



Rakovski National Defence College

A SYMBOL OF THE BULGARIAN SPIRIT AND PATRIOTISM



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Cultural Monument



From its establishment until today, *Rakovski National Defence College* has the honour not only to provide quality education and teach the spirit of patriotism and sacrifice in the name of the Fatherland, but also to preserve the traditions and natural bond of the army as part of the Bulgarian people.

The beginning was in the early years of the 20th century, when the reforms and modernisation of the Bulgarian army required more officers with higher education. On 11 December 1911, with a report to the Head of State, Tsar Ferdinand I, the Minister of War Major General Nikifor Nikiforov made a reasoned proposal for the establishment of a Military Academy. In the reasons for his proposal, he pointed out that the rapid development of military affairs necessitated *'the establishment of a higher military educational institution under the name of Military Academy.'* On 12 December 1911, the report was approved by Tsar Ferdinand I. He noted in his resolution, *'I approve with particular joy the submission of this bill to the XV Ordinary National Assembly and congratulate the Army on the occasion of this happy and fateful decision.'* On 1 March 1912, the MPs voted and adopted it, and on 20 April, the Tsar approved the Act on Military Academy by Decree No 26. On 8 May 1912, the act was stamped with the state seal and on publishing in The State Gazette, it entered into force. Founding the Academy became a fact.

The Balkan Wars of 1912 – 1913 delayed the opening ceremony of the Academy until January 4, 1915, when the academic year began with great solemnity. Tsar Ferdinand I was also present. However, the military students were unable to complete their study. The reason was the raging First World War, whose flames engulfed Bulgaria in the autumn of 1915.

Under the Treaty of Neuilly, signed with the Entente countries in the autumn of 1919, Bulgaria closed its military educational institutions. Only the Military School remained. Despite the restrictive clauses of the treaty, in 1922, the Military Academy began its hidden existence on the territory of the Military School in Sofia, but as an Instructor Course, under which name it existed until 1938. By 1944, 16 officer classes had graduated at the Academy, of which 16 general staff and 11 quartermasters. On March 5, 1946, with Regency Decree No. 6, the Military Academy was named after the patriarch of the Bulgarian national liberation movement, Georgi Stoykov Rakovski, and in 1952, the Academy received its first battle flag.





In the past the Military School was located on the outskirts of the city, but with the urban development, the location of Rakovski National Defence College – the descendant of the Military Academy – today is in the central part of the Bulgarian capital - Sofia. The overall architectural image of the College is shaped by the ensemble impact of all the buildings, built in different periods of time, but designed and built in a stylistic unity. The complex of sites on the territory of the National Defence College has had the status of a Group Cultural Monument since 1985. There are a number of cultural monuments on its grounds which are emblematic in the field of military affairs and represent an extremely valuable historical heritage.

The front fence of the College along Evlogi i Hristo Georgievi Blvd. is unique. It was constructed in the period 1933 – 1934 according to a specially developed project with the barrels of about 2,000 *Krnka* and *Berdan* rifles embedded in its high plinth. With these rifles, in 1885, the Act of Unification of the Principality of Bulgaria and the Eastern Rumelia was successfully defended. They

were also used in the national liberation struggles of the Macedonian and Thracian Bulgarians, as well as during the wars for national unity (1912 – 1918).

A monument to the great Bulgarian patriot Colonel Boris Drangov today stands right next to the entrance of the College. The life of this significant figure in Bulgarian military history is a paragon of an exemplary commander who devoted himself in deeds to the Bulgarian national cause, an example of self-sacrifice and true love for Bulgaria. Boris Drangov believed that an officer is – above all, a thinking person, an educator and a mentor of soldiers who, in times of peace and war, teaches them by his personal example. Therefore, throughout his military career, Colonel Drangov strove not to do anything that would harm the personal dignity and the creative initiative of his subordinates. He would rather command ardent, determined, enterprising and proud soldiers, than obedient people and pleasers. Today, the bronze figure of Colonel Drangov is on a permanent guard duty by the main gate of the Rakovski National Defence College. He is the first officer to ‘greet’ both the military and civilian students heading for the Academic Building, as well as the citizens entering the park.

The Alley of Victories begins from the main gate of the College at the Guardhouse, which is a valuable architectural monument in the shape of a cylindrical tower. At the very beginning of the alley, above the wrought-iron gates of the school, there was an inscription, *‘Keep the traditions of this home. When you join the national army, take them with zeal and pride.’* Built on



an artificial embankment that divides the park into two unequal parts, the alley overcomes a terrain unevenness of about 10 m and leads to the College parade grounds. The alley was shaped in 1933 and consisted of 90 columns with railings made of rifle barrels from the Balkan Wars. There are plates on the columns, flanking the Alley, that commemorate glorious victories of the Bulgarian Army – from the battle of Ongla in 680 when the Bulgarian state was founded to the Drava epic in 1945. Artillery shells with soil from the battlefields of Bulgarian military glory are laid in the foundations.

The main building on the territory of the College – now an educational corpus – was built in the period 1888 – 1894. The facade resembles an old fortress, with arched windows and vaults typical of buildings in this style. Architectural military motifs in the form of turrets are built on the roof cornices. The academic and administrative buildings of the College are a wonderful testimony to the architectural creativity of the Bulgarian state after the Liberation, still untouched by modern urban planning. The creation of its composition is a commemoration to the names of masters who are iconic for the architecture of the Bulgarian capital. The Czech architect Antonin Kolar is the author of the most impressive segment of the ensemble built in 1888–1894, the main educational building. Originally this corpus had two floors, but in 1908 a third one was added. It was designed in a neo-Romanesque style with typical military architecture with arched windows and vaults, battlements and turrets on the roof cornices. The facade of the building radiates an atmosphere of discipline, strictness and military order. The corpus used to house both the bedrooms and classrooms. The canteen, which could accommodate up to 1000 people, is preserved in its authentic form in the basement.

The Royal Halls, one of the most impressive interior spaces, completed in the early nineties of the XIX century, are on the second floor of the Academic Corpus. Here, Tsar Ferdinand I, and from 1918 Tsar Boris III,

led protocol-ceremonial rituals. The walls, built in the late Baroque style, are reminiscent with their gilded friezes and ornaments of the Belvedere Palace in Vienna. The hall on the right, called *Hope*, was used by the monarchs as a study during their visits to the Military Academy. The hall on the left was a library and in the 1930s it was named after Tsaritsa Joanna. The central of the three Halls was intended for welcoming foreign statesmen, official receptions, award ceremonies for officers, etc. The swordbelt-junkers from the Military School were received in the Halls and promoted to officer rank. Other frequent guests in the Halls were foreign diplomats and public figures, as well as representatives of the Bulgarian political, spiritual and cultural elite. The walls are lined with the wooden panelling typical of Austrian castles. The huge metal chandeliers and tall tiled stoves have been preserved in the interior. The weapons pyramid also makes a strong impression. It is made of massive wood, richly decorated with wood carvings from the Debar school. The pyramid contained weapons from different periods, presented to Tsar Ferdinand I and today it houses *Mannlicher M1895* rifles and carbines. On the walls, next to each entrance to the Halls, the sabres of the first Bulgarian Knyaz Alexander Battenberg were hung on memorial shields.

The **Headquarters** is left of the Academic Corpus and houses the College's administrative units – management, professors, academic department, etc. The building was constructed between 1938 – 1942 after the project of architect Alexander Dubovnik. It is similar stylistically



to the academic building. Commemorative monuments were erected in specially selected places, which were designated as a territory for solemn rituals according to the design of the open areas of the College by another notable architect, Friedrich Grünanger. In this way, the **Alumni Column** and later the Georgi Rakovski Monument were built, each in its own aesthetic and architectural space. The Alumni Column, opened in 1934, stands on the eastern side of the academic building. There are four bronze sculptures of lions at its base, symbolising the strength and bravery of Bulgarian warriors. At the top, there is an image of battle flags with lion cubs, between which the Coat of Arms of the Republic of Bulgaria rises. The numbers and years of promotion of the graduate classes of the Military School are written on granite slabs on the four sides of the column.

The monument to Georgi Rakovski, the patron of the National Defence College, was erected in 1967 opposite the column. The reason for its construction was the 20th anniversary of awarding the College with the name of the ideologist of the Bulgarian national liberation movement. The monument is a memorial composition designed by the sculptor Lilyana Marinova, and the space around it is shaped in the style of park planning, characteristic of the



60s of the 20th century. **The Holy Archangels Church**, built at the end of the 19th century, is behind the Rakovski Monument. Initially, the building was intended for a stable, but due to the existence of a covered arena with similar functions and considering the need for religious and moral education of the trainees and the instructor staff, a decision was made to convert the building into an Orthodox church. It was consecrated on 27 December 1897 by Metropolitan Parthenius of Sofia and Metropolitan Gregory of Dorostol and Cherven, in the presence of Knyaz Ferdinand, the ministers of Konstantin Stoilov's cabinet and the high command of the Bulgarian Army. The Knyaz made a heartfelt speech about the importance of religious education for shaping the moral image of the Bulgarian officers. Initially, the church was named *The Holy Seven Saints*, but on 20 January 1906, it was renamed *The Holy Archangels*. According to the Christian creed, the archangels Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, Uriel, Selaphiel, Jehudiel, Barachiel, and Jeremiel are the leaders of the Heavenly host, which identifies them with the commanders of the earthly army.

The church building is a three-nave pseudo-basilica oriented to the east in accordance with Orthodox canons. The names of all the *'officers who died gloriously in the wars for the freedom of Macedonia, Thrace, Dobrudzha and Moravia – graduates of the Military School,'* were written in gold letters on a black background on both sides of the altar after the First World War. Thus, the church became a pantheon of those who fell on the battlefields during the wars for national liberation and unification of Bulgaria. In the wake of 9 September 1944 (the Bulgarian coup d'état), the church was closed, the names of



the dead were erased; the domes and belfry – demolished. The fate of icons and church utensils was sad: *‘unnecessary ‘things’ are thrown out and destroyed.’* The premises were successively transformed into a warehouse, a print shop, a bookstore, and a grocery store. After 1989 (the beginning of Bulgaria’s transition to democracy and market economy), an initiative was taken to restore the chapel. The reconstruction began in 2001 and continued until 2006, when on 20 January, a Sanctification ritual was held and the restored temple was re-sanctified. Today, the names of those who died in the period from the Serbo-Bulgarian War to the Second World War are written on the right of the altar. Thus, the role of the temple has been restored as a kind of pantheon of those who fell on the battlefields during the wars for national liberation and unification of Bulgaria.

Another interesting object is the **Manege**, which is also located on the territory of the College. Over the years it was used by the instructors and trainees for their cavalry and equestrian training, but sometimes it also performed more special functions. The head of the royal stable, stable master Lt. Col. Geza Dobner von Rautenhof and Dettendorf, contributed to its construction. He was the man who prepared Ferdinand of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha for the officer exam in the Austro-Hungarian army. Geza Dobner first built the Royal Arena in 1890 – 1891, then the Manege at the Military School.

The Manege is also connected with several significant events for Bulgarian aviation. The first Bulgarian flying machine, the *Sofia – I* balloon, was made in it in April 1912. In 1915, it exhibited the first airplane made by the Bulgarian Asen Yordanov, who would become one of the personalities with a contribution to the development of American aviation in the following decades. A major Bulgarian war trophy was exhibited in the Manege in 1916 – the first enemy plane downed in aerial combat. The remains of the two-seater French biplane *Farman F40* are an eloquent proof of the rapid development of Bulgarian military aviation during the wars of national unification between 1912 – 1918. Today, the arena has been rebuilt into a modern sports hall.

The balcony of the Royal Halls overlooks the wonderful vista of one of the College's greatest attractions – **the park and the lake**. The park is perhaps the only one in Sofia that has preserved its authentic appearance from its creation until today. Its construction began in 1906 at the idea of the then Commandant of the Military School, Colonel Vicho Dikov. About 10,000 saplings of various tree species were purchased for this purpose. The park was designed by the Austrian architect Friedrich Grünanger, author of some of the most architecturally brilliant public buildings of his time – such as the Theological Academy and the Central Synagogue, as well as private homes in Sofia. An important architectural element is the lake, designed in the shape of the Cyrillic letter 'Ф' (in Latin – the letter F), the initial letter of the name of Tsar Ferdinand. **The Commandants' Staircase** descends to the lake. The busts of all the commandants of the school until 1934 were placed on granite columns on both sides of the staircase. Many monumental architectural and sculptural objects, the work of famous Bulgarian and German authors, some of which unfortunately no longer exist, were located in the space of the park. One of them was **the Grenadier Monument**, a figure of a soldier swinging his arm to throw a hand grenade. It was erected in the interwar period (1919 – 1939) to commemorate the Bulgarian soldiers who held this important post during the First World War. The Grenadier Monument was located west of the Manege and southeast of the Headquarters building of His Majesty's Military School.





A monument to the Apostle of Freedom Vasil Levski, who is also the patron of the Military School (today the National Military University), was erected and solemnly opened on the territory of the park in 2016. This project was a joint initiative of the National Defence College, Sofia Municipality and the Vassil Levski Alumni Committee. Adopting the revolutionary ideology of Georgi Rakovski, Vasil Levski practically further developed it, creating the committees and the internal revolutionary organisation in the country. Levski thought and acted like a military officer. He wanted the committeemen to be trained in military affairs and would insist that we needed a professional army and modern weapons. According to him, *'our work is not in the guerilla squads, but in a revolution on the ground, which will bring an army – well trained and armed – to the battlefield.'* This army had to be created and well hidden in the cities. Therefore, military science today determines that with the establishment of the Internal Revolutionary Organisation, the Apostle acted as a politician and as a statesman who, together with Georgi Rakovski, laid the foundations of the Bulgarian Army.

The Alley of Victories, along with the other iconic open-air gallery to be restored, namely the Staircase of the Commandants, as well as the Academic Corpus, the Headquarters and all the other architectural decorative-artistic and monumental works that fill the exterior spaces of the National Defence College, form a remarkable monument of the cultural and historical heritage for the Bulgarian nation. Every corner of this unique architectural ensemble reminds us of the greatness of the Bulgarian spirit, the patriotism and sacrifice of the Bulgarian army, our glorious past, the heroes who did not know defeat in battle, and their commanders.