

# Educational Film Review: *Heroes of Shipka*

## About the video

**Title:**

Heroes of Shipka

**Country:**

U.S.S.R./Bulgaria

**Duration (mins):**

116 mins 05 seconds

**Is this a clip or segment of a film? Or part of a collection?**

Part of the Education & Television Films Ltd. Series

**Year:**

1954

**Description:**

An account of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78 from a Russian and Bulgarian perspective focussing on the Battle of Shipka and the Siege of Plevna.

**Subject classification:**

History, War Studies, Media Studies

**Educational level of intended audience:**

Secondary, Undergraduate

## Audience and Use

The original audience for this motion picture were the people of the Soviet Union and Bulgaria. The film was made a decade after the Soviet liberation of Bulgaria – the final scene in the film shows Soviet troops taking part in a ceremony at the Battle of Shipka Pass Monument in September 1944. The film was part of a campaign by the Bulgarian Communist Party to revive the spirit of pan-Slavism that had existed in the late nineteenth century. While this film is clearly a propaganda film, it may well be of interest to secondary school pupils studying the history of southeast Europe. It may also be of interest to history and war studies undergraduates studying nineteenth century Europe.

## Content

The Shipka Pass in the Balkan Mountains was the scene of one of the most important battles of the Ottoman Turkish-Russian War of 1877-1878 and today is the site of an impressive monument. This is Pan-Slavic account of the Battle of Shipka Pass and the Siege of Plevna of 1877, and in particular what the film makers consider the crucial role of Russian General, Mikhail Dmitrievich Skobelev. The film suggests that Skobelev's success in the war was achieved in the face of infighting among the generals at the Russian military headquarters. The film also looks at the involvement of the other Great Powers, in particular Great Britain. Benjamin Disraeli, the British prime minister favoured the Ottoman Empire and opposed

Russia's expansion into southeast Europe and attempt to gain control of the Turkish straits of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles through a greater Bulgaria. In 1878 Bismarck offered to host what became known as the Congress of Berlin, which prevented the emergence of a greater Bulgarian state and left the Straits under Ottoman control. The film suggests that at that time the Russian army was within 60 miles of Constantinople and that Skobelev believed there was a realistic opportunity to take control of the Straits. Unfortunately for him, the Russian High Command ordered him to call a halt before he had a chance to realise his ambition.

### **Technical issues**

The film was very easy to download. However, it was more convenient to view as one file than in 24 segments. The original black and white and film stock had suffered considerable picture and sound quality deterioration. When I viewed the film on a big screen in one of my university's classrooms it was not always possible to see the English language subtitles. Most students will not be able to follow the original Russian and Bulgarian dialogue.

### **General comments**

Bulgaria is one of new EU accession states. Although this is a propaganda film made during the period the country was ruled by the Bulgarian Communist Party, its perspective on the liberation of the Slavs of Bulgaria from Ottoman rule differs little from the historiography of post-Communist Bulgarian Slavs. The opening scene in the film show the Ottoman Turks butchering Bulgarian Slavs and was precisely the kind of atrocity William Gladstone drew attention to in his 1876 pamphlet, 'Bulgarian Horrors and the Question of the East'.

The Bulgarian historiography refers to the suffering of the Bulgarian Orthodox Slavs during their time as part of the Ottoman Empire – a period referred to as the 'Turkish yoke'. In fact Bulgaria was a multicultural society which included a substantial Turkish and Bulgarian Muslim minority. However, the film provides the misleading, and probably deliberate impression, that Bulgaria was a mono-ethnic society of Orthodox Slavs.