

## Pioneer of Bulgarian National Revival

by Dr. Emil Georgiev

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*Editor's Note:*

Dr Emil Georgiev was Professor of Slavic Literature at the Sofia University *St. Clement Ohridski*. Some of his most important works are: *Cyril and Methodius, the Founders of the Slavic Literature* (1956); *Bulgarians and Czechs in the Epoch of their Revival* (1945); *Sketches of the history of the Slavic Literature* (1958); *Development of the Bulgarian Literature in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries* (1962) and other works. He was also contributing editor of *Slaviani*, a monthly publication on matters of Slavic civilization and culture.

*Vassil Popvassilev*

The pioneer of Bulgaria's national revival is a man who had a clear view of the needs of the period he lived in and was able to perceive the past, present and future of our people. Paissi Hilendarski, the great champion of our national identity, gathered the light of the past and illuminated with it the future. His book *Slav-Bulgarian History*, which is fairly modest in size, became the big divide between two epochs in the history of our nation: the Middle Ages and Modern Times.

Paissi's year of birth, calculated on the basis of data from his book is 1722. The question of his birthplace has given rise to many arguments. Just as once upon a time quite a few Greek localities claimed the honour of being Homer's place of birth, so a number of villages in southwest Bulgaria have proclaimed themselves, on the basis of various legends, the birthplace of the forerunner of Bulgaria's national revival. Dospei, Ralyovo, Belyovo, Kravevdol and Bansko, all claim that honour. It is only fairly recently that this honour belongs to Bansko, once a village and a town in the foothills of the legendary Pirin Mountains.

In the epilogue of his book, Paissi himself notes that he studied neither grammar nor laical sciences. Undoubtedly he studied at the monastic school in his native village and continued his education at Rila Monastery, which like Bansko was located in the Samokov diocese. In 1745, Paissi went to Mt. Athos Monastery where he became a monk.

At Mt. Athos Monastery, Paissi perfected his education and amid the books of the reach libraries, and in meeting with Bulgarians from various parts of the country who visited the Hilendar and Zograph Monasteries, he developed his national consciousness. He was greatly embittered and pained by haughty attitude and feeling of superiority manifested by Greek and Serbian monks because their peoples were more advanced in their cultural and national development and had a written history of their own. The chagrin and grief for the Bulgarian people prompted him about 1760 to sit down and write a Bulgarian history. He wrote it in the course of two years, gathering material for it primarily in the Mt. Athos Monasteries as well as in Karlovtsi, a town in the Austro-Hungarian Empire to which he was sent on a mission in connection with monastery matters. (**Karlovac** is a city in today's central [Croatia](#)). After completing his history, he left the monastery and set out to spread it throughout Bulgaria. It is difficult to say when he stopped traveling from town to town and from village to village, in order to

have his work copied. At any rate, he did not discontinue his activity until he felt that he had sown the seeds for a national awakening of his people, by then steeped in darkness. This is borne out by the numerous copies and alterations of the Slav-Bulgarian History, of which over 60 are known to date. They come from different parts of Bulgaria.

An analysis of the Slav-Bulgarian History will show that it represents an entire program of Bulgaria's national revival.

The first task which Paissi set himself was to make the Bulgarians nationally conscious as an ethnic unit within the vast confines of the Ottoman Empire, to establish the existence of a Bulgarian nation as such. He had a perfect grasp of the essence of a nation which, as is known, represents a historically formed stable community of people, which has emerged on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life and culture.

And Paissi set out to fight for the Bulgarian language, for a Bulgarian fatherland, for the right of the Bulgarian nationality to develop. His appeal "Bulgarian, know your origin and your language!" pervades his entire work.

The second task which Paissi set himself was to create a Bulgarian national life. It had to begin with the enlightenment of the Bulgarian people and to lead to the creation of a Bulgarian national culture. Paissi often spoke about studies. What counts is that these studies were associated with the native tongue. The question of a national culture arose when Paissi opposed Greek "learning" and stressed the existence of Bulgarian literary figures, of Bulgarian philosophers and teachers, of a Bulgarian school and a Bulgarian literature in the past. A special section of his book is devoted to the Bulgarian apostles of enlightenment, the brothers Cyril and Methodius.

With the awakening of the national consciousness there arises the next task: the political liberation of the Bulgarian people.

Paissi could not attack the Ottoman political rule as openly and boldly as he attacked the Greek spiritual rule. But he did stress clearly enough the necessity of the Bulgarian people's political freedom, so that they might become masters of their own future. Paissi may be said to have laid the groundwork for the struggle which ended the period of Bulgaria's national revival.

The national question, as raised by Paissi, was democratic in character. The great pioneer expressed his warm love for the common people – the plowmen, shepherds and craftsmen. He defended and praised them and was filled with wrath against their exploiters.

Striving to awaken his compatriots to resistance and struggle; to show them on whom they could count and whose support they should seek, Paissi underscored the close affinities of the Bulgarians with the Russian people and with Slavism. It may be said that by stressing the Slav affiliation of the Bulgarian people and their kinship to the Russian people, Paissi inspired hope for success in the struggle that had started or was about to start.

The great significance of the *Slav-Bulgarian History* for the development of the Bulgarian people, as the first major manifestation of Bulgaria's national revival, as the fruit of a patriotic elan, as a book progressive, democratic and no less revolutionary in character, will always attract our attention and interest towards the figure of its author, a figure which shines at the dawn of a new epoch.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paisius\\_of\\_Hilendar](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paisius_of_Hilendar)