

PREFACE

The history of the Balkans from the early ninth to the early eleventh century was dominated by a series of deadly conflicts between Bulgaria and the Byzantine Empire for hegemony in the region. As the direct continuation of the Eastern Roman Empire, which had not succumbed to the inroads of migrating barbarians as had its sister half in the west, Byzantium laid claim to the Balkan Peninsula as an imperial birthright that could not be relinquished. On the other hand, Bulgaria, a young “barbarian” state that was newly “civilized” along lines modeled after its Byzantine neighbor, viewed the Balkans as an arena for demonstrating youthful superiority over an elderly mentor by winning its possession from Byzantium. For much of the two-century-long period of generational conflict, youth appeared to hold the upper hand, with Bulgaria winning control of much of the peninsula. In the end, however, the resourcefulness and experience of age prevailed—the Byzantine Empire won an overwhelming victory and its upstart adversary was subjugated completely.

Few early medieval European military conflicts compared to the Bulgarian-Byzantine struggle in terms of scope, scale, and duration. The collective campaigns of the Frank ruler Charlemagne, extending from 772 to 812, came the closest. In territorial scope, both the Bulgarian-Byzantine wars and those of Charlemagne ranged over vast areas with their resident populations. The former eventually drew in nearly all of the Balkan Peninsula while the latter encompassed most of Germany,

parts of Italy, the Netherlands, Pyrenees Spain, western Hungary, and the northwestern Balkans. Regarding the scope of their historical implications, by the time they came to their ends, both the Bulgarian-Byzantine and Charlemagne's wars solidified the cultural configuration of two distinct European civilizations—Eastern and Western—that primarily were distinguished by their Christian religious beliefs (Orthodoxy in the East; Roman Catholicism in the West) and political mentalities (autocratic centralization in the East; individualistic decentralization in the West).

Although Charlemagne's campaigns roughly were comparable in scope to the Bulgarian-Byzantine wars, such was not the case in terms of scale. The military forces involved in the wars of Bulgaria with Byzantium were larger, better organized, and more diverse than those of Charlemagne's Franks and their assorted enemies. While Charlemagne's main army in any given campaign numbered some 8000 men (mainly infantry, with some cavalry), the Bulgarians and Byzantines fielded forces averaging between 15,000 and 30,000 troops (with cavalry constituting a quarter to half of their number). Moreover, Byzantium often made use of its fleet (some 200 available vessels with attendant sailors and marines) in operations against Bulgaria along the Black Sea coast and on the Danube River, adding a naval component that the Franks lacked. Also missing in Charlemagne's operations were the kinds of military coalitions with outside forces either formed or attempted by both the Bulgarians and the Byzantines. Magyars, Pechenegs (Patzinaks), Serbs, Croats, Arabs, and Kievan Rus' were recruited by one side or the other during the two-century-long conflict in the Balkans, lending it an international component not found in the west during early medieval times.

The Byzantine land army of the wars with Bulgaria was the best organized, armed, and supplied, as well as the most efficient, disciplined, and professionally led, military force in early medieval Europe. Its officers had available to them treatises analyzing military tactics, strategy, and intelligence information for use against enemies (real or potential), and they frequently drew on revered Roman military traditions to instill an unsurpassed *esprit de corps* among their troops. The Bulgarians, forced to face the Byzantine military machine for over two centuries, extensively borrowed from their enemy elements of organization, armament, and strategy that they added to their own original steppe tactical and disciplinary traditions, enabling them to survive and thrive for as long as they did. Charlemagne's military system, although more disciplined

and organized than any that had emerged in the west since the Western Roman Empire's collapse four centuries earlier, was crude by comparison with Byzantium's and fell somewhat short of Bulgaria's. While the Franks eventually placed great emphasis on maintaining a siege train in their field force, they never had to deal with the sort of extensive, strong, stone-and-brick fortifications faced by both sides in the Bulgarian-Byzantine wars. (The triple land walls of Constantinople, Byzantium's capital, were the longest and strongest set of medieval fortifications erected in Europe and often played a crucial role in the wars with Bulgaria.)

The scale of violence involved in any early medieval conflict was frightful. Man-to-man combat with such basic but deadly hand weapons as swords, daggers, maces, spears, axes, bows, and even clubs, slings, and stones was bloody and brutal. In the heat of combat, emotions ran hot and the immediacy of the "kill-or-be-killed" instinct often led to atrocities. At times, however, commanders intentionally employed savagery against the enemy for psychological or propagandistic purposes. Perhaps surprisingly, given the fact that the contenders generally stood at an uneven but higher stage of "civilized" development than did the Franks, in the Bulgarian-Byzantine wars such "object lessons" were more common than in those of Charlemagne.

The subtitle of this book, although appearing grisly at first glance, actually refers to two "object-lesson" episodes that serve as figurative "bookends" to the period of the Bulgarian-Byzantine wars, emphasizing the continuous level of ferocity that characterized the conflict throughout. Early in the hegemonic struggle (811), after ambushing and destroying a large Byzantine army led by Emperor Nikephoros I (who perished in the fighting), Krum, the victorious Bulgar ruler, had the dead emperor's head removed, the skull sawed off above the eye sockets and lined with silver, and then used it as his ceremonial drinking cup to proclaim Bulgar superiority over Byzantium. Two centuries later (1014), near the end of the protracted struggle, Byzantine Emperor Basil II defeated a Bulgarian force and had hundreds of the surviving captives blinded and sent back to the Bulgarian ruler Samuil (led by one man out of every hundred who was spared an eye for the purpose) to demonstrate Byzantine superiority and to herald the ultimate fate of Bulgaria. It matters little that some modern scholars have cast doubt on the authenticity of both episodes; as circulating tales, they were known and believed in their times and achieved their intended psychological impact on foes and friends alike.

In terms of duration, Charlemagne's wars were confined to his own lifetime (as was the relatively sophisticated level of his military system in the west)—some forty years, including intermittent bouts of peace. In contrast, the Bulgarian-Byzantine hegemonic wars stretched over two centuries and the reigns of a number of rulers on both sides. Although that long period was punctuated by interludes of peace, the cumulative extent of actual warfare totaled well over 60 years, and even the peaceful interludes were not free of recurring armed "incidents."

Despite the obvious immensity of the Bulgarian-Byzantine wars for Balkan hegemony, their story has received scant coverage in western, most especially English-language, military histories of early medieval Europe. While the name of Charlemagne at least is familiar to most in the west, that of Krum, Simeon, or Basil II is known mostly to Bulgarian or Byzantine specialists and students. Why? The same reason for the short shrift often given by western authors of general medieval European histories to, for example, the Mongols or Moors applies to Byzantium and Bulgaria as well: They lay outside the cultural sphere of Western European civilization and thus frequently portrayed as either "foreign" or "threatening" to western historical development. Compounding the problem is the fact that most English-speaking Bulgarian or Byzantine experts have produced studies narrowly targeted at specialized audiences rather than a more general readership. The work that follows, although scholarly in nature, is a modest attempt to broaden awareness of the Bulgarian-Byzantine wars beyond the ranks of dedicated specialists and students alone.

Those English-language accounts of the early medieval struggle between Bulgaria and Byzantium for hegemonic control of the Balkans that do exist usually have appeared in works devoted to Byzantine political or military history. Rarely has the story of the wars been told in English from the Bulgarian perspective. The underlying reasons for such one-sidedness are many. Most of the primary sources treating the conflicts were Byzantine products. Another reason for the paucity of English-language accounts of Bulgaria's early medieval wars with Byzantium is the scarcity of English-speaking historians working in the field of medieval Bulgarian history (or, for that matter, in the field of Bulgarian history in general). That Bulgaria ceased to play a significant role on the world stage after the early medieval period, spent much of its history either subjugated or dominated by foreign world powers, reemerged in the late nineteenth century as a small modern state located

in what most English-speakers consider a “fringe” area of Europe (the Balkans), and sports a localized language illuminates the reasons for this lack of professional interest. There is, of course, no lack of coverage of early medieval Bulgaria and its wars with Byzantium in Bulgarian-language historiography.

By drawing on the fruits of Bulgarian historians’ extensive research and integrating them with available English-language studies, the text that follows attempts to recount the drama and detail of the early medieval wars between Bulgaria and Byzantium for hegemonic control of the Balkans primarily from the Bulgarian side. The main emphasis is placed on military activities. Although military and political developments that are not specifically associated with the details of the hegemonic wars are included to provide the necessary setting for the conflict (as “prelude” to and “interludes” between the various stages of the conflict), the text does not pretend to provide a truly comprehensive history of the First Bulgarian Empire since important cultural (religion, literature, the arts, etc.) and economic matters are treated only when pertinent for the context. Nor does the text venture into describing Byzantine military organization and tactics in minute detail (the recent works of military scholarship by such experts as Warren Treadgold, John Haldon, and others admirably have done so and need not be repeated). With the understanding of these qualifying statements, it is hoped that the following effort will find a receptive audience among those English-speaking specialists, students, and intellectually curious general readers interested in military, Balkan, and medieval history, and make some contribution toward broadening the awareness and appreciation of the important role played by Bulgaria in early medieval Europe.

Wilkes-Barre, PA, USA, 2017

Dennis P. Hupchick

The Bulgarian-Byzantine Wars for Early Medieval Balkan
Hegemony

Silver-Lined Skulls and Blinded Armies

Hupchick, D.

2017, XXXV, 363 p. 9 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-56205-6