

PAISIUS OF HILENDAR
AND HIS “SLAVO-BULGARIAN HISTORY”:
A MANIFESTO OF THE NATIONAL REVIVAL
OF THE BULGARIAN PEOPLE¹

Abstract:

The article is devoted to Paisius of Hilendar (1722–73) and his “Slavo-Bulgarian History”: a manifesto of the national revival of the Bulgarians. This Athonite monk in 1762 managed to outline the main tasks that faced his native people, who were under the centuries-old Ottoman yoke. These included the restoration of the Bulgarian state, the national Church, and the creation of a system of national education: a network of schools teaching in the Bulgarian language. At the same time, he reminded the Bulgarians of the existence of their powerful state in ancient times, the appearance of their first Slavic tsar named Simeon, as well as the presence of a national Church with its own Patriarch and Slavic books, which were widely distributed among the Slavs. For almost a century, Paisius’ “History” has been available only in handwritten form, but it has played a huge role in awakening the Bulgarian national identity.

Keywords:

Bulgaria, national revival. Slavo-Bulgarian history, the program, the main points, the awakening of the people.

Аннотация: И.И. Калиганов. «Паисий Хилендарский и его “История славяноболгарская” — манифест национального возрождения болгарского народа».

Статья посвящена Паисию Хилендарскому (1722–73) и его «Истории славяноболгарской» — манифесту Национального возрождения болгарского народа. Этот афонский монах в 1762 г. сумел очертить главные задачи, которые стояли перед родным народом, находившимся под многовековым османским игом. Они заключались в восстановлении болгарской государственности, национальной церкви и создании системы национального просвещения — сети школ с преподаванием на болгарском языке. При этом он напоминал болгарам о существовании у них в древности мощного государства, появлении у них первого славянского царя по имени Симеон, а также наличии национальной церкви с собственным патриархом и славянскими книгами, которые широко распространились среди славян. «История» Паисия на протяжении почти столетия ходила в народе лишь в рукописном виде, но сыграла огромную роль в пробуждении болгарского национального самосознания.

Ключевые слова:

Болгария, Национальное возрождение. «История славяноболгарская», программа, основные пункты, пробуждение народа.

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Paisius of Hilendar (1722–73) was a historiographer, the first ideologist of the Bulgarian national revival, credited for the awakening of a national identity in the Bulgarian people. There is no precise information about the milestones in his life. He is believed to have been born in Bansko, in western Bulgaria, into a family of well-off parents. His secular name is unknown. On reaching the age of 23, the young man went to Mt. Athos to the Hilendar (Serb. variant — Hilandar) monastery, where his brother Lavrentius, who later became an abbot, was a monk. His other brother, according to a number of scholars, was Hadzhi Vylcho, a rich merchant from Bansko. In Hilendar, the young man took monastic vows under the name of Paisius, ultimately becoming a hieromonk and an assistant to the abbot. According to scholars, Paisius died in 1773 in the village of Ampelino, which later became the city of Asenovgrad.

While on the Holy Mountain (mainly in Zograph and Hilendar monasteries), Paisius became imbued with the idea of the need to create a history of the Bulgarians, who had begun to forget about their Slavic origins and heroic past. In that intention, according to Paisius's own testimony, he was strengthened by the constant ridicule of Greek and Serbian Athos brethren, who reproached Bulgarians for their ignorance of their own history and their lack of works on the subject. Some scholars believe that Paisius may have been influenced by the Serbian historiographer and educator, the monk Jovan Raich (1726–1801), who visited Hilendar in 1758 and who subsequently compiled his famous *The History of different Slavic peoples, primarily the Bulgarians, Croats and Serbs...* in the next decade. Paisius became fired up with the idea of writing his own history of the Bulgarians,



Father Paisius at the work.

Artist Koyu Denchev

having suitable conditions for it. Acting as a „taxidiot“ (from the Greek „stranger“) that is, a collector of donations that had accumulated in Hilendar sites in the Balkans, and at the same time a guide for groups of pilgrims going to the Holy Mountain), Paisius moved around a lot, and this enabled him to start purposefully collecting information about the history of his countrymen. While in various cities and monasteries, he sought out such information in ancient manuscripts, medieval chronicles, Russian printed prologues, and other sources.

He learned most of the information from two books in Russian translations that he found in the library of the Serbian Patriarchate in Sremski-Karlovtsi. These were the works of the Roman Cardinal, Caesar Baronius, *Acts of Church and Civil* (Moscow, 1719) and the essay of the Dalmatian historian Mavro Orbini, *The Book of Historiography...* (Sanct-Petersburg, 1722). The original works of these two authors (which had been published in Latin and Italian much earlier: Rome — 1588–1607 and Pesaro — 1601, respectively) were subjected to significant revision and reduction in the Russian version. These versions formed the basis of Paisius' epochal work, *Istoriya Slavyanobalgarskaya* („Slavo-Bulgarian History“), which he completed in 1762. Externally, Paisius' method of compiling the history resembles the techniques of medieval scribes: he constantly resorts to abundant compilations from foreign sources, most often without mentioning where and what is borrowed. He also appears to the reader in the guise of a typical medieval author, with traditional complaints of bodily ailments, feebleness of mind and his unworthiness for the task which he has undertaken.

Paisius wrote his „History“ by hand, without any hope of publishing it in any printing house, because of the lack thereof in Bulgaria. Therefore, he passionately urged Bulgarian readers to distribute his writings by copying them, by passing them along from hand to hand, and by reading them aloud publicly.

From the second half of the 18th century to the first half of the 19th century, several dozen copies of Paisius „History“ were created. The whole of it was published in printed form only after 123 years: at first a significant portion of it was published by N. Pavlovich in his *Tsarstvennaya Kniga* («The King's Book», Budim, 1844), and then the whole work was published by A. V. Loginov (Lublin, 1885). In Bulgaria itself, it was printed 13 years after the Loginov publication by the publisher M. Moskov in Tarnovo in 1898. Despite its medieval handwritten format, Paisius' work was truly appealing to the Bulgarians and awakened them from their medieval torpor. There was a lot that was fundamentally new in it: a bright, passionate language that touched readers and listeners to the quick and made them remember their sense of national dignity.

In *Slavo-Bulgarian History*, a program for a Bulgarian national revival was outlined, which set the task of reviving the national state and the national church and of creating a system of schools teaching in the national language. However, the realization of these ideas, borrowed in part from their Balkan neighbors (for example, the idea of the value of the native language and its equality or even superiority to others, was clearly accepted by him from the Croatian educator,

Andrea Kachich-Mioshich *Pleasant Conversation of Slavic People* (1756) required certain social forces that were then absent in the Bulgarian lands. Paisius was far ahead of his time, because the first secondary school with teaching in the national language appeared in the Bulgarian regions only 73 years later, in 1835; the national Bulgarian church in the form of the Bulgarian Exarchate was restored 108 years later, in 1870; and the restoration of Bulgarian statehood took place 116 years later: the formation of the Principality of Bulgaria in 1878.

Such a wide chronological break in the fulfillment of Paisius' teachings gave him the aura of a national genius in Bulgaria, and on the whole it is impossible to disagree. However, such a judgment should not extend to overinflated estimates of many Bulgarian scholars, who compare this awakener of the people to Rousseau, or even Voltaire, and who consider *Slavo-Bulgarian History* to be the starting point of „new“ Bulgarian literature. If one were to share the latter view, it would follow that Bulgarian literature outstripped Russian literature in its development („new“ literature in Russia began with Pushkin), and the national revival began in Bulgarian society earlier than in Croatian and Serbian society, where the conditions were far more favorable for the development of their national cultures in comparison with Bulgaria. It seems that the more academically correct opinion is that *Slavo-Bulgarian History* is the initial milestone of a long „transitional“ time, the first point of reference in the movement of national literature towards the milestone of „new“ literature.

However, there is no denying the fact that *Slavo-Bulgarian History* is indeed a program of Bulgarian national revival, but with a long-delayed implementation period. In *Slavo-Bulgarian History* there is a lot that is „old,“ but that does not entirely obscure the manifestations of innovative thought of Paisius. The author calls for the use of the national language, but many parts of the work he compiled are written in the language of traditional literature; in some places it resembles artistic journalism, but these are only tiny „islands,“ lost in numerous „borrowed“ passages from the books of Caesar Baronius and Mavro Orbini. Many other similar arguments can be made. Therefore, the characterization of the *Slavo-Bulgarian History* as a historiographical and literary monument of the „transitional“ period seems to be the only objective one. It should also be borne in mind that following Paisius' „History,“ there was a 43-year-long period of stagnation in innovation in Bulgarian literature: the features of the „transition“ period were manifested again in national speech only in the „Autobiography“ of Sofronius of Vratsa (1805).

Translated by the author

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ILLUSTRATIONS

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