

Research paper

INDUSTRIAL HERITAGE AND ITS PRESENCE IN THE CONTEMPORARY LIFE OF SMALL TOWN CITIZENS IN BULGARIA: CASE STUDY TRYAVNA

Polina Savcheva¹

Abstract

Bulgaria's industrial heritage, encompassing both tangible and intangible aspects, forms an integral part of the nation's historical legacy. However, the discourse surrounding this heritage remains divisive, primarily owing to two transformative events in its history: nationalization and privatization. Although its place in the current reality is often debated, these discussions rarely focus on smaller settlements. This article is part of a broader research project centered on exploring and promoting industrial legacy of small settlements in Bulgaria.

The subject of this study is the municipality of Tryavna, which is one of the four municipalities of Gabrovo province, Bulgaria. Methods employed in conducting the research include a literature review, interviews with local citizens and experts, as well as field research. A brief history of industrial development of Tryavna is provided, within the context of the broader regional history. Plachkovtsi, a nearby small settlement with rich mining and railway history is also examined. Notable industrial buildings from machine building, textile, furniture and mining industry are presented. It has been observed that industrial heritage constitutes a significant element of local historical narratives, yet it is relatively underrepresented in discussions regarding future development. Today, despite its rich industrial history, to its citizens, Tryavna remains primarily recognized as a center for tourism and traditional crafts and Plachkovtsi is rarely perceived as a mining town. Regardless, historical industrial development in this municipality remains an important element of the national industrial heritage.

Key words: *industrial heritage, small town, local identity, disappearance of historic industrial sites, mining town, railway history, Tryavna*

¹ PhD, Industrial buildings Department, UACEG, Sofia, Bulgaria, arch.savcheva@gmail.com, ORCID 0009-0001-2736-3253

1. INTRODUCTION

Industrial sites symbolize technological progress and modernity while simultaneously standing as monuments to decline, evoking the sense of loss and nostalgia. Protecting them helps in preserving cultural memory, strengthens regional identities and fosters a sense of place, yet many face neglect or redevelopment pressures. In recent decades, the preservation and repurposing of industrial buildings have grown to be a major theme in heritage studies, reflecting broader discussions on sustainable urban planning and collective memory. However, despite growing interest in industrial heritage, research on the mechanisms of transformation - how spaces evolve and how communities engage with them - is still lacking. This issue is particularly evident in Bulgaria, where industrial heritage is under-researched, especially in small settlements. Nationalization and privatization created gaps in historical documentation, with some aspects of industrial history intentionally erased from the official narratives in the second half of the 20th century. Following privatization, most industrial enterprises became private property. This shift, coupled with the wave of deindustrialization across Europe, led many to cease production and ultimately shut down. Some industrial complexes were demolished due to a lack of protection, as they were not recognized as historically significant. As a result, all historical layers were treated indiscriminately, leading to the loss of valuable heritage. Another issue is the absence of living witnesses from the years preceding nationalization, as firsthand accounts continue to fade into history.

Eastern Europe has a distinct industrialization trajectory. Due to a shared communist heritage, Eastern European countries display common patterns in industrial development and heritage interpretation. Existing heritage theories provide useful perspectives, but their application to Eastern Europe must account for its unique industrial and political history. One particularly relevant framework is Tunbridge and Ashworth's concept of **dissonant heritage** [1], which explores conflicting narratives surrounding historical sites. Industrial heritage itself is dissonant, as it carries elements of trauma, stemming from harsh working conditions, environmental degradation, labor strikes, alienation, and the societal upheaval caused by rapid industrialization. These challenges contribute to a complex legacy, where industrial sites evoke both nostalgia and struggle. Another theme within dissonant heritage is its ideological burden - heritage is inherently political. Given Eastern Europe's regional history - where industrialization was deeply tied to state-driven policies - it is only natural that industrial heritage sites remain ideologically charged. Similarly, Smith's **Authorised Heritage Discourse** (AHD) [2] highlights **top-down heritage control**, which socialist regimes reinforced by limiting alternative narratives. As Sucala notes, post-socialist contexts react against AHD, with grassroots movements emerging despite official rejection of Communist heritage [3]. Sucala's discussion on AHD [3] contrasts top-down heritage control with grassroots movements, aligning with Robertson's **Heritage from Below** [4], which explores community-driven heritage engagement. These civic initiatives often reflect *the instability of identity in contemporary society* [5] as local communities seek ways to redefine their heritage in response to political and economic shifts. A particularly relevant expression of this identity negotiation is **nostalgia for industrial labor** [6], which offers a unique lens through which Eastern European industrial heritage can be analyzed.

This paper examines the industrial heritage of **Tryavna municipality**, a region that, to the author's knowledge, lacks a contemporary comprehensive study of its industrial development. Its history has likely been overshadowed by the nearby town of Gabrovo, often referred to as the "Bulgarian Manchester" due to its prominent industrial legacy. While

existing local studies [7, 8, 9, 10] in Tryavna focus on individual factories or industry branches, they rarely address the buildings in their present form, leaving gaps in the broader narrative of industrial heritage. Since **heritage and memory are spatial** in character [1,5] preserving the materiality of these sites is important. This study seeks to construct an integrated account of Tryavna municipality's industrialization, linking historical developments with the physical sites that remain today. Additionally, it explores how local citizens perceive this industrial legacy, asking: *what is its place in the rapidly changing contemporary reality?* Through firsthand observations and documented sources, this research contributes to discussions on industrial heritage and its evolving significance in community identity.

A brief overview of Tryavna municipality follows in the next section, providing essential context for the analysis.

2. BRIEF OVERVIEW OF TRYAVNA MUNICIPALITY

Tryavna is one of the four municipalities of Gabrovo province, situated in the North-Central region of Bulgaria. Nestled on the northern flanks of the Balkan Mountain, the town of Tryavna is renowned for its preserved Revival architecture, rich cultural heritage and picturesque natural landscapes. It is the administrative center of the Tryavna municipality, as well as the cultural and economic center. Tryavna town has a population of around 8000 citizens [11]. During the Revival period, it was a cultural and education center serving as a meeting point for intellectuals, artists and socially conscious people. Tryavna art school (Trevnenska shkola) is popular Bulgarian art school, emerged in the XVI century, famous for its woodcarving, icon painting and building crafts. At the beginning of the 20th century, some crafts gradually developed into a flourishing industry, which was further expanded after World War II.

Eight kilometers south of Tryavna lies Plachkovtsi, a small settlement with a population of approximately 1,500 [11]. Situated at the foot of Tryavna Mountain - a nature reserve - Plachkovtsi is located at the convergence of three small creeks that merge to form the Tryavna River. Due to the proximity of the two settlements, they can be perceived as one continuous urbanized area, despite some notable differences in the character of their built environments. Railway line 4, a key factor in Plachkovtsi's development, passes through both settlements, connecting them to North and South Bulgaria [12]. Historically, Tryavna region hosted industries such as coal mining, textiles, machine building and woodworking, alongside a strong tourism sector.

Tryavna Municipality was selected for this study due to its limited representation in discussions on industrial heritage, despite its significant role in Bulgaria's industrial history. While the region's historical industrial narrative remains relatively preserved, the physical sites associated with it are largely unknown. Some of these buildings and industrial landmarks are embedded in the daily lives of local residents, yet they lack formal protection and are rarely acknowledged in conversations about the town's future development. Additionally, unlike other mining regions in Bulgaria, which are primarily defined by their industrial identity, Tryavna has a more complex character shaped by both its industrial heritage and its strong presence in the tourism and cultural sectors. This multifaceted context adds layers of complexity to the issue, requiring a nuanced approach to understanding its development and heritage.

3. METHODS

This study employs ethnographic fieldwork, focusing on direct observation of industrial heritage sites and their contemporary use. Sites were selected based on their historical importance, significance in the town's industrial development, and accessibility, ensuring a representative analysis of the local industrial legacy. Data were gathered through site visits and architectural assessments, including evaluation of physical condition, historical significance and stylistic features. Additionally, the research examined patterns of continued operation, reduced functionality, abandonment, or (partial) demolition. Informal interactions with locals provided insights into public perceptions of industrial heritage. Conversations with former workers, journalists, municipal administrators, and cultural institution employees, provided additional perspectives on the significance of industrial heritage. Field notes and photographic documentation captured details and spatial transformations.

Library research complemented the fieldwork, drawing on archival materials, historical records, and scholarly works related to industrial heritage and urban development. By integrating observational analysis with documented sources, this study offers a comprehensive perspective on industrial sites within their historical and social contexts. Furthermore, comparative analysis positions this case study within the broader framework of the country's industrial heritage preservation efforts, highlighting regional challenges.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Tryavna town: from crafts to industry

4.1.1. Textiles

Entrepreneurial initiative has played an important role in shaping industrial development across the region. The nearby town of Gabrovo is renowned for the entrepreneurial spirit of its citizens, who transformed it into an industrial center. Similarly, the people of Tryavna are known for their strong entrepreneurial drive. Many of the town's early manufacturing enterprises emerged from the innovative thinking of notable local figures. The first industry to develop naturally was **wool production**. The first factory in Tryavna was built around 1881 by local entrepreneurs in the nearby settlement Dimiev han (now neighborhood of Tryavna). Establishing this enterprise was a difficult task, as there was no efficient transportation structure to Western Europe at the time - except for possible transport via the Danube. One industrialist had to travel to England personally to purchase machinery and hire technicians. Transporting the machines back was equally challenging due to logistical hurdles, further complicating the process. It was innovative yet complex undertaking for the time - although the one industrialist did not speak a single word of any language other than Bulgarian, the initiative was successful and they manage to build the factory, which was known colloquially as "the English woman". Initially, the English specialists operated the machines and trained local workers, laying the foundation for industrial development. Although initially successful, leading to the construction of three additional factories in Tryavna and the surrounding villages, by 1896 the enterprise went bankrupt [13]. The biggest factory, located near the train station in Tryavna, was bought by "St. George" Company² and refurbished around 1902 [14].

² St. George Company was a part of "Badeshtnost" JSC, that is described in next section

Under this leadership, the property gradually turned into a very successful enterprise. The old factory building, measuring 13 by 70 meters [14] and likely constructed around 1891 [15], was soon joined by a new two-story structure built parallel to the original. The 22,000 m² property also housed three shops, three two-story residential buildings for workers and personnel, and two prominent buildings - one serving as the director's residence and the other designated for administrative functions [14]. Positioned at the intersection of two streets bordering the property, the two buildings served as focal points of the site. Around the mid-1930s, another factory, called "Cotton Yarn" - was built on the same site. It was a modern reinforced concrete two-story building of impressive size, measuring 36 by 36 meters with a height of 15 meters [16]. The complex was located on the riverbank and had picturesque appearance at first but progressively evolved and in 1930s, the site had taken on the appearance of a fully developed industrial complex, especially after 1931, when a thermal power plant – "Bedek" - was built. It used the low-quality coal from the nearby mines and had 51 meters-high chimney and two cooling towers, approximately 22-meters-high, which dominated the town's silhouette [17]. These were demolished in the second half of the century. Most of the buildings of this industrial site were demolished in the first years of the 21st century and to this day, the plot is empty. The only remnants are the two buildings at the intersection. The location of the complex can be seen in Fig 1, site 1.

Alongside this enterprise, another textile factory - focused on silk products - helped shape the local industrial landscape. **Silk farming and weaving** had long been practiced in Tryavna, forming a unique local craft [15]. Building on this tradition, a factory was established before the turn of the 20th century. It was a small workshop, founded in 1876 but it gradually developed some new machinery and forged commercial ties with customers in Italy, France, Vienna and Russia. This proto-industrial enterprise remained a family-run business until a pivotal moment in 1927, when the oldest son sought to modernize the factory despite his father's objections. Seizing an opportunity, he sent his father on holiday and, during his absence, demolished the family house, repurposing its space (and some of the materials) to construct a new, reinforced concrete factory - 6-meter-high and covering approximately 350 m² [8,18]. The factory was a very successful and well-known establishment based on the region's traditional craft. It produced horse tackle for the police force and was the only one in Bulgaria to produce surgical threads. However, following nationalization, the factory ceased to exist in its original form, as its operations were relocated to Rousse and its machinery was transferred there [8]. Thus, the new regime abruptly halted the operations of a once-thriving factory. Over the years, the building underwent many transformations and today hosts a nightclub. It is located on the riverbank, near craftsmen's street and the Museum for Woodcarving and Iconpainting, as shown in Fig 1, site 2. Although the factory's history has been well researched, the building itself does not appear to hold significant importance.

Another **textile factory** (that also produced apparel), called „Lotus“ (presented in Fig 1. site 3), was established in 1938 [19]. It was located at the center of the settlement, where a small stream flows through the site. The complex is an eclectic mix of buildings from different eras, creating a somewhat disorganized yet historically layered architectural landscape. One striking peculiarity is its proximity to the town's cemetery - due to the steep terrain, some graves are directly visible from the higher levels of the factory. Although the company has ceased production, all buildings remain standing, and plans are underway for their adaptive reuse, with proposals to transform some of them into a residential complex.

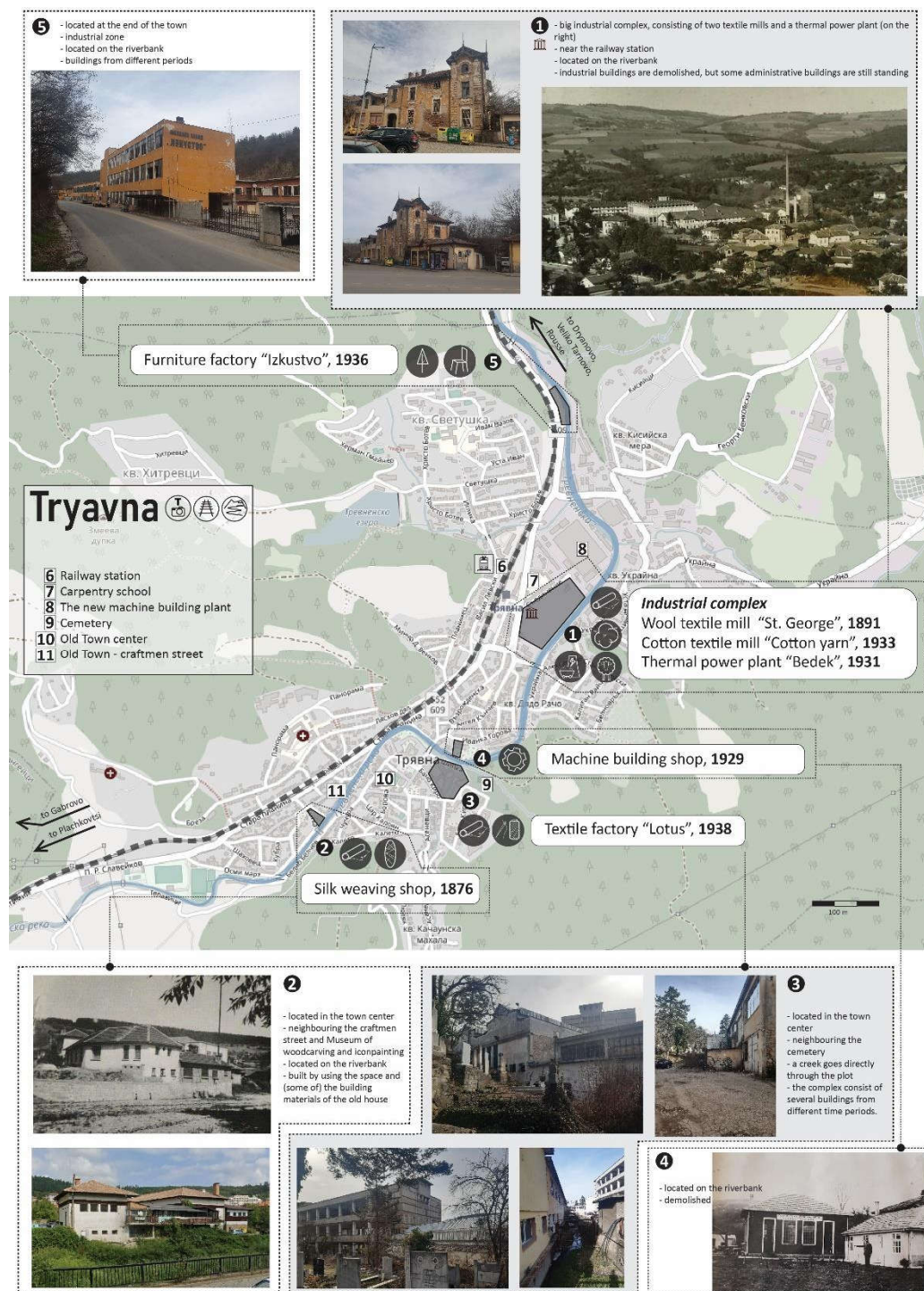


Figure 1. Map of Tryavna territory with industrial sites; source: author's own work; photos - author, archival photos: provided by Galina Ivanova, map: ©Open Street Maps

4.1.2. Railway and machine building

While textiles formed the region's industrial foundation, the arrival of the **railway** in the early 20th century was equally transformative, connecting Tryavna to the rest of the country. Its arrival necessitated the construction of new infrastructure and buildings to support its operations, while also bringing skilled railway workers whose expertise contributed to the training and education of the local population. That, in addition to the mining activities in nearby Plachkovtsi region, helped establish new interest for the machines. In Tryavna, one industrial branch that evolved organically was **machine building**. It was initiated by a single person who was self-taught but gained prominence over the years. He was formerly trained as a technician in Gabrovo and in Gorna Oryahovitsa - which is a marshaling yard - and wanted to become train driver but couldn't obtain a formal education. A skilled technician with a natural love for machines, he opened a small machine-building shop in 1929 and gave a start to a very successful machine building complex that is still operating today. The small shop held broader importance, as it was serving the factories in the whole region. After WWII, the factory was moved to a different site (marked in Fig. 1. as site 8). [7]

The original shop - shown in Fig. 1, site 4 - has not survived as it fell to neglect and was demolished less than 10 years ago. Buildings like this - with historical significance but less architectural distinction - are particularly difficult to preserve, as their history is often overshadowed or obscured by the communist narrative. The founder – Boris Hadzhisemkov - was a significant figure in Tryavna's history, similar to famous local craftsmen.

4.1.3. Furniture building

While textiles, railways, and machine building shaped the region's industrial growth, another branch emerged - one deeply rooted in local traditions and reflecting the area's unique history – **furniture building**. It is believed that many well-educated members of the ruling class made Gabrovo Province their home after the fall of the Second Bulgarian Empire in the late 1300s. These individuals not only held political influence but also had access to sophisticated art and culture, shaping the intellectual and artistic landscape of the region. Their dedication to preserving tradition and their pursuit of beauty became the foundation of Tryavna art school (Trevnenska shkola). It is a unique and known in Bulgaria school that includes woodcarving, icon painting and building crafts. At the beginning of the 20th century, a carpentry school was established, inheriting and advancing these woodcarving traditions. [20] With the first graduated class in 1924, a small-scale furniture workshop was created, expanding the craft into industrial production. In the early 1930s, the shop developed into a factory, situated on a 1000 m² plot with a two-story building measuring 40 by 12 meters [21]. The factory specialized in furniture construction, millwork, wood carving, upholstery, and lathe work, some of them in traditional Revival style [21]. After World War II, it evolved in "Izkustvo" factory (illustrated as site 5 in Fig.1) that produced luxurious furniture and interior millwork for export. Though it no longer operates at full capacity, the legacy remains - a complex of buildings from various periods, picturesquely situated along the river's bends in the northern part of the town.

4.1.4. Industrial heritage in Tryavna: legacy and future

Tryavna has always been and remains a city of artistic crafts. The development of industry, especially in the earlier period, is an expression of this shared pursuit of beauty among Tryavna residents and of their entrepreneurial spirit. The industrialization of Tryavna

in the 20th century reflects global economic and production trends, aligning with broader patterns of modern industrial development. Despite this, factories remain a large part of the lives of several generations of Tryavna residents and an integral part of the historical development of the town. Several in-depth local research works were conducted on the history of the town's industries with a focus on the key figures interwoven into their development. However, less attention is given to the remaining factory buildings and complexes - a material expression of this period. A natural question emerges: *how can these historical sites be integrated into the town's modern landscape, and what role should they play in shaping its future?* Yet another question lingers: *why are these buildings not important in a town renowned for its builders?*

4.2. Plachkovtsi town, Trans-Balkan railway and “black gold” deposits

4.2.1. Black coal

A key reason for Plachkovtsi's development is the **black coal deposits** located nearby in the mountain. First records about the exploitation of the deposits are from 1860 – before the Liberation of Bulgaria and under the Ottoman rule, here opened the first coal mine on the Bulgarian territory – state mine Belnovrah. Coal was essential for powering river vessels on the Danube. The black coal found in this region was particularly valuable for producing coke - an indispensable material for metal smelting - drawing keen interest from the army for its potential extraction. Some small-scale industrialists - particularly from the nearby towns of Veliko Tarnovo and Gabrovo, where Bulgaria's first industrial enterprises were emerging - attempted to explore coal deposits, as the growing industries naturally required energy sources. One major problem was the impassable terrain and the absence of modern roads leading to the mountain. Following the Liberation, several European companies sought concessions in Bulgaria. Among them, a company backed by Belgian and French capital became the first to explore the region's „black gold“. Around 1899 this company created a mine called “Prince Boris” which was located southward Plachkovtsi, near Radevtsi village. Gradually, a **miners' village**, called Grabchevo, was developed around the mine. Other miners' villages were also created high up in the mountain notably the mining settlement around “Lev” mine (1900). [9,10]

Grabchevo - marked in Fig. 2 as site 1- emerged as the most significant industrial center, primarily due to substantial financial investments. Initially, foreign capital fueled its development, followed by a surge in domestic investments around World War I, particularly from one of Bulgaria's most influential financial institutions at the time - Bulgarian Commercial Bank. This Bank was connected to the influential Burov and Gubidelnikov families, whose significant contributions to Bulgarian industry include the mining complex. The bank's shareholders established a new joint-stock company, “Badeshtnost” (meaning in Bulgarian - “future”), that controlled many mines in the region. This allowed Grabchevo to expand with superior architectural and engineering advancements compared to other industrial sites in the area. It facilitated the flow of not only capital but also know-how and technology, initially imported from abroad and later fostering a close-knit professional community around the mines [10]. The material legacy of this development includes Muller's villa (residential building from the French company period), Burov's villa, the main administration building, and various industrial facilities. At the turn of the twentieth century, the first experimental coke ovens in

Bulgaria were built in the village, alongside small-scale coal washing plant [10]. Following the mine's closure in the mid-twentieth century, a children's camp was established on the site. Today, however, the settlement stands abandoned.

The first official **industrial coke ovens** (shown in Fig. 2 as site 3) were built in Plachkovtsi around 1930 by "Badeshtnost". As at that point, the "Badeshtnost" company owned many mines from Tryavna to Burgas, they needed a central administration and decided to place it in Plachkovtsi [10]. That building still exist and has a similar style as the administration buildings of St. George complex in Tryavna, which had the same owners. The coke plant gradually developed into a big industrial complex which operated until the beginning of the 60s when coal deposits were depleted and coke ovens operations were moved to the site of the newly built metallurgical giant Kremikovtsi, near Sofia. After the 60s, it was decided a new type of industry to be created on the premise of the former coke ovens - one that was innovative and rare – **petrurgy** - production of basalt pipes, floor tiles and other products. Basalt products are acid-resistant, among other qualities, so they play an important role in chemical, textile (dyeing works) and certain food factories like breweries and sugar refineries. Their durability and resistance made them an essential and cost-effective choice for these industries, ensuring longevity and efficiency in production. As petrurgy was this tangential and innovative branch of metallurgy, an R&D program was launched, necessitating the construction of a new research and development center. Today, the new administration and R&D center are still standing, but the enterprise closed at the beginning of the 21st century. [9,10]

As mining operations began in the mid-19th century, after a century of extraction, many deposits were depleted. The last one working was Lev mine situated high up in the mountain near Krastets railway station, as can be seen on Fig. 2, site 2. It was not part of the „Badeshtnost" company [9], so it has a different development path. Mining operations continued after World War II, leading to the further development of the miners' village. It was closed at the beginning of the 21st century but most of the buildings are still standing, including miners' dormitories, cantine, administration, and transport facilities near the railway station.

4.2.2. The Railway

The **railway** was integral to the region's history. Plachkovtsi was as much defined by its railway heritage as by its identity as a mining town. At the turn of the 20th century, Plachkovtsi found itself at the center of major events of national significance, which unfolded as follows. There was a need for a Trans-Balkan railway. The railway was important for upholding the territorial integrity of Bulgaria after the Unification (1885), but a difficult choice had to be made between three possible routes. One route, located far to the east of Plachkovtsi, followed easy terrain, allowing for quicker and more cost-effective construction. The second proposed option involved a tunnel near Gabrovo, which was strongly supported by Gabrovo's industrialist community. The third and ultimately chosen route crossed the Balkan Mountains near the newly established mines in the Plachkovtsi region. On the one hand, having a railway leading up to the mines meant easier access and granted further development and exploitation of this important resource. On the other hand, the terrain posed significant challenges and constructing a railway included complex engineering work to overcome numerous steep slopes. There were heated debates, but at the end, the miner companies lobby prevailed, and a decision was made for the Trans-Balkan railway to cross the mountains via Tryavna and Plachkovtsi. The line was finished in 1913. [10]

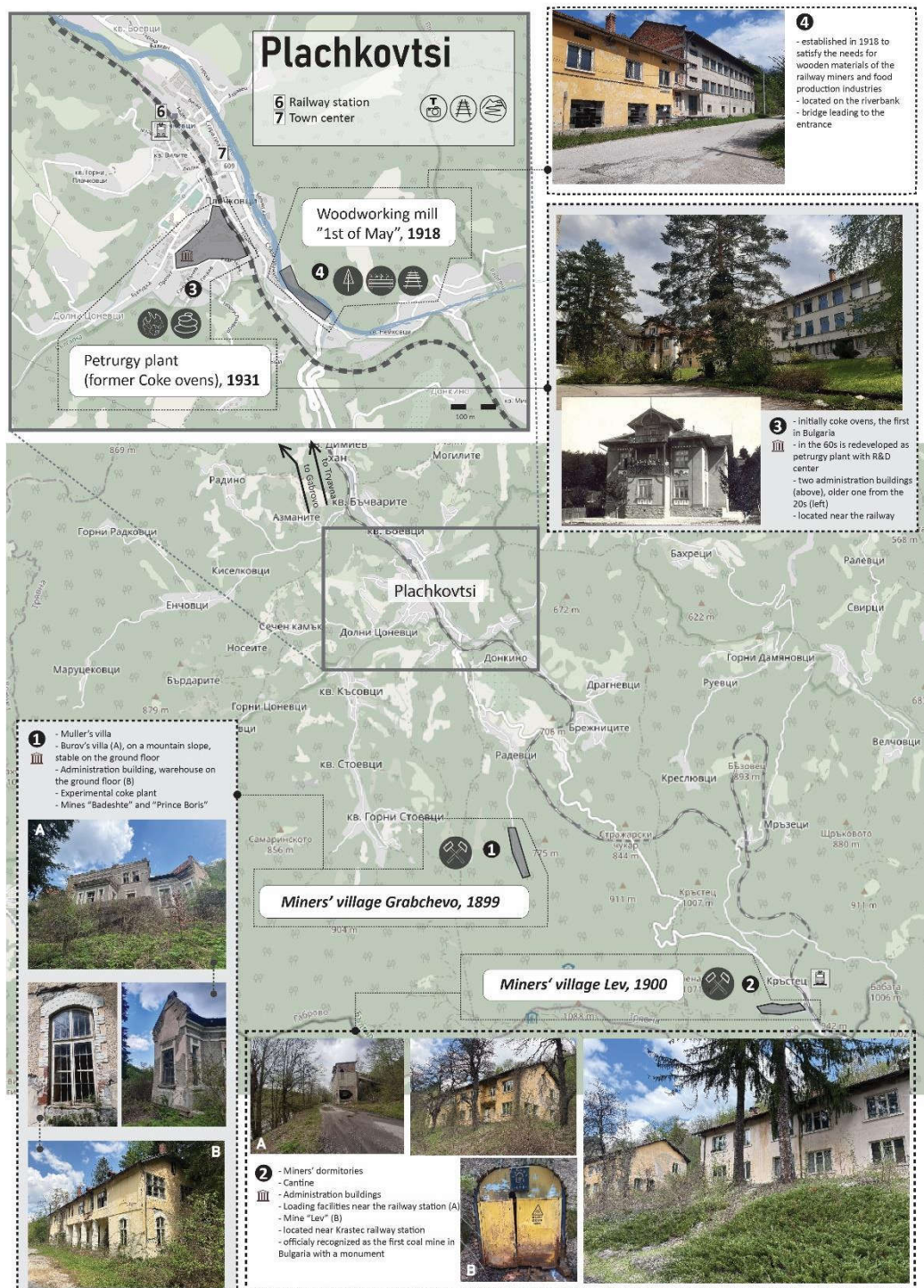


Figure 2. Map of Plachkovtsi territory with industrial sites; source: author's own work, photos - author, archival photo: Plachkovtsi municipality, map: ©Open Street Maps;

The one advantage of the unusual terrain was the creation of a remarkably picturesque route. The train winds its way up steep mountain ridges, navigating countless curves and tunnels that unveil breathtaking views. Today, this route stands as one of the most scenic railways in Bulgaria and a popular tourist attraction. However, it was much more for Plachkovtsi – it gave it access to the Danube, as well as to the southern part of Bulgaria and the small mountain town transformed into a lively center of transportation and mining activity [10]. With railroad workers and miners in need of services and entertainment, a range of new activities emerged. Additionally, the beautiful nature suggested the development of the region as a resort and soon that activity flourished, which resulted in the construction of many hotels and villas, some of which are still used. With the end of mining operations in the beginning of the 21st century, tourism retains its importance in the region.

4.2.3. Woodworking

One additional industrial branch that developed for the needs of the mining and railway industry was **woodworking**. A demand arose for wood products and wooden building materials – ranging from railway sleepers to structural elements for construction of bridges and tunnels. Additionally, wooden frames were needed to fortify the mineshafts. Furthermore, the manufacturing of crates and barrels, needed for packing of fruit and pulps, became important in the 1930s when Bulgaria was exporting various food products. Wooden material was abundant in the vast Balkan forests, and the problem that laid ahead was its extracting and processing. Three separate wood mills were created in Plachkovtsi and the surrounding villages. The first mill was created in the village of Neykovtsi (now a neighborhood of Plachkovtsi) in 1918 and was called “Progress”. It was a stonewall building. The largest one called „Predela“, was established in Plachkovtsi in 1940 and included a wood mill and a furniture production facility. [9,22] Strategically located along the riverbank, its entrance, accessible via a bridge, lent it a distinctive and picturesque quality that combines functionality with aesthetics. These factories were the foundation on which a wood-processing plant - “1st of May” - was developed in the second half of 20th century. The buildings still exist today, and the plant is operational. The plant location is shown in Fig. 2, site 4.

4.2.4. Industrial heritage in Plachkovtsi: fading national legacy

The last coal mining activities ended nearly 20 years ago. The remaining buildings stand in silence, and despite their historical significance, some have succumbed to neglect. The mountainous terrain, which was a major obstacle 120 years ago, still constrains the adaptive reuse of these structures, as mining villages are located in remote areas - though some lie along mountaineering routes. Almost all of the properties were privatized, and ownership is another obstacle to the process of adaptive reuse. Their history is slowly being forgotten – an art installation at the center of Plachkovtsi focuses on the story of the railway, but not of the mines. A lonely monument up in the mountain, near the Lev mine says that this is the place where the first coal in Bulgaria was being extracted. Today, Plachkovtsi takes pride in its past while steadily evolving into a tourist destination. Miners’ villages of Grabchevo and Lev are still standing, as is the Coke plant (Basalt casting factory). No conservation efforts are known to the author and some of the history is obscured due to the involvement of entrepreneurs and industrialists which were viewed negatively by the socialist state. Local citizens confide with frustration and nostalgia that “*Mines are no more*”. They also proudly share that in the previous years the town has won prizes for the best mountain resort. It is

true that tourist activities are an integral part of Plachkovtsi's identity, but the question of the disappearing industrial heritage remains.

5. DISCUSSION

One objective of this study was to examine how people engage with industrial heritage in their daily lives. The findings highlight the complex relationship between industrial heritage and local perceptions in Tryavna municipality. Some of these sites hold **national significance** - most notably, the first coal mines in Bulgaria - playing a key role in the country's industrial development. Yet, their heritage status remains largely undervalued. Many industrial sites have fallen into neglect, influenced by the broader process of deindustrialization and the shift to privatized ownership; however, other factors also contribute to their fading relevance in contemporary life. These include *the lack of official protective status for the buildings and sites, the absence of established traditions for reinterpreting and preserving industrial heritage, and the absence of a coherent narrative that integrates multiple perspectives*. In some cases, *historical distance* plays a role, as some mines closed in the 1960s, while certain factories shut down only two decades ago. Additionally, a growing emphasis on *tourism as a priority* has led to industrial heritage being overlooked.

For many local communities, *industrial sites are not something to preserve but something to revive*. The focus is often on rebuilding industry, restoring jobs, and ensuring economic stability, with sites seen more as remnants of lost industries rather than historical monuments. At the same time, **nostalgia for industrial labor** [6] persists, shaping how people engage with these sites and influencing attitudes toward their future. Conversely, some locals view industrial heritage as purely historical, treating it as a relic of the past. This view aligns with Smith's Authorized Heritage Discourse [2], which privileges expert-driven narratives that emphasize preservation and monumentality over community-driven interpretations.

These results highlight the tension between nostalgia for lost industries and the practical challenges of preserving historically significant sites, raising questions about the role of industrial heritage in contemporary urban landscapes. The tension aligns with the concept of **dissonant heritage** [1], which emphasizes how heritage can be contested, particularly when different groups assign conflicting meanings to industrial sites. However, as many industrial legacy sites in Tryavna municipality retain their architectural integrity, they present valuable opportunities for adaptive reuse and reintegration into the urban environment. *How should their interpretation evolve to ensure relevance in the present?* While some authors emphasize grassroots perspectives [4], others argue that only external experts can provide interpretations that effectively shape future development strategies [23].

Tryavna's industrial narrative is likely overshadowed by the nearby city of **Gabrovo**, the administrative center of the province. Gabrovo – a much bigger town than Tryavna - is renowned for the entrepreneurial spirit of its citizens and has long been recognized as a historic industrial center. One of the earliest factories in Bulgaria emerged here, gradually expanding the town into a thriving industrial center by the 1930s. Following World War II, the city experienced another major wave of industrialization, particularly in textiles, machine building, and chemicals, with large industrial complexes shaping its economic landscape. Despite economic shifts, Gabrovo continues to embrace its identity as a historic industrial center, maintaining a strong workers' spirit among its population. Industrial heritage is actively

researched, interpreted, and preserved, notably through the local **Industrial Heritage Museum** [24]. While some factories were demolished, others have been protected, refurbished, or repurposed for new uses.

Gabrovo remains recognized as a textile center, but when considering mining heritage, notable Bulgarian examples include Pernik, located near Sofia, and Madan, in the Rhodope Mountains. A summary table, comparing key characteristics of Pernik, Madan and Plachkovtsi is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of sites with mining industrial heritage in Bulgaria

	PERNIK	MADAN and RUDUZEM	PLACHKOVTSI and TRYAVNA
Location	Pernik province	Smolyan province	Gabrovo province
Size	~70 000	Madan ~5000 Rudozem ~3000	Plachkovtsi ~1500 citizens Tryavna ~8000 citizens
Industry type	Brown coal deposits Metallurgy, various industries	Lead-zinc deposits, Flotation factories	Black coal deposits, Coke ovens
Year of establishment	Late 1870s	Late 1920s	Late 1850s
Type of property	Mostly state property, until the beginning of XXI century	Mixed, but state property for most of the time	Mixed - private and state
Heritage status	Some facilities have heritage status; an underground museum is established in the 80s in one of the oldest mines (1891)	An underground museum is established in 2023	None

Pernik is a renowned coal mining and metallurgical center. The discovery of coal shortly after the Liberation spurred the development of various industries, most notably the rise of the metallurgical giant “Steel” (formerly “Lenin”), that is still operational. In the 1980s, in one of the oldest mines (1891), an underground *Museum of Mining* was established, contributing to the town’s evolving identity as a historical industrial center. Pernik has successfully cultivated its industrial heritage through numerous initiatives, including a digital platform [25] that provides extensive information on its industrial history and a map of the mines.

Unlike the mines in Plachkovtsi, which initially operated under private ownership, Pernik’s mines were always state-controlled and developed accordingly. Another factor contributing to Pernik’s greater recognition is the larger size of the town (approximately 70 000 citizens [5]) and its proximity to Sofia, making it more accessible and historically prominent.

Madan (~5000 citizens [11]) is a center for mining activity in the Rhodope Mountains, where lead-zinc deposits have been extracted since the late 1920s. Alongside the nearby town of Rudozem (~3000 citizens [11]), Madan has developed a strong industrial history and a distinct miners’ identity, as both towns largely grew around mining operations. Their early 1950s urban design and architecture, set against the mountainous landscape, create a unique and recognizable image. Efforts to preserve the region’s industrial heritage have been ongoing and supported by the local municipalities and the mining companies. Initiative began

in the 1980s, with the establishment of a “Rhodope’s Crystal” hall – a museum of crystals found in the mines. More recent projects include opening of *“Museum of Mining and Ore Extraction”* with artefacts and photographs donated by the biggest mining company of the region and repurposing of a mine shaft – Spoluka – into a tourist attraction and underground museum [26]. However, the continued presence of active mining operations makes it challenging to view some industrial sites as heritage landmarks. The mountainous terrain and the region’s remoteness also pose difficulties for wider heritage recognition. Additionally, while evidence of ancient and medieval activity exists, large-scale resource exploitation only began with the onset of World War II, meaning the historical distance may not yet feel sufficient for some buildings and infrastructure to be perceived as monuments.

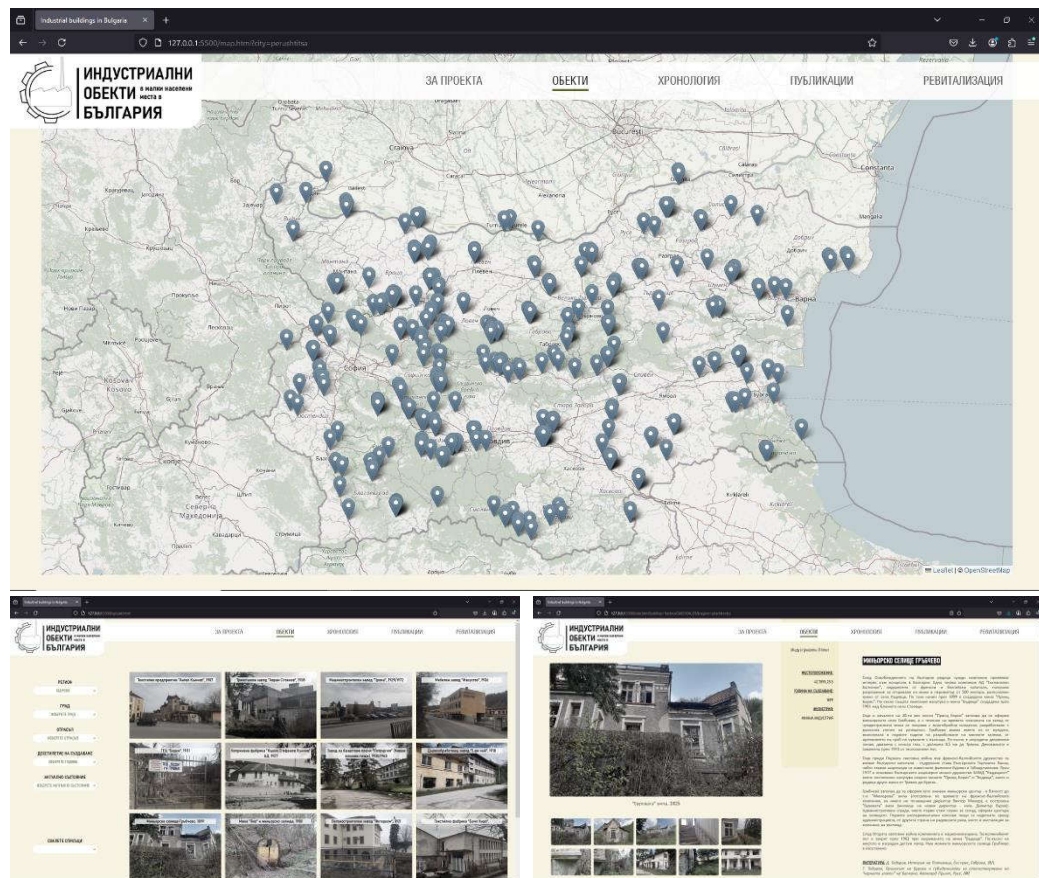


Figure 3. Screenshots from the interactive platform on Bulgaria's industrial heritage. First: map of Bulgaria with industrial sites. Second: list of industrial sites in Gabrovo region. Third: Information on an individual industrial site (Grabchevo);.Source: author's own work.

A common challenge across all cases of industrial heritage in small towns is the lack of information and awareness regarding how industrial heritage fits into a broader historical context and what are the possible ways to preserve it - through adaptive reuse, conservation efforts, etc. One initiative to address this issue is the creation of an online database for sharing knowledge on the subject. Such platforms foster collaboration, enabling joint efforts in gathering data on historic industrial sites and exploring strategies for their preservation.

Examples for such platforms include a platform [27] created by Research Centre for Industrial Heritage FA CTU Prague, Czech Republic and a platform [28] created by the civil non-profit organization V.I.D.A. in Greece. Such platforms can also create an invaluable collection of case studies that can be used as a starting point in preliminary research for preservation projects. Based on the ongoing research of the author, a platform on industrial legacy in Bulgaria (Fig.3) is currently under development. The platform seeks to not only gather information but popularize the existing efforts for preserving industrial heritage in Bulgaria [29] and to collect existing Bulgarian works on adaptive reuse approaches [30,31,32].

For Bulgaria, case study research from the broader region is also relevant and applicable. Researching the successful restoration of Senjski rudnik [33,34], the difficult divisive debate and civic initiatives around Petritsa's industrial heritage [35] and the rebranding of Lavrion's mines [36,37] can serve as a starting point for creating sustainable restoration plan and for deeper understanding of the conflict surrounding the contemporary industrial heritage debate.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper aimed to examine the industrial heritage in Tryavna region by placing it against the broader context of the town's historical development and the industrial development of the state. It highlights the complexities surrounding industrial heritage, revealing how factors such as privatization, deindustrialization, and historical distance shape public perceptions. While some communities in Bulgaria actively reinterpret these sites through adaptive reuse and preservation initiatives, others struggle to recognize them as heritage landmarks. Comparative analysis underscores the role of town size, local initiatives, policy support, ownership and accessibility in shaping the future of industrial heritage. Efforts to bridge knowledge gaps, such as industrial heritage platforms, demonstrate the potential of digital resources in fostering collaboration. Ultimately, fostering awareness and integrating industrial heritage into urban and cultural narratives can ensure these sites remain a meaningful part of contemporary life.

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