

Under the Yoke by Ivan Vazov – Distant Reading for European Literary History

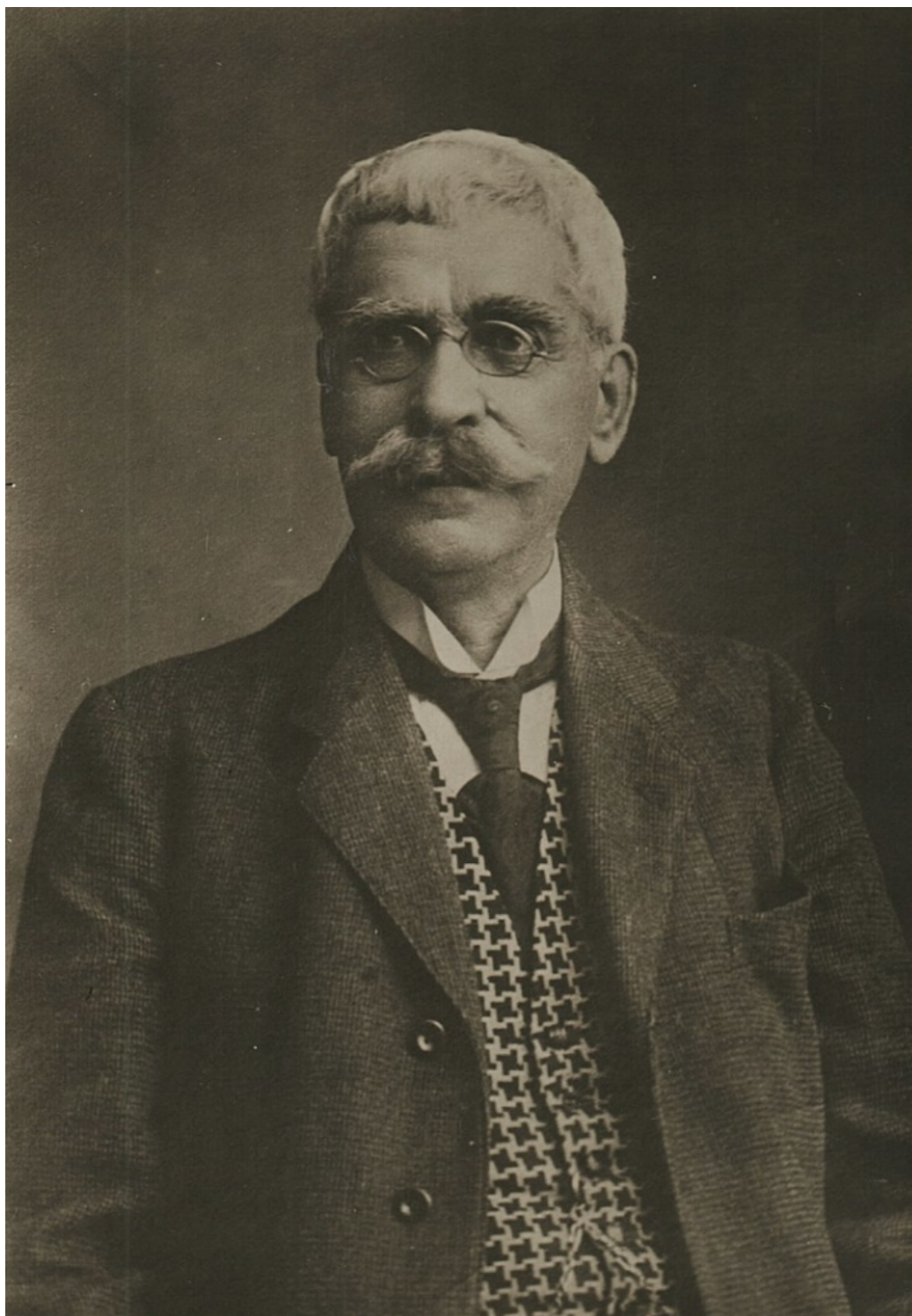
by Justin Tonra : 6-7 minutes

The third article of the Distant Reading Recommends series is written by Ellie Boyadzhieva of the South-West University of Blagoevgrad in Bulgaria. She describes a prominent revolutionary novel from the Bulgarian tradition whose enduring popularity is felt to this day.

In Distant Reading Recommends, an Action member introduces a novel, published between 1850 and 1920, from one of the participating countries in our Action. These novels may be important or notable within the individual nation's literary tradition, but less well-known in the broader European context. By bringing these novels to light, we aim to further advance our objectives of creating a broader, more inclusive, and better-grounded account of European literary history and cultural identity.

The novel *Под игото* (*Under the Yoke*) was written by Ivan Vazov, who is commonly referred to as “the Patriarch of Bulgarian literature” by Bulgarian literary historians.

Ivan Vazov (1850-1921) lived on the border of two eras and his numerous literary works depict two significant periods of Bulgarian history: the Renaissance and the Post-Liberation epoch. During his lifetime he was also a prominent public figure who exerted a huge influence on Bulgarian literary and cultural life.

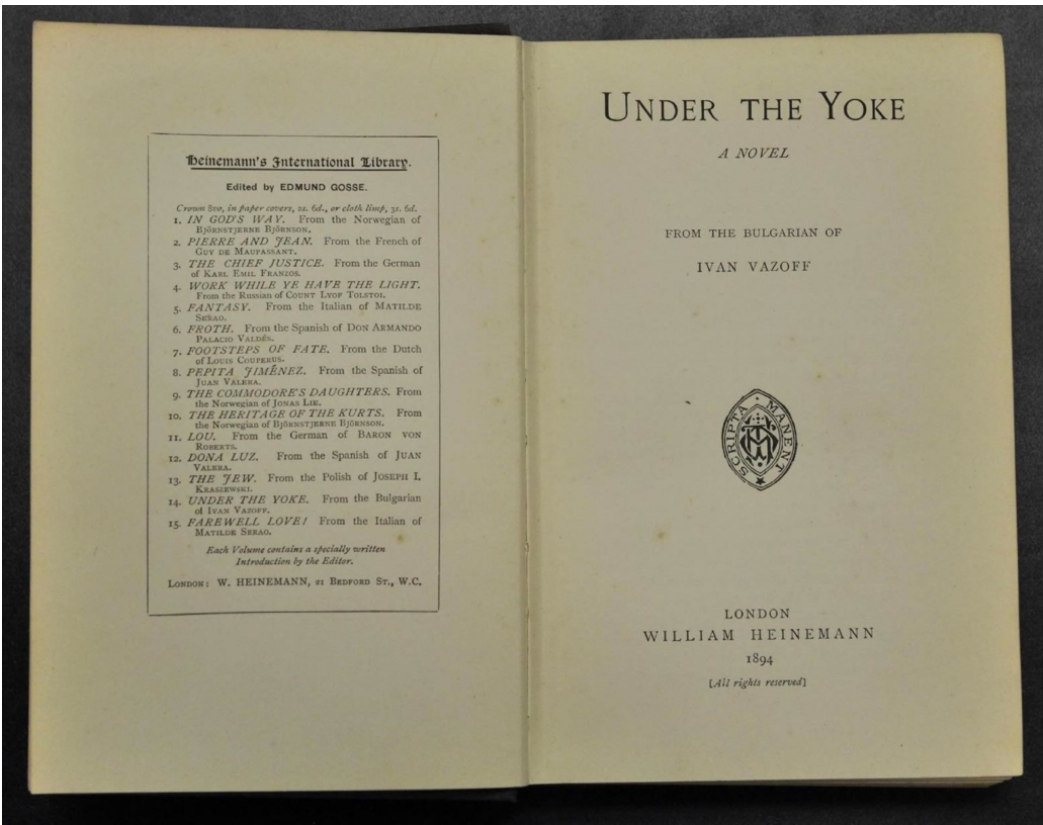


Ivan Vazov

He wrote *Under the Yoke* in Odessa (today's Ukraine) where, in 1886, Vazov was forced into exile because of the persecution of the Russophile political faction of which he was an active member.

The novel consists of three parts. The first part was published in 1889 in the periodical *Collection of Folk Lore, Science and Literature*, and the other two parts were published in

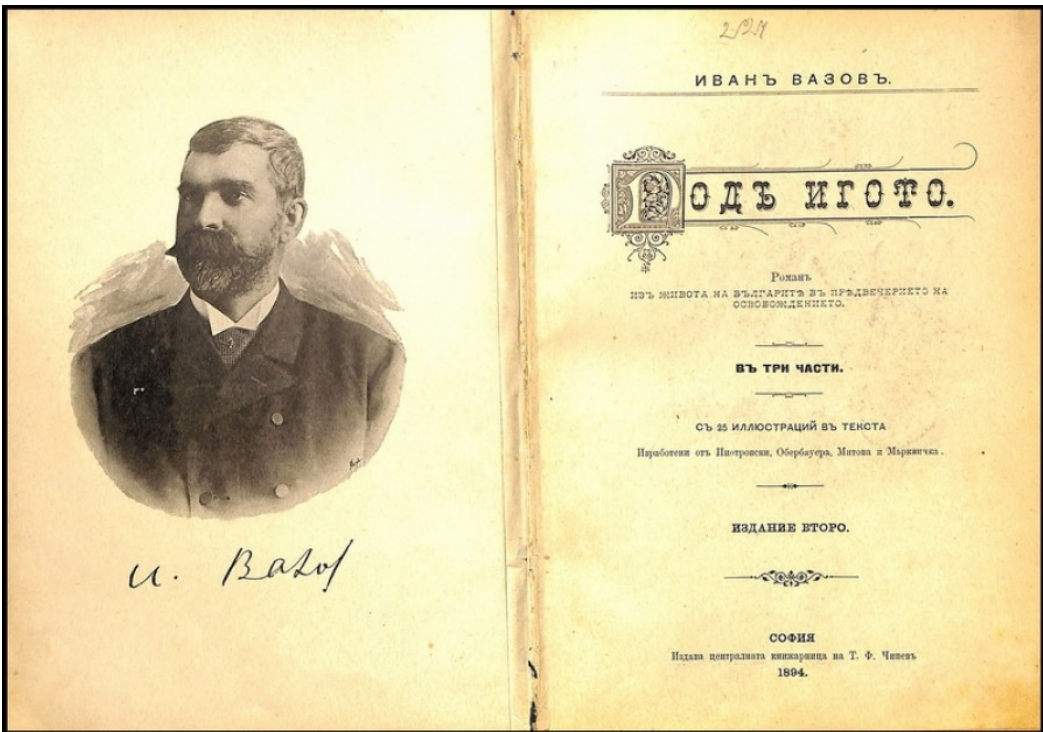
the same volume in 1890.



The first English edition of *Under the Yoke* (1894)

Curiously enough, *Under the Yoke* was first published as a separate volume in English in 1894. The British editor William Heinemann included it as № 14 in his newly-founded series, *Heinemann's International Library*, which published English translations of classical authors from all over the world. In this way, the novel was designated as a world literary classic on its initial publication. Later on in the same year, *Under the Yoke* was published in Bulgaria by T. F. Chipev. In the subsequent years three more Bulgarian editions appeared. Today *Под игото* is translated into over 30 languages, including Japanese.

The subtitle of the novel is “From the Life of the Bulgarians on the Eve of the Liberation,” as it depicts the heroic time leading to the April Uprising against Ottoman rule in 1876 and its subsequent cruel suppression.



The first Bulgarian edition of *Под игото* (1894)

The main protagonist in the novel, Boycho Ognyanov, is a romantic character: a personification of the revolutionary spirit in Bulgaria on the eve of the April Uprising. He is a brave and glamorous leader of the national liberation movement and a representative of the young Bulgarian intelligentsia.

The location where the action develops is the small mountainous town of Bjala Cherkva (White Church) in the spring of 1875. The first scene depicts a peaceful dinner in the home of Chorbadzhi Marko which is suddenly interrupted by a startling noise of falling bricks. Marko goes to check out what is happening and recognizes Ivan Kralicha, an outlaw who has managed to escape from Diyarbakir [1]. The Turkish soldiers are knocking on Marko's gate and Kralicha runs away. He takes shelter in a windmill outside the town where he kills two Turks to save the life of the miller and his little daughter. The miller helps him to bury them and takes him to the nearby monastery. Later he meets Doctor Sokolov and the two young men become friends as they share one and the same ideal: the liberation of Bulgaria from Ottoman rule. Sokolov invents a new identity for Kralicha under which he enters the community of Bjala Cherkva [2].

Ognyanov is hired as a teacher. This allows him to settle down in the town and to preside over the secret revolutionary committee. He saves the reputation of the young teacher Rada Gospozhina at the yearly exams in the girls' school, and receives the approval of all honest town folk. Everything goes smoothly until one of the schoolgirls unintentionally reveals revolutionary accounts she overheard at home, causing chaos. After that episode Rada and Ognyanov fall in love.

The story unfolds by depicting the preparation for the uprising, which changes the lives of many of the characters and finishes with the defeat of the revolt. Ognyanov, Sokolov and Rada sacrifice their lives in the final battle with the Turks.

Bulgarian literary historians unanimously agree that *Under the Yoke* is the first historical novel and the most famous novel in the Bulgarian literary tradition that has influenced other fiction written in this period and thereafter. Although the main theme is uniquely Bulgarian, the author's technique of narration with sudden turning points, escalating suspense, and unexpected climaxes, is deeply influenced by French romanticism and especially by Victor Hugo's historical novels. For over 50 years it has been included in the Bulgarian secondary school curriculum, and is still revered by Bulgarian readers. In 2009, the novel was voted as [Bulgaria's favourite novel](#) in the "Big Read" campaign, organised by Bulgarian National television.

Read the [text of Под игото](#), which will soon be included in the Bulgarian contribution to [ELTeC](#). For further reading, see:

‘Под игото’ и езикът , // В: Ракъовски, Цв. “Литературата и езикът”, Велико Търново, “Фабер” 2014: 20-28.

‘Иван Вазов’. *Уикипедия*, 28 Oct. 2019. [Wikipedia](#).

‘Произведения на Иван Вазов’. *Уикипедия*, 2 May 2019. [Wikipedia](#).

[1] Diyarbakir is a fortified city in Turkey, which during the Ottoman rule was used as a prison for political convicts from the Christian parts of the Empire.

[2] His new name is Boycho Ognyanov, which is a symbolic name. *Boycho* derives from *бой*, meaning *fight* and *Ognyanov* derived from *огън*, meaning *fire*.