

## **Bulgaria's policy on the "Jewish Question" during World War II**

Undoubtedly, the genocide of the Jewish population during World War II is one of the most horrific pages in the modern history of humankind. It is entirely justified that the study of these horrific events, known by the term Holocaust, continues to arouse the interest of both the scholars and the public. The passage of time since those events in no way makes the lessons of what happened more than 80 years ago any less relevant.

Various interpretations have recently emerged in Bulgaria and abroad that do not sufficiently take into account the wealth of information on this topic in the numerous and varied historical sources, as well as the role of the leading external factor at that time. In this regard, it is necessary to build an opinion that follows the research methods established in historical science, based on authentic historical sources. For a proper understanding of the policy of the Third Bulgarian Kingdom on the issue, it is necessary to consider it in the broader context of the events taking place in Europe at the time.

### **Neutrality and Bulgaria's foreign policy goals at the beginning of World War II**

Shortly after the outbreak of the global armed conflict, on 15 September 1939, the Bulgarian government, headed by Georgi Kyoseivanov, officially announced a policy of neutrality. This stance reflected both the prevailing mood in Bulgarian society and the sincere desire of the ruling factors in Bulgaria, led by Tsar Boris III, that the country should avoid any involvement in direct hostilities and prevent a repetition of the tragedies of the Balkan Wars and especially of World War I. This goal remained a guiding one even when Bulgaria was compelled to abandon the policy of neutrality. Alongside this, however, the contradictions between the belligerent countries created preconditions for the rejection of the unjust clauses of the Treaty of Neuilly. At that point, the Bulgarian Kingdom continued to pursue the policy of peaceful revision, already established in the inter-war period, i.e., the change of the Treaty could and should be carried out only by means of diplomacy. In this respect, some success had

already been achieved: in the early 1930s, reparations payments had practically been suspended, and from 1938, the military restrictions concerning Bulgaria had been lifted as well. Nonetheless, the most complicated part had remained - the territorial changes. The changes in international relations created the feeling in Bulgarian society that positive results could be achieved in this area as well. Even before the outbreak of the war, in April 1939, the government had formulated the objectives of the territorial revision of the Treaty of Neuilly - the return of Southern Dobruja, the Western Outlands, and an Aegean Sea outlet. It was considered unrealistic at the time to raise the question of changing the borders in Macedonia, so the government had contented itself with the demand for a recognition of the Bulgarian population in that area.

The change of government in February 1940 headed by Prime Minister Prof. Bogdan Filov did not alter at all the pursued policy of neutrality or the foreign policy goals for a peaceful revision of the Treaty.

Germany's blitzkrieg in the spring and summer of 1940 and, above all, the collapse of France, the pillar of the Versailles peace system, created the conditions for retailoring some of the borders on the European continent that had been considered unjust. The Bulgarian government reckoned that the time was right to assert its territorial aspirations and in the summer of 1940 raised the issue of the return of Southern Dobruja from Romania. The reasonable Bulgarian claims were not questioned by any of the major European powers - Germany, the USSR, and Great Britain. Yet, it should be noted that the most serious backing came from Germany, which exerted direct diplomatic pressure on Bucharest to meet Bulgaria's demands. Thus, on 7 September, with the signing of the Treaty of Craiova, Bulgaria achieved an impressive success in its peaceful revision policy - it had Southern Dobruja returned within the borders of the Fatherland.

### **Establishment of the Tripartite Pact and diplomatic pressure on Bulgaria to abandon the policy of neutrality**

On 27 September 1940, Germany, Italy, and Japan concluded an alliance treaty known as the Tripartite Pact. This was not just a military coalition aimed at achieving the final victory in the war, but also a declaration to build a "new world order" resting on the totalitarian state and ideological model. In Europe, it was to be marked by the racist and anti-Semitic ideas of the leading power in the pact - National Socialist Germany. From its inception, the Tripartite Pact had been open to other European neutral states to join. In November, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia joined the Pact. Yugoslavia and Bulgaria were asked to do so. The Bulgarian government turned down the German insistence to abandon its policy of neutrality. Germany apart, the USSR also exerted pressure on Bulgarian neutrality. It tabled proposals for a treaty of mutual military assistance. Moscow declared that Bulgaria could get Eastern Thrace. Sofia rejected those invitations.

However, maintaining neutrality proved increasingly difficult after the outbreak of the Italo-Greek War in October, which turned the Balkans into an

arena of intense hostilities. Rome also called on Bulgaria to join the war with the promise that it would get Western Thrace. The Bulgarian government refused once again.

The humiliating defeat suffered by the Italian troops in Greece forced Germany to come to the rescue of its poorly performing ally. In early 1941, German diplomacy put an ultimatum-like demand that Bulgaria should determine as soon as possible on which side it stood, which conditioned the way the Wehrmacht would cross the country - as an enemy or an allied force. Sofia realized that the days of Bulgarian neutrality were numbered.

### **Adoption of anti-Semitic legislation in Bulgaria**

Confronted with an ever-increasing pressure to join the Tripartite Pact, the government in Sofia decided to take action to demonstrate that it was shifting to a policy of overt benevolent neutrality towards Nazi Germany, which controlled almost all of Europe. The hope was that by making some overtures to the Reich, the country's inclusion in the Pact could be avoided, or at least postponed. Moreover, as the British and American diplomats in Sofia noted in late 1940, the German press often wondered why Bulgaria, unlike many other European countries, was delaying the passing of laws restricting Jews and prohibiting the activities of clandestine organizations. Under those circumstances, the National Assembly passed the Law for Protection of the Nation in late December 1940. It imposed severe and humiliating restrictions on the Jewish population in Bulgaria, depriving them of most rights. Broad social strata, various organizations, and the Bulgarian Orthodox Church opposed the adoption of the law. The law had nothing to do with the legislative tradition of the Third Bulgarian Kingdom, nor was it born out of any powerful anti-Semitic sentiments in Bulgarian society. The law also banned the activities of clandestine organizations in Bulgaria, of which a number of power-holders in Sofia were members, including Prime Minister Bogdan Filov and the bill's sponsor, Interior Minister Petar Gabrovski.

However, this legislation failed to cancel Bulgaria's entry into the Tripartite Pact. On 1 March 1941, German troops entered Bulgaria and that same day, Prime Minister Filov signed the country's accession to the Pact. Nonetheless, the Bulgarian government negotiated for the endorsement of the condition that Bulgaria should not be involved in direct hostilities.

Events would soon further commit Bulgaria to the Reich. In the wake of a military coup, Yugoslavia, which had joined the Tripartite Pact on 25 March 1941, changed its position and in early April, German troops launched an offensive that resulted in Yugoslavia and Greece signing formal surrenders and Germany becoming their supreme wartime sovereign. Later, parts of Macedonia and Western Thrace were handed over to Bulgaria with the right to administer them, explicitly stressing that no changes to the state borders were involved. Their fate was to be decided after the end of the war. For this reason, Bulgaria regarded the establishment of a Bulgarian administration in the said territories as "a preliminary stage of [...] reincorporation into the mother country". Meanwhile, Germany reduced but maintained its military presence in these territories, and

the German military administrations continued to operate there alongside the Bulgarian ones, ensuring control by the German authorities.

### **The “Jewish Question” after Bulgaria’s entry into the Tripartite Pact**

Undoubtedly, the termination of neutrality and Bulgaria’s entry into the Tripartite Pact severely crippled the country’s ability to pursue an independent policy in a number of areas - mainly in foreign policy, but also in some aspects of domestic policy. As an ally of the Third Reich, the Bulgarian government had to comply with directives coming from Berlin. A large number of representatives of the German foreign policy services and the Gestapo were stationed in the country and strictly monitored whether Bulgaria was loyally fulfilling its Allied commitments. Particular attention was paid to the treatment of the Jews. For example, a number of reports by German officials noted that the Law for Protection of the Nation was not being applied with all its rigour - too few Jews were wearing the yellow star, many of the restrictive measures were not being enforced, and the regime in the labour teams where Jews were gathered was not at all strict enough, and many Jewish officers even continued to wear their army uniforms.

In 1942, the situation of the Jews deteriorated sharply. After the adoption of the “Final Solution” at the Wannsee Conference, Nazi Germany’s services were busy implementing it. Pressure also grew on Bulgaria to enhance anti-Semitic measures. A law instructed the Council of Ministers to do everything for the settlement of the “Jewish Question” and related matters, and a regulation for its implementation was passed. In late August 1942, the Commissariat for Jewish Affairs was established based on a German proposal. A staunch supporter of Nazi ideas, the anti-Semite Alexander Belev, was placed at the head of the Commissariat.

### **The deportation of Jews from the new lands**

After the German troops were repelled from North Africa, starting in late 1942, and the possibility of an Allied landing in the Balkans, a critical moment came for the Jews of the region. At the end of January 1943, Theodor Dannecker arrived in Bulgaria as Counsellor for Jewish Affairs at the German Embassy. He came with the mission to arrange the deportation of the Jews of Vardar Macedonia and Western Thrace, but he also intended to include the Jews of Bulgaria.

Bulgaria’s position on the question of the Macedonian and Western Thrace Jews was mainly determined by the international status of these areas, which were parts of Yugoslavia and Greece conquered by Germany. The administrative status and powers of the Bulgarian authorities were quite clearly outlined by the signing of several important documents. The one known in history as the Clodius-Popov Agreement was the most significant of them. It was signed on 24 April 1941, and defined precisely who the supreme ruler in Vardar Macedonia

was. It stipulated that the natural resources were to be processed in German enterprises and exported to the Reich, the property of the enemy states as well as the confiscations carried out to that date remaining entirely in Germany's favour. Article 5 of the document read that Bulgaria could not oppose sending people from the area to work in Germany.

Having assumed the administration of the new lands, Bulgaria put Bulgarian legislation into effect there and, on its initiative, granted Bulgarian citizenship to people of Bulgarian origin. Although people of non-Bulgarian origin were allowed the option to choose their citizenship, and the local Jews were refused the possibility to change their Yugoslav and Greek citizenship, the German Army Command South-East protested against the citizenship regulation on the grounds that it was at least "questionable whether Bulgaria has the right to settle citizenship in the newly liberated lands before there is a peace treaty affecting the fate of these lands". For this reason, the German Command South-East "demands that the regulation of citizenship in the newly liberated lands should be abolished". Although they were trying to administer the districts as an integral part of Bulgaria, this in no way meant that the Bulgarian authorities could disregard the agreements concluded with Germany. Until the end of its presence in the area, the Bulgarian administration did not allow itself to use any of the resources allocated for Germany as specified in the documents. Regardless of how Bulgaria viewed these lands, during that period Berlin fully considered them as territories directly under the power of Germany and the Jews living there as subjects of defeated countries and fully applied German law to them. Significantly, after the Wannsee Conference and the ensuing collection of information on the Jewish population in Europe, the Jews of these areas were listed in German statistical documents as a category and number within the total numbers for Yugoslavia (Serbia) and Greece, completely separate from those in Bulgaria. Actually, what the German official requested from Bulgaria was not permission, but involvement in rounding up these Jews from their homes and transporting them to the transit camps in Lom and Skopje, where the German authorities officially took over, and carried out the deportation with transport of their own.

Nowadays the question is asked whether the Bulgarian state could and should have refused to participate and sabotaged the action prepared by Dannecker. Undoubtedly, such an action would have been an impressive moral act that would have gone down in golden letters in Bulgarian history. The problem is to what extent this would have been possible in the early spring of 1943, at a time when the country was striving to achieve its main objectives - maintaining its sovereignty, national reunification, and non-involvement in hostilities. Moreover, opposition to German plans in that period posed a substantial risk that, through German intervention, an extreme pro-Nazi government would be established in the country, as was later the case in Hungary, with disastrous consequences for the whole society. Besides, it must be borne in mind that at the same time Bulgaria was secretly negotiating with the Western Allies for its withdrawal from the Axis and the sending of large numbers of Jews to Palestine.

## **The Rescue of the Bulgarian Jews**

Compared to the Macedonian and Western Thracian Jews, the issue of the deportation of Jews from the state borders stood differently. Dannecker presented his plan and insisted on rounding up the number of deported Jews to 20,000, i.e., along with those 12,000-odd from the “new lands”, another 8,000-odd from Bulgaria proper to be handed over. The plan was vigorously supported by Commissioner Belev. But as the German Ambassador Beckerle noted, during Dannecker’s very first meeting with the Interior Minister, held on 2 February, Gabrovski stated that at that time deporting Jews from the old frontiers was out of the question - they were needed for the construction of roads and railways. In order to make clear the Bulgarian political position on the Jews with Bulgarian citizenship, on 16 February Prime Minister Filov told Ambassador Beckerle: “The Jews from Sofia and old Bulgaria will be mobilized first of all in labour activities for the Bulgarian interest”. Over the twenty days that followed, the German diplomats exerted strong pressure and the Council of Ministers voted to expel up to 20,000 Jews from the so-called “new lands”. Belev started frantically organizing the deportation, trying to keep it secret given the anticipated unfavourable public reaction. Soon, however, preparations for sending Bulgarian Jews out of the country became known. The rescue actions started in town of Kyustendil. The Jewish community turned to its prominent fellow citizens and sought their support. Asen Suichmezov, Vladimir Kurtev, and Ivan Momchilov responded. Together with MP Petar Mikhalev, they travelled to the capital and familiarized the Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly Dimitar Peshev with the situation. On 9 March, a delegation of MPs headed by Peshev held a meeting with Interior Minister Gabrovski to brief him on the situation. After a telephone conversation, presumably with King Boris III, the Interior Minister ordered that the measures within the old borders be suspended. More protests were staged against the deportation. In Plovdiv, Metropolitan Cyril strongly opposed the rounding up of the Jews in a local school and cabled his protest to King Boris. Later, the Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and various representatives of cultural, scientific, and civil organizations declared their opposition. The highlight of the action was the petition initiated by Peshev of 43 deputies, mostly from the parliamentary majority, but also signed by representatives of the opposition.

Two things are striking in the events related to the protests against the deportation of Bulgarian Jews. First, this was not a purely public initiative. It involved representatives of official institutions, such as the parliament and the Church, and they expressed their opinion precisely as representatives of these institutions. The most important event was staged by the National Assembly Deputy Speaker Peshev, for which he later had to pay the political price for his actions, namely his removal from that post. It is impressive to note the all too rapid cancellation of the action to prepare the deportation. The Interior Minister cancelled the action taken by the Commissariat at the very first meeting with the parliamentary delegation, before any public appearances had begun.

In this complex situation, the role of the monarch, King Boris III, was of utmost importance. Being the person in control of the main centres of power,



his decision was undoubtedly decisive for the outcome of events. In addition to his order to halt the deportations, nearly a month later, after a personal meeting with Hitler, the Tsar would tell the German Foreign Minister Ribbentrop that he “only wanted to get rid of an insignificant number of Bolshevik-Communist elements” and would not authorize the deportation of Bulgarian Jews who would be used in the labour drafts to build infrastructure. Moreover, at that meeting he even dared to declare to an anti-Semite that Bulgarian Jews, who were predominantly Sephardic, had never played a negative role in Bulgarian history.

After the March events, Belev continued to make plans for the deportation of Bulgarian Jews, but his ideas did not find the necessary support in the ruling circles and in the autumn of 1943, he was forced to step down. Although the deportation of Jews from the capital to the countryside, which had begun in May, was seen by many as a preparation for a subsequent deportation to Nazi camps, in view of Tsar Boris III’s declaration to Ribbentrop a month and a half earlier, it can be said that it was actually aimed at keeping the large Jewish community of Sofia from attracting the attention of the numerous German diplomats in the capital. Contrary to German demands, the Jews were not concentrated but scattered in small groups around the country. Alongside those measures, the massive use of able-bodied Jewish men in labour teams continued. This fact became the strongest argument in the government’s stance not to deport the Bulgarian Jews. The situation did not change after the death of Tsar Boris III. Once the Germans realized the failure of their plan to deport Bulgarian Jews in September 1943, Dannecker was recalled from Bulgaria.

### **The transit of Jews through Bulgaria to Palestine**

During those fateful years for European Jewry, the name of Bulgaria was associated with another very important event that allowed thousands of Jews to find salvation from the Holocaust zone - emigration to Palestine. Throughout World War II, Bulgaria was one of the main corridors for *Aliyah Bet* (illegal emigration). The process had begun in the days immediately before the outbreak of the war, with streams of Jews fleeing Central Europe heading for the Bulgarian ports of Ruse, Varna and Burgas, from where they made the perilous journey to the shores of Palestine in Bulgarian ships, some flying foreign flags. In the period since the beginning of the war, more than 7,500 Jews passed through the country’s waters on the sea route. Another 4,000 used the railways and headed for Turkey and thence to Palestine. After Bulgaria’s accession to the Pact, the conditions for the transit of Jews became more complicated. The presence of a large number of German officials, as well as the establishment of double border control (i.e., a German checkpoint as well) at the Bulgarian-Turkish border created numerous obstacles and risks for the immigrants. However, despite the additional obstacles to issuing transit visas, the Bulgarian consular offices in Bucharest, Budapest and elsewhere, with the consent of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Denominations leadership, issued thousands of transit visas that became a ticket to salvation.

Another telling fact about the attitude of the Bulgarian authorities towards emigration were the negotiations between the Bulgarian and British authorities, through the mediation of the Swiss government, to arrange the despatch of 4,000 Jewish children accompanied by 500 adults to Palestine. At the same time, when in February 1943 Dannecker prepared the deportation of the Macedonian and Western Thrace Jews, the Bulgarian government undertook to provide the railway transport and the necessary sanitary conditions for the transfer of 4,500 people to Turkey. Eventually, because of the lack of discretion on the British side and the delayed reaction of Turkey, the German authorities learned about the negotiations and vigorously interfered with the Bulgarian authorities, which were forced to reduce the transit of large groups of Jews.

All these examples clearly show that the Bulgarian institutions, and more specifically the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Denominations, did not share the Nazi ideas of the "Final Solution".

Throughout 1944, there was an increasingly noticeable weakening of the pressure on the Jewish population in the country. The transit of Jews by sea, which took place mainly on Bulgarian ships from Romanian ports, increased. The conditions for the issue of Bulgarian transit visas were relaxed to the maximum. In August, under the government of Ivan Bagryanov, the anti-Jewish measures were abolished and the Commissariat for Jewish Affairs virtually ceased its activities.

The following main conclusions can be drawn in regard to Bulgaria's policy on the "Jewish Question" in the years of World War II:

- **Anti-Semitic legislation** was introduced and implemented in Bulgaria. This policy line was a consequence of the influence of the external factor, in this case Hitler's Germany, which at that time dominated almost all of Europe and universally imposed racist and anti-Semitic ideology. Anti-Semitic measures were introduced in all countries under the direct or indirect control of the Reich, and Bulgaria was no exception in this regard. However, the Law for Protection of the Nation had one significant difference from the Nuremberg legislation - Bulgarian Jews were not deprived of their citizenship and were not to be expelled.

- **The deportation of the Jews from Vardar Macedonia and Western Thrace** was solely and entirely a German initiative. The Bulgarian authorities were involved in the preliminary stage of this action as a result of the conditions laid down as early as April 1941, under which Bulgaria assumed the administration of these territories belonging to the Reich. This assertion is confirmed by the judgments in the Eichmann, Beckerle, and Fritz von Hahn trials, which did not impute guilt to the Bulgarian Kingdom.

- **The rescue of the Bulgarian Jews** was a courageous act of opposition to the German policy of implementing the "Final Solution". It came as a result of the interaction of representatives of state institutions, public organizations, individual groups, and persons. This synchronicity of action determined the lasting nature of Bulgaria's refusal to send its Jews to the death camps.

- The almost unhindered **transit** that the Bulgarian state provided to Jews fleeing the Holocaust zone, including in the worst years - 1942-1944 - is eloquent proof that the government did not share the extreme anti-Semitic policy of the Third Reich.



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