁹.

A significant contribution to the reassessment of Ferdinand I's place in modern Bulgarian history comes from historian Petar Stoyanovich. His extensive study, "Ferdinandum: Ferdinand I and the Europeanization of Bulgaria," is the result of long-term research on the monarch. Focusing on the first twenty-five years of Ferdinand's reign—a period when Bulgaria transformed from an Ottoman province into a European state—Stoyanovich describes Ferdinand as "a man who is neither an angel nor particularly sympathetic in character, but a man without whom Bulgaria would in no way have looked the way it did in just twenty-five years." His study examines various aspects of state development, including the military, infrastructure, architecture, communications, transportation, culture, education, and public life. While

²⁵ Граф Робер дьо Бурбулон. *Български дневници* (София: Колибри, 1995).

²⁶ Шалафов, И. *Цар Фердинанд Български. Вярност и постоянство* (София: ИНС, 2010).

²⁷ *Цар Фердинанд – циник, измамник и лицемер*, съст. и ред. Ц. Билярски (София: изд. „Анико“, 2009). Bilyarski particularly highlights the 1991 edition of the book "Advice to My Son", published by the respected Sofia University Press, which portrays Ferdinand as holding deeply contemptuous views of the Bulgarian people; however, the authorship of this text by Ferdinand has not been conclusively established. *Цар Фердинанд. Съвети към сина*, предговор и бел. Т. Димитров (София: УИ"Св. Климент Охридски", 1991).

²⁸ Цветков, Ж. *Книга за цар Фердинанд и българите* (София: Сиела, 2010).

²⁹ Ботев, Р. *Личният живот на Фердинанд Български* (София: Милениум, 2021).

recognizing that Ferdinand's contributions to modernization were not unique, Stoyanovich emphasizes their significance and argues that they must be considered in any comprehensive understanding of Bulgaria's development in the early twentieth century³⁰.

The 1994 documentary "Ferdinand of Bulgaria" (*Фердинанд Български*), directed and written by Svetoslav Ovcharov, portrays Ferdinand I as a cosmopolitan and educated monarch whose personal ambitions were closely intertwined with Bulgaria's national aspirations. The film often emphasizes his self-image and vanity, as well as the ways he harnessed the idea of the Bulgarian nation to further his own dynastic and personal goals. In doing so, the documentary offers a more nuanced cultural memory of Ferdinand—one that avoids both glorification and vilification, and instead critically examines the personal and national myths surrounding his legacy.

In present-day Bulgaria, Ferdinand's role in the country's modernization is widely acknowledged, yet his legacy remains overshadowed by the two national catastrophes, preventing full rehabilitation. This ambivalence is especially evident in the long-standing debate over the return of his remains to Bulgaria. After abdicating in 1918, Ferdinand spent his remaining years in exile in Coburg, Germany, where he died on September 10, 1948. His wish to be buried in Bulgaria went unfulfilled for 76 years, with his initial interment in the crypt of St. Augustine's Catholic Church in Coburg reflecting both postwar political realities and lingering sensitivities about his reign. While other members of the royal family were honoured on Bulgarian soil, Ferdinand's remains stayed in Coburg, symbolizing the nation's continued ambivalence toward his legacy.

In May 2024, however, his remains were finally repatriated to Bulgaria through the efforts of the Tsar Boris III and Tsaritsa Joanna Fund and a decision by the Bulgarian government. Transported with military honours, the coffin was received at Sofia Airport and brought to Vrana Royal Palace, where a memorial service was held. After lying in state, Ferdinand was interred in the family crypt at Vrana Palace on May 29, 2024, in a private, state-supported ceremony attended by the royal family, clergy, and public figures. While not an official state funeral, the event marked the formal fulfilment of Ferdinand's last wish and represented a significant symbolic moment in the ongoing reassessment of Bulgaria's monarchical history.

Since 1989, Bulgaria's first prince, Alexander of Battenberg (1879-1886), has also attracted growing interest from both scholars and the public. Once largely overlooked, his legacy is now illuminated through the availability of his

³⁰ Стоянович, П. *Фердинандеум: Фердинанд I и европеизацията на България, представена в избрани области на държавното управление и в обществото 1861-1887-1912* (В. Търново: Фабер, 2022).

personal diary, memoirs from his contemporaries, and earlier foreign studies³¹. Recent monographs have provided more comprehensive and balanced assessments, with most evaluations portraying Alexander as a symbol of national independence—especially for his role in the 1885 Unification of Bulgaria and the subsequent Serbo-Bulgarian War³². His public profile has also risen through commemorative acts such as the reopening of his mausoleum in 1991, the naming of a central Sofia square in his honour in 2007, and the unveiling of Bulgaria's first bust of Prince Alexander I at his former residence at Kabiyuk Stud Farm—the site where he endorsed the Unification of Bulgaria in 1885. Installed on the 140th anniversary of these events, this monument, made possible by civic initiative and public fundraising, highlights Alexander's enduring significance as a symbol of unity and reflects contemporary engagement with Bulgaria's historical memory. However, the creation of this monument was a private initiative, and there are voices that argue both the state and the historical community have not yet fully acknowledged the contributions of Bulgaria's first prince to the country's modern development³³. In 2026, the official incorporation of Alexander's documents and personal items into the national archives is expected to spark renewed academic interest in his legacy.

Monarch in Exile, Prime Minister at Home: Simeon II's Unique Path to Political Authority

Following the changes of 1989, interest in monarchy has surged in Eastern Europe, particularly in the Balkans, where it persisted the longest throughout the 20th century. Most Balkan monarchs were overthrown between 1945 and 1947 due to the influence of the communist regimes that emerged in these nations. In Greece, monarchy lasted until 1974, when a referendum held after the military junta's fall led to its abolition. Monarchist parties and

³¹ Александър фон Батенберг. *Дневник. Моите преживявания по време на войната с турците 1877/1878г* (София: УИ "Св. Климент Охридски", 1992). Кох, А. *Княз Александър Батенберг. Истината за царуването му*, (София: Българска история, 2018); first edition is in German: Koch, A. *Fürst Alexander von Bulgarien: Mittheilungen aus seinem Leben und seiner Regierung nach persönlichen Erinnerungen*, (Darmstadt: Bergsträsser, 1887); Мах, Р. *Из българските бурни времена* (София: Стрелец, 1992); the memories of the German officer and journalist Richard von Mach were first published in German in 1928 and translated into Bulgarian in the following year).

³² Among others, Пантев, А. „Детето на Европа“ в български изпитания. Княз Александър Батенберг (1879–1886)“ in Андреев, Й., А. Пантев. *Българските ханове и царе* (Велико Търново: Абагар, 2015); Райчевски, С. *Княз Александър Батенберг I* (София: изд. Захарий Стоянов, 2019). Златарски, В., „Между „заплаха“ и „герой“: княз Александър I Български и Германия“, *Епохи*, 2, 2022, 276-289.

³³ Николов, Т., „Загърбваният Батенберг и истините за Съединението“, *Портал Култура*, September 4, 2025.

organizations were established, advocating not only for the restoration of the pre-World War II system but also for a return to monarchical statehood³⁴.

The Bulgarian monarch in exile Simeon II greeted the collapse of communism on November 10, 1989, with hope and excitement. Although he immediately considered returning to Bulgaria, he moved cautiously, gathering information and carefully weighing his options before taking action. The first member of the royal family to visit Bulgaria after the political transition was his sister, Maria Luisa, in 1991. Two years later, in August 1993, their mother, Tsaritsa Joanna, returned at the age of eighty-six. During her visit, Maria Luisa travelled extensively and was warmly received by the public, who were surprised and impressed by her fluency in Bulgarian, a fact that reportedly embarrassed her. Joanna's visit was at the invitation of Patriarch Maxim, who asked her to attend a commemorative service at the Rila Monastery marking the fiftieth anniversary of Tsar Boris III's death.

In the early 1990s, public attitudes toward Simeon II's return were characterized more by curiosity, nostalgia, and symbolic interest than by explicit political aspirations. His first interview for Bulgarian National Television, filmed in his Madrid home and broadcast on February 11, 1990, attracted five million viewers. For many Bulgarians, Simeon represented a living link to the pre-communist past, a period often idealized as stable and dignified. His decades-long exile, personal restraint, and avoidance of direct political ambitions contributed to a generally sympathetic image. However, this favourable perception was tempered by uncertainty, as many remained cautious about the reappearance of a former monarch in a republican context. Political elites were even more reserved, frequently voicing concerns. Successive governments took care to manage Simeon II's presence, especially during royal family visits, remaining wary of the mobilizing power of royal symbolism and the potential resurgence of monarchist debates. The leftist press launched a vigorous campaign against the royal family. Mainstream parties initially regarded Simeon II as a symbolic figure rather than a political actor, while monarchist organizations remained marginal and no major party seriously advocated for the restoration of the monarchy.

Nevertheless, his enduring popularity was closely monitored, as it represented an unpredictable factor in Bulgaria's fragile political landscape. The anxieties and implications surrounding the potential return of the exiled tsar among politicians were underscored by the fact that, although the mentioned operational case file No. 3016, codenamed "Dvora," was officially closed on 14 March 1990, the collection and preservation of documents related to Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha continued until 19 August 1993³⁵. This sustained

³⁴ Баева, И., "Монархия-република в Източна Европа през XX век", *Исторически преглед*, кн.1-2, 2002, 95-115.

³⁵ Димитрова, *Тайните*, 218-219.

institutional attention, even after the file's formal closure, highlights the ongoing sensitivity and uncertainty regarding Simeon II's role in post-communist Bulgaria.

Simeon's return to Bulgaria in May 1996, after fifty years in exile, was a deeply emotional moment. As he recounted in his 2014 autobiography, he had long hoped for this homecoming, though he never truly expected it to happen. The sight of Sofia from the airport and the enthusiastic welcome from the Bulgarian people moved him profoundly³⁶. Public speculation about Simeon's potential candidacy for president grew steadily. In response, 76 members of parliament from across the political spectrum petitioned the Constitutional Court to clarify the constitutional requirement that presidential candidates must have resided in Bulgaria for the previous five years. In February 2001, the Court issued a decision that effectively barred Simeon from running for president. However, this did not deter him from entering Bulgarian politics, as he had already made up his mind.

In early 2001, Simeon settled at Vrana Palace. On April 6, he addressed the nation to announce his intention to participate in the upcoming parliamentary elections, emphasizing that the movement's agenda did not include restoring the monarchy³⁷. Two days later, the National Movement Simeon II (NDSV) was established. On June 17, 2001, the NDSV won a landslide victory, securing half of the 240 seats in parliament. On July 24, Simeon took the oath of office before the National Assembly and the Bulgarian Patriarch, honouring a longstanding tradition. Thus, in a historic turn, Simeon became one of the very few former monarchs worldwide to return to political leadership through democratic elections—not as king, but as prime minister under Bulgaria's republican constitution. His rise to the premiership was unprecedented in post-communist Europe. Simeon's appeal stemmed from his personal legitimacy, perceived moral authority, and his promise of rapid economic improvement. His success reflected widespread public disillusionment with established political elites, rather than a resurgence of monarchist sentiment.

As prime minister from 2001 to 2005, Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha pursued pro-European and market-oriented reforms, leading to Bulgaria's accession to NATO in 2004 and significant progress toward EU membership. Although his government made no attempt to restore the monarchy, it showed that members of the pre-communist elite could successfully participate in

³⁶ СИМЕОН II. *Една необикновена съдба. Автобиография* (София: Сиела, 2014, 17-32). The first edition of the book was in French, *Un destin singulier, Siméon de Bulgarie*, (Paris: Flammarion, 2014).

³⁷ Naegele, J., "Bulgaria: Exiled King Attempts Political Comeback," *RFE/RL*, April 11, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1096195.html>.

democratic politics. Initially, public attitudes were marked by enthusiasm and high expectations for rapid change, but these soon evolved into more pragmatic and critical assessments as many socio-economic promises remained unfulfilled. While Simeon's administration was credited with advancing Bulgaria's Euro-Atlantic integration, disappointment over unmet domestic reforms eroded both his popularity and the support for the NDSV. Over time, Simeon II's image shifted from a symbol of Western integration to that of a leader judged by the usual standards of democratic governance. This decline in public confidence was reflected in the NDSV's diminishing electoral fortunes, culminating in Simeon's resignation in 2009 after the party received only 3.0 percent of the vote.

Another key aspect of the monarchy's post-communist legacy involves the ongoing disputes over royal property. In the 1990s and 2000s, several former royal estates were returned to Simeon II and his family through administrative decisions rather than clear restitution laws. This process generated significant controversy, legal challenges, and accusations of undue privilege. Legal battles over royal properties became a prominent public issue, further complicating the monarchy's legacy. In 2021, a European court ruling on matters related to former royal estates highlighted the complex interplay between transitional justice, property rights, and historical reconciliation in Bulgaria's post-communist context³⁸.

While the former king's victory in the June 2001 election initially raised hopes for a possible restoration of the monarchy, these prospects quickly faded due to shortcomings during his time in office—particularly his inability to resolve Bulgaria's chronic economic and institutional problems. Despite notable foreign policy successes, such as Bulgaria's accession to NATO and the European Union, Simeon did not meet the high expectations of those who believed he could lead the country out of crisis. His political decline was further accelerated by public outrage over the controversial restitution of royal properties, which significantly increased his personal wealth and damaged his reputation. As a result, support for the restoration of the monarchy has diminished, and for many Bulgarians, Simeon has become a source of disappointment and even embarrassment³⁹.

Today, Simeon II remains present in Bulgarian public life primarily through participation in historical commemorations and occasional public

³⁸ Todorov, S., "European Court Finds Bulgaria Breached Former Tsar's Property Rights," *Balkan Insight*, September 7, 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/09/07/european-court-finds-bulgaria-breached-former-tsars-property-rights/>.

³⁹ Vassilev, R., "Why Was the Monarchy Not Restored in Post-Communist Bulgaria?," *East European Politics and Societies* 24, no. 4 (November 2010): 503-519, DOI:[10.1177/0888325409360211](https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325409360211).

commentary. His role is now largely symbolic and personal rather than institutional. He is viewed less as an active political figure and more as an elder statesman, situated outside direct political engagement.

Conclusion

The post-1989 political transformation brought renewed attention to the monarchy, its history, and its role in Bulgarian society, partly as a reaction to decades of ideological suppression. This period saw a proliferation of popular and amateur publications, alongside the gradual emergence of more balanced, scholarly assessments. Since 1989, Boris III has been increasingly depicted as a wise and moderate ruler, a skilled diplomat who sought to keep Bulgaria out of major military conflicts. In media and cultural discourse, he is often called the “Tsar-Unifier,” credited with the recovery of Southern Dobruja, the annexation of territories in Macedonia and Thrace (1940–1941), and preventing Bulgaria’s direct involvement on the Eastern Front. However, critics emphasize Bulgaria’s alliance with the Third Reich, the restriction of democratic freedoms, and growing authoritarianism during his reign. His role in antisemitic policies—both in saving Jews from the old territories and in the deportation from newly annexed areas—remains a topic of public and academic debate. Despite these controversies, Boris III still enjoys a more favourable reputation than his father, Ferdinand I. Even with renewed attention, Ferdinand remains less popular and is seldom defended with emotional fervour. He is often portrayed as an eccentric and intelligent monarch with a complex but problematic legacy. Recent historiography views him as an important, though not dominant, decision-maker whose dynastic ambitions and eccentricities greatly influenced his actions. His responsibility for the Second Balkan War and Bulgaria’s alignment in World War I, both resulting in significant territorial losses and reinforcing the narrative of national catastrophe, remains widely acknowledged and has largely resisted revision. After 1989, there has also been an effort to reevaluate Bulgaria’s first modern monarch, Prince Alexander of Battenberg, and to properly recognize his contributions to the country’s national development. The repatriation of royal archives and the continued public presence of former royal figures highlight Bulgaria’s ongoing efforts to reckon with its monarchical past.

The fall of communism throughout Eastern Europe, including the Balkans, reignited interest in monarchies as political institutions. Bulgaria stands out in this context, having witnessed the remarkable political return of its former monarch, Simeon II, who came back from exile and ultimately became prime minister. His return generated complex and often ambivalent reactions within Bulgarian society and the political elite, which evolved over time. While his term in office brought significant foreign policy achievements, his inability to fulfill public expectations and deliver on promises led to political decline and widespread disillusionment. Legal disputes over the restitution of royal property

emerged as a major public issue, adding further complexity to the monarchy's legacy.