

## N.S. DERZHAVIN: A BULGARIST WHO FOUND SUCCESS IN BOLSHEVIK AND SOVIET ACADEMIC STUDIES<sup>1</sup>

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### **Abstract:**

This article is devoted to the biography of the famous Soviet academic N. S. Derzhavin (1877–1953) and his academic activities, primarily relating to Bulgaria and the Bulgarians. This scholar had a dizzying career, became an academic without a doctorate and created his own specialist institute, by virtue of his sensitive understanding of the state of affairs in the country. He left behind a rich heritage though some of his books did not stand the test of time. All his life N.S. Derzhavin sincerely sympathized with the objects of his study.

### **Keywords:**

N.S. Derzhavin, Bulgaria, Bulgarians in Russia, the Macedonian question, Slavistics from 1930s to 1950s.

### **Аннотация:** Н.С. Гусев. «Н.С. Державин — болгарист, преуспевший в большевистской и советской науке».

Статья посвящена биографии известного советского академика Н.С. Державина (1877–1953) и его научной деятельности, в первую очередь касающейся Болгарии и болгар. Этот ученый сделал головокружительную карьеру, став академиком даже без степени доктора наук и создав собственный научный институт в силу чуткого понимания конъюнктуры. Он оставил после себя богатое наследие, хотя некоторые его книги не выдержали проверки временем. Всю свою жизнь Н.С. Державин искренне симпатизировал объекту своего изучения.

### **Ключевые слова:**

Н.С. Державин, Болгария, болгары в России, македонский вопрос, славистика в 30-е — 50-е гг. XX в.

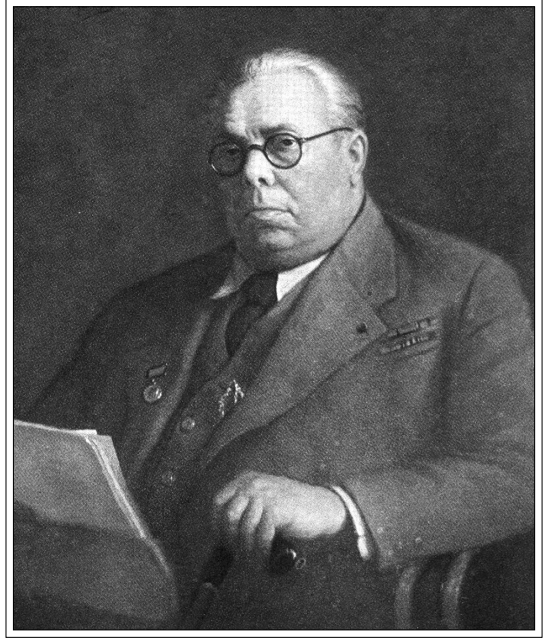
Nikolay Sevastyanovich Derzhavin (1877–1953) is slavacist, historian, academic, a far from straightforward figure in the history of Russian scholarship. Coupled with a sincere love for Bulgaria and Bulgarian culture were many of the archetypal traits of the “new academics” of the Soviet nation of the 1920s–40s.

The first lines of Nikolay Sevastyanovich’s biography speak about his future specialization. He was born on 15 December 1877, a landmark year in Bulgarian history, five days after the fall of the key Turkish fortress of Pleven in the village of Preslav of the Tauride province (now the Zaporozhie region of Ukraine). The inhabitants of the village were predominantly Bulgarian immigrants, and it was

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itself one of the centers of cultural life for Bulgarians of the Russian Empire. After graduating from gymnasium, Derzhavin, following in the footsteps of his father, a rural teacher, started training as a teacher at the St. Petersburg Institute of History and Philology. However, for unclear reasons, Nikolay Sevastyanovich soon transferred to the Nezhinsk Institute, which educated similar specialists. Perhaps this was due to its proximity to his home and the lower cost of living in a small Ukrainian town compared to the capital. During his studies, Derzhavin became seriously interested in Bulgarian literature and already in his third year published a paper, *Essays on the Life of Southern Russian Bulgarians*, in the journal "Ethno-



*A portrait of N.S. Derzhavin,  
made sometime after 1947*

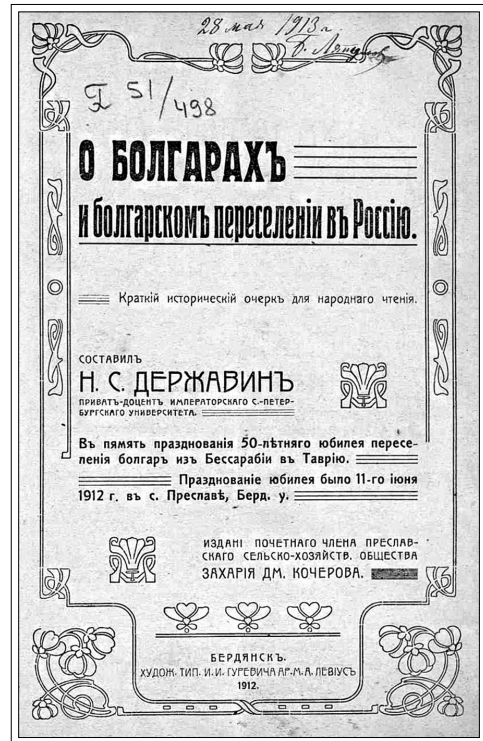
graphic Review." However, after the institute, the talented graduate set off not to conquer the universities of the capital, but to work in Transcaucasia as a teacher of Russian language and literature at a gymnasium of the city of Batumi, and then in the modern Georgian capital of Tbilisi. Derzhavin gained credibility with his colleagues, conducting wide-ranging educational work among the local population and defending the right of non-Russian peoples to education.

During this time, he did not abandon his studies but published articles of historical, literary and ethnographic nature, thereby attracting the attention of the Academy of Sciences, which in 1903 sent him on a mission to Bulgaria and Turkey. In the latter, Derzhavin worked as part of the Russian Archaeological Institute in Constantinople, which elected him as its corresponding member. In 1907 he moved to Petersburg and became a graduate student at St. Petersburg University. In 1909–10, as part of the scientific team from the Academy of Sciences, he visited Bulgaria and Bessarabia, where many ethnic Bulgarians lived. Collecting folklore material, Derzhavin used a technical novelty, a phonograph, enabling him to quickly gather a solid base of sources for his master's thesis. In 1912 he received the position of privat-docent at the St. Petersburg University, and certification that he had submitted a thesis, giving him the right to give lectures but not yet be registered as a staff member, apparently due to a lack of vacancies.

In the same year, the First Balkan War began: Bulgaria, Serbia, Greece and Montenegro joined forces against the Ottoman Empire. Derzhavin warmly wel-

comed these events, wrote congratulatory letters to his Bulgarian friends, including the famous historian V. Zlatarsky, and delivered public lectures about Bulgaria and its history. When a dispute broke out between Bulgaria and Serbia in 1913 about the future ownership of Macedonia (which the future academic considered to be inhabited by Bulgarians), Derzhavin took an active part in the public defense of Sofia's rights to the contested lands. At academic meetings, he argued with Serbian emissaries J. Genchich and professor Alexander Belich about Macedonia, pointing out to them the futility of attempts "to come to Russia to try to influence the attitude of Russian society towards Serbian harassment," since memories of the Russo-Turkish war of 1877–78 were still fresh. Here he came into conflict with his university colleagues: M.G. Dolobko accused Derzhavin of bias, and P.A. Lavrov spoke on the side of the Serbs. The Second Balkan War soon followed, ending with Bulgaria's defeat and the transfer of most of Macedonia to the rule of Serbia. After this, Derzhavin wrote to a colleague: "I personally am so depressed by all that happened that I can neither work nor think; most of all I am outraged by these bastard Serbs." Deciding to promote the rehabilitation of the Bulgarian people in the eyes of Russian society, he began to speak publicly on the Macedonian issue and prepared the book "Bulgarian-Serbian Relations and the Macedonian Question," in which he engaged in polemical debates with Serbian scholars and proved the Bulgarian ethnicity of the population in the disputed region. It should be noted that in Russia there were no publishers willing to pay to publish this work; it was issued in Petrograd, paid for out of funds from the Bulgarian government. It should be recognized that at that time it was necessary to have great courage to speak in a similar spirit, since almost all of Russian society was completely opposed to Bulgaria. However, Derzhavin's feelings for this country and its people were apparently so sincere that he ran the risk of doing so.

At the same time, his master's thesis, *Bulgarian Colonies in Russia (Tauride, Kherison and Bessarabian Provinces)* was being prepared. The first volume, an ethnographic review, was published in 1914 in Bulgaria, and the second, de-



*The cover of the scholar's popular book "On the Bulgarians and the Bulgarian Relocation to Russia." Berdyansk, 1912*

voted to the language of the population, came out in Petrograd in 1915. No matter how principled Derzhavin's position on Macedonia was, he did not hesitate to appeal to Professor P. A. Lavrov, seeking his support to publish the second volume during voting by the faculty's academic council. In 1916 he defended his master's thesis. The academic public greeted it coldly because of the quality of work, and, according to certain information, only the intervention of the legendary Russian philologist A. A. Shakhmatov allowed Derzhavin to obtain his degree. In 1917 he obtained the post of professor at the University of Petrograd, and in the very same year the course of Russian history shifted abruptly: the October Revolution took place, bringing with it a new order, which swooped Derzhavin up and carried him to new academic heights.

In 1922 he created and headed the university "Left Professors Group," became the rector of Petrograd, and then (in connection with the renaming of the city) Leningrad University. In this post, he launched a massive purge of "unreliable elements" from the university. Some "bourgeois" teachers were sent abroad, some were dismissed from work, and half of the students were expelled from the university. However, in 1925 Derzhavin lost the election for rector and became dean of the Faculty of linguistics and material culture, and in 1928: head of the Department of Russian and Slavic languages of the same faculty.

At the same time, Derzhavin worked in Leningrad's public library, became its deputy director and managed to create a Slavic unit, which was responsible for storing and studying Western and South Slavic books and manuscripts. In 1929 Derzhavin was relieved of his post as deputy director, and the following year the Slavic section was closed. Nevertheless, his work at the library greatly influenced Derzhavin's further career; he met director N. Y. Marr, became his loyal supporter and supporter of Marr's Japhetic theory. Its essence was that there is no genetic development of languages, all words of all languages have a common origin, they change under the influence of society's development and intersect with each other. As a result, it argued that Russian is closer to Georgian than to other Slavic languages, and German originated from the Svan language, which is closer to Georgian, etc. This pseudoscientific theory was, however, approved by the Soviet leadership because of it went along with Marx and Engels' theories of class struggle. Marr gained enormous influence and began to arrange patronage for his followers. When elections were held in 1931 in the Academy of Sciences, from which the "alien elements" had just been "cleared," the founding father of the Japhetic theory got Derzhavin elected as an academic, though he lacked not only the status of a corresponding member, but also a doctoral degree.

Later, perhaps because Derzhavin wanted to have his own institute or, something that also cannot be ruled out, for the sake of scholarship, he was able to create the Institute of Slavic Studies, which he headed. Whatever his motives and means, this event must be considered as a positive development; Slavistics once again had its own academic center, with the possibility to publish research on Slavic issues. However, they managed to publish just two collections of pa-

pers. In 1933, the “Slavic case” began: a criminal investigation fabricated by the NKVD, according to which many academic, especially Slavists, created a secret fascist party, which was involved in sabotage and arranged for the assassination of Prime Minister V. M. Molotov. In 1934 a trial was held, convicting about 70 people, including academics and corresponding members of the USSR Academy of Sciences. There were no mass death sentences, but Soviet Slavistics was crushed and defamed: it was publicly stated that “Slavic philology pours water on the fascist mill.” The fate of the specialized Institute (as well as the fact that its secretary was implicated in the “conspiracy”) was a foregone conclusion; in 1934 the Academy of Sciences decided to shut down the Institute of Slavic Studies. Derzhavin, as an academic, did not suffer from repression, but apparently fearing it, in 1935 he wrote a letter directly to Stalin himself. In the text, he recalled his youth in Georgia, emphasized his revolutionary activities and exaggerated the role of Koba-Dzhughashvili (Stalin) in the First Russian Revolution in Transcaucasia. In connection with this, he wrote his own biography in the third person, in which he accused his enemies of opposing the party line and constantly emphasized his Marxist views.

Meanwhile, the world was inching toward the Second World War, and in the USSR the official view of the past changed. The Bolsheviks began to seek the prop of patriotism in Russian history. In 1938, realizing this, Derzhavin turned to Molotov with a proposal to recreate the Institute of Slavic Studies to combat fascist propaganda in the Slavic countries and to demonstrate the Soviet Union’s interest in them. The letter went unanswered. The Great Patriotic War raised the issue of relations with the Slavic countries more sharply than ever, and Derzhavin turned out to be a key figure in the Stalinist version of Panslavism. In 1942 he became a member of the Presidium of the All-Slavic Committee and chairman of the Anti-Fascist Committee of Soviet Scientists, traveled around the country conducting lectures on the Balkans, and was published in the press. Derzhavin was sensitive to the changes in the leadership’s rhetoric and adjusted to them. Thus, if in 1932 he denounced and scolded the famous pre-revolutionary Slavist V. I. Lamansky, in 1942 he glorified and praised him. Once again there was an opportunity to revive the Institute of Slavic Studies, and Derzhavin began to lobby for this idea. However, under wartime conditions, it was only possible to achieve the creation of the Slavic Commission of the USSR Academy of Sciences, which, as expected, Derzhavin headed. He resumed his contacts with Bulgarian colleagues, and soon after Bulgaria’s liberation, he visited this country. In 1944 Derzhavin received the title of Doctor of Science honoris causa (by virtue of merit) from the University of Sofia. In 1946 he became an honorary member of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, and a street in Sofia received his name. In 1944 and 1945 he was twice awarded the Order of Lenin, the USSR’s highest award. The war years were fruitful for Derzhavin: he began teaching at the philological faculty of Moscow State University and prepared several books. *The Origin of the Russian People* and *The Slavs in Antiquity* went beyond the ac-

ademic's specialization and were more likely political, but the books about the most important figures of Bulgarian history and culture, I. Vazov and Chr. Botev, although written from a Marxist point of view, were very important in that they introduced the Soviet people to Bulgaria. For his work, the academic was awarded the Stalin Prize in 1948, which attested to recognition of the significance of his work at the highest level. However, at the same time it should be noted that colleagues regarded this fruitfulness as graphomania, and M. N. Tikhomirov, an expert on medieval Russian history, labeled *The Origin of the Russian People* as simply garbage. In the same year, the fourth and final volume of Derzhavin's history of Bulgaria was published, the first such work since 1910, which, in its completeness, had no equal. The academic hoped to receive the Stalin Prize, but this time his application was not supported.

Increased communication with Slavic countries, which were increasingly becoming "people's democracies," reinforced the idea of creating an integrated Institute of Slavic Studies. Derzhavin contributed a lot to its advancement, but in 1945 he suffered a stroke. His ensuing and prolonged illness forced him to let go of the initiative, and when he was able to return to work, it turned out that he had missed his moment, and his attempts to assume the post of director of the institute were futile. In 1947, the Institute of Slavic Studies, the main center for Slavonic studies in the USSR, and now in Russia, was established in Moscow, however, its director was the academic B. D. Grekov, and Derzhavin only headed the Leningrad institutional department, of which he was the one and only member.

In 1950 a new blow awaited the academic. Open criticism of N.Y. Marr had begun, and Stalin's article came out, putting an end to this issue. Marr's approach, previously considered the most Marxist, was declared unscientific. Derzhavin tried to adapt, but he was no longer young, and sometimes, during public speeches, unnoticed by himself, he would again slip into Japhetic theory. The times had also changed: it was now the turn of other academics, new scholarly administrators, and Derzhavin did not fit in. He remained a member of the Presidium of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, but his fate took no more sharp turns. On February 26, 1953 Derzhavin died. His ashes were buried at the Literary Bridges of Leningrad's Volkov's Cemetery, the place where many prominent figures of science and art were laid to rest.

With respect to Slavonic studies, N. S. Derzhavin remains a figure with a checkered reputation. A vain careerist and tribune, he played a huge role in restoring the authority of Slavic studies in the USSR. Whatever his motives, objectively his attempts to create specialized centers exerted a positive influence on scholarship. Regardless of how his academic research was perceived, whatever its actual level, Derzhavin fought for his work. He was not ever able to let go of the dispute with Belich, which begun in 1912; he was annoyed by the very mention of the Serbian scientist's name, he argued with him in absentia, and he tried to turn the awarding of the title of honorary professor of Moscow State Univer-

sity into a farce. On the day of Derzhavin's death, one of his colleagues rightly noted: "Through all his life, he bore a love for the Bulgarian people, its history, culture, language."

*Translated by Ksenia Melchakova*

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#### ILLUSTRATIONS

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3. The cover of the book by N.S. Derzhavin "Bulgarian-Serbian relations and the Macedonian question."
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