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The Deportation of the Jews from the Bulgarian-Occupied Territories: A Concise Presentation based on the Collections held at the Bulgarian State Archives

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present the impact of the Bulgarian occupation on the Jews of Yugoslav Macedonia, Eastern Macedonia and Thrace through the utilization of historical documents held at the Bulgarian State Archives. The paper describes the application of restrictive measures against the local Jewish communities, as well as Bulgaria's involvement in the design and implementation of the deportation operation of the Yugoslav and Greek Jews to the Treblinka extermination camp (1941-1943).

Keywords: Holocaust, Jews, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Greece

Introduction

Bulgaria joined the Axis alliance on March 1941, following Germany's promise to grant Yugoslav and Greek territories that Bulgaria had been claiming since the 1878 Treaty of San Stefano. While the Bulgarian king, Tsar Boris III, and the prime minister, Bogdan Filov, were admirers of Adolf Hitler, anti-Semitism was not mainstream in the country. There were a few anti-Semitic organisations, which attempted to replicate the Kristallnacht,¹ but their impact was low. In the twilight of joining the Axis alliance and while bilateral discussions were ongoing, the Bulgarian government introduced several anti-Semitic laws that imposed significant restrictions upon the Bulgarian Jewish community.

Once Bulgarian occupation forces entered Yugoslav Macedonia, Eastern Macedonia and Thrace, Filov's government worked on stabilizing their regime. They immediately divided the occupied region into three Administrative Units and administratively annexed them as integral parts of the Bulgarian state. To this aim, they equipped local administrations with Bulgarian public servants and officers, who worked on the transition of the local services to the Bulgarian administration model and developed a detailed and big budget "Bulgarisation" plan, with which the Bulgarian government hoped to enforce pro-Bulgarian sentiments and to assimilate the local population.

¹ Kristallnacht refers to the violent events against Jews that took place in Germany on November 1938. During these events Jewish people were targeted and their properties were destroyed. Bulgarian anti-Semitic organisations attempted to organise a "Kristallnacht" at Sofia, by attacking Jewish-owned shops, hoping that more people will join their lead. This attempt was easily suppressed by the police. Ρουμιάνα Μαρίνοβα – Χρηστίδη, Η μεταχείριση των Εβραίων στη Βουλγαρία κατά την διάρκεια του Β' Παγκοσμίου Πολέμου: Ευρωπαϊκή Εξάιρεση;, Το Ολοκαύτωμα στα Βαλκάνια (Θεσσαλονίκη: Επίκεντρο 2011), 37.

This would enable Bulgaria to claim annexation of the territory from the Germans, after a projected Axis victory, as Germany only consented on the temporary concession of Yugoslav Macedonia, Eastern Macedonia and Thrace to Bulgaria and postponed the discussion on the future of these territories until the end of war. To this end, shortly after the beginning of the Bulgarian occupation Bulgarian public servants with their families were allocated in the occupied regions to support the “Bulgarisation” process, while locals of Bulgarian origin were trained on the Bulgarian administration model, in order to be able to contribute to the national cause.²

Shortly after the beginning of the Bulgarian occupation, additional anti-Semitic laws were imposed, and a Special Committee of Jewish Affairs was established (according to some researchers the creation of the special committee was requested by Germany). These developments affected both the Bulgarian, Yugoslav and Greek Jews in the occupied territories and their application was not possible without the contribution of the local administrations, the public servants, the police and the army officers.

On February 22, 1943, the Special Committee of Jewish Affairs signed an agreement with the German envoy, Theodor Dannecker, to deport 20,000 Jews from the Yugoslav and Greek regions occupied by Bulgaria to the German Eastern Provinces. The Bulgarian Jews were saved from deportation due to the massive protest of political and social actors against it, but also due to the loss of faith that Germany would eventually win the war. On the other hand, Jews living in the occupied regions, were not saved, as their deportation was linked to the policy of “Bulgarization” of the occupied territories and also enabled the Bulgarian authorities to postpone the discussion on the deportation of the Bulgarian Jews.³

The current paper, which is based mainly on the archival collections held at the Bulgarian State Archives, will inter alia present the following:

1. actions taken prior, during and after the organization of the deportations (imposition of anti-Jewish legislation, ghettoization, establishment of the Special Committee of Jewish Affairs, etc.),
2. the role of local and central administrations, of the civil servants and of the army officers in these developments,
3. ways of collaboration between the Bulgarian and the German officials,
4. actions of resistance towards the deportation of the Jews.

² For a detailed account of these developments, see: Άννα Μπατζέλη, *Όψεις της βουλγαρικής πολιτικής στην Γιουγκοσλαβική Μακεδονία κατά τη διάρκεια του Δευτέρου Παγκοσμίου Πολέμου* (Αθήνα: 2023).

³ ЦДА (Central State Archives of Bulgaria), фонд 666К, опис 1, а.е. 2 (Piro, 1943 – n.d. (no date), the document most probably was drafted during the first trimester of 1943)· ЦДА, фонд 190К, опис 1, а.е. 8518 (Sofia, 22 February 1943)· ЦДА, фонд 667К, опис 1, а.е. 7 (Stip, October 1942 – n.d.)· New York Times, 29 August 1942· Витка Тошкова и др., *България своенравният съюзник на Третия райх* (София: Военноиздателски комплекс “Св. Георги Победоносец”, 1992), 113-116· Dimitar Jončev, “The Jews from the New Lands in the Policy of Tzar Boris III (October 1940 – March 1943).” *Annual of the Organization of the Jews in Bulgaria „Shalom”*, Vol. XXVII (1993/1994): 19-30· Николай Поппетров, *Програмни и организационни документи на български авторитаристки националистически формации* (София: 2009), 90-94.

Overview of Antisemitism and Anti-Jewish Legislation in Bulgaria (1935-1942)

Bulgaria prior to accessing the Axis camp and in the framework of strengthening its bilateral relations with Germany, had introduced a series of laws that deprived the Bulgarian Jews of fundamental civil and political rights.⁴ The validity of these laws was extended to the Jews of the occupied territories with the beginning of the Bulgarian Occupation. Although in Bulgaria anti-Semitism did not have a broad popular base, there were several active organizations which had copied the German National Socialist model, such as the Union of Bulgarian Legions and the Bulgarian National Defence.⁵ Moreover, in September 1939, the replication of "Kristallnacht" was attempted in Sofia.⁶

The daily life of the Bulgarian Jewish community deteriorated significantly after the passing of the "Law for the Protection of the Nation", which was signed by King Boris on January 21, 1941 and published in the Government Gazette on January 23, 1941.⁷ This law inter alia provided for the removal of the right to acquire Bulgarian citizenship (and the rights that came with it) from Jews. In addition, strict financial restrictions were imposed on members of the Jewish community, who had to declare all their movable and immovable assets to the relevant state agencies. As a result, options for professional advancement and business activity were significantly limited for Jews, since they were deprived of the right of owning large property, as well as of sending remittances, and they were additionally obliged to pay a special extraordinary tax. Furthermore, limitations were imposed on the maximum number of Jews who could practice the professions of doctor, attorney and engineer, as well as, on the number of Jews who could register as students at the University.⁸

The Jewish community of Bulgaria had attempted with official memoranda, reports and appeals to prevent the signing of the "Law for the Protection of the Nation". On October 23, 1940, the Central Council of the Jews of Bulgaria communicated a report to the Municipality of Sofia regarding the proposed "Law for the Protection of

⁴ Romania and Yugoslavia had also adopted anti-Semitic bills, following the model of the "Nuremberg Laws". An indicative list of secondary sources follows: Ioanid Ranu, "The Holocaust in Romania: the destruction of Jews and Gypsies under the Antonescu regime, 1940-1944", Chigago III (2000): 16-43· Ivo Goldstein, "The Jews in Yugoslavia 1918-1941, Antisemitism and the Struggle for Equality", Jews Studies Yearbook, vol. II (2002): 51-64· Ženi Lebl, Do "konačnog rešenja", Jevreji u Srbiji 1521-1942 (Beograd: Cigoka Stampa, 2002)· Iulia Padeanu, The Holocaust in Romania: Uncovering a Dark Chapter (USA: 2012).

⁵ For a detailed account of the Bulgarian organisations see: Άννα Μπατζέλη, Κατοχή ή Απελευθέρωση; Όψεις της βουλγαρικής πολιτικής στην Γουγκοσλαβική Μακεδονία κατά την διάρκεια του Δευτέρου Παγκοσμίου Πολέμου, 1941-1944 (Θεσσαλονίκη, 2019), 58-79.

⁶ Ρουμίνα Μαρίνοβα – Χρηστίδη, Η μεταχείριση των Εβραίων στη Βουλγαρία κατά την διάρκεια του Β' Παγκοσμίου Πολέμου: Ευρωπαϊκή Εξάιρεση;, Το Ολοκαύτωμα στα Βαλκάνια (Θεσσαλονίκη: Επίκεντρο 2011), 37.

⁷ Държавен вестник, 23 January 1941.

⁸ Фани Милкова, История на българската буржоазна държава и право през периода 1918-1944 година (София: Университетско изд-во "Св. Климент Охридски", 1973), 192-193· Фани Милкова, Българската държава и изключителното й законодателство през периода 1923-1944 г. (София: Университетско изд-во "Св. Климент Охридски", 1991), 501· Иван Божилов, Вера Мутафчиева, Андрей Пантев, Константин Косев, Стойчо Грънчаров, История на България (София: ИК "Христо Ботев", 1993), 711· Димитър Токушев, История на новобългарската държава и право 1878 – 1944 (София: изд-во СИБИ, 2006), 370-371.

the Nation", which was submitted by the Minister of the Interior and Public Health, Petar Gabrovski.⁹ In this report, among others, the following were mentioned:

"The Bulgarian Jewish community, although it is consisted of a small number of members, has numerous times and throughout time demonstrated its readiness to serve the motherland. Bulgarian Jews with all their strength were always present, on the side of the motherland, as an integral part of the Bulgarian nation. The Bulgarian Jews together with the whole society were always present in the difficult moments of the motherland, in the joy and in the victory, supporting the great struggles and the national cause.

And our hearts shrivelled with pain when the measures imposed on Bulgaria by the European states, after the signing of the peace treaties, were announced. And together with the Bulgarian nation, we expected the restoration of justice for our long-suffering motherland. And the culture of the Bulgarian Jewish community is common to the culture of the rest of the Bulgarian citizens.

Bulgarian songs, Bulgarian literature, Bulgarian theatre, Bulgarian education – they are an integral part of the culture of Bulgarian Jews. With the Bulgarian culture the Jews of Bulgaria are nurtured, who through it learn to appreciate the value and greatness of life; they learn through it to sincerely love the motherland and to be ready to sacrifice themselves for the good of Bulgaria. It is a pure feeling that remains unchanged over time".¹⁰

In addition, the members of the Central Council of the Jews of Bulgaria drafted and send a series of appeals to important political figures. Among the recipients was the prominent MP Mushanov. In their letter to Mushanov, the Central Council of the Jews of Bulgaria also included a list of the names of 952 Bulgarian Jewish soldiers who "died fighting for the motherland" in the military conflicts that the country was involved in after its liberation from the Ottoman yoke. The letter was also accompanied by a table that illustrated the social and economic status of the Jews of Bulgaria, which served as a proof that it was not better than the non-Jews.¹¹ The authors of the letter considered as necessary to attach both the list of the names of the Jews who "died fighting for the motherland" and the table showing their financial status, as they were tangible evidence of their claims.¹² While it is not possible to

⁹ Following the end of WWII, Petar Gabrovski was sentenced to death by People's Court for his actions during the war. This conviction was subsequently annulled by the country's Supreme Court in 1996. Ташо Ташев, Министрите на България 1879-1999: Енциклопедичен справочник, (София: АИ "Проф. Марин Дринов", 1999), 103-104. Furthermore, at the General Archives of the Bulgarian State there is preserved a copy of the speech delivered by Gabrovski to the National Parliament, in which he listed the reasons why the "Law for the Protection of the Nation" should be approved: ЦДА, фонд 538К, опис 2, а.е. 19 (Sofia, October 1940).

¹⁰ Translated from Bulgarian by the author. Source: ДА – София (State Archives – Sofia), фонд 1К, опис 5, а.е. 26 (Sofia, 23 October 1940).

¹¹ ЦДА, фонд 1303К, опис 1, а.е. 73 (Sofia, 12 November 1940).

¹² With regard to the property situation of the members of the Jewish community, it should be noted that several propaganda publications had been circulated, which clearly spoke of "Jewish thieves" capable of stealing foreign property, etc. see for example the newspaper Български (20 July 1942), where an antisemitic article is accompanied by a caricature of a Jew, who is presented as an exuberant figure of a man in royal attire, smoking expensive cigars and wearing the star of David. This man holds in his hands two large sacks filled with the "gold of Egypt".

evaluate the impact of this letter on Mushanov's beliefs, it should be noted that he was among the Bulgarian politicians who supported the campaign to prevent the deportation of the Bulgarian Jews to the German concentration camps.¹³

In addition to the letters sent by the members of the Central Council of the Jews of Bulgaria, Jews, who were members of professional chambers and associations, addressed letters and appeals to the government, MPs and the general public. Such as the Jewish painters, who in their letter they expressed their concern about the possibility of their expulsion from the "*Association of Young Bulgarian Painters*".¹⁴

Despite the mobilization of the Jewish community, it was not possible to prevent the ratification of the "Law for the Protection of the Nation". The situation gradually got worse after the country joined the Axis powers. In July 1941 an extraordinary property tax was imposed against the Jews,¹⁵ and a few months later, in December, the Minister Gabrowski submitted to the Prime Minister for approval a supplementary amendment to Article 25 of the "Law for the Protection of the Nation". The new amendment defined the removal of the right to own and manage industrial units and businesses from individuals of Jewish origin. As a result, all business and industrial activities of the Jews were placed under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Labor.¹⁶ The new amendment also impacted the Jewish communities of Yugoslav Macedonia, Eastern Macedonia and Thrace.¹⁷

Following the Wannsee Protocol,¹⁸ a series of new and stricter measures followed against the Jews living in Bulgaria and the occupied territories. With special bills, the operation of Jewish clubs and the free movement of Jews were prohibited. To this end, Jews had to apply for an official permit in order to travel, while they were gradually prohibited from moving freely to specific areas within the urban fabric, as well as entering certain areas (for e.g. in Monastery/Bitola, the Jews were forced to move to a degraded area, which has since become an informal ghetto). Also, the Jews of Bulgaria and of the occupied territories had to prominently display the yellow Star of David, denoting their Jewish identity, and also to remove any Bulgarian endings from their surnames. Furthermore, they suffered severe economic implications, after being forced to pay special taxes and to give up movable and immovable assets. The number of Jews who were forced to leave their work activities was significant.¹⁹ In addition Jews were forbidden to own cars, radios and

¹³ Ташо Ташев, Министрите на България 1879-1999: Енциклопедичен справочник (София: АИ "Проф. Марин Дринов", 1999), 309-310. Недев, Недю, Три държавни преврата или Кимон Георгиев и неговото време (София, „Сиела“, 2007), 691.

¹⁴ A copy of this letter can be found at Musanov's archive: ЦДА, фонд 1303К, опис 1, а.е. 73 (Sofia, 12 November 1940).

¹⁵ ЦДА, фонд 173К, опис 6, а.е. 1787 (Sofia, 10 – 11 July 1941); ЦДА, фонд 173К, опис 6, а.е. 1790 (Sofia, 11 – 14 July 1941).

¹⁶ ЦДА, фонд 264К, опис 1, а.е. 119 (Sofia, 10 December 1941).

¹⁷ Александър Гребенаров, Надя Манолова-Николова (eds.), Българското управление във Вардарска Македония (1941-1944): документален сборник (София: Държавна агенция "Архиви", 2011), 63.

¹⁸ The full text of Wannsee Protocol can be accessed via the following link: <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-wannsee-protocol>.

¹⁹ ЦДА, фонд 666К, опис 1, а.е. 1 (Sofia, 7 November 1942); ЦДА, фонд 173К, опис 6, а.е. 1735 (Sofia, 18 December 1941 – 5 January 1942); ЦДА, фонд 242К, опис 2, а.е. 2514, (Sofia, 5 February 1942); ЦДА, фонд 264К, опис 1, а.е. 124 (Sofia, 6

telephones.²⁰ The application of these measures would not be possible without the involvement of the Bulgarian civil servants and of the army officers in both the Bulgarian and the occupied territories.

In June 1942, with the passing of the "Law on Bulgarian Nationality", both the Bulgarian Jews and those living in the occupied territories were deprived of the possibility of acquiring Bulgarian citizenship or retaining it for those who already had it. The Holy Synod of the Church of Greece tried to prevent the ratification of this law, by submitting an official written request to the representative of Germany in Athens. Also, the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece in collaboration with Greek organizations, who had been expelled from the areas under Bulgarian occupation, and the Metropolis of Thessaloniki, worked on preventing the replication of actions of public humiliation in the territories occupied by Bulgaria, similar to that suffered by the Jews of Thessaloniki in July 1942,²¹ as well as, on preventing the compulsory participation of men in the Bulgarian forced labour battalions.²² In total, it is estimated, based on reports in primary sources, that more than 10,000 Jews (Greeks, Yugoslavs, but also Bulgarians) were conscripted to work on public works, mainly road construction.²³ In addition to the members of the Jewish community, the Serbian inhabitants of Yugoslav Macedonia and the Greeks of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace were forced to work in public works.²⁴ The propaganda magazine *Iliustratšija Ilinden* (*Илюстрация Илинден*) reports that in the first year of the Bulgarian occupation rule, more than 12,000 young people from Yugoslav Macedonia, Eastern Macedonia and Thrace were forced to work in public works and contributed to the construction of bridges, roads and the Giussevo–Kumanovo railway link, Kočani–Gorna Tsumaya (today's Blagoevgrad).²⁵

The “Final Solution” and the Role of the Public Administration of Bulgaria

In parallel to the application of strictest measures towards the Jewish population, Bulgarian officials hold discussions with German counterparts on arranging the deportation of the Jews from the territories under the Bulgarian administration. 26 In

October 1942): ЦДА, фонд 2506, опис 1, а.е. 47 (Sofia, 14 January 1942): ЦДА, фонд 173К, опис 6, а.е. 2124 (Sofia, 16-19 March 1942): New York Times, 16 May 1942: Драгољуб С. Петровић, “Положај Јевреја у југоисточном делу Србије и у Македонији под Бугарском у II светском рату” *Balkanica* XXIV (1993), 241.

²⁰ Димитър Токушев, *История на новобългарската държава и право 1878 – 1944* (София: изд-во СИБИ 2006), 369-370.

²¹ The Jewish Museum of Greece has relevant archival material in its collections, see for ex.:

<https://www.searchculture.gr/aggregator/edm/jewishmuseum/000141-photograph-3350>

²² Βασίλης Ριτζαλέος, *Η ελληνική ορθόδοξη Εκκλησία της Θεσσαλονίκης και το Ολοκαύτωμα, Το Ολοκαύτωμα στα Βαλκάνια* (Θεσσαλονίκη: Επίκεντρο 2011), 312-313.

²³ New York Times, 5 May 1942.

²⁴ One of the strictest measures imposed during the Bulgarian occupation was the systematic recruitment of men from the Bulgarian-occupied areas to perform forced labor in Bulgaria (the so-called "trodivaks", "labor battalions"). This measure secured free labor in the public works of Bulgaria and also deprived the local population of its young members, as well as, enabled the occupation forces to limit the development of guerrilla movements in the occupied territories. Αικατερίνη Θ. Τσέκου, *Τρίτη Βουλγαρική Κατοχή της Καβάλας, 1941-1944*, Θεσσαλονίκη 1995, 103-119 (Primary postgraduate thesis in the History of the Slavic Peoples – Aristotle University of Thessaloniki).

²⁵ *Илюстрация Илинден*, March 1942, p. 13.

²⁶ ЦДА, фонд 173К, опис 6, а.е. 2212 (Sofia, 15 April – 29 June 1942) New York Times, 28 June 1942: Нир Барух, *Кръстю Гергинов, Антонина Желязкова, Давид Коен, Ангелина Пенева* (ed.), *Оцеляването: Сборник от документи 1940-1944* (София: Шалом, 1995), 184.

these developments, key role had acquired the special Committee for Jewish Affairs (or the "special committee for the issues of the Jewish community"), which was established by a government decree in August 1942 and was administratively subordinated to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Public Health. Some scholars report that the authorities set up the Committee for Jewish Affairs at the request of Germany. Alexander Beleff, a well-known anti-Semitic political figure, was appointed as the Head of the Committee for Jewish Affairs. Although there were several candidates for the post, Beleff, who was one of the co-founders of the far right / anti-Semitic association "Ratnitsi" and knowledgeable about Hitler's anti-Jewish laws, which he had studied in depth on a visit he had made for this purpose to Berlin as an employee of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Public Health, was judged to be the most suitable. Beleff soon proved that he was rightly chosen for this role. Evidence provided by Bulgarian historians shows that he introduced a number of initiatives to ensure the smooth implementation of the deportation plan. To this aim, upon assuming his duties, Beleff visited the occupied territories to assess the situation, to investigate ways of transporting the Jews, as well as to identify places, which could be used as temporary/transit camps until the deportation operation is completed. Beleff was assisted by Theodor Dannecker. Dannecker was an SS officer, who had participated in the organization of the deportation operations of the French Jews.²⁷

On January 22, 1943, Dannecker and Beleff reached an agreement, which provided for the deportation of 20,000 Jews from Yugoslav Macedonia, Eastern Macedonia and Thrace to the East German Provinces.²⁸ The historian Assa Aaron states that the Dannecker-Beleff Pact is "unique of its kind" because Germany did not proceed to "sign a similar bilateral agreement to deport Jewish citizens" to the extermination camps with other counterparts.²⁹ The Bulgarian Jews were exempted from the agreement³⁰ thanks to a nationwide awareness campaign spearheaded by prominent members of the Bulgarian intelligentsia, ordinary citizens, political figures, religious leaders, and executives of professional and trade associations. It should be added that the Committee for Jewish Affairs had repeatedly organized operations to deport the Bulgarian Jews until the end of the war, but their completion was not possible due to the reaction of the local population and due to the intense pressure exerted by King Boris and the government from the filing of official memorandums of protest by the Metropolitans of Sofia and Philippopolis,³¹ from the letter of protest

²⁷ ЦДА, фонд 666К, опис 1, а.е. 2 (Pirov, 1943 – n.d. most probably it was drafted during the first trimester of 1943); ЦДА, фонд 667К, опис 1, а.е. 7 (Stip, October 1942 – n.d.) New York Times, 29 August 1942; Витка Тошкова и др., България своенравният съюзник на Третия райх (София: Военноиздателски комплекс "Св. Георги Победоносец", 1992), 113-116; Dimitar Jončev, "The Jews from the New Lands in the Policy of Tzar Boris III (October 1940 – March 1943)." Annual of the Organization of the Jews in Bulgaria „Shalom”, Vol. XXVII (1993/1994): 19-30; Николай Поппетров, Програмни и организационни документи на български авторитаристки националистически формации (София: 2009), 90-94. ²⁸ ЦДА, фонд 190К, опис 1, а.е. 8518 (Sofia, 22 February 1943).

²⁹ Assa Aaron, Macedonia and the Jewish People (Skopje: 1994), 36.

³⁰ It should be noted that Beleff tried without success the deportation agreement to also include the Bulgarian Jews: Ρουμίνα Μαρίνοβα – Χρηστίδης, Η μεταχείριση των Εβραίων στη Βουλγαρία κατά την διάρκεια του Β' Παγκοσμίου Πολέμου: Ευρωπαϊκή Εξάρτηση, Το Ολοκαύτωμα στα Βαλκάνια (Θεσσαλονίκη: Επίκεντρο 2011), 46.

³¹ ЦДА, фонд 1318К, опис 1, а.е. 2200 (December 1940 – n. d.); ЦДА, фонд 1318К, опис 1, а.е. 2201 (Sofia, 2 April – 25 June 1943); ЦДА, фонд 2506, опис 1, а.е. 47 (Sofia, 23 November 1943); ЦДА, фонд 2506, опис 1, а.е. 47 (Sofia, 27 May 1943); ЦДА, фонд 2506, опис 1, а.е. 47 (Sofia, January – March 1943).

signed by 42 members (out of 160) of the National Parliament,³² and the letters and pro-Jewish publications of well-known personalities in the printed media.³³

These initiatives were also supported by ordinary citizens,³⁴ as well as, public servants. For example, the public servants Petsev, Vachev, Levenson and Zlandarov who were working at the visa department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, rescued hundreds of Jews by accepting their applications for travel visa, despite the existence of a law that deprived members of the Jewish community of the right to leave the country without having acquired a special permit. This act of theirs was recognized after the war, because Petsev, Vachev, Levenson and Zlandarov proceeded to issue visas at risk of losing their jobs.³⁵ In the framework of these developments, the Bulgarian King, Boris III, in his meeting with Ribbentrop in March 1943, managed to convince him to postpone the discussion on the deportation of the Bulgarian Jews. He claimed that the Bulgarian Jews should remain in the country and not to be included in the first deportation operations, as through forced labour they contributed to the completion of important public works.³⁶ As an additional factor in the exclusion of Bulgarian Jews from the deportation to Hitler's camps, some researchers consider the shaking of the faith of the Bulgarian leadership in the final victory of Germany.³⁷

³² ЦДА, фонд 1335К, опис 1, а.е. 126 (Sofia, 17 March 1943).

³³ ЦДА, фонд 1303К, опис 1, а.е.1).

³⁴ Давид Коен и др., Борбата на българския народ за защита и спасяване на евреите в България през Втората световна война, Документи и материали (София: БАН, 1978), 17-22.

³⁵ ЦДА, фонд 1870К, опис 1, а.е. 17 (Σόφια, χωρίς ακριβή ημερομηνία).

³⁶ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fragility of Goodness. Why Bulgaria's Jews Survived the Holocaust* (London: Orion, 2001), 5-15.

³⁷ Георги Марков, *Покушения, насилие и политика в България 1878-1947* (София: Военно-издателство, 2003), 302-303.

Bulgarian Public Administration Involvement in the Deportation of the Jews from Yugoslav Macedonia, Eastern Macedonia and Thrace

While protests against the deportation of the Bulgarian Jews were ongoing, Bulgarian central and regional authorities worked on the organization of the deportation of the Jews living in the occupied territories of Yugoslav Macedonia, Eastern Macedonia and Thrace. For some researchers, the deportation of the non-Bulgarian Jews has been considered as part of the “Bulgarisation” plan of the occupied territories, while others believe that it enabled the Bulgarian government and the King to save time and to postpone the discussion on the deportation of the Bulgarian Jews.³⁸

In March 1943, a series of special decrees was released which defined the stages of the process of deporting the Jewish population to the East German Provinces. These decrees inter alia provided detailed instructions on the process for the allocation of the necessary human resources/public servants to the occupied territories in order to implement and coordinate the deportation process with the support of the Bulgarian army and the police. They also provided information on the role of the Bulgarian Railways Organization on the transportation of the Jews from the occupied Regions of Skopje, Monastir/Bitola and the Aegean from their place of residence to the temporary concentration camps in Skopje and Lom (and the intermediate stations - concentration and transit camps, such as the tobacco warehouses of Kavala).³⁹

It should be noted that although the Bulgarian Jews were saved from the deportation to the East German Provinces, they suffered the effects of anti-Semitic laws. For example, there were cases of Bulgarian citizens who wanted to take advantage of the existing legal framework and appropriate the assets of their fellow citizens of Jewish origin. For instance some Bulgarians submitted written requests to the Committee for Jewish Affairs asking Jews to be evicted from their homes in order to acquire them.⁴⁰ Letters were also sent by organizations and associations requesting the disposal of the properties of the Jews of the occupied territories to Bulgarians, such as the Union of Macedonian Cultural and Educational Fraternities of Bulgaria, which addressed a relevant request to the Head of the Committee for Jewish Affairs.⁴¹ Incidents of looting of Jewish property also occurred in the occupied areas, not only by the Bulgarians, but also by locals who collaborated with the occupation forces.⁴²

³⁸ Σπυριδων Σφέτας, Εισαγωγή στην Βαλκανική Ιστορία, τ. Β, Από τον Μεσοπόλεμο στην Λήξη του Ψυχρού Πολέμου (1919-1989) (Θεσσαλονίκη: Βάνιας, 2011), 264-265· Ξανθίππη, Κοτζαγεώργη-Ζυμάρη, Οι πληθυσμιακές μεταβολές στην Ανατολική Μακεδονία και την Θράκη κατά την διάρκεια της Κατοχής, Η Βουλγαρική Κατοχή στην Ανατολική Μακεδονία και την Θράκη (Θεσσαλονίκη: Παρατηρητής 2002), 156 (footnote: 20).

³⁹ ЦДА, фонд 173К, опис 6, а.е 2425 (Sofia, 26 March 1943).

⁴⁰ А. Ненкова, “Лице в лице с историята”, Deutsche Velle, 6 October 2012. See also New York Times, 26 May 1943.

⁴¹ ДА – София, фонд 65К, опис 1, а.е. 1418 (Σόφια, 12 Μαΐου 1943).

⁴² Experiencing History, Holocaust Sources in Context, Letter from Ester Ruben Menahem to the Commissariat for Jewish Questions, available at: <https://perspectives.ushmm.org/item/letter-from-ester-ruben-menahem-to-the-commissariat-for-jewish-questions/collection/the-holocaust-in-yugoslavia>· Ξανθίππη, Κοτζαγεώργη-Ζυμάρη, Οι πληθυσμιακές μεταβολές στην Ανατολική Μακεδονία και την Θράκη κατά την διάρκεια της Κατοχής, Η Βουλγαρική Κατοχή στην Ανατολική Μακεδονία και την Θράκη (Θεσσαλονίκη: Παρατηρητής 2002), 165.

In March 1943, "the final solution to the Jewish question" was implemented and the operation to deport the Jewish population of the Bulgarian-occupied areas of Yugoslavia and Greece to the Treblinka extermination camp began. The operations began in Eastern Macedonia and Thrace on March 4, 1943, and in Yugoslav Macedonia on March 10, 1943. The Bulgarian public administration, when planning the deportation operations, took into account lists depicting the family and property status of the Jews, which had then been drawn up by field officers. These lists proved useful to the Bulgarian administration, as they allowed them to estimate the cost and duration of the process of transporting the Jews from the place of residence to the transit camps, and from there to the East German Provinces. Based on these data, three railway routes were calculated for the transport of the Greek Jews from the transit camps to the city of Lom, five routes for the transport of the Yugoslav Jews from Skopje, three for the transport of the people who lived in the Monastery/Bitola and the wider area and two routes from Pirot for the deportation of the Yugoslav Jews, living in the so-called "Western Provinces". Moreover, the Bulgarian administration was able to calculate the capacity that the "transit ghettos" should have as well as the number of the public servants, soldiers and police officers that should be allocated in order to carry out the whole deportation operation.⁴³ According to contemporary approaches to the issue by North Macedonian scholars, the German administration allegedly covered part of the total cost of the deportation operation.⁴⁴

Bulgarian administration executed similar deportation plans of the Jews in the occupied Yugoslav and Greek territories.⁴⁵ In both cases, the operations began in the early morning hours. Large units of Bulgarian soldiers and policemen surrounded the houses and neighbourhoods where the Jews lived, and armoured soldiers stationed at points around the cities, to prevent the possibility of escape. Bulgarian soldiers and policemen went from house to house to inform the owners that they had little time to prepare for departure. According to testimonies, in order not to provoke tensions and to get the population to consent to their departure without protest, the soldiers told the Jews that they would be temporarily transferred to Bulgarian provinces or to work battalions in Germany (the second version was also reproduced in the foreign press)⁴⁶ and after the end of the war they would be allowed to return to their homes. There are reports from the Greek cities of Drama and Xanthi which report that the "the Jews on their departure were shouting 'Long live Tsar Boris III'".⁴⁷ However, in some cases the reassurances of the Bulgarian

⁴³ Жамила Колономос, Вера Весковиќ-Вангели, Евреите во Македонија во Втората светска војна (1941-1945), Зборник на документи, том 1, и том 2 (Скопје: 1986), 834-885; Ξανθίππη, Κοτζαγεώργη-Ζυμάρη, Οι πληθυσμιακές μεταβολές στην Ανατολική Μακεδονία και την Θράκη κατά την διάρκεια της Κατοχής, Η Βουλγαρική Κατοχή στην Ανατολική Μακεδονία και την Θράκη (Θεσσαλονίκη: Παρατηρητής 2002), 162-163; Александар Манојловски, "Еврејската верска општина во Скопје и прашањето за депортираните Евреи од Македонија" Гласник на ИНИ, бр.1 (2016): 209-223.

⁴⁴ МИНА, 4 February 2013.

⁴⁵ The Jewish Museum of Greece has photographic material of the deportation operations in its archive: <https://www.searchculture.gr/aggregator/edm/jewishmuseum/000141-photograph-1346>

⁴⁶ New York Times, 24 March 1943.

⁴⁷ Ξανθίππη, Κοτζαγεώργη-Ζυμάρη, Οι πληθυσμιακές μεταβολές στην Ανατολική Μακεδονία και την Θράκη κατά την διάρκεια της Κατοχής, Η Βουλγαρική Κατοχή στην Ανατολική Μακεδονία και την Θράκη (Θεσσαλονίκη: Παρατηρητής 2002), 164.

soldiers were not enough to prevent panic and confusion that an unexpected mass evacuation could reasonably cause. In Yugoslav Macedonia, an additional factor that probably contributed to the fear was the spread of rumours during the previous days from unofficial sources about the impending evacuation. As reported by five survivors of the Holocaust from the Monastery/Bitola, due to the existence of these rumours, with the arrival of the Bulgarian forces, they hid in the basement of a shop from where they could hear what was happening outside:

“At dawn we heard the uproar of groups of police. In a moment there was the sound of horses' footsteps and the noise of carts. Then all was calm. Then came a noise like thunder.... We asked each other what it could be? Then we were able to discern the sound of voices, shouts, the crying of many people, of babies, of women! We were able to distinguish the words of the Bulgarians who shouted: 'Quickly! Quickly!' The prayers, moans, curses, the crying was clear... They were taking all the Jews, old and young, not just the youths who could work.... A river of people passed alongside us....”⁴⁸

The Bulgarian administration authorities rounded up the Jews of the Monastir / Bitola region at the Central Railway Station and from there they transferred them to a building of the Monopol tobacco processing factory in Skopje, where the Jews of Skopje had also been taken.

During the route to the tobacco warehouses, there are reports that the Bulgarian soldiers and policemen took the money and other valuables from the Jews, often with the use of violence. The looting of valuable objects from their owners continued upon arrival at Monopol. The value of the objects seized by the Yugoslav Jews, according to later estimates by the president of the Jewish Community of North Macedonia, amounted to 16 million dollars (these estimates should be accepted with caution).⁴⁹

The confiscation of the personal valuables of the Jews was part of the operating regulations of the temporal camp of Monopol, which had been drawn up by the Committee for Jewish Affairs. In particular, according to the regulations, the Jews, upon their arrival in Monopol, had to hand over to the Bulgarian guards all their belongings, except the clothes they were wearing. Also, during their stay in the *"transit ghetto"* they could not use the toilets without a police escort or light a fire to warm themselves (despite the low temperature), nor could they attempt to communicate in any way with the outside world (i. e. reading newspapers, correspondence, etc. was not allowed).⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Cohen, Last Century of a Sephardic Community: The Jews of Monastir, 1839-1943 (New York: Foundation for the Advancement of Sephardic Studies and Culture, 2003), <https://www.usmmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10006804>.

⁴⁹ Утрински весник, 16 October 2006.

⁵⁰ Жамила Колономос, Вера Весковиќ-Вангели, Евреите во Македонија во Втората светска војна (1941-1945), Зборник на документи, том 1, и том 2 (Скопје: 1986), 834-885; Mark Cohen, Last Century of a Sephardic Community: The Jews of Monastir, 1839-1943 (New York: Foundation for the Advancement of Sephardic Studies and Culture, 2003), <https://www.usmmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10006804>.

Article 25 of the operating regulations referred to the distribution of rations twice a day for adults and three for children, but, according to Elena Leon Ishakh, who was released due to the fact that she was a doctor, the food was not enough:

“Hunger pervaded...

Only on the fifth day did the camp authorities set up a kitchen, but for over 7,000 of us there were too few stoves. Food was doled out starting at eleven in the morning, and the last ones were fed around five in the evening. Food was distributed once daily and consisted of 250 grams of bread and plain, watery beans or rice...

They also gave us smoked meat, but it was so bad that, despite our hunger, we couldn't eat it...

Under the pretext of searching us to find hidden money, gold, or foreign currency, they sadistically forced us to undress entirely... In some cases they even took away baby diapers... If anything was found on somebody, he was beaten....⁵¹

In the transit camp of Monopol the Bulgarian administration authorities had gathered the Jews of Yugoslav Macedonia. This particular factory was chosen as a "transit ghetto" because it had several large capacity warehouses and had a direct connection to the railway network. Survivors report that during their stay at Monopol they repeatedly suffered physical violence, humiliation and inhumane treatment. Moreover, the conditions of detention were particularly harsh due to the winter weather conditions (there was not any heating system in place and the guards had distributed a small number of blankets to only a few people) and the degraded sanitary conditions. Finally, there were cases of beatings and rapes (of women and little girls).⁵² Nico Pardo, who was one of the few prisoners who managed to escape from Monopol, reports the following:

“We were in a terrible mood. The youngsters tried to sing every so often, but the adults and the elderly people were in deep depression. We did not know what awaited us, but the dreadful treatment we received from the Bulgarians showed the value of the promises given us that we would only be taken to a Bulgarian work camp. Here and there youngsters whispered of the possibility of an uprising and a mass escape, but they never materialized. There was no prospect of it succeeding. The yard was surrounded by a wooden fence and behind that a barbed wire fence. At each of the four corners there was a sentry with a machine gun and other armed guards would patrol the yard.

⁵¹ Mark Cohen, *Last Century of a Sephardic Community: The Jews of Monastir, 1839-1943* (New York: Foundation for the Advancement of Sephardic Studies and Culture, 2003), <https://www.usmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10006804>.

⁵² Жамила Колономос, Вера Весковиќ-Вангели, Евреите во Македонија во Втората светска војна (1941-1945), Зборник на документи, том 1, и том 2 (Скопје: 1986), 834-885. Mark Cohen, *Last Century of a Sephardic Community: The Jews of Monastir, 1839-1943* (New York: Foundation for the Advancement of Sephardic Studies and Culture, 2003), <https://www.usmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10006804>.

*Also, the belief that the worst possible fate did not await us prevented such suicidal acts from taking place.*⁵³

Several historians report that the total number of the people transferred to the Monopol warehouses was 7,215, the vast majority of whom remained there for at least 10 days. According to the figures provided by Holocaust scholars, 539 of them were children under the age of three, 602 were children between the ages of 3 and 10, and 1,172 were children between the ages of 10-16. In addition, 865 people were over 60 years and 250 were patients, incapable to walk, who had been left lying down to the "transit ghetto". In addition, four women gave birth during their stay in Monopol and four people died. These figures, in other words, conclusively demonstrate that one-third of the Jews the Bulgarian authorities had transferred to the temporary camp were vulnerable people. The only ones who were released few days after their arrival were 98 Jews with their families who had foreign citizenship and 67 Jewish doctors and pharmacists with their families, because the Bulgarian administration needed their services, in the absence of a sufficient number of Bulgarian doctors and pharmacists. The remaining Jews were transported by train to the Treblinka extermination camp on three routes on the 22nd, the 25th and the 29th March 1943, provided by German railways and escorted by Bulgarian and German soldiers. Of these people, none survived. The exact number of the Yugoslav Jews killed in the centre of Treblinka varies from source to source and ranges between 7,056 and 7,340. To this amount it should be added at least four people, who died enroute from Skopje to Treblinka.⁵⁴ The Skopje Holocaust Memorial Museum reports that 7,148 people were assassinated. The majority of the researchers accepts this report.⁵⁵

The Greek Jews had been transferred to Lom on March 18 and 19, 1943. As in the operations in Yugoslav Macedonia, the Jews of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace were initially transferred to the tobacco warehouses of Kavala, Drama, Komotini, Xanthi and Serres, which were designated as transit centres. Then, they were transferred to Lom, with intermediate stops at the temporary concentration camps of Gorna Jumaya and Dupnica. A total of 2,677 Greek Jews were transferred from Gorna Tzoumaya to Lom and 1,386 from Dupnitsa. On March 19-21, 1943, 4,219 Jews were transported by ship from Lom via the Danube to Vienna and from then to Treblinka.⁵⁶

During the stay of the Greek Jews in Lom, there were Bulgarian citizens, probably motivated by the wider climate of support towards the Jewish community in Bulgaria,

⁵³ Mark Cohen, *Last Century of a Sephardic Community: The Jews of Monastir, 1839-1943* (New York: Foundation for the Advancement of Sephardic Studies and Culture, 2003), <https://www.usmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10006804>.

⁵⁴ Жамила Колономос, Вера Весковиќ-Вангели, *Евреите во Македонија во Втората светска војна (1941-1945)*, Зборник на документи, том 1, и том 2 (Скопје: 1986), 834-885; Mark Cohen, *Last Century of a Sephardic Community: The Jews of Monastir, 1839-1943* (New York: Foundation for the Advancement of Sephardic Studies and Culture, 2003), <https://www.usmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10006804>.

⁵⁵ Source: http://holocaustfund.org/?page_id=40&lang=mk

⁵⁶ Ξανθίππη, Κοτσαγεώργη-Ζυμάρη, *Οι πληθυσμιακές μεταβολές στην Ανατολική Μακεδονία και την Θράκη κατά την διάρκεια της Κατοχής, Η Βουλγαρική Κατοχή στην Ανατολική Μακεδονία και την Θράκη* (Θεσσαλονίκη: Παρατηρητής 2002), 162-167.

who attempted to help them. Nadka Vassileva,⁵⁷ was one of them, who during the stay of the Greek Jews in Lom, collected and distributed food and water to them. Her contribution was made known by a letter of thanks sent to her by the Lom Jewish Community, after the end of the war. In the General Archives of the Bulgarian state, her personal letters are still preserved, in which she describes the events as she herself experienced them as a witness:⁵⁸

“I would like to present the dramatic events I experienced at the port and the railway station during the deportation operation of the Jews from the Aegean and Thrace to Germany via Lom during spring 1943. [...]”

During the beginning, or the end of March, one day between March 15 and March 20, 1943, it was Monday I remember, I visited my neighbour Ms. Penka Vouko Ivoseva [...] When she brought me a glass of water she told me “Nadka the last three days I do not want to go to the kitchen. I cannot stand to watch all these that are currently happening. I can’t stand listening to the calls for help from the Jews who are located in the overcrowded train wagons, awaiting the steamboats that will transfer them to Germany”. I left the water glass on the table, without drinking any water, and I went into the next room from where I could see the Danube river. It was heart-breaking. I could see people’s hands who were crammed into cattle wagons and were crying for help in three languages: in Bulgarian, Turkish and Jewish: “Can’t anyone give us some water?” I could understand what they were saying, as when I was a child I had Jewish friends. [...]”

What I saw and what I heard brought to my memory my childhood. Everything around me went dark and when I regained consciousness, I took a big water jug and several cups with me and rushed out towards the cattle wagons. The guards and the police officers stopped me. They raised their weapons and they told me: “Go back, otherwise we are going to shoot. You will die like a dog”. I looked into their eyes and I told them: “Don’t you have a family? Don’t you have children? [...] Kill me, I don’t care, but leave me first to give them some water.. Aren’t you humans? Don’t you have any feelings? How could you leave them three days and three nights without water? [...]”⁵⁹

Nadežda Vasileva was eventually allowed to distribute water to the Jews. Some locals who were present, followed her lead and also distributed food and water, slightly easing the suffering.

⁵⁷ Anna Batzeli (2023), The Deportation of Greek Jews from Northern Greece to Nazi camps: Nadežda Vasileva’s testimony, published at Women’s History Network blog: <https://womenshistorynetwork.org/the-deportation-of-greek-jews-from-northern-greece-to-nazi-camps-nadezda-vasilevas-testimony-anna-batzeli/>

⁵⁸ ЦДА, фонд 1568К, опис 1, а.е. 190 (Lom, 20 October 1944); ЦДА, фонд 1568К, опис 1, а.е. 190 (Lom, 19 July 1947); ЦДА, фонд 1568К, опис 1, а.е. 190 (Lom, 30 August 1947).

⁵⁹ Translated from Bulgarian by the author. Source: ЦДА, фонд 1568К, опис 1, а.е. 190 (Lom, 19 July 1947).

German Propaganda on Jewish Deportations

A few days after the completion of the deportation operation, the German consul in Skopje sent to his counterparts in Sofia, a report in which, inter alia, the following is mentioned:

“The deportation took place without problems and without any protests from the Jews [...] the local population without exception welcomes the deportation of the Jews and happily declares that following their deportation the food of all kind can be found in the market, mainly milk, seed oil, eggs and meat, and these are at 50% lower prices than previously [...].

It is gratifying that after the deportation of the Jews the majority of the population has realized what kind of burden [the Jews] represented. First of all, they [the Yugoslav Macedonian population] noticed that there is an end to profiteering in the food market. Nevertheless, from a military and political point of view, it is necessary to ensure that no Jew will remain in [Yugoslav] Macedonia in order to deprive from the enemy support of their most reliable allies.”⁶⁰

The German consul in Skopje articulates the population's "satisfaction" with the removal of the Jews, to whom he assigns responsibility for the phenomena of profiteering and shortages of basic goods, which, he claims, were eliminated immediately after their expulsion. This text, although in line with the official state propaganda, presents a distorted picture of the situation in the occupied Yugoslav provinces, where, according to the primary sources, no mass events to applaud the expulsion of the Jews took place, nor was the issue of profiteering after March 1943 – an issue for which, the Jews were not responsible. The German consul probably hoped for recognition of his contribution to the deportation operation and provided an incorrect description of the prevailing situation to his superiors.

We cannot rule out the possibility that this text is a figment of fear (to avoid for e.g., possible recommendations/sanctions in case the result was deemed insufficient), but neither is the possibility that the author of the report considered it as a panacea for all problems the deportation of the Jewish population or to take for granted the collective satisfaction of its persecution. Finally, it should be taken into account the parameter that this report is a compilation of reports submitted by the Bulgarian authorities to the German consul, who, in the context of further tightening of bilateral relations, were feeding their partners with information they would like to hear. Nonetheless, based on historical evidence what can be said with certainty is that only a few hundred Yugoslav and Greek Jews from Yugoslav Macedonia, Eastern Macedonia and Thrace survived the Holocaust. Several of those rescued had found

⁶⁰ Translated from Greek by the author. Quoted in Ρουμίανα Μαρίνοβα – Χρησιτίδη, Η μεταχείριση των Εβραίων στη Βουλγαρία κατά την διάρκεια του Β' Παγκοσμίου Πολέμου: Ευρωπαϊκή Εξ αίρεση;, Το Ολοκαύτωμα στα Βαλκάνια (Θεσσαλονίκη: Επίκεντρο 2011), 47.

refuge in the resistance movement, while others remained in labour battalions during the period of organized deportations.

Conclusion

Bulgaria applied a different policy in the territories temporarily granted to it by its ally Germany than the one adopted inside the country, regarding the management of the Jewish population. Bulgaria's different policy in the occupied territories seems to have been dictated by its intention to:

- a) serve its ally Germany, anticipating, with the end of the war and the victory of the Axis, when the fate of the Balkan peninsula would be decided, to be finalized the concession of Yugoslav Macedonia, Eastern Macedonia and Thrace to the Bulgarian territory,
- b) facilitate the future definitive annexation of the occupied territories by Bulgaria with their demographic thinning and their “Bulgarisation” and
- c) to avoid tensions within the country, because of the many reactions in defence of the Bulgarian Jews.



Figure 1 - Bulgaria, border changes 1939-1942 (source: encyclopedia.ushmm.org).

