At the crossroads of Europe and the Orient, Bulgaria has come under the influence of many neighboring cultures, from Greek and Roman to Byzantine and Bulgar. Part of the Ottoman Empire for nearly 500 years, Bulgaria gained independence in 1878, but became a Communist republic in 1946. Today, Bulgaria is a fully democratic state and a member of the European Union.

With a warm climate and fertile soil, the region that is now Bulgaria attracted human settlement from ancient times. Archaeological discoveries at Stara Zagora show that, as early as 5500 BC, Neolithic people were living in the region, where they grew crops, raised animals, and made vividly decorated pottery. By 4000 BC, metalworking techniques in the region had developed to become one of the most advanced in Europe, as the exquisite gold jewellery found near Varna shows so vividly.

THRACIANS AND GREEKS

By 1000 BC, southeastern Europe was falling under the power of a people known as the Thracians. Across a territory consisting of present-day Bulgaria, Romania, and northern Greece, the Thracians formed tribal states. These were ruled by warrior-kings who may also have played a priestly role.

It is thought that the Thracians performed ecstatic religious rituals similar to the wine-fuelled Dionysiac revels of ancient Greece. The Thracians also believed in an afterlife, and it is likely that the cult of Orpheus, who journeyed to the Underworld in search of his wife Eurydice, originated in Thrace before it became established in Greece.

From the 7th century BC, Thracians and Greeks maintained close contact, with Greeks from Asia Minor establishing colonies on Thrace's Black Sea coast. Greek settlements such as Mesembria (present-day Nesebur) and Apollonia (Sozopol) supplied Athens and other Greek cities with grain, honey and animal hides from the Thracian hinterland. After the 4th century BC, several Thracian tribes, notably the Odrysae in central Bulgaria and the Getae in the northeast, established powerful states. But, being disunited, the Thracians were unable to resist their more powerful neighbors. Philip II of Macedon invaded southern Thrace in the 4th century BC, founding the city of Philippopolis (present-day Plovdiv). In 335 BC, his son Alexander the Great, subdued Thracian tribes as far north as the Danube. As Macedonian influence grew, the Thracian tribes lost their independence, but this brought them into closer contact with Greek culture.

THE ANCIENT THRACIANS

The Thracian first emerged as a distinct tribal culture in the second millennium BC, but they never developed a written language, so we know relatively little about them. It is not until the 5th century BC that any information appears. According to Herodotus, the Thracians were the most numerous people in Europe. Politically divided, they often fought among themselves. Archaeological evidence shows that in the 5th to 1st centuries BC, the Thracian established a thriving trading civilization in the Balkans, much influenced by the Greeks of Asia Minor. Despite brief periods of unity under individual warrior-chiefs, the constant warring left them open to the Roman conquest in the 1st century AD.

RELIGION, MYTHS AND LEGENDS

The Thracians' key religious beliefs involved fertility, birth and death. They held a strong belief in life after death and it is likely that the cult of Orpheus began in Thrace before it won popularity Greece. It is also thought that the Thracians practiced ecstatic religious rites similar to the wine-fuelled Dionysiac revels of ancient Greece. Another important deity was he fierce Thracian Rider or Hero.

KAZANLûK FRESCO

Kazanlûk, in central Bulgaria, is the site of this richly decorated chieftain's tomb. Dating from around the 4th century BC, it consists of a domed burial chamber covered by a large mound of earth. The frescoes that adorn
the tomb depict a funeral feast, with the deceased accompanied by one of his wives. The Thracians appear to have had a positive view of the afterlife, and the transition from this world to the next was the cause for celebrations as well as mourning.

**THRACIAN TOMBS**

To date, over 50 tomb complexes have been excavated in Bulgaria and many more are certain to be discovered. Believing in an afterlife, the Thracian built an eternal house for a dead king and filled it with weapons, jewellery and even horses or dogs. Animal sacrifice was an important part of the ritual, although whether this was for food or to accompany them is not known. These royal tombs became temples or sacred places.

**THRACIAN ART**

Because of the lack of a writing system, most information about the Thracians has come from archaeological finds. It is clear that Thrace was greatly influenced by her neighbors. From Persia came the stylized depictions of mythical creatures that adorn Thracian gold and silver vessels. From Greece came more naturalistic portrayals, as in the frescoes in Thracian tombs.

**A WARRIOR NATION**

Greek and Roman historians portrayed the Thracians as superior fighters - tough, mobile and with excellent cavalry. To the ancient Greeks, Thrace was a hostile and wild place, home of Ares, god of war. The Romans had a type of gladiator named after the Thracians – lightly armed with a curved sword and circular shield. Spartacus, the gladiator who started a revolt that neatly overthrew Rome, was Thracian.

**THE ROMANS**

From the 2nd century BC, the Romans gradually replaced the Macedonians as the main power in southeastern Europe. By AD 50, they had taken control of the region, obliterating the old Thracian kingdoms and creating the provinces of Moesia and Thrace in their place. The Romans also built roads, founded new cities, and turned existing towns such as Philippopolis and Serdika (modern Sofia) into great metropolises. In AD 330, Constantine the Great's establishment of a new imperial capital at Constantinople (Byzantium) boosted southeastern Europe's importance, bringing renewed vibrancy to the cities of Thrace.

However, the Roman world's prosperity was increasingly threatened by barbarian invasions. The Visigoths ravaged the Danube region in 378, and the Huns sacked Serdika in about 450. In many cases the Byzantine authorities had no choice but to allow these migrating tribes to settle. The main beneficiaries of this policy were the Slays, who came from northeastern Europe to the Balkans in the 6th century, and soon made up the majority of the rural population.

**BIRTH OF THE BULGAR STATE**

The Slays lived peacefully under Byzantine rule until the arrival of the Bulgars, a warlike Turkic tribe whose origins lay in central Asia. In 681, a group of Bulgars under the leadership of Khan Asparuh crossed the Danube into what was to become Bulgaria, The Bulgars established a capital at Pliska, and gradually extended their rule over the Slays already settled in the region. Unable to resist the Bulgars, Byzantium was forced to recognize their nascent state. Under Asparuh's successors, notably Khan Krum (803-14), Bulgaria's borders were extended southwards at Byzantium's expense.

The ruling Bulgar aristocracy adopted the language and culture of the Slays, and the two communities merged to form the Bulgarian nation. This was accelerated by Khan Boris's conversion to Christianity in 865. Boris invited the Alav-speaking monks Kliment and Naum to spread the faith, ensuring the primacy of the Slav language. In order to translate the gospels into the Slav tongue, Kliment and Naum developed a new alphabet, which they named Cyrillic in honor of their mentor, St Cyril. With the new script, Bulgaria became a major centre of manuscript production, and the new spiritual and intellectual centre of the Balkans.
THE FIRST BULGARIAN KINGDOM

Bulgarian power reached its peak under Tsar Simeon (393-927), who pushed the Byzantines back to Constantinople, and extended the country's borders to the Black Sea in the east and to the Aegean in the west. However, Byzantine resurgence then halted further Bulgarian expansion. Bulgarian society was also weakened by a rift between the Church and a breakaway group of heretical preachers known as the Bogomils.

Squeezed by the Byzantines in the south and by Prince Svyatoslav of Kiev in the north, the Bulgarian kingdom fragmented in the late 10th century. A feeble Bulgarian state, under Tsar Samuil, survived in what is now Macedonia until 1019, when the Byzantine emperor Basil the Bulgar-Slayer destroyed Samuil's army at the Battle of Strumitsa. Four years later, Samuil's capital, Ohrid, fell to the Byzantines.

THE SECOND BULGARIAN KINGDOM

Byzantine rule brought peace and stability to Bulgaria. However, heavy taxation, and the replacement of Bulgarian priests with Greek-speaking clergy, led to discontent. In 1185, Petur and Ivan Men led local boyars (nobles) in a revolt against Byzantine rule. After a struggle for independence, Ivan Asen was crowned tsar in 1187 and Veliko Tûrnovo became the capital of the reborn kingdom.

The fall of Byzantium to the Crusaders in 1204 gave the Bulgarian kingdom the opportunity to consolidate and grow. Under Ivan Asen II (1218-41), Bulgaria's territorial expansion resumed but in 1240, the Mongols swept through the Balkans, pillaging as they went. A group of Mongols (later known as the Tatars) settled on the northern Black Sea coast. With the revival of the Byzantine Empire after 1261, Bulgaria was once again at the mercy of its neighbors.

To stay in power, Bulgarian tsars often needed the support of either the Byzantines or the Tatars. The rebel and mystic Ivano the Swineherd (1277-80) won the Bulgarian throne by promising to rid the country of Tatar influence, but in the end he fled to the Tatar court.

Bulgaria's decline as a major Balkan power was sealed by the rise of Serbia. The Bulgarian emperor, Mihail Shishman, tried to take advantage of the Byzantine civil war and attacked Serbia, but was defeated in 1330. Under his nephew, Ivan Aleksandûr (1331-71) Macedonia was surrendered to the Serbs.

THE RISE OF THE OTTOMAN TURKS

Anatolia in the early 14th century was made up of a patchwork of Turkish tribal states, the most successful being the Ottoman Turk. Gradually absorbing Byzantine territory, they established a foothold in Europe in 1354. The effective light cavalry of the Ottomans soon made inroads into the Bulgarian kingdom. Rather than outright conquest, the Ottomans made the Bulgarian tsars their vassals. Tsar Ivan Shishman's attempts to throw off this vassal status provoked a brutal response. In 1393 Sultan Bayezid sacked Veliko Tûrnovo, killed Ivan Shishman, and effectively wiped Bulgaria from the map.

In the anti-Ottoman crusade of 1396, King Sigismund of Hungary sought to liberate Bulgaria but was defeated by Bayezid at Nikopol. Another crusade, led by King Wladyslaw Jagiello of Poland, met a similar fate at Varna in 1444. Nine years later, the fall of Constantinople, last outpost of the Byzantine Empire, left the Ottomans in control of the Balkans.

BULGARIA UNDER OTTOMAN RULE

The Ottomans initially used cruel measures to assert their control of Bulgaria. Nobles were imprisoned or executed, and their subjects deported or enslaved. The Orthodox Church was allowed to carry on its activities, but the Ottoman legal system gave precedence to Muslims over Christians.

Under the Ottomans, cities such as Sofia, Plovdiv, Shumen, and Varna emerged as major trade and administrative centers, endowed with fine mosques, covered bazaars, drinking fountains, and prestigious public buildings. With a population that included Bulgarian artisans, Greek traders, merchants from Armenia
and Dubrovnik, and civil servants from all over the Ottoman Empire, these cities became highly cosmopolitan.

Some Bulgarian communities converted to Islam, perhaps to preserve their social status, Ottoman dervishes, who offered an accessible version of the Muslim faith, were key in making Islam attractive to potential converts. Those who adopted Islam were called Pomaks (Helpers) by their countrymen. Their descendants still inhabit the south of the country.

Ottoman bureaucracy was staffed almost entirely by slaves. These were usually collected under the devshirme system, by which the sultan's agents toured Christian villages, taking away an agreed proportion of boys aged between seven and 14. These were then forcibly converted to Islam, and educated in special schools before joining the army or the civil service. The brightest gained prestigious jobs. The Sultan's Grand Vezir (chief minister) was often a former devshirme boy. Cruel though it may have been, the devshirme system was broadly popular among Christian villagers because it offered their offspring an otherwise unimaginable degree of social mobility.

The Bulgarian nobility largely faded away, although a few rich landowners who cooperated with the regime retained their wealth. The inhabitants of highland villages, such as Kotel, Elena and Koprivshtitsa, also prospered. The Ottomans granted them privileges in return for keeping local mountain passes free of bandits and for supplying the Ottoman army with Balkan-reared sheep and wool.

By the late 18th century, central authority in the Ottoman Empire had started to weaken. Bandits known as kurdzhali roamed the Balkan region with impunity, attacking wealthy villages and sacking monasteries. By their failure to act, the authorities appeared to favor the bandits, and relations between Christian Bulgarians and their Muslim rulers deteriorated.

Long drawn-out wars with Austria and Russia had also weakened the Ottoman Empire. Educated Bulgarians began to look to the Russians, fellow Orthodox Christians who spoke a similar Slavic language, as their potential liberators from Ottoman rule. This coincided with a new Interest in Bulgarian history and culture. In 1762, the monk Paisii of Hilendar wrote his Slavo-Bulgarian History, which opened Bulgarians eyes to their country's pre-Ottoman greatness. The authorities forbade the printing of Paisi’s history, but it circulated in manuscript form and played a key role in awakening Bulgarian patriotism.

**THE NATIONAL REVIVAL**

Bulgarian merchants who had grown rich from the wool trade began to fund patriotic cultural projects, such as the publication of books in the Bulgarian language, and to support schools where pupils were taught in Bulgarian. Funds were also raised for the refurbishment of historic monasteries such as Rila, Troyan and Bachkovo, and the best Bulgarian architects, icon painters and woodcarvers were commissioned to work on them.

This patriotic upsurge in education and the arts was later dubbed the National Revival. Many Bulgarian merchants built themselves lavish family houses that reflected the new taste for fine architecture and wood-carving. This gave rise to a National Revival style of domestic architecture.

The patriotic spirit gradually spread from the cultural to the political sphere. From the earliest days of their rule, the Ottomans had placed the Orthodox Church in the hands of Greek-speaking priests and patriarchs. Bulgarian community leaders now pressed for the creation of a separate branch of the Church, a Bulgarian exarchate free of Greek control. The sultan conceded to these demands in 1872.

Frustrated by the slow pace of reform, Bulgarian intellectuals proposed more radical tactics. In 1871, patriots of the younger generation formed a proindependence organization from the safety of the Romanian capital, Bucharest. The revolutionary leader Vasil Levski (1837-73) set about organizing an underground anti-Ottoman movement in Bulgaria itself but was captured and executed in 1873. Meanwhile, young revolutionary ideologues like Lyuben Karavelov and Hristo Botev continued to pin their hopes on a mass uprising.
FROM UPRISING TO LIBERATION

This was the April Rising, which began in 1876 in Koprivshtitsa, a mountain village at a safe distance from the Ottoman-controlled lowland towns. The Ottomans easily quashed the rebellion, but used undisciplined auxiliaries known as bashibazouks to restore order. Outraged by the indiscriminate massacres carried out by the bashibazouks, public opinion in Russia and Western Europe fell solidly behind the Bulgarian cause.

In April 1877, Russia declared war on the Ottoman Empire. Despite Ottoman resistance, Russian forces soon overran Bulgaria and forced the sultan to accept defeat. In March 1878, under the terms of the Treaty of San Stefano, an independent Bulgarian state was created. Besides core Bulgarian territory, it included large pans of Thrace and Macedonia. Britain, France, Germany and other Western powers suspected that Russia would use the new Bulgarian state to increase its influence in the Balkans. In June 1878, at the hastily called Congress of Berlin, "Greater Bulgaria" was dismembered. A Principality of Bulgaria, still nominally subject to the Ottomans, was created north of the Balkans, with its capital at Sofia. Bulgaria south of the Balkans became a self-governing province of the Ottoman Empire, called Eastern Rumelia, with Plovdiv as its capital. Macedonia still remained a pan of the Ottoman Empire, without self-governing status. For staunch Bulgarian patriots, the Congress of Berlin represented a major defeat, and their dream of reuniting the territories assigned to Bulgaria at the Treaty of San Stefano became the dominant theme of Bulgarian politics for the next 70 years.

INDEPENDENT BULGARIA

Having played a key part in the Liberation, Russia expected to have a guiding role in the new Bulgaria. The Bulgarian army and civil service also desperately needed an influx of Russian bureaucrats to help the fledgling state get on its feet. Alexander Batenberg, a German aristocrat who had served as a volunteer in the Russian army, was chosen to become the principality's new ruler. A natural autocrat, Prince Alexander had difficulty in dealing with Bulgaria's radical politicians, many of whom had been republican revolutionaries before the Liberation. He also had problems with Bulgaria's Russian masters.

In 1886, Bulgarian nationalists took control of Eastern Rumelia and unilaterally declared its union with the Principality of Bulgaria. The Russians, enraged that they had not been consulted, kidnapped Prince Alexandûr and tried to provoke a pro-Russian coup. Alexandûr was released, but was forced to abdicate. Another central European aristocrat, Ferdinand of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, became the principality's new head, and Bulgaria's foreign policy was reoriented towards Germany and Austria-Hungary.

BULGARIAN NATIONAL REVIVAL

By the early 19th century, 400 years of Ottoman rule had forced Bulgarian culture into the background. Very few could read or write, and monasteries were the only places where scholarship lived on. However, a new generation of wealthy merchants wanted a Bulgarian-language education for their children, and raised money for teachers and schools. Before long, a cultural renaissance was under way, reawakening an interest in Bulgarian history and culture, and unleashing new energies in art and architecture. This was the National Revival, and by the mid-19th century, its effect was felt in the political sphere, too, with radical young patriots demanding political change. Bulgarians dared to dream of a liberated future. A growing national consciousness swept through Europe. Greece gained independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1829, and Russia, long a friend to Bulgaria, was ready to take on the Turks and their allies.

THE BEGINNING OF THE REVIVAL

Spiritual godfather of the Bulgarian National Revival was Father Paisii of Hilendar (1722-73), a Bulgarian monk from Mount Athos. Dismayed by the Greek clergy's stranglehold on the Bulgarian church, which used Greek as its official language, Paisii penned a patriotic manuscript entitled the Slaw-Bulgarian History, with eulogized Bulgaria's medieval rulers in stirring fashion. It was, in essence, a manifesto of Bulgarian nationalism - a history of the Bulgarian state and Church. Although the Greek-controlled Church authorities forbade the printing of Paisii's book, it was widely circulated, and became required reading for subsequent generations of Bulgarian
EDUCATIONAL REFORM

One of the main popularizers of Father Paisii’s work was Neofit Rilski (1793-1880), a Bansko-born monk who devoted himself to the promotion of Bulgarian-language education. His Bulgarian Grammar (1835) was one of the first-ever text books in the language; He also translated a huge quantity of religious texts from Greek into Bulgarian, and spent decades working on a huge Greek-Slavic Dictionary. Most importantly, Neofit Rilski headed the first secondary school in Bulgaria, founded by Vassil Aprilov in Gabrovo in 1835. He went on to found a similar school two years later in Koprivshtitsa, introducing modern secular teaching methods later taken up across the whole of Bulgaria.

ECCLESIASTICAL ARCHITECTURE

Relatively unharmed by the Ottomans - and the only form of public construction permitted, churches acquired civic functions, becoming keepers of the national identity. As the only outlet for Bulgarian nationalism, a wave of church building activity swept the country during the 1830s and 1840s. The renovation of Rita Monastery was one of the great patriotic projects of the era, funded by contributions from Bulgarians keen to turn Rila into a national spiritual landmark, One of Neofit Rilski’s most famous followers was Zahari Zograf, a Samokov-bon painter whose work can be seen in churches and monasteries throughout the country. Among his best-known works are the icons inside Rila monastery church, and frescoes in the church’s porch.

DOMESTIC ART AND ARCHITECTURE

The upsurge in Bulgarian culture was accompanied by changes in lifestyle. Wealthy merchants were travelling widely and building large family houses, often using traditional Bulgarian crafts in their design and construction. House painters used Bulgarian folk art as the inspiration for the colorful floral designs with which they covered outer facades and reception rooms. Wood carvers incorporated floral motifs, bird shapes and sunburst patterns into Intricate fretted ceilings. This all maintained a link with the past and reinforced a national identity. This increasing demand for artists in turn led to the development of schools of art - at Tryavna, Samokov, and Boyana for example. This artistic legacy remains and can be seen in Plovdiv, Koprivshtitsa, Tryavna, Veliko Tŭrnovo and elsewhere.

THE WILL FOR POLITICAL CHANGE

Bulgaria’s newly literate population was unwilling to put up with the administration imposed by the Ottoman Empire Radicals like Georgi Sava Rakovski (1821-67) established the country’s first anti-Ottoman armed group, inspiring intellectuals and freedom fighters such as Lyuben Karavelov (1834-79), Vasil Levski (1837-73) and Hristo Botev (1844-76) to organize pockets of resistance. In April 1876 a large-scale uprising against the Ottomans was launched but was brutally put down. However, news of the massacres resulted in universal condemnation, the start of another Russo-Turkish War and ultimately independence for Bulgaria in 1878.

BULGARIANS AND MACEDONIANS

After the Congress of Berlin, many Macedonians, who saw Bulgaria as their main ally in the struggle against Ottoman rule, came to Sofia as exiles. Because of ethnic and linguistic similarities between Bulgarian and Macedonian Slavs, many people from both groups claimed that they were historically one nation. The Bulgarian court and the country’s armed forces also sought closer links with Macedonian factions.

Prime Minister Stefan Stambolov angered the court by trying to clamp down on the Macedonian lobby, and was dismissed by Prince Ferdinand in 1895. The following year Stambolov was murdered in Sofia by Macedonian revolutionaries. This was the first of many political assassinations linked to Macedonian émigré groups.

In 1903 the Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO) staged an uprising in Macedonia against Ottoman rule. The revolt was brutally put down, sending another wave of Macedonian exiles into Bulgaria. In 1908, the
Ottoman Empire was again convulsed, this time by the Young Turks, a group of Western-oriented radicals who tried to introduce a modern liberal regime. Bulgaria took advantage of Ottoman weakness to declare itself an independent kingdom, with Ferdinand Tsar Ferdinand I.

THE BALKAN WARS TO WORLD WAR I

Eager to force the Ottomans from their remaining European possessions in Macedonia and Thrace, Bulgaria was drawn into an anti-Ottoman alliance with Serbia and Greece. In the First Balkan War of 1912, these three Balkan states inflicted a crushing defeat on the Ottomans but disagreed on how to divide their conquests. The Greeks and Serbs occupied much of Macedonia, which Bulgaria regarded as rightly hers. Bulgaria responded by declaring war on her former allies, but was roundly defeated in the Second Balkan War of 1913.

Bulgaria’s involvement in World War I was an even greater disaster. Once again lured by the chance to occupy Macedonia, Bulgaria joined the war on the German-Austrian side in 1915. Three years later a Greek-French-British army invaded Macedonia, sweeping the Bulgarian army aside. With the country in a state of collapse, Tsar Ferdinand abdicated in favor of his son Boris III, and Aleksandůr Stambolyiski, radical leader of the Agrarian Party, became prime minister.

THE INTER-WAR YEARS

Stambolyiski's policy of giving power to the peasants enraged the urban middle classes. He also lost the support of Bulgarian nationalists by failing to oppose Macedonia's becoming part of Yugoslavia. In 1923, Stambolyiski was murdered by embittered Macedonian writers and their Bulgarian allies. An uprising by Bulgarian Communists was put down, leaving power in the hands of the authoritarian right.

Throughout the 1920s, Macedonian revolutionary factions continued to influence Bulgarian politics. They ran southwestern Bulgaria as a virtual gangster-state. Eager to bring the Macedonians under control, a group of intellectuals and Bulgarian army officers staged a coup in 1934. Tsar Boris III imposed a royal dictatorship the following year.

WAR AND REVOLUTION

In 1941, two years after the outbreak of World War II, Bulgaria joined the Axis, judging that an alliance with Germany would allow her to reoccupy Macedonia. By 1943, however, it was apparent that German victory was not assured, and Bulgarian politicians sought other options. In 1944, Bulgaria switched sides, hoping to head off an invasion by the Soviet Red Army. However, the Red Army invaded, providing the Bulgarian Communist Party with the opportunity to seize power.

The Communists' first priority was to banish all other political forces. Politicians sympathetic to the Communists were cajoled into joining the Fatherland Front, an umbrella organization controlled by the Communists. Anti-Communist politicians were denounced as traitors who were sabotaging the country's postwar reconstruction. Elections held in 1945 gave the Communists a landslide victory. A staged referendum in 1946 voted to abolish the monarchy, and Bulgaria became a republic. Persecution of the Communist Party's opponents culminated in 1947 with the trial of Agrarian leader Nikola Petkov, who was executed for allegedly plotting with foreign intelligence services.

Bulgaria was forced to accept the loss of Macedonia, which became a federal republic within Communist Yugoslavia. The BKP leader Georgi Dimitrov considered solving the Macedonian question by forming a Bulgarian-Yugoslav Confederation, of which Macedonia would be a constituent part. However, Stalin disapproved, and Dimitrov died in mysterious circumstances in 1949.

Under his successor, Vuklo Chervenkov, Bulgaria became a model Stalinist society in which political, economic and cultural life was tightly controlled. Agriculture was collectivized and the development of heavy industry fed economic growth. The death of Stalin in 1953 was followed by the fall of his close associates in Eastern Europe, and in 1956 Chervenkov stepped down in favor of Todor Zhivkov. Although he allowed greater cultural
freedom, Zhivkov remained a hard-line Communist loyal to the Soviet Union.

By the early 1980’s, the Bulgarian economy was stagnating and Zhivkov could no longer rely on full employment and improving standards of living to ensure continuing support. He also launched a policy of bringing Bulgaria’s Turks into the national fold. Turks were made to adopt Bulgarian surnames, and the use of the Turkish language in public places was discouraged. The policy was justified by the dubious theory that Bulgaria’s Turks were ethnic Bulgarians, forcibly Turkicized during Ottoman rule.

THE COLLAPSE OF COMMUNISM

By the 1980s, across Eastern Europe confidence in the Communist system was ebbing away. While the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev addressed the problem through policies of glasnost (openness) and perestroika (restructuring), Zhivkov was unwilling to follow his lead. Instead, he opted to whip up nationalist passions by stepping up his anti-Turkish campaign. As a result, some 360,000 Bulgarian Turks fled to Turkey in 1989. The exodus led to catastrophic labor shortages, and crops remained unharvested.

At the same time, Bulgarian dissidents became increasingly active, forming pressure groups such as the environmentally ethical Ecoglasnost, and the embryonic trade-union movement Podkrepa. The fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 suddenly changed Eastern Europe's political landscape. The Bulgarian Communist leadership forced Todor Zhivkov to resign, and embarked on a reformist path. Soon after, the anti-Communist opposition united to form the Union of Democratic forces (UDF), led by the dissident intellectual Zhelyu Zhelev. Bulgaria’s ethnic Turks, allowed political expression for the first time, founded the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF).

CONTEMPORARY BULGARIA

Under a new name, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), the Communists won the first free elections in Bulgaria in 1990. They were, however, greeted by a wave of protest, and were forced accept the veteran anti-Communist Zhelyu Zhelev as president. Fresh elections in 1991 brought the UDF to power, but its radical program of economic reform was halted when coalition partners, concerned by the social cost of free-market policies, deserted the government.

The BSP re-established itself as the dominant force in Bulgarian politics in 1994. However, economic mismanagement led to runaway inflation and food shortages, provoking mass protests. The UDF was returned to power in April 1997, but it failed to stamp out government corruption, and in 2001 Bulgaria turned to a new, non-ideological party formed by Bulgaria’s former Tsar, Simeon of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha.

Simeon II’s National Movement continued the program of economic stabilization initiated by the UDA. But despite economic growth, prosperity failed to reach most of the populace, who returned the BSP to power in 2005.

Despite these frequent changes in government, most political parties agreed that Bulgaria's most important priority was its smooth integration into Western organizations. Bulgaria joined NATO in 2004, and signed the European Union Accession Treaty in 2005. Bulgaria's entry into the EU in 2007 marked a significant new phase in the country's voyage from post-Communist chaos to political and economic stability.