



*Journal of
Religion & Society*
Supplement Series

The Kripke Center

Supplement 19 (2019)

Religious History and Culture of the Balkans

Edited by Nicolae Roddy

4. The Role of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church on the Subject of the Rescue of the Bulgarian Jews During the Holocaust (1941-1944)

Lea Cohen, former Bulgarian ambassador to Brussels, EU, and NATO; former member of the Bulgarian Parliament

Abstract

Generations of Bulgarians have been inspired by the national legend relating how the Bulgarian state and its monarch, King, Boris III, mobilized to save Bulgaria's 48,000 Jews, plus more than 11,000 Jews in regions annexed by Bulgaria in Macedonia, Serbia, and northern Greece during the war. This paper calls the national myth into question, examining the historical realities behind the deportations in response to the questions of who exactly acted to save Jews, and from whom were they actually being saved? The paper asserts that the hierarchy of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, most notably Metropolitans Kiril and Stefan, were among the true heroes, mobilizing actions aimed at protecting Bulgaria's Jews. It argues that the moral dimension of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church created a timeless historical moment, that despite the national myth to the contrary, neither the government nor the monarch's territorial and realpolitik ambitions were able to bring about.

Keywords: Bulgaria, Holocaust, Bulgarian Orthodox Church

Introduction

If you should ask, what are the three things with which Bulgaria prides itself before the world, it is almost certain that most people shall unanimously answer “the rescue of the Bulgarian Jews during the Second World War.”¹

The celebrated rescue of Bulgaria’s 48,000 Jews is as much a part of Bulgaria’s national identity as rose oil and *keiselo myako*, its own unique kind of curdled milk. Generations of Bulgarians are proud of the noble legend that recounts how the entire nation, led by the King Boris III, rushed to save Bulgarian Jews from certain annihilation. However, blinded by a collective amnesia, the recounters of this beautiful story never seem to get around to answering two very simple questions, namely, “Who exactly acted to save the Jews?” and “From whom were they actually being saved?”

Asking such a question would undermine an entire bastion of historical clichés and political prejudices that to this day prevents any straightforward assessment of the Bulgarian political regime from 1939 to 1944. Until 1989, that period of Bulgarian history was referred to as “monarchic fascism” – empty communist nomenclature that serves no purpose except to create convenient political obfuscation. Eliminating this term from post-1989, post-communist political discourse, has brought about gradual rehabilitation of the regime of King Boris III and Prime Minister Bogdan Filov’s government; however, Bulgaria’s entry into the Tripartite Pact, signed by Filov in Vienna on March 1, 1941, did not occur by any mere happenstance. Whatever nomenclature one uses to whitewash the reputation of the regime, Bulgaria cannot escape the facts of its history. Without describing what this regime meant for the Jews in political terms, I can only note that for the 11,343 Jews deported from territories annexed by the Bulgarian Kingdom in 1941, it meant certain death, and this was the same regime from which the Jewish population of Bulgaria needed to be rescued only two years later.

The subject of the remaining 48,000 survivors, or rescued Jews, depending on which terminology one chooses – has been discussed at great length without arriving at a consensus on the exact role of the King, the government, or any other political authority. At the same time, the subject has been abusively distorted by self-proclaimed political saviors and their supporters. Before 1989, the year communist rule in Bulgaria came to an end, the role of national savior was ascribed to the Communist Party, in support of the proposal of awarding Party Chief Todor Živkov a Nobel Peace Prize for the so-called “Salvation.” When Živkov was expelled, the role of Savior became available again, igniting a dispute that lasted until the campaign victory that awarded the title to an actor from the same era, namely King Boris III. This campaign exerted many acts of overt influence, including the planting of symbolic trees in Jerusalem, done illegally, so consequently uprooted; the arbitrary placing of unauthorized

¹ Opening lines of *The Guide to Jewish life in Bulgaria*, published by Shalom, an independent Bulgarian Jewish organization, successor of the former Public Cultural and Educational Organization of Jews in Bulgaria (1957-1990) and, before that, the Consistory (1920-1957). Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Bulgarian to English are my own.

memorial plaques, which were also removed; the publication of laudatory books, most of which were published abroad; the production of films and documentaries; a revisioning of the history curricula for secondary education; and, last but not least, the creation of a lobby to promote the role of King Boris III as national savior. To be sure, the creation of this national myth has been challenged by many Bulgarian historians and colleagues abroad (Dubova and Chernjavskiy, Chary; Lustiger; Berenbaum; Gaffney), as well as researchers from the Holocaust Museum, in Jerusalem; the United State Holocaust Memorial Museum, in Washington, D.C.; and the World Sephardi Association, in New York.

The National Myth in Light of Newly Discovered Historical Realities

The myth of King Boris III's salvific role in the fate of Jews from Bulgaria and its annexed territories has not found acceptance among the many small Jewish communities that were resettled in the formerly annexed territories since the annihilation of 1943. Recent Bulgarian films and publications have attempted to factually present heretofore ignored or circumvented questions about the tragic deportation and annihilation of 11,343 Jews from Bulgarian-annexed Macedonia and Aegean Thrace between March and April of 1943 (Ragaru; Avramov; Lustiger; Barenbaum; Cekova). Other groups and individuals continue to conduct critical research into the historical role the Bulgarian people and their institutions played in the survival of some 48,000 Jews. Despite imminent danger to themselves, heroic rescuers battled against time to intervene, thus increasing the chances of rescuing others. This long battle is of immense significance, as it was fought in the face of the racist, anti-Jewish laws that were adopted in December 1940, signed into law by King Boris III in January 1941, and enforced through 1943. As a result of new research conducted over the past decade, the State of Israel recently recognized an additional seven persons as "Righteous Among the Nations," one of the highest recognitions awarded in Israel, bringing the total number of Bulgarians so honored to twenty (Yad Vashem). These recently added heroes include Patriarch Kiril (née Konstantin Markov) and Exarch Stefan (née Stojan Popgueorguiev) of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, Macedonian activist Vladimir Kurtev, and other Bulgarian contemporaries known to have openly expressed resistance to King Boris III over the deportation of Jews. It is fitting that the list of Bulgarian "righteous" does not include King Boris III, nor any affiliates of the royal court or government of the period.

Paralleling the historic recognition of the saviors' efforts, significant new research has also begun on the deportation and killing of 11,343 Jews of the territories annexed by Bulgaria. This research is in part a consequence of the change in Bulgaria's political situation since 1989. The collapse of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia saw the emergence of new states significant to the history and geography of the Holocaust. These include the Baltic States – Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia – as well as the Ukraine, Belarus, and the half-dozen republics emerging from Yugoslavia's dissolution. A number of archives have recently been opened, bringing many new historical facts to light. These newly independent states have not only rediscovered their own identities, but their own histories as well. This inevitably involves a much more careful interpretation of events leading to the destruction of six million Jews during the Second World War.

Bulgaria's experience has proven to be significantly different than that of Lithuania and Latvia, places of true anti-Jewish terror; for the Ukraine, where the guilt of the local population

was clearly evidenced in the so-called “Holocaust with a bullet,” the killing of approximately one million Jews; and, for certain republics of former Yugoslavia, where, for example, some 40,000 Jews were massacred by the Croatian Ustashe, a nationalist paramilitary group responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Jews, Orthodox Serbs, and Romani (Novak). Many of these countries have gone through the difficult process of deconstructing and revising their own history, ultimately rejecting the long-held notion of impunity and lack of accountability due to their affiliation with major political alliances of the past. This process has yet to be completed, for today we are still witnessing its latest episodes. In 2003, for example, Romanian president Ion Iliescu was obligated to issue an official national acknowledgment and apology for Romania’s sole culpability in the deportation and murder of some 280,000 to 380,000 Jews in Romania and the territories it occupied, namely Transnistria and Bessarabia (Radu and Shapiro). Likewise, Croatia’s political precondition for finalizing negotiations in its accession to the EU required official recognition of, and an apology for its actions against the Jewish population during WWII, which it issued in 2008. Most recently, in August 2018, the Lithuanian government released a document recognizing the guilt of Lithuanian individuals during the WWII in the murder of 200,000 Lithuanian Jews.

Today, the global community’s Jewish and non-Jewish intellectuals have a clear understanding of the roles played by various parties during that era; however, this clarity yet eludes Bulgarian society at large. At the same time, it is a fact that Bulgaria offers itself as a special case in that some Jews were actually saved, as so many others were being sent to their deaths. The argument that Bulgaria saved all of its Jews from the Bulgarian Kingdom’s territories prior to the annexation and therefore should not bear responsibility for the Macedonian and Aegean Thracian Jews – a position often emphasized by some historians and politically-minded people – is naïve and morally questionable. In the context of the Holocaust, any argument that distinguishes other Jews from its own Jews is reprehensible from a moral point of view.

Bulgarians took pride in the Unification of 1941, at which time Bulgaria joined Hitler’s coalition and was permitted to access new territories. To this day, Bulgarians continue to boast about building roads and bridges in Macedonia, opening schools and churches, and establishing a university in Skopje, all the while failing to admit that these were not gifts presented to another country, but full-blown nationalized investments. Even after Soviet forces entered Bulgaria in September 1944, Bulgarians hoped that they would continue to control Macedonia. Many Bulgarian politicians, even high-ranking ones, fail to grasp the implications of the nation’s understanding of the rescue and its recognition. The problems are related to two clichés, the first being that Jews were rescued by “the people,” and the other asserting that Jews were “rescued from above,” that is, delivered by the supreme state hierarchy synonymous with King Boris III. The details of both clichés differ only in the national list of recognition, wherein major protagonists are followed by less significant saviors, including clergy, intellectuals, parliamentarians, and others.

Comparing statements on the so-called rescue by communist dictator Todor Živkov; Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha (Sakskoburggotski), the son of King Boris III; and most recently by Prime Minister Bojko Borisov – apart from the understandable differences in political rhetoric – reveals amazing similarities. All use the same outdated terms like “the people” (*xorata*, *khorata*) and “the leader” (*лидерът*, *lideriŭt*). In their parlance, the term “people” revives

ideas of unification, a unification that did not exist in 1943. The role of leader was initially assigned to Živkov, and more recently to King Boris III, largely due to the political functions of each.

Another similarity in their statements is the historic revision of rescue history, which by virtue of bipartisan consensus is considered to have been a monumental collective act. However, in order to do this, significant historic facts must be ignored, such as the undeniable guilt of the Bulgarian authorities and government in the deportation and physical destruction of 98% of the Jewish population in territories occupied and governed by Bulgaria between 1941 and 1944. Also overlooked is the apathy of Bulgarian society during and after this period. Bulgarian society takes pride in its civil insubordination towards the plan to deport the Jewish community in Bulgaria; however, it has failed to clarify even to itself why it remained indifferent to the violence directed towards Jews from Macedonia and Aegean Thrace.

It is fair to note that post-1989, democratically elected Bulgarian presidents have acknowledged Bulgaria's guilt on various occasions, attributing it to the particular wartime monarchy and government. For example, in Cekova's film, *Spaseni* (The Saved, 2012), Želio Želev contends that it was the state that sent the Jews to Treblinka. However, his statement was not official, as it was filmed fifteen years after serving his term as head of state. Furthermore, in an article in the journal *Trud*, dated March 2012, Petar Stojanov, President of Bulgaria from 1997 to 2002, admits to the guilt of the Bulgarian authorities for the deportation of Macedonian and Aegean Jews, but again, it came only after he has returned to unofficial life. Finally, a similar statement was made by Stojanov's successor, Georgi Parvanov, during an official visit to Israel in 2008. His statement bore the marks of mere improvisation and was confirmed neither by Bulgarian institutions nor the media. In fact, due to the failure to reach consensus on the matter, Bulgaria has yet to adopt an official position of accountability for its persecution of Jews during WWII, admitting no responsibility for their persecution and deportation. As of this writing, Bulgaria's current Prime Minister Boyko Borisov and President Rumen Radev refuse to officially recognize the guilt of the Bulgarian state for the deportation and killing of 11,343 Jews in the territories occupied by Bulgaria. Having said this, all recent occasions marking the remembrance of deportation victims have been attended by official state representatives, which would seem to indicate at least partial acknowledgment of Bulgarian responsibility. One recent commemoration ceremony, which took place in March 2018 in Skopje in remembrance of the deportation of Macedonian Jews, was attended by PM Borisov, who expressed regrets, but categorically refused to accept any responsibility of the Bulgarian state (Bulgarian Presidency.eu).

The role of the people in the rescue is a particularly delicate one. True, the rescue of Jews in the old territory of the Kingdom of Bulgaria is due largely to vigorous actions initiated by the country's civil society. However, this civil society, as such, is not included within the politically-charged term "people" (*khorata*), which connotes the people as a whole; however, the truth is far more complicated than that. The saga comprises three episodes, each one with its own character and significance, somewhat unconnected, and involving different actors.

Episode One: Responses to the Law for the Protection of the Nation

The first episode dates from October through November, 1940, when the Law for the Protection of the Nation (Закон за защита на нацията) was drafted and sent to the National

Assembly for review. This Law consisted of several parts, but it was no secret that the essential part was Part II, entitled “On people of Jewish descent.” Proof of this is the fact that protests against the Law were specifically focused on this part (although the Law included other formal limitations, as, for example, a statement against the Freemasons). The first reaction against the Law for the Protection of the Nation came from the Jewish council, known as the Consistory, which protested against nationalism in Bulgarian government and society. Petitions, letters and declarations against the Law were signed by a group of Bulgarian writers; the Bulgarian Association of Lawyers; a host of public figures, including Hristo Punev, Janko Sakazov, Dimo Kazasov, and Stojan Kosturkov; and some members of the opposition party in the parliament, including Petko Staynov and Nikola Mushanov. Most notably, on November 15, 1940, the entire Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church petitioned the government to treat Bulgarian citizens of Jewish origin who had converted, or were willing to do so, in the same manner as Christian Bulgarians. The petition was signed by all the metropolitan bishops included Metropolitan Kiril of Plovdiv, who had written a pamphlet condemning antisemitism two years earlier (Yad Vashem).

It should be noted that the 1930s brought about a marked increase in the interest of justice among the Bulgarian intelligentsia, which began to form professional associations that affirmed ideas and principles of tolerance, respecting other nations and religions and rejecting anti-Semitism. Some political parties, such as the Radical-Democratic and the Democratic Party, even incorporated specific texts affirming these ideals in their programs. The atmosphere of tolerance and friendship towards the Jewish population that this created was the basis for the generally unanimous reaction by the intelligentsia against the Law for the Protection of the Nation. To clarify, most Jews lived in cities, accounting for roughly 15% of the population in Sofia and Plovdiv, Bulgaria’s second largest city, and was thus fully integrated with the Bulgarian society, creating close relations among intellectuals. Many Jews were involved in liberal and intellectual professions: doctors, lawyers, journalists, musicians, artists. In 1937, journalist Buko Piti published a brochure titled “Bulgarian Public Figures Against Racism and Anti-Semitism,” which contained sixty statements by intellectuals and public figures from various circles affirming the lack of anti-Semitism in Bulgaria and appealing for open-mindedness and religious tolerance (Chary: 33).

In such an atmosphere, the reaction of the intelligentsia against the Law for the Protection of the Nation came as no surprise. It was a natural response without significant thought or necessity for organization. From October 20, 1940, until the end of November, 1940, as the Law’s review was nearing an end, the National Assembly was overwhelmed with protests from writers, lawyers, and public figures. Artists such as Jules Pascin (née Julius Mordecai Pincas), David Peretz, and especially by composer Pancho Vladigerov, composer of the patriotic “Bulgarian Rhapsody Vardar” (1922), which echoed Bulgarian aspirations following the Treaty of Neuilly-sur-Seine (1919), also voiced their resistance. However, due to media censorship against all newspapers and radio stations that were not openly pro-government (and hence pro-German), the public at large was shielded from their dissent. Unfortunately, this first episode lacked the involvement of any MPs from the majority party, such as famous rescuer Dimităr Pešev, who confessed in his memoirs that he initially believed the draft law to be a necessity. As historical fact reflects, resistance was futile. As a result, the Law for the Protection

of the Nation was adopted and entered into force on January 23, 1941, ratified legally by the decree of King Boris III.

The Second Episode: 1941-1943

The second episode dates from January 1941 through March 1943, at which time the plan for the deportation of all Jews from the Kingdom of Bulgaria and its annexed territories became evident. The first reaction erupted in Kyustendil, birthplace of Dimităr Pešev, Vice President of the National Assembly, who would later receive the honor of Israel's Righteous. At that time, Jako Baruch organized Jewish representatives of the community, who, in turn, obtained support not only from Pešev and other local civil authorities, including Vladimir Kurtev (who would become another honoree of Israel's Righteous), Assen Sjuišmesov, and Ivan Momčilov. Pešev wrote a letter to the Prime Minister in defense of Jews, collecting forty-two supporting signatures from other MPs among the ruling majority. His letter is on display in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, in Washington D.C. (Ragaru).

At the same time, a revolutionary atmosphere was looming in Plovdiv. The Jewish community had already been herded to the railroad station for deportation; however, Metropolitan Kiril, hierarch of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, joined their ranks. Assuming the role of a leader, he dispatched a dramatic telegram to the King, effectively preventing the deportation from taking place. There can be no doubt that the open defiance demonstrated by Orthodox clergy played a decisive part in postponing the relocations. This episode did not include organized participation by the intelligentsia, who had been divided over the annexation of Macedonia and Thracian territories in April, 1941; for one segment saw the realization of a Bulgarian national ideal for unification after WWI and the Treaty of Neuilly,² while the other saw a potential act of solidarity with Jews, the historic significance of which was underestimated at that time.

A review of newspapers published between the signing of the Law and March 1943, reveals a lack of concern for Jews and silence on the issue of Jewish persecution. The deportation plan seemed to be buried deep, if not altogether missing from the news. Newspapers like *Mir*, *Zora*, *Utro*, and others covered Germany's victories all over Europe, but never denounced its war against Jews. As late as February 1943, only a month before the planned deportation of Bulgaria's Jews, *Mir* was publishing engagement and wedding announcements for people of Jewish descent, and advertising a biography of Albert Einstein, who had long left Germany to escape the Nazis, among newly published books. Casual readers never suspected what was about to occur.

The fact that the printed media chose to act as a mouthpiece for the government, self-censoring so as not to aggravate the Jewish problem, is indisputable. This politics of silence may be viewed as censorship, but it may also be the result of what Adolf-Heinz Beckerle, German Ambassador to Bulgaria Sofia, bitterly called in his diary "disinterest on the part of the Bulgarians to resolve the Jewish question" (Toškova). Even Pešev's attempt to intervene with his letter to Prime Minister Filov remained practically unknown to the general public, the

² The Treaty of Neuilly-sur-Seine, signed Nov. 27, 1919, required Bulgaria, part of the Quadruple Alliance during WWI, to cede land in western Thrace, eastern Serbia, and southeastern Romania. They were able to reoccupy some of the lands during the Second World War.

consequences of which remained unknown even to Pešev himself. When Filov, in accord with King Boris III, organized his urgent counterattack resulting in the withdrawal of the MPs' signatures, the March 27, 1943 issue of *Zora* published the following brief announcement:

From the National Assembly: Yesterday the National Assembly voted on the proposal by MP Dr. Al. Popov to call for a vote of no confidence concerning the Vice President of the National Assembly, Mr. Dim. Pešev. The proposal was accepted by majority vote.

In the press, stories of large-scale anti-Jewish campaigns were few. From the debates over the Law for the Nation's Defense in autumn, 1940, to the beginning of 1943, hardly any mention was made of the deportations from Macedonia and Aegean Thrace. However, anti-Jewish articles and correspondence were published toward the end of this period, accusing Jews of speculation and mercantilism – anti-Semitic propaganda that enforced negative stereotypes during a strategic moment during the anti-Jewish persecutions. One radio commentary reported, "There needs to be an end to sentimentalism. There are intelligent people who cry over the destiny of the Jews . . . the Jewish question is not merely an economic question, it is also a question of the biological destruction of the Jews."³

At this point it is important to mention the well-known Soap Affair of 1942, in which industrialists Leon and Raphael Arié were accused and condemned to death for market speculation. They were hanged on April 16, 1943, after pleas for mercy were rejected by the King Boris III. The Arié's were condemned for secretly stockpiling 600 dozen pieces of hidden soap – soap produced in their own factory. There were hundreds of others trials in the same period, in which Jews were charged for similar crimes, all covered by the press for the purpose of generating anti-Semitic feelings in Bulgarian society. The King and the government of Filov had decided that a propaganda campaign was necessary to prepare for the planned deportation of Jews, which would take place in March, 1943.

The Third Episode: The Events of 1943

The third episode relates further to deportation efforts in 1943. It is no mere coincidence that announcements were issued on the eve of National Education Day, May 24th, Bulgaria's most important cultural holiday, which celebrates the creation of the Cyrillic alphabet by Sts. Cyril and Methodius. At that time, Jews living in Sofia received an order to leave the capital city within three days and depart for several small cities and villages close to the northern border. From there, Jews could be deported more easily. They would be herded on ships and transported down the Danube river, following some 4,000 Jews from occupied northern Greece, which had been deported four months earlier. This time, the alert from Sofia was sounded by rabbis Daniel S. Zion and Asher Hananel, as Jewish religious leaders rushed to seek support from all levels of national authority.

The King refused to meet with Jewish leaders. He abandoned Sofia on May 23, thus absenting himself from the dramatic development of events. By contrast, Metropolitan Stefan met with the rabbis and joined them in raising the cry. Preaching his annual National

³ Bulgarian National broadcast, ΔΑΑ (State Archives Agency, records of broadcast emissions from 1943), <http://archives.bnr.bg>.

Education Day sermon before some ten thousand people at the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in the Sofia's historic city center, Metropolitan Stefan publicly reprimanded Bulgarian authorities for their actions towards the Jews and expressed sorrow that more Jewish students could not take part in celebrating the national holiday. He also wrote an official letter to the King, who kept refusing to meet with him, and so handed it to Pavel Gruev, the King's personal secretary and closest advisor. Stefan boldly wrote to the King-in-hiding, "Do not persecute so that you yourself will not be persecuted. Your measures shall be returned to you. I know, Boris, that from heaven God will keep watch over your actions (Yad Vashem). Stefan's act of public insolence presented the communists with an opportunity to assume a global policy position against the Bulgarian government by involving themselves in the plight of Jews. Representatives of the right-wing majority, including with Pešev, whose role as a government dissident was terminated after drafting his letter of opposition, did not take part in rescue actions. Despite growing resistance, the authorities herded Sofia's Jews into designated small towns and villages in northern Bulgaria. Their sudden removal from major urban centers, where they might receive support from the Church and the intelligentsia. In the end, Sofia's and Plovdiv's Jews were not delivered to the Germans. The deportation was postponed again and again until. Finally, with the death of King Boris, the allied invasion of Italy, and the fear of an invasion of the Balkans, the order was cancelled altogether. In September 1944, with the Red Army closing in on Bulgaria's borders, the new Bulgarian government declared war on Germany (Yad Vashem).

Attempts at Resistance: The Case of Dimităr Pešev

The historical record lacks evidence for any organized program of resistance. The only Bulgarian institution to actively denounce discrimination and persecution of the Jewish community was its state Orthodox Church. Its efforts were actualized not only by its hierarchy, but taken up by many of its priests as well. This support was surely welcomed by Bulgarian Jewry, who refused to take a passive role under authority of the King and government, doing everything possible – sometimes the seemingly impossible – to inspire Bulgarian civil society to act. Some Bulgarian Jews reluctantly "decorated" their chests with the degrading yellow stars; others pinned their stars in place of their earned military decorations. However, they refused to give up on a country they accepted as their own, as shown by the fact that their resistance lacked any real political leadership (Lustiger).

The highest ranking civil official to resist his government's anti-Jewish actions was MP Dimităr Pešev, Vice President of the National Assembly. Pešev's extensive moral merit was evidenced when he assumed great personal risk by leading a campaign to rescue Kyustendil's Jewish population from deportation. As MP from the ruling majority, Pešev became a true dissident.⁴ In preparing his decisive letter to claim annulation of the deportation of Jews, Pešev realized that a public, collective action was necessary, and managed to collect forty-two MP signatures on a letter he quickly drafted and sent to the Prime Minister. Unfortunately, PM Bogdan Filov was unwilling to meet with Pešev, which led the dissenting MPs to withdraw their signatures. Pešev, too, was forced to withdraw from this lack of support, thus aborting

⁴ This was not the first time that Pešev had opposed the King. Several years earlier, as Minister of Justice, Pešev refused to confirm the death sentence of Damjan Velčev, a military officer, opposed by the Monarchy.

the protest movement. Because of his actions, Pešev was immediately demoted from his position, thereby terminating his upward climb in the party. The betrayal of the forty-two MPs not only prevented Pešev from becoming de facto leader of the protest, but prevented the protest from becoming a significant political act. This, giving credit to these forty-two Members of Parliament for an act of defiance seems unwarranted.

When the Law for the Nation's Defense was finally voted upon, only left-of-center MPs voted against it, namely Todor Poljakov, Ljuben Djukmedziev, Nikola Sakarov, Nikola Mušanov, and Petko Stajnov (Ragaru). Pešev's act of resistance against the regime of Filov and King Boris III had struck at the very heart of power. Pešev was certainly no Klaus von Stauffenberg – the German officer, who organized an unsuccessful attempt to assassinate Hitler – and his letter failed to affect the positions of Filov and the King. However, there were secondary consequences, perhaps more significant than the protest itself. Having been written by a member of the majority and supported (albeit temporarily) by forty-two MPs – one quarter of the government's MPs – the letter represented a symbolic, but active stand against the pro-German politics of government and King. Needless to say, members of the opposition MPs including Petko Stajnov and Nikola Mušanov, lacked political influence at the time. However, they did have the stage at the National Assembly, and they used it to share the secret plans of the government and the royal court in hopes of undermining the population's trust in the righteousness of the government's actions (Ragaru).

Justice demands observance of the fact that during the spring of 1943, when the entire Jewish population of Europe was subjected to the fiercest levels of persecution, there was a politician named Dimităr Pešev who openly stood up in opposition to his King and government's anti-Jewish measures. The Bulgarian nation had opposition that exerted its political right to protest – circumstances unthinkable for any other country subject to the German alliance. Paradoxically, this weakness of the Boris III – Filov regime opened up opportunities for resistance, which Pešev and hierarchs of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church exploited to the utmost.

The Role of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church in Support of Jews

All of this provides the background for highlighting the most effective actors in the resistance, namely the hierarchs and clergy of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC). In the debate on the fate of Jews, the BOC faced a well-organized state machinery, which it attempted to influence with unusually firm and constant pressure, beginning with open protest against the Law for the Nation's Defense. Displaying strong opposition to the law, the BOC continued to exert pressure until the complete cessation of anti-Jewish activities in September 2, 1944, as the Soviet Army neared the Bulgarian border.

During this entire war period, the BOC had a rather complicated and adversarial relationship with the royal court and the government, which together had denied the church's right to elect a Patriarch. Hierarchs, most notably Sofia's Metropolitan Stefan, Plovdiv's Metropolitan Kiril, and Vidin's Metropolitan Neophyte, had openly opposed the King on church-related matters; now they were publicly challenging Bulgaria's pro-German policy. Fully aware of putting the church's internal affairs at risk, the Bulgarian metropolitans took a moral and political stance in favor of Bulgarian Jews. It was the kind of choice that not one single religious institution in Europe, nor any single official organization as a whole, can claim

to have done. The clergy and hierarchy of the BOC steadfastly maintained its unprecedented position on behalf of Jews, both in word and deed.

Kiril's and Stefan's heroic efforts in support of Sofia's and Plovdiv's rabbis include, among other things, dispatching stern letters and telegrams to the King urging him to stop the deportation; Kiril's public proclamation that he would place himself with the Jews on the trains; and together their written directives to parish priests to open the doors of churches and monasteries in order to provide sanctuary for Jews. These are not urban legends and secondhand stories, but well-documented facts. The effect of these exceptionally dramatic and public efforts stirred the emotions of people, who, inspired by these spiritual leaders, rallied around them in action, momentarily transforming a call for action into a cause. The fact that all eleven metropolitans of the BOC's Holy Synod, despite usual disparities and conflicts, managed to reach agreement on joint resistance against the anti-Jewish legislation, its implementation, and severe persecutions, is no less than astounding. *The Protocols* of the wartime holy synods (1940–1944) testify to the fierce battles fought by the BOC to protect the lives and rights of Bulgarian Jews (Taneva and Gizenko). Its exceptional content, published in 2002, challenges the myth of national salvation for all time.

In sum, it is now evident that the Bulgarian Orthodox hierarchs were the true moral exemplars of the rescue of Bulgaria's Jews, using the authority of their office to encourage society and its leaders to uphold civil decency and human rights. They not only instigated many popular protests, but exhibited their own true sense of civil disobedience, which shook the foundations of the monarchy and the government, thus forestalling the deportation of Bulgaria's Jews. In the face of such success, direct pressure on the government was implemented each time a new danger for deportation arose, thwarting the government's actions against Jews by depriving it of widespread popular support.

Conclusion

As a result of the activism of Bulgarian Orthodox Church hierarchs, mobilization within Jewish settlements, the responses by the intelligentsia, Pešev's letter, and the sharp reactions of some foreign diplomats (including the Spanish ambassador, Julio Palencia, and Swiss chargé d'affaires, Charles Rédard), the resistance movement gained enough force to tip the scales in favor of Jews. The scales were already weighted down by significant factors like the international situation and the government's internal political struggles, when on August 28, 1943, King Boris III died unexpectedly. None dared to enforce vital decisions or bear any significant responsibility. Ironically, it appears the death of King Boris III helped save Bulgarian Jews to a greater extent than any actions attributed to him while he was alive. For the latter half of 1943, a confluence of events began to arise in Bulgarian political life, the strategic goal of which was not over the fate of the Jews in Bulgaria at all, and the topic nimbly (or not so nimbly) became mythologized for political advantage.

At the time these events went virtually unnoticed, but later became a national catastrophe the when these government actors' efforts came to be elevated to the level of a national individual image and proclaimed as great exemplars of Bulgarian humanity. In light of this, the use of the term "people" is little more than a socio-historic illusion when it comes to the role of delivering Bulgaria's Jews. Specifically, it was the Bulgarian Orthodox Church that inspired the greatest and most effective calls for action, including Metropolitan Kiril's participation in

the spontaneous demonstrations in Plovdiv; and Metropolitan Stefan's public statement at the second deportation attempt, the ensuing demonstration that even communists joined, and his directive to open the doors of the churches and monasteries as places of refuge for persecuted Jews. In the fateful moment for the Bulgarian Jewry, the Church blazed the right way to incorporate people Bulgarian society and politics. The BOC formulated a cause with a moral dimension, creating a timeless historical moment, one that neither the monarchy, nor the government managed to attain. The term "people," used in the context of the history of the rescue of 48,000 Bulgarian Jews, which has long been a matter of pride for every Bulgarian, is hardly valid unless it is preceded by the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, written in capital letters and playing a decisive role for the Bulgarian Jewry during the darkest time of its history.

Epilogue: The Case of Léon and Raphael Arié

The Ariés were Bulgarian-French perfumers who founded the modern Bulgarian cosmetics industry during the first half of the twentieth century. In the late eighteenth century, following a series of pogroms in Vienna, the wealthy merchant family abandoned their home for the relative safety of the Ottoman Empire. They chose to live in the small town of Samokov, Bulgaria, where they built a large mansion, a synagogue, and a school. This house is still standing and has become a historical monument, known as Saraphskata kachta, "the House of the Bankers."⁵

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Arié family created a prosperous company based on luxury cosmetics. In 1918, they bought the French company Germandrée, which was founded by perfumer Mignot-Boucher. The Ariés had been trading in Bulgarian rose oil for over two centuries, and decided to incorporate it into their own products. As the company grew, they Ariés became major producers of soaps, powders, and perfumes, with factories in Sofia, Bucharest, and Paris.

The Arié family clan led a relatively easy life. As a rule, they did not delve into politics; however, they were active participants in Bulgarian public life during the 1920s and 1930s. In the early 1930s their peaceful took a turn for the worse, as far-right organizations emerged, spouting anti-Semitic rhetoric. One of the most anti-Semitic organizations, called "Defense of the Fatherland," proudly displayed fascist symbols and openly called for a "war on Jewishness." It was banned for a short time between 1934 and 1936, but was soon reborn as the Union of Bulgarian National Legions.⁶

The Defense of the Fatherland published its own newspaper, which always contained a section reserved for the "Jewish danger." In 1932, some of its members, including the president of the organization, kidnapped a number of prominent Jews in order to mistreat and hold them for ransom. One of their victims was Raphael Arié, who was kidnapped and abused,

⁵ I recently visited this magnificent house, which still stands next to the old Arié synagogue. Also, my latest novel, *Raphael* (Sofia: Enthusiast Books, 2017), was inspired by the lives and deaths of Raphael Arié and his uncle Léon.

⁶ It is not without concern that the Bulgarian political party, along with its eponymous newspaper, *Ataka* ("Attack") has taken up the "good tradition" of the *Ataka* of the 1930s. The modern version is led by ultranationalist Volen Siderov, a currently a member of ruling coalition in Bulgaria.

but managed to escape. The criminals, Dimităr Kalpakšiev, Toma Stojanov, and Radan Radev, were arrested by the police, tried, and sentenced to one to seven years in prison. While in prison, Kalpakšiev, a chief organizer of the criminals, found inspiration by writing anti-Semitic poetry.

Over the next ten years, times became increasingly more difficult for the Arié family, as it was for Bulgarian Jews generally. In January 1941, King Boris III signed the famous Law for the Defense of the Nation, which deprived the Jews of all their rights as citizens and confiscated their property and money. Although the Ariés lost everything, they were allowed to produce only soap for the needs of the state, but with special labels indicating “Jewish Production.”

At the same time, anti-Semitic propaganda became even more ubiquitous, as several anti-Jewish exhibitions, publications, and film screenings were organized. The film “Jüd Süß,” produced by Joseph Goebbels, Nazi Minister of Propaganda, was screened at the Royal Cinema, a Jewish owned property that had already been confiscated. The premiere was honored by Prime Minister Bogdan Filov and his wife, Evdokya Filova, who spared no praise for the film, describing it in her diary as “A strong and truthful work.” Evdokia Filova also attended an anti-Semitic exhibition staged in the center of Sofia, accompanied by Queen Jovana and the wife of German Ambassador Beckerle. To her credit the Queen refused to look at the anti-Semitic books, commenting to the ladies, “Das interessiert mich nicht.”

The anti-Semitic campaign reached its peak in October 1942. Following his trip to Berlin, King Boris III addressed the Bulgarian Parliament, issuing a specific demand, namely the liquidation of Jewish profiteers, ordering extraordinary measures of justice, and the rigorous enforcement of anti-Jewish legislation, thus initiating a reign of terror. Between November 1942 and August 1943, hundreds of Jews were accused of illegal market speculation and other crimes. By order of the King, delivered in a speech before Parliament, the Courts of Justice followed a simplified and accelerated procedure for prosecuting these cases. A blacklist was generated, and in November 1942, the Ariés found themselves on it.

In preparation for the Arié trial, prosecutors relied on the testimony of two criminals, Kalpakšiev and Toma Stojanov, both of which had been released from prison at the end of 1940, the latter having been sentenced for the kidnapping of Raphael Arié, in 1932. Shortly upon their release, both men became active members of the Union of the Bulgarian National Legions, a fascist organization. The prosecution constructed its case methodically, but it was based almost entirely on false accusations and claims, including anonymous letters entered into evidence as proof. Raphael Arié was accused of illegally keeping 90,000 Bulgarian leva from the sale of soap (equal to about 2,000 euros today). However, a receipt in the police file showed that the money was actually given as a reward to the police officer who executed his arrest.

In his closing argument, Attorney General Karagyozev requested that both Raphael and Leon Arié receive either the death penalty or life imprisonment. Presiding Judge Dimitrov sentenced them to death by hanging, appealing to the King's speech to justify the severe sentence. Thus their path to the gallows was determined. Raphael and Leon Arié were sent to their deaths over 600 dozen bars of soap, which investigators claimed they had hidden.

Raphael and Léon Arié were hanged in the courtyard of Sofia's Central Prison at 6:00 a.m., on April 16, 1943, and buried the same day in the Jewish cemetery of Sofia.

No other trial in the history of the Kingdom of Bulgaria has ever received such publicity in newspapers as the Arié trial, dubbed "The Soap Affair." The timing of the Arié trial was not chosen at random. In March 1943, the mass deportation of Jews from the territories occupied by the Kingdom of Bulgaria had begun. The first were Jews from Thrace, followed by Jews of Macedonia, and part of the former Yugoslavia, namely the town of Pirot, in southeastern Serbia. At the same time, Jews of Sofia and other cities were sent to ghettos. Jewish men were sent to forced labor camps, while all Bulgarian Jews were forced to wear yellow stars. The Jewish communities from Bulgaria and Macedonia were very close and often linked by family ties; but Macedonian Jews did not receive Bulgarian citizenship, so they were sent by the Bulgarian authorities to the concentration camps in Nazi-occupied Poland, mainly to Treblinka.

The Ariés' sentences were not the only ones of this kind. In March and April of 1943, a campaign of searching out Jewish speculators began, in which the press actively participated. Prominent newspapers with large circulations such as "Dnes," "Mir," "Utro," "Zora," and "Zaria" (the latter with close ties to the government and the King) all called for a "fight against Jewishness." On March 25, 1943, the newspaper "Zora," whose editor-in-chief Krapčev was particularly close to Prime Minister Filov, published a list of Jews who were fined one million leva for "irregularities concerning real estate." The list includes Jews from the cities of Drama, Bitola, and Skopje, some of whom had already been deported and killed in Treblinka. It also included Jews from the interior of the country, who already fled to Palestine, Argentina or the United States. This arbitrary confiscation of money was organized and implemented by Minister of Finance Bojilov.

During the Macedonian deportations, a possible escape route by way of the road to Albania, one of the few places where Jews were not being persecuted, seemed a possibility. Some Bulgarian Jews attempted to escape along this road, but were soon arrested by Bulgarian police. The newspaper "Zora," on May 11, 1943, lambasted the "criminals" who tried to escape the Law for the Defense of the Nation. Following the anti-Jewish campaign of March-April 1943, which ended with the deportation of the Jews of Macedonia, Thrace and Pirot, the remaining Bulgarian Jews clearly understood the fate that awaited them. This little article of May 10, 1943 proves it. Only after September 9, 1944, when the Red Army crossed the Danube River border of Bulgaria, did Jews who were able to do so return to their homes. Three years later they began to leave Bulgaria en masse for Palestine, and later to Israel. Today in Bulgaria, the Jewish community totals roughly 3,000 individuals; sadly, almost no one remembers the Soap Affair or the Arié family.

Bibliography

Avramov, Roumen

- 2012 "Спасение" и падение, Университетско издателство. ("Salvation" and Fall: Microeconomics of the State Antisemitism in Bulgaria, 1940-1944). Sofia: Sofia University Press "St. Kliment Ohridski."

Barenbaum, Michael

- 2012 *The Jews in Macedonia in World War II* (Evreite vo Makedonija za vreme na vtorata svetska vojna). Skopje: Holocaust Fund of the Jews from Macedonia.

Bulgarian Presidency.eu

- 2018 “Borissov stopped shortly of apologising for the deportation of 11,000 Jews from Macedonia.” *Bulgarian Presidency.eu* (March 12). Available online at <http://bulgarianpresidency.eu/borissov-stopped-shortly-of-apologising-for-the-deportation-of-11000-jews-from-macedonia>.

Cekova, Marina

- 2012 “Spaseni” (The Saved Ones) and “Anti-Jewish Legislation in Europe and Bulgaria: Legal Studies.” Journalist reports (two parts). Nova Televizija, broadcast March 10-11.

Chary, Frederick B.

- 1972 *The Bulgarian Jews and the Final Solution, 1940-1944*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Drinov, Marin

- 2007 Опыт беды и выживания. (*Experience of Ordeals and Suffering*). Sophia.

Dubova, Larisa, and Georgiy Chernjavskiy

- 2007 Опыт беды и выживания. Судба евреев Болгарии в годы Второй мировой войны. (*Experience of Misfortune and Surviving: The Fate of Bulgarian Jews during World War Two*). Sofia: Marin Drinov Academic.

Gaffney Ed

- 2012 *Empty Boxcars*. Gamut Media. DVD.

Ioanid, Radu, and Paul Shapiro

- 2004 *Final Report: International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania*. Available on the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum website at <https://www.ushmm.org/m/pdfs/20080226-romania-commission-findings-recommendations.pdf>.

Lustiger, Arno

- 2011 *Rettungswiderstand. Über die Judenretter in Europa während der NS-Zeit*. Gottingen: Wallstein.

Novak, Victor

- 1948 *Magnum Crimen: pola vijeka klerikalizma u Hrvatskoj*. Zagreb: Nakladni zavod Hrvatske. Published in English as *The Great Crime: A Half-Century of Clericalism in Croatia*, 2 volumes; Jagodina: Gambit, 2011.

Ragaru, Nadège

- 2017 “Contrasting Destinies: The Plight of Bulgarian Jews and the Jews in Bulgarian-occupied Greek and Yugoslav Territories during World War Two.” *Encyclopedia of Mass Violence* (March 15). Available online at <https://www.sciencespo.fr/mass-violence-war-massacre->

[resistance/en/document/contrasting-destinies-plight-bulgarian-jews-and-jews-bulgarian-occupied-greek-and-yugoslav-](#)

Taneva, Albena, and Ivanka Gizenko, editors

2005 *The Power of Civil Society in a Time of Genocide: Proceedings of the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church on the Rescue of the Jews in Bulgaria, 1940-1944.* Translated by Alex Taney. Sofia: Sofia University Press “St. Kliment Ohridski.”

Toškova, V., editor

1992 *Iz dnevnika na Beckerle – pulnomoshten ministur na Tretiya raib v Bulgaria* (From the Diary of [Heinz-Adolf] Beckerle, Minister Plenipotentiary of the Third Reich in Bulgaria). Sofia: Sofia University Press “St. Kliment Ohridski.”

Yad Vashem

2002 “Two Bulgarian Clergymen honored as Righteous Among the Nations.” *Yad Vashem World Holocaust Remembrance Center*. Available online at <https://www.yadvashem.org/events/12-march-2002.html>.