

THE HISTORY OF THE BULGARIAN REVIVAL IN 100 ARTIFACTS

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A review of: Nenov, Nikolay, ed. *100 Artifacts of the Heroic Time. Visual Stories in the Museum*. Sofia: ROD Publishing & Impresario House, 2018, 136 pp. [In Bulgarian: Ненов, Николай, ред. *100 артефакта от героичното време. Визуални разкази за музея*. София: Импресарско-издателска къща РОД, 2018, 136 стр.] The book presents 100 artifacts from the late Bulgarian National Revival (1867–1878), all of which are currently spread throughout 33 Bulgarian museums. The publication is focused around seven significant topics: *Free Time; Self-presentation; Education; Revolutionary Attributes; Weapons, Banners, Signs; Religious Symbols; Memory Objects*, with the objects being presented via images and short descriptions. The central approach used to introduce the objects is anthropological. It establishes the main code for deciphering the meaning of the artifacts – a glimpse into history through the medium of the personal story and moments that have been preserved in human memory. The book is an original Bulgarian response to *A History of the World in 100 Objects* by Neil MacGregor (2011).

Keywords: *The Bulgarian Revival, artifacts, museum, anthropology, A History of the World in 100 Objects, Neil MacGregor*

The book *100 Artifacts of the Heroic Time. Visual Stories in the Museum*¹ is an unusual presentation of the Bulgarian struggles for national liberation and the period of the late Bulgarian Revival (1867–1878). The publication was compiled, edited and authored by Prof. Nikolay Nenov, Director of Rousse Regional Museum of History. He attracted to his project professionals from 33 Bulgarian museums to present curious glimpses of Bulgarian history using museum objects. The book is focused on seven significant topics: *Free time; Self-presentation; Education; Revolutionary Attributes; Weapons, Banners, Signs; Religious Symbols; Memory Objects*.

¹ The publication is under the research project titled *On the Traces of the Heroic Time (1867–1878)* of the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with a Museum of BAS and Rousse Regional Museum of History. The project is supported by the Research Fund of the Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science.

We will mention some of the intriguing objects, the stories of which the reader will find in the book: Baba Tonka's cane², the stamp of the Bulgarian Revolutionary Committee in Sevlievo, a child's sketch of marching Russian soldiers in the village of Vardun, Targovishte region (1878), the bell that announced the start of the April Uprising in Klisura, Ilyo Voyvoda's rifle³, Hristo Botev's sabre⁴... For the purposes of this publication, several Bulgarian museums have given objects related to Vasil Levski⁵: a forged stamp for his conspiratorial mail, a power of attorney to Yurdan Stoyanov by Aslan Dervishooglu Kardzhal (Vasil Levski), a portable printing press, a seashell trumpet, a pocket knife, a dagger and a sabre, a deacon's tippet, a lock of his hair kept in the National Museum of Military History. There are some unusual artifacts such as the tombstones of revolutionaries Stefan Karadzha and Nikola Voyvodov that were originally placed on their graves by Baba Tonka. It is important to note that it is exactly through this book that the Bulgarian audience gets a chance to learn about some of the objects, such as the stamp of Panayot Hitov's fighting group⁶, Zhelyo Voyvoda's stamp, the *Sunday Readings Book with Different Messages* of Vasil Drumev – member of Botev's fighting group, etc.

Along with personal belongings, photographs are also represented. The photographs let the events *live largely through the preserved image*; they do not only keep episodes of past times, but even turn into *a real text showing visual images of the past*, as Nikolay Nenov states in his introduction (Nenov 2018: 10). The book allows the audience to establish a vivid, intimate contact with national heroes through the photographs of Vasil Levski and Teodora Bakardzhieva – Long Hair, who was one of the secret couriers of BRCC (the Bulgarian Revolutionary Central Committee) delivering mail, newspapers and weapons.

According to the author, the presented artifacts of the Bulgarian history *are essential to understand the way the Bulgarian nation went through the processes of growing mature and becoming a reality, because they visualise them and make them tangible* (Nenov 2018: 7).

The leading object presentation approach is the anthropological method as it provides the key to decode the meaning of those objects: a look into history through a personal story and moments preserved in people's memory.

2 Tonka Obretenova (known as Baba 'Granny' Tonka, 1812–1893) was a female Bulgarian revolutionary.

3 Iliya Markov Popgeorgiev (known as Ilyo Voyvoda, 1805–1898) was a Bulgarian hajduk and revolutionary from the region of Macedonia.

4 Hristo Botev (1848–1876) was a poet, journalist, and revolutionary, one of the most prominent figures in Bulgarian national history.

5 Vasil Ivanov Kunchev (known as Levski, the Apostle of Freedom, The Deacon, 1837–1873) was a leading revolutionary and is widely considered the most prominent Bulgarian national hero.

6 Panayot Hitov (1830–1918) and Zhelyo (Zhelyu) Voyvoda (1828–1893) were hajduks, revolutionaries and participants in the Russo-Turkish Liberation war of 1877–1878.

The selected artifacts tell not only about the turbulent revolutionary time, they just as well provide evidences of Modernity getting born on the land of Bulgaria. The emergence of the category of *free time* is related to leisure and entertainment. There are some intriguing objects: Georgi S. Rakovski's⁷ coffee pot and recipes for *various remedies*, Panayot Hitov's tambura, the pocket watch that belonged to Georgi Bocharov (a craftsman from Gabrovo linked with the Bulgarian revolutionaries in Romania). A number of objects that had come to Bulgaria from Europe can be seen as tokens of Modernity: the French coffee grinder of the Bulgarian volunteer Nikola Korchev, a silver bell pendant – a souvenir from the Cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris, Panayot Volov's⁸ porcelain stationery box from Vienna, and the writing desk of Lady Emily Anne Smythe, Viscountess Strangford – an English public activist, traveller, writer and philanthropist.

100 Artifacts is an original interpretation of the Bulgarian heroic past using the effect of tangible objects. The book is the Bulgarian response to Neil MacGregor's *A History of the World in 100 Objects* (MacGregor 2011). The former Director of the British Museum published a book under the mentioned title, and the significance of the artifacts was further promoted by BBC Radio 4 series (in 100 series, of course). In 2014, he published his book *Germany: Memories of a Nation*, in which he used architectural sites, different images and objects to visualise 140 years of the German history (MacGregor 2014).

MacGregor's idea turned out to be contagious. Further history books followed: Ireland, World War One, sailing, bicycle riding, the Catholic Church, and even history of the future – all of them expressed in 100 objects. Exhibitions were organized in Wales and the USA, showing the countries' history using corresponding 100 objects.

In that context, the Bulgarian release of *100 Artifacts of the Heroic Time* fits into a modern trend of telling about different segments of time in history from an unexpected perspective. Artifacts are witnesses of time; they give life to history and make it more touchable, visible and closer to the emotions of contemporary audiences.

7 Georgi Stoykov (Sava) Rakovski (1821–1867) was a revolutionary, author of one of the first Bulgarian literary poems, and the organizer of the First Bulgarian Legion in Belgrade (1962).

8 Panayot Volov (1850–1876) was one of the main organizers and leaders of the Gyurgevo Revolutionary Committee and the Bulgarian April Uprising against the Ottoman Empire in 1876.

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