



Archives of Local Self-Government in Bulgaria: Municipal and District Administration in the beginning of 20th century

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Abstract

Archives play crucial role in preserving legal, administrative, and historical continuity in governance. As guardians of the institutional memory, they are responsible not only for safeguarding documentary heritage, but also for promoting effectiveness, credibility, and transparency in the administrative practice. After Bulgaria's liberation in 1878 the following decades were marked by the development of a modern state and that was closely associated with the establishment of new administrative institutions. Key for that were the institutions at the municipal and district levels, which served as the main channels between local communities and the central government. The systematic creation, preservation, and use of documents laid the foundation for local archival systems, which was an important part of their activities.

The current paper aims to examine the organization and functions of administrative and municipal archives in Bulgaria in the beginning of the 20th century. The main focus is laid on the legal framework, organizational models, and practical approaches to archival work within state and local administrations. Special attention is paid to municipal and district archives. Although their activity is essential to institutional memory, local archives often operated under challenging conditions. In the period under research local archives often operated under challenging conditions. Absence of a unified regulatory framework and centralized archival policy resulted in uneven practices. In the meantime, limited financial and human resources frequently placed documentary heritage at risk.

Archives of these institutions functioned as practical instruments for everyday administration and control, and at the same time simultaneously acquiring lasting historical value by documenting the development of the Bulgarian society. The current paper points the problems, challenges, and prospects of archival work, demonstrating that administrative and municipal archives not only reflected but actively participated in the modernization of the Bulgarian statehood and local self-government. Their preservation and study are therefore crucial for understanding institutional continuity, regional diversity, and the local dimensions of Bulgarian modernity.

Keywords: *archives, local administration, municipality, post-liberation Bulgaria*

1. Introduction

Archives could be easily considered as the fundamental instruments for preserving institutional memory and social knowledge within all systems of governance. Far beyond their generally known administrative function, archival records constitute a crucial source base for historical, demographic, and genealogical research. In this way they enable the reconstruction of individual life trajectories, family histories, and local community structures. If we think it this way, the archives of local self-government – especially the municipal and district administrations – handle a vital position at the intersection of three main areas – governance, social history, and collective memory.

After Bulgaria's Liberation in 1878, the establishment of a contemporary state required not only political institutions and legal frameworks, but also the development of effective administrative practices at local level. Both municipal and district authorities became the main interfaces between the central government and local communities, which are responsible for the essential process of civil registration, population records, property documentation, and the everyday regulation of all aspects of social life. It is with these functions, that local administrations managed to generate extensive documentary corpora, which today forms the backbone of archival collections related to civil status and population administration, later institutionalized within the structures of civil registration authorities. At the beginning of the 20th century, the organization and preservation of these records remained largely decentralized and dependent on local capacities. The growing shortage of one unified archival policy and standardized procedures resulted in uneven practices. At the same time limited financial and human resources frequently endangered the long-term survival of documents. Regardless



municipal and district archives gradually evolved into repositories of enduring historical and genealogical value by documenting family relations, migration patterns, social mobility, and regional diversity.

The current paper examines the archives of local self-government in Bulgaria – and more specifically municipal and district administrations – in the context of the early 20th century state modernization. By drawing attention on the legal regulations, organizational models, and archival practices, the paper underlines the dual role of local administrative archives as tools of governance and as indispensable sources for genealogical research. It is with this perspective; the study argues that the preservation and systematic study of local archival collections are crucial actions for understanding both the institutional development of Bulgarian statehood and the genealogical foundations of Bulgarian society.

The early development of archival work in Bulgaria was characterized by fragmented institutional responsibility and the absence of a coherent state archival policy, a condition that particularly affected records produced by local administrative bodies. In the absence of specialized archival services, municipal and district administrations often retained records primarily for practical use, inadvertently shaping the future genealogical value of civil registration documents [1].

Within this framework, the current paper also considers the significance of local administrative records as a primary source base for genealogical research, particularly through civil registration and population documentation.

2. Historical and Legal Context of Local Administration of Local Self-Government (1878–1912)

Since the Liberation (1878) local self-government is a constituent part of the more general process of state construction and administrative modernization. Lacking their own sophisticated national administrative traditions, the newly established Bulgarian state relied on its own legal and institutional models of foreign and domestic origin accrued by the Ottoman era. Municipal and district governments became principal intermediaries between the centre and local communities, assuming many tasks that naturally created copious amounts of administrative documentation.

There were administrative functions of the state carried out by municipalities and regions from the first years of their foundation: public order, taxation, education, etc. These skills involved organising and keeping systematic accounts, as administrative decisions had to be recorded, deposited and retained in a written format. Consequently, in the 18th century the local governments were already included among the big producers of documentary material, where started to be constituted also, at municipality and department level, the administrative archives.

The legal structure that governs local self-governance was primarily influenced by the Tarnovo Constitution (1879), which set out the basic principles for decentralisation and municipal autonomy to be subsequently regulated through various pieces of legislation setting out the regulations regarding how municipalities are to be administered. The primary regulatory documents governing the establishment of municipalities were established in the Constitution and were therefore used to define both the structure, the competencies, and thus, the responsibilities of local authorities. Unfortunately, however, the majority of the applicable laws, rules, and regulations governing the establishment of municipalities, paid very little attention to the establishment of archives as a separate area of regulation. As a result, archival creation and maintenance were regarded as supportive administrative functions rather than an independent service. This perspective had a considerable effect on how the local archival activities were conducted.

In the end of 19th century and beginning of 20th century in Bulgaria, municipal and district government operated in a dynamic and often unstable legal environment. There were ongoing changes to laws and administrative reforms, which resulted in uneven practices of documentation and record preservation. In many cases, the record-keeping procedures depended largely on the experience, education, and personal initiative of local officials rather than on standardized and unified rules. This lack of uniformity would later pose serious challenges for both archival organization and historical research. Local governments created relative places of documents where law and administrative control were essential. Records dealing with people management were particularly important in this area – for example, birth, marriage and death records, lists of taxpayers and voters. Due to these records' administrative purpose, they also recorded information related to demographics, communities, and families for future use.

Without a centralized archive policy, municipalities and districts developed their own archives independently, reflecting the characteristics of their regions and local administrative cultures. In larger



cities, where the resources and administrative capacity were more developed, recordkeeping was more systematic and most records were stored in official municipal repositories. Smaller towns and rural areas, on the other hand, generally have poorly developed archives, which are exposed to risks of loss, damage and/or dispersion.

Administrative memory in post-Liberation Bulgaria was shaped primarily at the local level, where municipal and district institutions produced and maintained documentation essential for governance, control, and continuity. The gradual institutionalization of archival practices reflected broader processes of state-building, even though local administrations often operated under uneven regulations and limited resources [4].

The lack of financial and human resources further exacerbated the challenges, which are experienced at local level regarding the archival practices. There were typically no professionals trained specifically for documentation and records management in a municipality, and clerks and/or secretaries performed archival functions as part of their many other duties. As a result the opportunities for systematic organization and long-term preservation of records were severely limited. Nevertheless, through documentation production continued through this time, the total number of records created that survive today is more than most local governments would expect to have.

Municipal and district archival collections were created during this historical and legal era to be used as tools for governance and the administration of control. The purpose of these records was to help create decisions, provide legal documentation of actions taken by municipal or district authorities, and facilitate communication between institutions and the public. However, over time, the records have grown beyond their original administrative purposes and are now used as repositories of institutional memory, providing detailed information about local governments, social relationships, and individual life histories.

The significance of local government archival collections can be particularly identified in their role as historical documentation of citizen legal status and migration or population movement. The municipal and district authorities were instrumental in collecting and maintaining records related to citizens' legal status because there were not yet universal and standardized civil registration systems in place. The archival record-keeping established by these authorities would ultimately contribute to the development of more formalized civil registration and population administration systems.

As a result, local self-government institutions' archival legacies serve as an important source base not only for administrative history but also for social history, demographic studies, and genealogical research. The records created by municipalities and districts provide rare examples of everyday administrative practices and how individuals and families lived in their local communities.

Archival practices in Bulgaria evolved in close interaction with broader models of cultural heritage management, where administrative documents gradually came to be recognized not only as legal evidence but also as carriers of long-term historical and social significance [2]

To properly evaluate the significance of municipal/district archives, it is imperative to have an understanding of the historical and legal context in which local self-government has developed through time. This will allow for greater appreciation of archival practices by demonstrating what types of conditions were present when records were created/preserved/lost, as well as providing appropriate language in order to assess the genealogical value of the record series being discussed in the following section.

3. Civil Registration Records as Genealogical Sources

Civil registration systems emerged as fundamental instruments of modern governance, designed to record population events in a standardized and legally binding manner [5]. Civil registration records are one of the most key and reliable categories of sources for genealogical research. They document major events on individual level and as part of family – birth, marriage, and death – as part of a legally recognized administrative framework. In Bulgaria at the beginning of the 20th century, these records were primarily created and maintained by municipal and district administrations. Fulfilling this function made local archives indispensable repositories for reconstructing familial lineages and demographic patterns. The systematic recording of births, marriages, and deaths not only served administrative and fiscal purposes but also laid the groundwork for long-term demographic analysis and historical reconstruction [5].

3.1. Birth Registers



The birth registers represent the main entry point for genealogical reconstruction. They formally record the beginning of every individual's legal and social existence. In the period, examined in the current research paper, municipal authorities were responsible for registering births within their territorial jurisdiction, by documenting information such as the name, date and place of birth, parents' names, occupation, residence, and, in some cases, even religious affiliation. These records enable genealogists to establish parentage with a high degree of reliability and to trace family origins at local level.

Beyond their immediate administrative function, birth registers also reflect broader demographic and social patterns. That includes fertility trends, naming conventions, and the influence of religious and cultural traditions. The variations in record structure and completeness (in different municipals and regions) reveal differences in local administrative practices. That makes contextual analysis essential for accurate genealogical interpretation.

3.2. Marriage Registers

The marriage registers provide crucial data for connecting individual life trajectories into one family unit. Again, maintained by municipal and district administrations, these records typically contained information about the spouses' name (new surname for the wife after the marriage), age, place of origin, marital status (before the marriage), occupation, and even parental background (names, places of origin, sometimes ages). From a genealogical point of view, marriage records are particularly valuable especially for identifying intergenerational connections, migration patterns, and social networks extending beyond a single locality.

Marriage registers also document the legal recognition of family formation and often include various references to supporting documents. These could be birth certificates or permissions from higher authorities. The supplementary materials, when preserved (not all are correctly preserved and could be examined today), further enrich the genealogical value of local archival holdings by offering insight into administrative procedures and personal circumstances surrounding family formation.

3.3. Death Registers

The death registers end the documentary cycle of one individual's existence within local administrative systems. These records contain essential information such as name, date and place of death, age, cause of death, and, in some cases, familial relationships or occupation. For genealogical research, death records could be used not only to confirm life spans but also to contextualize individual biographies as part of broader historical events, which include epidemics, wars, and social transformations.

At local level, the death registers often reveal the administrative challenges that were faced by municipalities as accuracy depended on timely reporting and available medical or clerical expertise. Nevertheless, even incomplete or inconsistently maintained records contribute valuable evidence when analysed in conjunction with other civil registration documents.

4. Methodological Note

This study uses a source-oriented qualitative research methodology by combining archival research, legal-historical contextualization, and some digital humanities elements. The main source for this study is civil registration records birth, marriage, and death records which have been preserved in municipal and district archives.

The methodology involved first identifying and selecting archival units for inclusion in the study, then systematically describing and digitizing all relevant documents. Special attention was paid to the original administrative structure of records, including their chronological organization, territorial coverage, and internal classification, so that the context of sources could be preserved when they are added to the digital research environment.

Digitizing records into project databases which provide the organization of the data through common genealogical data elements such as the person's name, date, place and familial relationships. In addition, the database provides for cross-referencing between different civil registration records and enables the reconstruction of both the individual life trajectory and family tree across multiple generations. As well, the database enables the researcher to perform analytical queries related to demographics, migrations and administrative functions at the local level.



Using this programmatic framework also recognized the limitations of the source materials; specifically, the gaps, inconsistencies, and system differences in how regions created their records. Instead of viewing these as “problems” to be avoided, this research viewed these as historically meaningful indicators of the capacity for the region to have operated relatively consistently or not and to have implemented governance structures/levels local to them. Within that construct, research methodology is combined with interpretive flexibility so that reliable genealogical results are achieved based on the context of the archives in which they were created.

5. Research Significance and Practical Implications

Archives function as institutions of memory that mediate between administrative practice and collective historical consciousness, preserving traces of individual lives within the framework of state and local governance [3]. In addition to bringing to light how the archive functioned historically, this study is also important because it identifies how the base of municipal and district records – particularly civil registration records – can be used to validate genealogical research and establish genealogical research as a legitimate, methodologically grounded academic area of study within both the historical and archival professions.

Local administrative archives served as the initial method of record keeping for documenting vital statistics of births, marriages, deaths, residence or family relationships, etc. Originally developed for purposes of government (taxation, legal authority, and population control), these records have now been imbued with ongoing historical and social significance. By subjecting civil registration materials to a systematic analysis, it can be demonstrated that they provide the foundation upon which genealogies (lineage and family history) can be reconstructed. Evidence contained in civil registration records enables genealogists to track family trees (individuals and their families) and to trace migration patterns, social mobility, and demographic changes both locally and nationally.

From an archival perspective, this study reflects the essential importance of taking into consideration the provenance, institutional context, and administrative function of genealogical records in conducting genealogical research. An understanding of the way specific registers were created, and of the purpose of that particular register’s creation, will contribute to a researcher’s ability to interpret the content within genealogical records in a more informed manner as well as to assess the reliability, completeness, and evidentiary value of the records. This level of detail enables researchers to make connections and address issues in genealogy due to a lack of documentation and the existence of inconsistencies in record management and regional differences in record management.

The project-based database that was created as part of the study presents a tangible contribution in practical terms. The database helps to facilitate the digitization of civil registration documents which have been organised into established sub-collections and can be searched and accessed remotely in order to support both academics and members of the public interested in searching for their family history. The database will also allow for the interdisciplinary use of the digitised archival records by historians, demographers, sociologists, and researchers working on family history as well as provide a way for researchers to meet current European norms for management of digital heritage and providing access to those documents.

On a broader level, the research highlights the role that local archives play in connecting individual memory with the historical record of an institution. The process of genealogy allows for a re-consideration or a reintegration of individual life experiences as recorded in civil registration records into the larger narrative of modern Bulgaria and nation-building. Therefore, the digitisation, preservation and scholarly use of civil registration documents not only relates to the administrative history of Bulgaria, but also helps to promote a greater level of historical awareness, cultural identity, and inter-generational linkages.

Genealogists represent a distinct group of archival users whose research practices are driven by the search for personal connection, identity, and meaning, rather than solely by institutional or academic objectives. Archival records created for administrative purposes acquire new interpretative value when reused for genealogical research, transforming institutional documentation into sources of personal and collective memory [6].

6. Conclusion and Discussion

The analysis of municipal and district archives in Bulgaria at the beginning of the twentieth century demonstrates that local administrative records played a far more significant role than is often acknowledged in both archival history and genealogical research. Civil registration documents were



not merely by-products of governance but central instruments through which the state interacted with individuals and families, documenting their legal status, social relations, and life events.

The study highlights that, despite the absence of a unified archival policy and the persistent challenges faced by local administrations, municipal and district archives succeeded in maintaining continuity in the documentation of population data. Birth, marriage, and death registers preserved at the local level provide a unique and irreplaceable source base for reconstructing family histories and understanding regional diversity within Bulgarian society. Their genealogical value lies precisely in their administrative origin, which ensured systematic record creation and legal reliability.

At the same time, the uneven development of local archival practices underscores the need for careful methodological and contextual analysis. Genealogical research based on civil registration records must consider the institutional conditions under which these documents were created, preserved, and sometimes lost. Recognizing these limitations allows for more accurate interpretations and prevents the decontextualization of archival data.

By integrating civil registration records into a structured digital database, the current project contributes to both the preservation and active use of local archival heritage. The database transforms traditional administrative documents into a dynamic research infrastructure, facilitating genealogical reconstruction while also supporting broader historical and demographic analyses. This approach demonstrates how historical archives can be reactivated as living resources with direct relevance to contemporary scholarly and public interests.

In conclusion, municipal and district archives emerge not only as repositories of administrative memory but as foundational pillars of genealogical knowledge. Their systematic study bridges the gap between institutional history and personal memory, connecting individual life stories to the broader processes of state-building and modernization. Preserving, digitizing, and contextualizing these records is therefore essential not only for archival science but for the continuity of historical consciousness and genealogical research in Bulgaria.

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