

## **The building of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences: Matter and Spirit**

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**Abstract.** The article traces the individuals whose lives and work are connected with the central building of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (BAS). The founders include not only eminent men of letters and public figures like Marin Drinov, Dobri Voynikov, Lyuben Karavelov, Vasil Levski, Hristo Botev, but also enlightened businesspersons like the brothers Evlogi and Hristo Georgievi. A constellation of outstanding architects have imbued the building with their artistic brilliance: Jacob Meyer, Petko Momchilov, Sava Ovcharov, Yordan Yordanov, Lyuben Konstantinov. The political activity of a number of statesmen is linked to the building: they include the prime ministers Aleksandar Malinov, Vasil Radoslavov, Aleksandar Stamboliyski, Nikola Mushanov, Kimon Georgiev, and nearly twenty ministers of foreign affairs. The forty-year-long history of the building's construction is also charged with the energy of the Academy's devoted presidents Ivan Evstratiev Geshov, Lyubomir Miletich, Bogdan Filov.

**Keywords:** BAS, building, architecture, history, personalities

If it is true that every space preserves a trace of those who have inhabited it, then the central building of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (BAS) is a universe of spirituality, ardent desire for progress, and lofty ideals. Its walls have echoed with the footsteps of people whose names today we find in Bulgarian and foreign textbooks. Their spirit not only bound together the bricks and the walls - it also fostered the growth of the Bulgarian nation.

It is impossible to separate the history of the building from the history of the Academy - not only because the former is the natural product of the organization's activity and serves as the material environment of the activity pursued within it, but also because the historical course and unfolding of this material structure is an "optical instrument" through which one can perceive the nuances, aspects and tendencies in the birth and existence of the Academy.

Long before it came to be, patriotic Bulgarians were cherishing the idea of Bulgarian enlightenment and Bulgarian science. United by this idea, Bulgarians

ian émigrés from Brăila, Bucharest, Galați, Constantinople, Odessa, Chișinău founded the Bulgarian Learned Society (BLS) in 1869 - years before we had an independent State. This national institution, chronologically the first in our modern history, was called upon “to become and to be a centre of Bulgarian intelligent forces” (Hristov 2015, 33). Foreigners also contributed to the enterprise - individuals from Russia, Austria, Bohemia, France, Romania, Moldova, and other countries. Hundreds are the people who stinted themselves of food so that the Society could become a reality. Among the first founders and donors, we find the outstanding names of men of letters and public activists, such as Dobri Voynikov, Lyuben Karavelov, Hristo Botev, Rayko Zhinzifov, Todor Ikonov, Nayden Gerov, as well as the names of enlightened traders and businesspersons like the brothers Evlogi and Hristo Georgievi. The archives still preserve a note issued to Deacon Vasil Levski for his contribution.

Few of these first generous donors ever wandered through the corridors of the building that we know today - in those distant years, it was not yet even a dream. But the building inevitably preserves the high spirit, enthusiasm, and visionary force of those bright minds, thanks to whom it became a reality a decade and a half later. If the grateful descendants had raised a monument to all of them, as the Georgievi brothers are commemorated at Sofia University, the whole facade of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences would not have sufficient space for all.

The building on Narodno Sabranie Square owes its existence to Marin Drinov, the first president of the Bulgarian Learned Society, a scholar from the Revival period, a historian and statesman who is the patriarch of Bulgarian science (Fig. 1). The Publishing House of BAS and dozens of schools and streets throughout the country bear his name. We also owe the building to his associates, the members of the Society’s Board of Trustees, who included Vasil Drumev, the theologian, writer and politician, also known as Metropolitan Bishop Kliment of Tarnovo, Vasil D. Stoyanov, an educator and a public figure, and Kostaki Popovich, a national Revival leader to whom the grateful citizens of Yambol have erected a monument. Members of the business world willingly joined the men of letters and contributed their organizational skills and sponsorship “for the good of the nation”, thereby giving strong support to the yet fragile Bulgarian Learned Society. Such businesspeople included the chairman of the Board of Trustees, Nikola Tsenov, a merchant, Vasilaki Mihailidi, a banker, and Stefan Beron, nephew of the author of the *Fish Primer*.

Thanks to them all, the Bulgarian Learned Society survived and, nine years later, in 1878, under the new political circumstances, moved its headquarters from Brăila to Sofia, continuing its activity in the native land. Knyaz Alexander I, head of the state, agreed to be its supreme patron. The Minister of National Education, Konstantin Jireček, author of the first academic work on the history of Bulgaria, and the first foreign full member of the BLS as of 1884, appointed a Temporary Managing Committee, which was to revive and manage the Society’s activity. The National Library, the State Printing House, and the National Museum were also given initial impetus thanks to the erudition, persistence and remarkable industriousness of this progressive intellectual and activist (Regionalen istoricheski muzey Sofia 2018), who was honoured by Aleko



**Fig. 1.** Marin Drinov (1838-1908), founder and first president of the Bulgarian Learned Society (1869-1882, 1884-1898)

Konstantinov in the latter's immortal book *Bay Ganyo*. Thus, new names - in this case, from the sphere of government - joined the circle of eminent people who contributed to the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and its building. The favourable attitude of people in government did not, however, divert the Society from its staunch course as an "autonomous and independent institution", as declared in Art. 2 of its new Statutes of 1884.

The Society was in need of a home of its own and in 1882 addressed a request to the Sofia Urban Municipal Management, asking to be given a terrain on which to erect a building of its own. The request was supported by Knyaz Alexander I, who, after a special audience with the Society's president Vasil D. Stoyanov, ordered the Mayor of the city to do the necessary to allot a place for the construction. On 6 March 1884, the Sofia Urban Municipal Management granted, free of charge (as a distant herald of public-private partnerships), a plot on what was then Tsarigradska Str. The land property was specially meant for a building for the Society and could not be used for any other purposes or sold.

It then became possible for the central building of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, as we know it today, to be born. The construction was discussed at the first Chief Assembly of the Society to be held after the Liberation - the Assembly was opened with a ceremony on 29 July 1884 in the presence of the Knyaz, ministers and high-ranking officials. The initiative was supported by all the participants. In the summer of the following year, the Society began to prepare the construction under the leadership of a specially established committee.

As of that moment, a constellation of eminent architects contributed their creative inspiration to the building's aura. The first asked to propose a project was the Viennese architect of Bulgarian origin Konstantin Yovanovich, who prepared drawings and calculations of the cost of construction. Later, the Society opted for another architect, Jacob Heinrich Meyer, a Swiss who had arrived in Bulgaria after the Liberation. He is also known for his design for the Bulgarian National Bank (1889) and the mausoleum of Alexander of Battenberg in Sofia, the pavilions of the First Bulgarian Exposition in Plovdiv (1891), the palace in Euxinograd, banks in Plovdiv, Varna and Ruse. There followed years of intense discussion, cost estimates of proposals, and organizational activity for the construction of the Society's future home. Even the smallest details were considered: the marble of the stairway, the fence and the metal lattices, the graphite slabs for the roof, the carpentry, and the furniture.

The sod-turning ceremony was held on 5 October 1890 in the presence of the Governing Council and the Society members. A copy of the act of the laying of the foundation stone was buried in the foundation: it was signed by the Governing Council, the chief architect Jacob Meyer, and the entrepreneur Nikola Dukov. The act committed the building to the high ideals of the Society: "The purpose of this building is to be a meeting place for all champions of the comprehensive study of the Bulgarian nation and its fatherland Bulgaria, of the development of Bulgarian language and literature, and the development and dissemination of sciences in general; to be a material mark of the moral force that a nation's enlightenment and literature represents" (Gesheva 2015, 92).



**Fig. 2.** The building of the Bulgarian Learned Society in Sofia at the end of the 19th century

Laid in the foundation together with the act was a full list of the regular, auxiliary, corresponding and honorary members of the Society - in all, more than 520 people. Thus each of them declared their commitment to the great cause of Bulgarian science, and linked their names forever to the building's purpose and soul.

The first stage of construction - the two floors of what is today the corner block - was completed at the end of 1892 (Fig. 2). The Society, however, could not move into its new home, the cost of which exceeded the envisaged sum; it became necessary to draw a loan from the National Bank, which was to be repaid over a long period of time. The building was rented to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Religious Confessions for an indeterminate term; thus, it proved to be, as in the title of Goldoni's classical play, "a servant of two masters" until as late as 1944 (Gesheva 2015, 93).

For the next 50 years, the offices with a panoramic view to the square and the Parliament became the silent witnesses of the political skills of nearly 20 ministers of foreign affairs from various parties and governments. The first Foreign Minister to cross the threshold was the jurist Dimitar Grekov, member of the Stefan Stambolov government (from 1890 to 1894) and a full member of the Bulgarian Learned Society since 1881. The next was Grigor Nachovich (1894-1896), who took part in the negotiations and signing of the Bulgarian-Turkish Agreement of 1904, thanks to which more than 15,000 Bulgarians from Macedonia and the Adrianople region, who had fled after the suppres-

sion of the Ilinden-Preobrazhenie Uprising, were able to return to their homes. His post was next occupied by Todor Ivanchov, simultaneously Prime Minister (1899-1900), who had previously, as Minister of National Education, published the first official orthography of the Bulgarian language. His successor Stoyan Danev combined foreign affairs with the position of Prime Minister in three governments (1901-1903) and in 1913, again as Foreign Minister, headed the Bulgarian delegation that signed the London peace treaty ending the Balkan War. His successors were military men: General Racho Petrov (for one month in 1901 and in the period 1903-1906) and Lieutenant General Stefan Paprikov, Foreign Minister from 1908 to 1910. Dimitar Stanchov, a law graduate of Vienna University, headed the Foreign Ministry in the governments of Dimitar Petkov and Petar Gudev (1906-1908), after which he served as ambassador to several European states, but was dismissed for opposing the entry of Bulgaria in the First World War.

In the meantime, one more architect, this time a Bulgarian, Petko Momchilov, joined the row of eminent names who embodied their creative credo in the building. Among his works are some of Sofia's emblematic buildings: Central Mineral Bath, the Seven Saints Church, the Holy Synod Palace, the former Notary building, the Alexander Hospital, as well as, in Varna, the Metropolitan Bishopric building and the High School for Girls (now the Archeological Museum). As Chief Architect of the Ministry of Public Buildings, Roads and Communications, he was chosen by the Governing Council of the Bulgarian Learned Society to represent its interests in evaluating the damages after the fire that occurred in December of 1900. Later he made the design for the expansion of the building with two new wings at the request of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Religious Confessions, which needed additional rooms.

Though working far from its own building, the Society continued to accumulate scientific potential and academic production. The designation "society" had become too narrow and the idea of transforming it into an academy - first proposed by the jurist Anton Kableshev at the Annual Meeting in January 1907 - won supporters. It was fulfilled thanks to the altruistic action of the Society's president Ivan Evstratiev Geshov, who, "in order to make of our Society an independent institution with sufficient means to be able to function as a genuine free Academy" (Dokumenti za istoriyata na BKD 1966, 306), and make it financially independent from its very creation, repaid with his personal resources, in 1908, the mortgage for the loan of 120,000 leva used for the building's construction.

Early in 1911, the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences became a fact. Its new Statutes once again affirmed that "the Academy is an autonomous and independent institution [...] aiming to develop and disseminate the sciences and arts, particularly with a view to Bulgarians and the Bulgarian lands, the Bulgarian language and literature" (SA of BAS, 73-74, 75-76). According to the new BAS Law, "the Academy is under the high patronage of His Majesty the Tsar of Bulgarians" (Zakon na BAN, 1912).

Ivan Geshov (Fig. 3) remained president of the Academy until his death in 1924. If the 13 years in which he headed the Bulgarian Learned Society are added, he proves to be the person with the longest term of leadership of the



**Fig. 3.** Ivan Evstratiev Geshov, long-standing president of the Bulgarian Learned Society and Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (1898-1924)

foremost scientific institution in Bulgaria. As Director (1883-1886) of the Bulgarian National Bank (the first emission of Bulgarian lev banknotes carries his signature), he continued the tradition of the BLS for scholars and businesspersons to join efforts in the name of science. Although he was one of the richest people in the country, he warned his sons, studying abroad, “not to parade a lavish lifestyle, as Bulgaria is destitute and has been crucified” (Nenova). He himself, as a student in Great Britain, had won an English spelling contest, for

which he was invited to tea with the Queen. Geshov impelled not only the expansion of the BLS building but also, as universal heir and executor of the will of Evlogi Georgiev, the construction of the building of Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”.

Geshov was the first president of the Academy to have his office in the building on Narodno Sabranie Square - not, however, in his capacity as Head of the institution, but as Minister of Foreign Affairs (1911-1913), coupling this position with that of Prime Minister. He was able to combine his scientific and governmental activities, following the rule that “the best guarantee for good governance is an enlightened nation” (Nenova).

After Geshov, a number of statesman, who likewise were not only in charge of our foreign affairs but also of the executive branch of power, have their activities linked with the BAS building. They include: Aleksandar Malinov, three times Prime Minister and three times Minister of Foreign Affairs (1910-1911, 1918, 1931), Vasil Radoslavov, twice Prime Minister - after the abdication of Knyaz Alexander I (1886-1887) and again during the First World War, when he was also Minister of Foreign Affairs (1913-1918), Teodor Teodorov (1918-1919), who resigned because he refused to sign the Neuilly Peace Treaty, and Aleksandar Stamboliyski (1920-1923), who intervened in support of BAS when certain government circles were thinking of expropriating the building and its terrain. The first Bulgarian female diplomat, Nadezhda Stanchova, probably also started out from the BAS building after the First World War, leaving for London to serve as Secretary of Legation; the newspaper *Glasgow Herald* declared her to be “the first woman diplomat in the world” (Kyoseva 2016).

In later years, the offices of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Religious Confessions in the BAS building were occupied by Hristo Kalfov (1923-1926), Atanas Burov (1926-1931), Minister in the three governments of Andrey Lyapchev, Nikola Mushanov, Minister and Prime Minister (1931-1934), and Kimon Georgiev (May 1934 and 1946-1947). It was probably in the same building that, in 1941-1944, the head of the Consular-Economic Directorate, Minister Plenipotentiary Nikola Petsev, together with the legation councilors Nikola Vanchev, Hari Levenson and Lyuben Zidarov, permitted (despite the prohibition set by the Directorate of Police) the issuing of “transit visas for persons of Jewish origin, because they could not bear the thought that women, children, men, old persons risked being burned in the Nazi death camps” (Beraha 1979).

During all these years, although far from its building, the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences was growing, and the need for more space for its activities became increasingly clear. “It is impossible for the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences to continue wandering in the buildings of others” (Dokumenti za istoriyata na BAN 1974, 136), and hence it wanted to construct a new edifice, as a continuation of the existing one, on the empty part of the plot.

This task was undertaken by Lyubomir Miletich, a linguist, ethnographer and historian, and member of the BLS since 1898 (Fig. 4). Having assumed the position of President of the Academy after Ivan Geshov, and likewise a defender of the Bulgarian national cause, Miletich upheld the belief that “only by elevating its science and culture can Bulgaria take the eminent place in the world that





**Fig. 4.** Lyubomir Miletich (1863-1937), president of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (1926-1937)

is rightfully its due based on its history and the proven capacity for culture of our people” (Miletich 1928, 3).

The idea for a new building dates from June 1924, but the decision to start the construction work was made at the Extraordinary General Assembly of BAS one year later, on 30 June 1925 (Letopis na BAN 1924/25). The foundation stone was laid on 27 May 1926. In 1927, the building was completed and in June 1928, it hospitably opened its doors for the Annual General Assembly of BAS. The building was officially consecrated on 14 May 1929, during the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Liberation and the millennial anniversary of the Age of Simeon the Great. As in the time of Knyaz Alexander I, the heads

of the government linked their names to Bulgarian science: according to its Statutes, the Academy was “under the high patronage of His Majesty the Tsar of Bulgarians”, and the royal family attended the ceremony.

Two more prominent Bulgarian architects, Sava Ovcharov and Yordan Yordanov, wove their professional career into the history of the Academy. At the architectural competition for the new building, they collectively won two prizes - first and third - and the project given the first award was chosen for the construction. Like architect Petko Momchilov before them, Ovcharov and Yordanov gave to Bulgaria some of its finest architectural monuments: Cultural Home of Jurists on Pirotska Str. and the Teachers' Savings Bank on Slaveykov Square in Sofia; the building that today houses the Biological Faculty of Sofia University; the Postal Palace in Plovdiv; the Commercial-industrial Chamber in Burgas; and the Municipality House in Sliven.

Elegantly integrating the existing wing into the new composition, Ovcharov and Yordanov made of the BAS building a harmonious architectural whole, preserved to this day despite the destruction caused by air raids during the Second World War.

Once again, as in the nearly fifty years that had elapsed since the establishment of the Bulgarian Learned Society, the willingness of academicians to make sacrifices for the noble cause gave life to the new building. BAS needed additional funds to cover the costs of construction. The needed sum was provided through the unprecedented act of twenty-two of its members, who took the risk of drawing personal loans from the Bulgarian National Bank to the amount of 3 million leva, ensuring the loans by mortgaging their personal properties. These individuals included Lyubomir Miletich and Vasil Zlatarski (respectively President and Vice-President of BAS), Ivan Shishmanov (President of the Historical-philological Branch of the Academy), Stefan S. Bobchev (President of the Philosophical-social Branch), Sava Mirkov (President of the Natural Science and Mathematics Branch), Andrey Toshev, Aleksandar Tsankov, Bogomil Beron, Georgi Danailov, Dimitar Mishaykov, Ivan Urumov, Yosif Fadenheht, Stefan Vatev, Stefan Danadzhiev, and Todor Vlaykov. Prime Minister Andrey Lyapchev and the Minister of National Education Nikola Naydenov gave their support to the request for the loan, which perhaps contributed to the state administration's favourable attitude and expedience in resolving the issue.

The new building provided proper conditions for setting up a modern and comfortable library area, with a book depository, a room for periodicals, workrooms for the academicians and the librarians. Intensive activity began in compiling catalogues and indexes for the whole library fund. Thanks to Stefan Panaretov, full member of the Academy and first Bulgarian ambassador to the US (who donated all his valuable documents and personal money invested in banks in Bulgaria - over 2.5 million leva) a reading room was opened in 1935, which carried his name. Thus, the library met the needs of the academicians as well as of university teachers and students.

The BAS Library grew thanks to the members of the Academy, and other scholars, who donated their archives and collections. Among these donors was Ivan Kasabov, a regular member of the Bulgarian Learned Society and an activist in the national liberation movement (through Maria Kasabova, 1918); Marko

Balabanov, an academician and Bulgarian Foreign Minister (1929); Felix Kanitz, author of the most comprehensive and in-depth travel guide on the history and ethnography of the Bulgarian lands in the second half of the 19th century (through Jacques Kanitz, 1930), and Andrey Lyapchev (*Entsiklopediya Daritelstvoto*). The library received monetary donations as well: one such came from the Ivanka Trifonova Fund, for the purchase of books and dictionaries in Slavic philology. Many associations stipulated in their statutes that, upon the discontinuation of their activities, their financial resources should be transferred to the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (Argirova-Gerasimova, Peycheva 2000).

The history of the construction of the central building of BAS had concluded, but the history of its existence continued. One of its offices, with a view of the Parliament, was again occupied by a person skilled both in science and in administration. Bogdan Filov, archeologist, founder and first director of the Bulgarian Archeological Institute, member of the Academy since 1918, assumed the position of President in 1937 and undertook to stabilize the institution's affairs. Later, as Minister of National Education (1938-1940) and Prime Minister (1940-1943), he initiated the drafting of a bill for the Academy and facilitated the enlargement and development of BAS.

The air raids on Sofia in the beginning of 1944 partially destroyed the central building of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, and its activities had to stop. One more eminent architect added his name to those of the masters Meyer, Momchilov, Ovcharov and Yordanov. The half-destroyed Great Assembly Hall was restored by the architect Lyuben Konstantinov, author also of the design for the south wing of Sofia University.

Nearly 40 years had gone by from the first sod-turning ceremony for the future home of the Bulgarian Learned Society to the completion of the BAS building as we know it today. The history of its construction points to factors and forces that impelled not only the expansion of the building but also the growth of the Academy itself. In the present-day Bulgarian vocabulary, words like 'credo', 'ideals', 'patriotism', 'morale', 'erudition', 'integrity' are declining in importance, but had they not been charged with great spiritual and motivating force 150 years ago, the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences would not exist today. And perhaps other things would be inexistent as well. The last decades of the 19th century, a time declared to be "romantic", send a message to our unromantic age, a message encoded in the life of the building and in the echo, which its walls still preserve, of the great individuals that made this history possible.

The Bulgarian Learned Society was born thanks to those ardent lovers of the fatherland and of knowledge, the creators and followers who generously devoted their thought, time and energy to the great task without waiting for a reward or a financial bonus. The Society was able to survive the dramatic episodes of its history thanks to the great-hearted donors who were willing to sacrifice some of the comforts of life in the name of science and enlightenment. Donors like the little-known A. Tsvetanov, a merchant in faraway Paris, who, in July 1885, transferred 2,000 golden leva to the Society; like Stefan Beron, who personally assumed the expenses for the transfer of the Society from Brăila to Sofia in 1878; like Ivan Evstratiev Geshov, who donated a three-story house in

the centre of Sofia to the Academy; or like the academicians who mortgaged their homes so that the building might come to be.

Deeds that some contemporaries, ours or theirs, would categorise as theatrical and shortsighted. Yes, that would be the sum total if the value of a deed can be calculated through its return on investments or the percentage of profit and budget revenue. But the result would be quite different if we went to a higher level of values, unachievable for the limited potency of financial indicators.

Enlightened and progressive monarchs and statesmen publicly declared their patronage and invariably stood up for the Academy in hard times. When there was need for a terrain for the building, loans to pay the construction costs, resources for publishing, a budget for growth, defense against the attempts to expropriate the lawful property of the Academy, these people gave their support to ensure the institution's survival and progress. In the history of the Academy, not all people in government fall in that category; the result of this was clearly stated by Lyubomir Miletich before the General Annual Assembly on 16 June 1929: "...the sad stagnation in the activity of the Academy is due to the lack of the necessary moral contact between the representatives of our higher scientific circles and the representatives of the state ... amidst the general economic crisis ... it is impossible for the Bulgarian Academy, precisely now, when it is in need of powerful moral and material support, not to feel depressed, frustrated in its normal development..." (Letopis na BAN 1928/29, 10).

Scholars and business people not only coexisted peacefully at both the Bulgarian Learned Society and the Bulgarian Academy of Science, but in those turbulent times willingly and skillfully, side by side worked to achieve their common altruistic goal - enlightenment and science for all Bulgarians. There was no division between thinkers and men of action, between those who produced words and those who produced objects. Bankers and tradesmen did not consider themselves more equal than the bearers of knowledge and spirituality.

A person from the latter category, a member of the Learned Society far before the BAS building became a reality, expressed in verse the core principle of success in which they all unreservedly believed:

And those of all ages, classes, sexes, and callings  
took part in this venture.  
The rich, with their money; the poor, with their labour;  
the maiden, with her needle; the scholar, with his brain.

I wonder how many schoolchildren today are familiar with this verse, or this principle?

We may look upon the building of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences as a good baroque-flavoured architecture, designed by talented creatives. Or, we might try to penetrate beyond the facade and listen to the whisper of the past - perhaps we will be able to sense the echo of the voices of those whose ideals and deeds have been incarnated in the edifice. And understand what they tell us. Was it by chance that Stoyan Mihaylovski, a member of the Bulgarian Learned Society, wrote precisely in 1892 - the year the first BAS building was completed - the verse with which we greet each 24th of May: "Forward! A nation never falls when knowledge is alive!"?

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