

The Armenians of Bulgaria: History, Present, and Future

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The history of the Armenian community in Bulgaria is rich not only in its historical depth but also in the cultural and social vibrancy of the Armenians currently residing there. According to encyclopedic and historical sources, Armenians first appeared in Bulgaria as early as the second half of the 5th century. In the 6th century, some Armenian nobles fought alongside the Byzantines against the Persians and were relocated to Macedonia and Thrace. Armenian historians testify that during those years, the fortress of the Bulgarian city of Plovdiv was guarded by an Armenian unit.

At the end of the 7th century, the Bulgars invaded the Balkan Peninsula and established the first Bulgarian state, called Bulgaria. Later, during the 8th–9th centuries, a mass migration of Armenians occurred as a result of the rise of the Paulician and Tondrakian sectarian movements in Armenia. As historian Siranush Papazian-Danielyan explains, the Paulicians arrived in the 10th century, and by the 16th century, Armenians were also arriving from Persia and the Ottoman Empire.

Even in the Middle Ages, many Armenians held high positions in the Bulgarian royal court. The Armenian military commander Samuil “the Comitadji” ruled western Bulgaria from 997 to 1014. Interestingly, he is also considered the king of the Macedonians, and there is a statue dedicated to him in the center of Skopje.

As historian Gohar Khnkanosyan shared in an interview, during those years, Armenians from Poland received permission from the sultan to come to Bulgaria. They set off on three ships but never reached their destination—the ships sank. Those who survived settled in Sofia and founded the local Armenian church. Around the same period, between 1610 and the 1620s, Armenian churches were also built in the cities of Silistra and Plovdiv. Every time these wooden churches were burned down, they were rebuilt, and the new construction bore a new inscription with the date. The Silistra church was rebuilt again in 1878, after Bulgaria’s liberation and the establishment of the Bulgarian Republic.

Later, for urban development purposes, the lands of Armenian churches began to be expropriated. Historian Ara Markos deciphered the stones that have been preserved from those churches. These properties also housed adjacent buildings, including initially single-

story wooden schools, which were later replaced by stone structures. In Plovdiv, school buildings were constructed with rooms for teachers to reside in.

In the Middle Ages, Armenians lived in the Bulgarian cities of Nicaea, Philippopolis (Plovdiv), Melenikon, Devol, Serdica (Sofia), Bitola, Veliko Tarnovo, and several villages, with their population totaling around 30,000. Many of these Armenians belonged to religious sects and were instrumental in founding the Bogomil movement. Of course, in cities like Ohrid, Strumica, Sofia, Devol, and Veliko Tarnovo, there were also followers of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

In the Petritsion Monastery (present-day Bachkovo), built in the 9th century by Armenian princes Grigor and Abas Bakurian, Armenian Chalcedonians resided. Over the centuries, many sectarian Armenians assimilated into the Bulgarian population, while some converted to Catholicism. Evidence of this can be seen in village names such as Pavlikeni, Gorno and Dolno Pavlikeni, Armenokhor, Armenitsa, Ermenli, Toros, and Ermenska, where Armenians lived for long periods.

When the Turks conquered Bulgaria in the 14th century, Armenians were also relocated. During this period, Armenians arrived from Moldova, Persia, Poland, and Western Armenia due to various wars and settled in the Bulgarian cities of Ruse, Varna, Burgas, Shumen, Haskovo, Razgrad, Yambol, Sliven, Silistra, Pazardzhik, and Nova or Stara Zagora. In the late Middle Ages, Armenians also settled there from Armenia, Nakhichevan, and Crimea. Their numbers grew to several tens of thousands. Most were artisans and merchants.

In 1876, during the uprising against Ottoman rule, Armenians also took part. Among them were Hovhannes Alajajyan, Eranos Eranosyan, Hovhannes Svajyan, and others. To support the cause, Armenians printed anti-Turkish books and pamphlets in Constantinople and brought them to Bulgaria.

During the 1877–1878 Russo-Turkish War, many Armenians distinguished themselves with bravery on the Balkan front. Following Russia's victory and Bulgaria's liberation in the war, around 10,000 Armenians arrived from Thrace and Macedonia and settled in major cities across Bulgaria.

According to the new Bulgarian Constitution of 1879, Armenians were granted the right to obtain Bulgarian citizenship, vote and be elected to public offices, establish national community councils, and create cultural and educational institutions. They were also given the autonomy to manage church affairs independently and to oversee judicial matters.

During those years, in cities with large Armenian populations, Armenians founded self-governing bodies such as neighborhood councils, ecclesiastical boards, judicial courts, and school boards. Their structure and regulations were based on the 1860 Armenian National Constitution.

By the 1890s, prompted by Catholicos Khrimian Hayrik, Bulgarian Armenians aligned themselves with the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin. Educational and cultural centers and associations were established. Armenian national political parties were also active in Bulgaria.

In 1912, when the Kingdom of Bulgaria, along with Serbia, Greece, and Montenegro, declared war on Turkey, a battalion of 273 Armenian volunteers—under the leadership of Garegin Nzhdeh and Andranik—was formed. It fought as part of the Bulgarian army against the Turks and earned recognition for its heroism.

During the 1880s and 1890s, Armenian schools, diocesan councils, political parties, public and cultural organizations, hometown unions, and sports associations were active in the community. Periodicals were published. Nzhdeh's house in Sofia is still preserved, while Andranik's house is located in Varna. As historian Gohar Khnkanosyan told us: "The old colony lived in Shumen. The first wave of around 20,000 Armenians came from Turkey after the Hamidian massacres of 1895–96. The second wave was smaller, arriving in 1915–16, while the third and largest wave came during the Greco-Turkish War in the autumn of 1922. The new Armenian migrants were generally more fluent in Armenian than those who had earlier moved to Bulgaria from the Ottoman Empire, many of whom had already forgotten the language."

During the first wave, teachers and clergy came from Edirne and Constantinople to teach Armenian. In 1922–23, schools became gathering places for Armenians, where new organizations were founded, including Homenetmen and the "Artsiv" (Eagle) mountaineering organization. Until the 1950s–60s, the community remained tightly knit, with chapters in different cities. They founded the first sports union and later established its branches across the country.

Thus, between 1915 and 1922, over 20,000 Armenians fleeing the Armenian Genocide found refuge in Bulgaria, raising the Armenian population there to 50,000. In addition to the government's support, the local Bulgarian-Armenian community created a Refugee Fund, also receiving assistance from Armenian communities in Europe.

A class of Armenian merchants also emerged in Bulgaria. At one point, more than 30 Armenian trading houses operated in the country, involved in textiles, carpet weaving, oriental spices, leatherworking, tobacco processing, and more. During World War I, Armenian-populated cities also saw the establishment of savings and mutual aid societies, treasuries, and Armenian banks.

Economist Vahan Totomian played a key role in the development of the cooperative movement and cooperative credit banks in Bulgaria. Within Armenian communities, various regional patriotic associations were formed by Western Armenians—such as associations for people from Mush, the Caucasus, Constantinople, and others.

Armenian industrialists also held significant positions in Bulgaria's economy. Notably, Aram Avetisyan, Hakob Manukyan, Grigor Terlemezian, and Barunak Garalyan owned silk factories, and the Armenian "Metaks" (Silk) joint-stock company was active. Renowned carpet weavers included Hovhannes Poghosyan, Grigor Zakaryan, Hasmik Tamanyan, the Petrosyan family, and Serovbe Paharyan.

In the leather and footwear industry, prominent names included the Malkhasyan family, the Panosyan brothers, Avag Margaryan, the Palyan brothers, Sarkis Nalchadjian, and others. According to some data, 70% of Bulgarian-Armenian workers were employed in these enterprises. Large tobacco-processing businesses were owned by Tagvor Tagvoryan, Mkrtich Thomasian, Grigor Tyutyunjian, Ruben Terteryan, and Manuk Manukyan. Armenians were also active in jewelry, food production, and other sectors.

During the global economic crisis of the 1930s, many Bulgarian-Armenians emigrated to other European countries and the U.S., while those living in smaller villages moved to Bulgaria's larger cities. As a result, by the time of World War II, the Armenian population in Bulgaria had declined again to around 25,000.

During WWII, Bulgarian Armenians actively participated in the anti-fascist resistance movement, including in partisan units and resistance organizations. Prominent figures in the movement included Hermine Razgratlyan, Tigran Peshtimaljian, Ara Matukyan, Gevorg Barseghyan, Hovhannes Baklavajyan, Tiran Barikyan, Sarkis Alayan, Antoine Dyulgheryan, Zohrab Ghasabyan, and others.

Later, during WWII, when Southern Dobrudzha and several cities were incorporated into Bulgaria, the Armenian population increased again to around 35,000. Between 1946 and 1949, about 5,000 Bulgarian-Armenians repatriated to Soviet Armenia.

It was also significant that, after the declaration of the People's Republic of Bulgaria in 1946, Armenian-owned factories and businesses were nationalized, and small businesses were restricted. At the same time, many Armenian youths began receiving higher education, and by the 1980s, Armenians were active in the fields of education, healthcare, science, and culture.

During the Soviet era, major changes in community life affected Armenian schools—many were closed, traditional Armenian political parties were banned, and all types of public organizations were prohibited. The only functioning organization was the cultural union “Yerevan,” which also published a newspaper of the same name. Even during that time, many Armenians emigrated to cities in Europe, the U.S., and Canada.

After the fall of communist rule in 1989, the Armenian community regained its freedom. From 1990 onward, organizations such as AGBU, Homenetmen, and the Armenian Relief Society (ARS) resumed their activities and established branches in other Bulgarian cities. Armenian schools were reopened in Sofia, Plovdiv, and Ruse, where Western Armenian was taught.

During those years, branches of the Zoravar Andranik Youth Union operated, along with the “Ararat” youth and women’s unions in Varna, and the “Arax” charitable organization in Plovdiv. From 1990 onward, Armenians from Armenia also began settling in Bulgaria.

According to 2003 data, there were around 50,000 Armenians living in Bulgaria, but today that number has dropped to around 30,000. Currently, Armenians live in cities such as Sofia, Ruse, Varna, Plovdiv, Burgas, Shumen, Haskovo, Sliven, Silistra, Pazardzhik, Stara Zagora, Yambol, and Pleven.

According to *Yerevan* newspaper editor V. Topakbashyan, the official census registered 6,000 Armenians in Bulgaria. However, he notes that in the 2011 census, declaring ethnic minority status was not mandatory. Taking that into account, he estimates the Armenian population to be around 10,000–12,000. This does not include Armenians from Armenia, as there is no data on how many are permanent residents versus temporary. Including them, the number of Armenians may reach 20,000–25,000.

“There used to be 30,000 just from Armenia, but many have left,” says Topakbashyan.

Many have studied the history of Armenians in Bulgaria. Books have been written by Hovnanyan (“The History of the Bulgarian-Armenians up to 1900”), historian Hakob Karapetyan (“The Armenians” collection), and Mesropuhi Gevorg Mesrop Tanguranyan

("The History of Bulgarian-Armenian Schools"), which also touches on community history. Z. Ghasabyan authored the monograph *Sketches from the History of the Bulgarian-Armenian Community*. Hayk Kilikyan from Plovdiv has also conducted research on the Armenian community. Other monographs and articles have also been published.