

Bulgaria's Tsar Samuel

By Ivan Mihailoff

On November 19 we celebrate 1000 years from Tsar Samuel's death.

Among our Bulgarian society, often the name of Tsar Samuel is mentioned. November 19 would be the anniversary of his death.

In fact, who was Tsar Samuel? Which was his kingdom that he had so heroically defended?

These questions have been eloquently answered by historical documents which had chiefly been written by contemporary ancient Greek analysts. Foreign historians had also written about Samuel's reign. However, below we are giving only a brief outline of the most significant events that had occurred during his period. Let us here repeat: In this endeavour we are guided only by indisputable historic accounts.

1. Samuel's kingdom was the final period of the first Bulgarian State. Because of the name of its capital, some historians rightfully are referring to it as "Ochrid Bulgaria" ; before that there was "Preslavka Bulgaria" (the City of Preslav as its capital). Later on there was a "Tirnovska Bulgaria" – after undergoing nearly 200 years of Byzantine oppression.
2. Before Samuel's time, Bulgaria had attained extensive frontiers. They embraced the entire Balkan Peninsula – including Albania to the Adriatic Sea, and to the entire center of Greece – the Gulf of Corinth; on the north they had touched the Carpathian Mountains, including present Romania, along with Transylvania, and also Bessarabia. All of these territories constituted parts of the geographic extent of the then Bulgarian State. Under the reign of some of the Bulgarian Tsars, Bulgaria had much greater territory than that of present France. She had appeared as the third political and military power in Europe – yielding only to Byzantium and the Empire of Charles the Great (Charlemagne, 768-814). During the Middle Age, all of Serbia with Belgrade and the far western and southern provinces had been under Bulgarian domination for more than two centuries.

As it is well known, during the first Bulgarian State the most important Tsars had been Kroum, Boris and Simeon.

3. Byzantium's constant policy and aim had been the destruction of the Bulgarian State. Many wars had periodically occurred between the two adversaries. Quite often some Bulgarian Tsars had reached the walls of Constantinople (Byzantium); they had also won brilliant victories, by capturing as prisoners even Byzantine emperors.
4. After Simeon (893-927), the throne was occupied by his son, Peter, who had reigned for many years. His rule, being disliked by many, developed widespread dissatisfaction among his people. Tsar Peter was considered a good man, but on the whole he had been a weak person; the defence of the country has been completely neglected.

Against such dangerous situation, there had appeared an open revolt in the Macedonian provinces; it had been led by Simeon's first son, Mihail, who was a monk. Soon after the beginning of the revolt, Mihail had died; his followers fled to Epirus, where the Byzantine authorities violently subdued them.

5. At one time Byzantines had persuaded the Kiev Prince Sviatoslav to attack Bulgaria. Indeed, in 967, with an army of 60,000 troops, he invaded and occupied present Dobroudja. After plundering the country, he retreated, but soon he again invaded Bulgaria. The diplomatic game had worked out so that Sviatoslav had taken the side of the Bulgarians. But he was finally put to flight by the Byzantine emperor Ioannis Tzimiskes (969-976). As a consequence, Byzantium occupied the eastern half of the Bulgarian State, with its capital Preslav.
6. After Tsar Peter's reign, there had again occurred a revolt in Macedonia against the Byzantine rule in Bulgaria. The Byzantine morals – particularly in the emperor's palace and also in the church hierarchy – had been harmful. A good deal of Eastern Bulgaria had been eaten up or corrupted by the reign of Byzantinism, while the western provinces had strongly preserved the national traditions. The revolt was, therefore, a serious attempt to rescue Bulgaria.

At the head of this armed resistance had been the four brothers – Moses (Moissey), Samuel, Aaron and David. Their father – Count (Commit) Nikola, was a boyar from Sredetz (Sofia) with close ties to the royal court of Preslav.

7. The Emperor Tzimiskes had for three years been engaged in war with the Arabs and it was during this period of time that the above mentioned brothers had strengthened the state and attained foreign recognition. In 973 a Bulgarian delegation had appeared before the German Emperor Otto I in Quedlinburg. Meanwhile to offer their services, important refugees from Eastern Bulgaria had been arriving in the Ohrid Kingdom, like the renowned boyar Krakra who ruled from Pernik.
8. In "Ochridska" Bulgaria the Patriarch who had been removed by the Byzantine Emperor Tzimiskes had also arrived. During the reign of Simeon and Peter, the seat of the Patriarchate was in Drustur (Dorostol or Silistra) and was later moved to Sredetz, Maglen and Prespa, until finally Ohrid had become not only the capital of the kingdom, but also the seat of the Bulgarian Church.
9. While Emperor Tzimiskes had been involved with his own problems in the Arab lands in the east, "Ochridska" Bulgaria had managed to regain some of the recently lost Bulgarian territories in the north-eastern part; now only the lands between the Balkan and the Rhodopa mountain were left under Byzantine rule.

To incorporate in his state the southern territories inhabited by Slavic people, Samuel sent out an expedition toward Thessaly, where Slavs had settled since the Seventh century. Samuel had achieved what former Bulgarian kings were unable to accomplish. But later, however, these Slavs had again fallen under Byzantine rule.

Tsar Samuel had taken Larissa and resettled its inhabitants to Bulgaria. His son, Gavril (Gabriel) Radomir (reigned 1014-1016) had married a captive woman, Irene from Larissa. The remains of the well-known saint Achilles (St. Achil) were taken from Larissa and placed in a church especially built on an island in the lake of Prespa.

While Samuel was in Greece, his brother Moses (Moissey) had perished during the siege of the City of Siar (Serres) and the other brother, David, had been ambushed and killed somewhere in the Kostur (Kastoria)-Prespa districts; some historians maintain that he was killed by roaming Vlachs.

10. When he had conquered Eastern Bulgaria, Emperor Tzimiskes had carried away the entire Bulgarian royal family to Constantinople.

Boris II (reigned 969-972) and his brother, Roman, learning about the development in Western Bulgaria, had succeeded, after eight years of captivity, to escape Byzantium, and flee toward the Bulgarian frontier. By accident, Boris II had been killed by Bulgarian border guards, while Roman succeeded in entering Bulgaria.

As representative of the old Bulgarian dynasty, Samuel and Aaron had pledged their loyalty to Roman. He was proclaimed as Tsar, while the two brothers became his assistants and army chiefs. Because of his vigour and ability, Samuel was next to Roman. Aaron, therefore was third in line.

11. Until now, because of internal quarrels, Byzantium had not undertaken any action against "Ochridska" Bulgaria. Ten years had already passed since Tzimiskes (John I) had seized territories from the eastern half of the Bulgarian State.

Finally, the Emperor Vassilios (Basil) II (named Voulgarochtonos or "Slayer of the Bulgarians"), born 958, reigned 976-1025) had now launched a campaign against the Bulgarians. By way of Plovdiv (Phillipopolis) he had reached Sredetz and besieged the city. Failing to occupy the city after a long siege, he had decided to retreat.

But Tsar Samuel (reigned 976-1014) had resolved to pursue him. On August 17 987, the Byzantine army had frightfully been cornered at "Trojanovi Vrata" (Trayan's Gate) in the valley of Yavornitza river, near the village of Vetren (Pazardjik district), about 85 miles east of Sofia. Greek historians and poets had vividly described the Emperor's defeat, who had managed to save his life thanks to his Armenian guards.

12. A number of years had passed. Internal quarrels had again appeared in Byzantium. At that time Aaron, jealous of his wise and enterprising brother, had managed to establish contact with the Byzantines. Because of his duty and responsibility to his state and people, Samuel had no other choice but to punish his brother, Aaron with death. Aaron's execution took place in the area of Razmetanitza (same name today) between Kiustendil, Dounnitza and Radomir.
13. After the death of Aaron, the war with Byzantium had flared up. To assure his rear flank, Samuel had captured the City of Drach (Dyrrachium, now Dürres) on the Adriatic Sea, he had figured that a Byzantine fleet with troops might arrive at this point.
14. For about three years Vassilios II had again waged war against the Bulgarians, but for these events there is no available information. However, the Arab chronicles are pointing out that in these struggles, the Bulgarian Tsar Roman had for a second time been taken prisoner in Byzantium, where he later died.
15. In fact, for nearly 20 years, Samuel had been ruler of Bulgaria. With Roman out of the way, Samuel proclaimed himself as Tsar. Again the war with Byzantium had been renewed. Advancing first toward Salonika (Soloun) he had there defeated the Byzantine army which was led by Gregorios Taronites, an Armenian by nationality, whose son was taken prisoner. Thanks to the strong fortifications, the City of Salonika was saved.
16. From here Samuel had advanced toward Thessaly and the Thermopylae, arriving at Attica. He had intended to annex the Peloponesian Slavic tribes of *Milentsi* and *Ebertsi*. But, arriving at the Gulf of Corinth, Samuel was checked.

While he was delaying in Greece, the General Nikephoros Ouranos, had arrived with select troops from Byzantium. As they were returning north of Thermopilae, the Bulgarians had reached the Spercheios River. Failing to take the necessary protective measures, the Bulgarian camp was unexpectedly attacked by the Byzantine troops who had crossed the river during the night. After suffering an enormous defeat but saving himself, Samuel departed for Macedonia (996).

17. For some time both sides had felt the necessity of stopping the hostilities. Taking advantage of the calmness, Samuel had proceeded to strengthen his position against the Serbs, who could have, as they had during Simeon's time, attacked Bulgaria. He had conquered all Serbian lands governed by different princes, and had reached the City of Zara (modern Zadar) in Northern Dalmatia. Through Bosnia and Rashka he had returned to his base. The "joupans" (governors) of those two countries had readily been subdued. One of the Serbian princes, Iovan Vladimir, after having shown some resistance, was finally brought to Ochrid. Samuel had married him to his daughter Kossara and gave Vladimir the principality of Zeta (present Montenegro), Zahlme (Duklia) and Travunia (Trebinje in southern Bosnia). His other daughter, Miroslava, Samuel married to Ashot, who had earlier been taken prisoner at Salonika, and entrusted him with the military command at the City of Drach (Dürres).
18. Many of the Byzantine aristocrats had begun to make adjustments, and even to compromise with Samuel; some of them had left Adrianople and joined him.
19. But the misfortunes had moved against Bulgaria, attacking the country at different fronts – at Sredetz (Sofia), Preslav and from Southern Macedonia.

Samuel's *voyvodas* (chiefs) had tenaciously held themselves, willing to risk their lives to defend the independence of the Bulgarian State. These desperate struggles have given the basis for historians to mark this epoch as the most heroic of Bulgarian medieval history. Numerous are the examples of devotion to country, duty and self-sacrifice.

Dragshan, the defender of Voden (Edessa) had twice been taken as prisoner by the Byzantines, but escaping, he had always appeared in the ranks of the fighters in defence of Bulgaria. He was taken prisoner for the third time. Vassilios II had now ordered to have him put on the spit.

After the fall of Larissa, a Bulgarian from Thessaly by the name of Nikolitza had enlisted in the service of Samuel. Made prisoner by Byzantium, he had escaped and had reenlisted to serve under Samuel.

20. Completing his successful campaign in the south, the Emperor had appeared at Vidin on the Danube, and after eight months of siege he had occupied the city. From there he turned south to Skopje, which he had also occupied.

Soon the Byzantines set out for Sofia. But there they had met with great resistance by the Bulgarian *voyvoda* Krakra. Betraying his command, Ashot, Samuel's son-in-law, had surrendered the City of Drach to the Byzantine fleet and escaped to Constantinople.
21. The struggles had continued for eight more years without any decisive battle. But the year 1014 had arrived. Leading a huge army, Vassilios II was arriving from the north. Samuel's troops had fortified themselves in the valley of Kliuch, situated between Ograjden and Belassitza mountains. Passing through Belassitza, the Byzantine commander Nikephoros Xiphias had flanked the rear of the Bulgarians, thus making

their defeat inevitable. Samuel had saved himself only because Gavril Radomir, his son, had him mounted on his horse. Samuel had arrived in Prilep, but 15,000 Bulgarian troops had been made prisoners.

However, at the western slopes of Belassitza, Gavril Radomir had succeeded in routing the Byzantine general Theophilactos Votaniat. But this victory had not altered the previous defeats. It even became more catastrophic when Samuel saw his blinded troops, fainted and never again recovered (October 6, 1014). Of the Bulgarian prisoners, the Byzantines had left one person with one eye as leader for every 100 blinded soldiers.

22. After the death of Samuel the throne was occupied by his son, Gavril Radomir (1014-1016) who had been participating in the war for 20 years, and was also a trusted assistant to his father, Samuel. He had been equally brave but lacked his father's genius.
23. Vassilios II had attacked a number of Bulgarian strongholds – Prilep, Shtip, Maglen and had captured them.

The enterprising Emperor had secretly established relations with Aaron's son, Ivan Vladislav, whose life had once been spared by Gavril Radomir. But now Vladislav had villainously encroached on his cousin's life; Gavril Radomir had been killed near the village of Petersko at the Ochrid Lake (1016).

Meanwhile Vassilios II had also conspired to assassinate Ivan Vladislav, but did not succeed. The Byzantine army had now moved toward Bitola district and had captured the City of Ochrid. But when one of the Emperor's rear guard between Bitola and Ochrid had been annihilated by the Bulgarian troops, together with the Emperor they quickly retreated. At Stroumitza and Sofia (Sredetz) they had also been checked.

24. At this time, Ivan Vladislav had perfidiously slain Ivan Vladimir, Tsar Samuel's son-in-law.
25. The Byzantines had again appeared in the district of Bitola. Meanwhile, to shift the war in the eastern Bulgarian lands, the *voyvoda* Krakra of Pernik in the Sofia district had made an attempt to enlist the Pecheneg tribes as allies; but failed.
26. During 1018, Ivan Vladislav had sieged Drach; but in a duel with Nikita Pigonit, the defender of the city, Vladislav was slain.
27. After this event everything had collapsed, Queen Maria (Vladislav's widow), the Patriarch David and the *voyvoda* Bogdan, commandant of the so called "internal strongholds" in Ochrid, had decided to cease all resistance against Byzantium and decided on voluntary capitulation. In addition, they had prevented Froujin, the oldest son of Ivan Vladislav, to ascent the throne.

Other *voyvodas*. among whom was the courageous Ivatz, had been against the capitulation. Hundreds of Bulgarian strongholds had still been in existence that could have defended themselves. Had Samuel been alive, or any other person with his determination and character, the resistance, even at these moments, could have given different results.

Vassilios II was in Constantinople when he had been informed that the Bulgarian leaders were ready to surrender. All the *voivodas* and strongholds of the Western Bulgaria had begun, one after the other, to disarm. However, entrenched in the present Albania, the *voivoda* Ivatz had resisted to the end; for two months Emperor Vassilios II had tried to persuade Ivatz to surrender. Finally the courageous *voivoda* had treacherously been blinded. The City of Srem in the far north-western part of the country (present day Serbia), had continued to resist but the *voivoda* Sermon, its defender, had also become a victim of Byzantine treachery.

Meanwhile, the Serbian princes had made no effort of resisting. Consequently, Byzantium had finally become the ruler of the Balkans.

28. Briefly, this is the complete truth about Samuel's Kingdom. It was nothing else but Bulgaria in its western half.

We again repeat that all Greek contemporaries and later historians have been pointing out Samuel as Tsar of Bulgaria. The victorious Vassilios II had been christened by the Byzantines themselves with the name of "Bulgarochtonos" (Killer of the Bulgarians) and with this qualified name he is being referred to by historians of different nations. More than 250 years ago Samuel had been glorified as Bulgarian King by the well-known Croatian-wakening poet, Andrea Kachich-Mioshich.

The greatness of Samuel lies in the fact that he had universally been recognized as a born leader. His strength, of course, did not come from the fact that he was Tsar, but primarily from his character as a man and fighter. For 20 years before he was crowned as Tsar, Samuel had been fighting against Byzantium; which means that, in the eyes of his people and foreigners, he had long ago attained enormous respect.

Even persons like Boril, who later (under the Second Bulgarian Kingdom) had participated in the conspiracy against the life of Tsar Kaloyan, were becoming Tsars. But bestowing the title of Tsar on such individuals does not necessarily make them great; on the contrary, they often debase the crown by their weakness and corruptness.

Macedonia can only be proud of her famous son Samuel.

For one to ignore the truth of the above stated facts, it would mean historical falsification. Numerous are the ancient Greek testimonials which are referring to Tsar Samuel as Bulgarian, and that his kingdom was Bulgarian. This has also been confirmed by all serious historians of various leading nations, as for example, the French historian Schlumberger, author of the famous book *The Byzantine Empire at the End of the Tenth Century*. The territories which have been included in Samuel's domain are also pointing out that it was a Bulgarian kingdom. We have stated that the Sofia, Vidin and Morava provinces along with the entire Danube Bulgaria had been included in the boundaries of Samuel's state. Is it then possible that the people in all of these in Macedonia itself, were from some kind of "Macedonian" nationality? For, even then, no one had ever heard of such "nationality".

The aim of the Macedonian liberation movement is neither the creation of a widespread state, such as Tsar Samuel had, nor a creation of a state with frontiers to the Adriatic Sea, the Carpathian mountains, to Athens and Constantinople, which domain was once governed by Tsar Samuel.

The prevailing current political ideas of the Macedonian liberation movement do not go beyond the geographic frontiers of Macedonia. We do not desire to rule over other peoples; nor do we wish aliens to command over Macedonia. The people themselves should be in charge of their political destiny.

Let Samuel's courage and will inspire and give us strength in our efforts for the attainment of an independent Macedonia. During the period of the Tsars Kroum, Boris, Simeon and Samuel, Belgrade was only an ordinary Bulgarian stronghold. But now some gentlemen of Skopje are collaborating to keep Macedonia subjugated to Belgrade. If Tsar Samuel could have risen from his grave he would unhesitatingly spit in their face.

In conformity with Samuel's energy and spiritual power, let us also defend our Bulgarian nationality. And let us also recognize the firmness with which the Greeks or Serbs were defending their nationality not only at the time of Samuel, but even later. Without the mutual respect of the ethnic nationalities in Macedonia, we could never attain our desired goal.

Our struggle and tomorrow's independent Macedonia have no need of falsifications; the latter is needed and practiced only by the renegades and subjugators of our country.

Our goal in Bulgaria is brotherhood with everyone, regardless of faith or nationality. We give our hand to everyone who is willing to shed his blood together with us for life and human freedom.

Vassil Levski

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