

Jewry Related Discourse in Bulgaria Between the First and the Second World Wars

The article is dealing with the position of the Jewish minority in Bulgaria in the period between the First and the Second World Wars, which is not well presented issue in foreign and even the Bulgarian historiography. Most of the literature is dedicated to the Second World War but very little attention is paid to the problem of anti-Semitism in Bulgaria before 1941. The author of the article is trying to prove that the rescue of 50,000 citizens of Jewish origin in Bulgaria, which was a Nazi ally during the World War II was not a "miracle" but a result of a long-lasting tradition. The rare tolerance towards the Jews in Bulgaria over the centuries was reaffirmed in the 20th century when in comparison to the anti-Semitic wave sweeping through Europe Bulgaria saved its Jews and prevented them from becoming victims of the "final solution" during the Holocaust.

Introduction

The position of Bulgaria's Jewish minority in the period between the First and the Second World Wars has not been properly researched not only in Bulgarian but in foreign historiography either¹. With very few exceptions, scholars have given little attention to the problem of anti-Semitism in Bulgaria before 1941, being focused on the treatment of Jews during the Second World War. The topic is partially explored in some general works on anti-Semitism in the era when Fascism and Nazism were imposed and spread as ideology and practice throughout the Old Continent. Most of the literature dealing with the Jewry-related discourse in Bulgaria is dedicated to the Second World War when, following the introduction of Anti-Jewish legislation (similar to the German Nuremberg laws) in 1940 and some deportations in 1943, anti-Semitism reached its peak in Bulgarian history².

¹ There are just several articles in Bulgarian historiography, dedicated to it, but they deal mainly with the socio-economic aspects of the Jewish life or with specific Jewish municipalities in the country. Most of them are published in the periodical *Yearbook. Almanac of the History of Jews in Bulgaria /Годишник. Алманах за история на евреите в България/*.

² There is a huge literature on the topic: CHARY, Frederick. 1972. *The Bulgarian Jews and the Final Solution, 1940-1944*. University of Pittsburgh Press; Борбата на българския народ за защита и спасяване на евреите в България през Втората световна война. Документи и материали, 1978. София; БАРУХ, Нир. 1991. *Откупът. Цар Борис и съдбата на*

The persecution and annihilation of six million Jews during the Second World War casted a shadow over European life, morality and law and is one of the darkest episodes in the history of the Old Continent. But there were many cases where people did help the persecuted Jews and saved their lives. In recent years, increasing attention has been devoted to such cases. Even in Poland and Croatia, there were individuals, Church leaders, or organisations helping the Jews. In Denmark and Finland the Jews survived unscathed. In that course of thoughts, the Bulgarian experience was not unique. As Frederick Chary compares “Denmark was more dramatic and courageous, Italy more persistent, Finland more thorough”³. The Bulgarian Jews, like many Rumanian and Italian Jews, and all of the Finnish Jews, were saved because these countries were allies to the Reich, rather than defeated by it. Final Solution was Nazi plan, not the one of its allies. The association of fascism with anti-Semitism is not a scientific fact⁴. The Jews had the better chances for survival in the allied countries than in the occupied, because here the German intervention was not direct, but through the foreign office and diplomacy⁵. In Greece and Serbia, neighboring Bulgaria and occupied by the Wehrmacht the Jews were almost completely destroyed⁶.

българските евреи. София; БОЯДЖИЕВ, Христо. 1991. *Спасяването на българските евреи*. София; LEVY, Solomons. 1993/1994. *The Saving of the Bulgarian Jews: Facts, Timing and Interpretation*. *Годишник*, XXVII; КОЕН, Давид. (състав.) 1995. *Оцеляването. Сборник документи 1940-1944*. София; *Спасяването на българските евреи през Втората световна война. Международен симпозиум в памет на д-р Илко Ескенази*, 1995. София; БАР-ЗОАР, Михаел. 1999. *Извън хватката на Хитлер. Героичното спасяване на българските евреи*, София; КАЗАКОВ, Емил. 1999. *Спасяването на евреите в България и националният въпрос (геополитическа интерпретация)*. *Годишник XXXII*, ПАУНОВСКИ, Владимир, Йосиф ИЛЕЛ. 2000. *Евреите в България между унищожението и спасението*. София; KHIVAROV, Nikolai. 2000. *Die Bulgarisch-Orthodoxe Kirche und die Rettung der Bulgarischen Juden. Österreichische Osthefte* Vol. 42, Issue 1: 35-55; TODOROV, Tzvetan. 2001. *The Fragility of Goodness: Why Bulgaria's Jews Survived the Holocaust*. London; MOSSEK, Moshe. 2001. *The Bulgarian Church and the Jews during the Second World War*. *Shvut* Vol.10: 280-298; BAROHN, Emmy. (ed.). 2003. *History and Memory. Bulgaria: Facing the Holocaust*. Sofia; *Обречени и спасени. България в антисемитската програма на третия Райх. Изследвания и документи*. 2007. София; КАЛЧЕВА, Дора. 2008. *Холокостът в Третия райх и неговите съюзници*. София; ПОППЕТРОВ, Николай. 2008. *Фашизмът в България*. София; HOLLANDER, Ethan. 2008. *The Final Solution in Bulgaria and Romania: A Comparative Perspective*. *East European Politics and Societies*, 22/2: 203–248; ЕЛДЪРОВ, Светлозар. 2010. *Българската православна църква срещу расизма и антисемитизма в навечерието и по време на Втората световна война*. В *Българи, България, български съдби*. София.

³ CHARY 1972: 194.

⁴ Fascist Italy and Francoist Spain protected the Jews from the Nazis, even not only their citizens but some in other countries too. See CHARY 1972: 194.

⁵ Exception among the occupied lands is Denmark where the entire Jewish population was transported safely to Sweden. See CHARY 1972: 194.

⁶ In Serbia 20,000 of a total of 23,000 Jews were killed before 1942 and Nazis sent almost all of 53,000 Jews living in Salonika to Auschwitz (most of Greece's 74,000 Jews). See CHARY 1972: 195.

However, one of the most remarkable examples of rescue occurred in Bulgaria where a series of petitions, individual letters of protest and public demonstrations against anti-semitic measures prevented the deportation of the population of Jewish origin (around 50,000) – they were rescued and not sent outside the country for extermination. Various commentators have pointed out that this was the only case where Jews largely survived within a country that was in the pro-German camp and where, at the end of the war, there were more Jews living than before it started⁷.

But that undisputable fact got political explanations in different periods of time. Soon after the “revolution of 1944” the salvation of Bulgarian Jews was a “taboo-topic” because the members of the Parliament who had helped for the salvation of the Bulgarian Jews were sentenced by the People’s Tribunal. Later the Bulgarian pre-1989 regime asserted that Bulgaria was „the only European country“ overrun by Hitlerite fascism in which the life and security of the Jews were „completely preserved“ and that was used with political purposes for decades. M. Bar-Zoar, B. Ardit, N. Baruh, S. Levy, and other authors from Jewish origin wrote quite positively about Bulgaria in the 1990s, and highly praised the rescue of the Bulgarian Jews⁸. Other scholars share different opinion, as the writer and ambassador of Bulgaria in other countries Lea Koen, the historian with German origin Marcus Wien⁹, etc.

But this controversy is more a political issue rather than historical investigation. There is still a debate who was involved in the rescue. For many years the Communist party was imposing the notion it was the Jewish “savior”¹⁰. But in the 1950s other thesis merged in the Bulgarian émigré press - that the King Boris III was the person responsible for preventing the deportation of Bulgarian Jews to Poland¹¹. Others claim he was anti-Semite and pro-Nazi and only the oppositional pressure prevented him from deporting the Jews. After 1990 the debate was taken up in Bulgaria itself¹². Another opinion transferred the credit for the salvation to the whole society. Different authors will always give different answer to this issue, but it is an inappropriate one, because the essence is the very fact of the rescue of the Jews in war-time Bulgaria.

⁷ For many years the saving of Bulgarian Jews was a well-known fact only among professional historians, because of the country’s isolation beyond the Iron Curtain. Western public knew nothing about it. Only the Danish and the Finish case (the rescue of 6,000 Jews and 2,000 respectively) were praised and celebrated. See ПЕШИЕВ 2004: 254; BAROUH (ed.). 2003: 35-36, 47; ПЕШИЕВ 2004: 254.

⁸ TODOROV 2001: 14.

⁹ Many scholars still argue that Bulgaria did not do everything possible to rescue its Jews. They point out that the Bulgarians deported 12,000 Jews from Macedonia, Western Thrace and Pirot, so-called „the newly liberated lands“. See ATAOV 1994: 51-56; WIEN 1999.

¹⁰ That was a true lie because in 1943 it was banned and subjected to government repression and had very little influence in the country.

¹¹ The notion was imposed by Benjamin Ardit, a Bulgarian Jew who had emigrated to Israel.

¹² For the debate see TODOROV 2001: 18.

But was Bulgaria free of anti-Semitism that it could save its Jews during the war? The decision of the government to resist Nazi Germany's demands in the spring of 1943 to deport the Bulgarian Jews did not take place in a vacuum. Actually, there was a long history of tolerance towards them in Bulgarian lands¹³. It was reaffirmed in the first half of the 20th century when the country was not affected by the anti-Semitic wave sweeping through Europe¹⁴. What happened in Poland and Ukraine, where the local population persecuted the Jews with great passion, never occurred in Bulgaria. In neighboring Romania the great hostility towards the Jews culminated in the extermination of almost half of them in the war-time period¹⁵. Slovakia, Croatia and Hungary replicated the German Holocaust on their territories¹⁶. But anti-Semitism has never been deeply rooted in Bulgarian mentality, and this would play a crucial role in the saving of the Bulgarian Jews during the Second World War.

Historical Overview

The century-long coexistence between Bulgarians and Jews in the Bulgarian lands has never been tarnished by serious tensions. Persecuted in Byzantium and elsewhere, many Jews migrated to Bulgaria as early as the Middle Ages. During the Ottoman rule Jews from all over Europe continued to settle down in the region¹⁷. The economic and religious freedoms given to them facilitated their fast adaptation in the Ottoman provinces¹⁸. Until 1878 there were Jewish communi-

¹³ Nowadays, this opinion is not shared by all historians. Some critics reject "the assumption that Bulgaria was a land free of anti-Semitism". They impose the notion that the pre-war discourse might be used as a proof of the anti-Jewish resentments among the Bulgarian population, especially during the war. See WIEN 1999.

¹⁴ In a letter to his superiors the German Ambassador in Sofia from 1941 to 1944 Adolf Heinz Beckerle explained this attitude with the traditional multi-ethnicity of Bulgarian society: "Having lived all their lives with Armenians, Greeks and Gypsies, the Bulgarians see no harm in the Jew to justify special measures against him." Quoted in: TODOROV 2001: 32.

¹⁵ It is one of the most anti-Semitic countries in Europe and had one of the largest Jewish population on the continent (800,000). See CHARY 1972: 196.

¹⁶ КАЛЧЕВА 2008: 133; BARTOV 2008: 557-593.

¹⁷ Towards the end of the 15th century, after being expelled from the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal) many Sephardic Jews fled to the Balkan realms of the Ottoman territories and Salonika became their chief city. Generally, the anti-Semitism in the Ottoman Levant was not so strong compared to the Christian West. See COHEN 1981: 63; BENBASSA, RODRIGUE 1995: 159; ПАУНОВСКИ, ИЛЕЛ 2000: 172.

¹⁸ New wave of Jewish settlers infiltrated when Ashkenazi (as the German and Austrian Jews in Bulgaria were called) moved to Bulgarian lands in the 17th century from the Austro-Hungarian Empire (especially those driven out by the anti-Semitism in Hungary and Poland). But they were also incorporated into the Sephardic communities. See ASTRUKOV 1980: 10-11; ТОШКОБА 1997: 8-10.

ties in almost all Bulgarian cities; Sofia and the other big cities became important centers of the new settlers¹⁹.

There were many different reasons why the Jews were well accepted by the Bulgarians. As “*raja*” both nations were subjects of the Sultan. That explains why anti-Semitism, so typical for the Central and Western Europe, was not popular in the Bulgarian lands. Other reasons were the absence of powerful religious centers or elites that could create antagonism between the two communities, the high level of tolerance towards the Jews on the part of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, and the traditional low religiosity of the Bulgarian population²⁰. Bulgarian national ideology which grew and flourished in the 19th century was targeted mainly against the Turks and Greeks, but not so much against the Jews or other national minorities. Moreover, some modern ideas adopted from the West advocated that all citizens should be equal in respect to the law and Jews were no exception to that general understanding²¹.

After the Liberation of Bulgaria in 1878 the Jews went through a drastic political change: from subjects of a multiethnic and multicultural empire they found themselves a minority in a national state. The basic law of the country – the Turnovo Constitution²² – which was one of the most democratic and progressive ones in Europe at the end of 19th century, guaranteed legal equality of all citizens regardless of their religion and nationality and state protection of minorities. It imposed priority of religion for the definition of any social group as a “minority”. Art. 40 proclaimed freedom of religion in Bulgaria for all its citizens; autonomy in ecclesiastical matters (Art. 42)²³; equality before the laws and political rights for all Bulgarian citizens (Art. 57 and 60), etc.

In the period from the Liberation until the Second World War minorities in Bulgaria enjoyed the biggest liberties to express their ethno-cultural rights, to practice their religion and speak their language. The Turnovo Constitution created an environment conducive to the religious, political and civil emancipation of the Bulgarian Jews. Perfectly tolerant, the official policy of Bulgarian governments was directed towards their integration into the Bulgarian nation and national state.

¹⁹ Especially Sofia, situated on the trade route to Constantinople, held the largest Bulgarian Jewish community. Until the Liberation in 1878 25% of its 20,000 population were Jews. See CHARY 1972: 28.

²⁰ ASTRUKOV 1980: 11-12; COHEN 1981: 63-64.

²¹ In general, the Bulgarian national movement have inspired liberal principles and traditions, and these became dominant in relations between Jews and Bulgarians. See MOUTAFCHIEVA 1995: 44-47; ИЛЕЛ 1999: 120; ПАУНОВСКИ, ИЛЕЛ 2000: 67-68.

²² It was in force from April 16, 1879 till December 4, 1947.

²³ It was very important article – from one side it gave freedom for the self-ruling of the religious communities in the country, but from the other, the executive power (the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Religion) got primary control over them. See КРЪСТЕВА (състав.) 1998: 71; ПАУНОВСКИ, ИЛЕЛ 2000: 69.

As a result, after 1878 the Jewish community gradually became an integral part of the Bulgarian nation. It did not live in linguistic isolation, or in ghettos; it soon acquired an active role in the country's political, public, economic and cultural life. In the newly liberated Bulgaria Jews were dealing with handicrafts, trade and "free professions" and enjoyed great opportunities for business. Many of them took part in the building process of the new state occupying important positions in the administration and in the army²⁴. They also participated actively in all wars waged by Bulgaria for national liberation and unification – in the Balkan Wars (1912-1913) and the World War I (1915-1918)²⁵. About 200 Jews, who had graduated the Military School or the School for Second Lieutenants of the Reserve, fought in those wars as commanding officers or military doctors. No other minority group in Bulgaria had had such a great number of officers as the Jewish one, although that group was less numerous than many others. This comes as a proof that due to the long peaceful co-existence and economic, social and cultural compatibility Jews had been solidly incorporated in the Bulgarian nation²⁶.

The first legislative act of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Religion concerning the Jews and all other religious groups in Bulgaria was Decree 321 of July 9, 1880, the so-called "Temporary Rules for Spiritual Management"²⁷. It recognized the Jewish synagogue as a legal entity. Later on, many other regulations were introduced. Gradually the management of the synagogue acquired secular powers. The rabbi of Sofia (who became also the rabbi of Bulgaria) was a non-elected member of the Bulgarian Constituent Assembly, while three other Jews were elected as councilors to the Sofia Municipal Council. The Jewish communities, created as religious institutions, gradually acquired secular functions, taking care mostly of education and culture²⁸.

International acts were the other prerequisite for proclaiming legal equality for all citizens of the country irrespective of religion, mother tongue, ethnic origin and nationality. Such acts were the Treaty of Berlin (1878) and the minority protection rules in the Peace Treaty of Neuilly (1919).

²⁴ MOUTAFCHIEVA 1995: 48; ПАУНОВСКИ, ИЛЕЛ 2000: 74-177.

²⁵ In 1933 a construction of a monument started – Jewish Military Hospital, which was erected in memory of all the Jews who died in the wars waged by Bulgaria after 1878 (according to statistical data – 962 officers and soldiers). See ИЛЕЛ 1988: 117-138; ПАУНОВСКИ, ИЛЕЛ 2000: 184, 186.

²⁶ ИЛЕЛ 1988: 125; КАЗАКОВ 1999: 105-106.

²⁷ *Държавен вестник (State Gazette)*, бр. 56, 9.VII.1880.

These Rules were in force during the entire period until World War II, although in many aspects they were inadequate and unsatisfactory. See КРЪСТЕВА (състав.) 1998: 76.

²⁸ ТОШКОВА 1997: 11-13; *Jews in the Bulgarian Hinterland. An Annotated Bibliography* 2002: 370.

Jews in Interwar Europe

After World War I and the collapse of the multinational empires, in the new nation-states of Central and Eastern Europe nationalism became the dominant ideology and assumed exclusive and extreme forms seeking to impose a uniform identity on the minority groups. The League of Nations, established after the war to resolve international conflicts peacefully, had to introduce a legal procedure for the protection of minority rights²⁹.

Jews presented a particularly difficult case in the region because of religious differences and the traditional hostile attitude. In many states their number was enormous³⁰. Despite their assimilation and patriotic loyalty, they were denounced as an alien body. Deterioration in a nation's economic well-being in the region, the impact of increased immigration of Eastern European Jews, and the high extent to which leadership of the political left, which had growing popular support in the interwar period, was identified with Jews produced higher levels of anti-Jewish feelings³¹. Popular anti-Semitism and government discrimination spread all over the region, becoming a semi-official policy of the young states. In most of them the "national" group rights of the Jews were not respected, even the legal equality of citizens was frequently infringed³².

Widespread social changes also generated conflicts of interest between Jews and non-Jews. The socio-economic situation created conditions for discrimination against the Jews in these countries. In many of them the Jews comprised a large section (at some places even a majority) of the urban middle classes. Thus they occupied an important place in the economic life and constituted a considerable percentage of the local intelligentsia. Jews were seen as controlling or owning the major economic resources and were perceived in a positions of dominance within a nation's economy. That is why there were slogans for their removal from economic sector, state apparatus and the whole socio-economic life of society³³.

Mistrust between Christians and Jews had a long history dating back to the Middle Ages. But anti-Semitism as a political doctrine, based partly on the economic competition between Jews and non-Jews, and partly on ideological differences, was something new for the mid-20th century. It reached new heights in the 1930s with the growth of fascist tendencies and nationalist radicalization in many European countries. With Hitler's coming to power a new "modern" (urban, middle-class)

²⁹ ALMOG 1990: 100-101.

³⁰ The region was the largest concentration of Jews in the world. See BARTOV 2008: 561.

³¹ The perception in the West was that Jews were over-represented in the leadership of the Bolsheviks and the Communist Parties. See BRUSTEIN, KING 2004b: 39-40.

³² BRUSTEIN, KING 2004b: 42.

³³ ETTINGER 1974: 8, 10-11.

anti-Semitism was imposed in Europe. According to its propaganda, Jews had to be pushed away from the economic, political and cultural life of the society, as far as they occupied too strong positions in it. They were associated with capitalism, socialism, modernization, liberalism, etc. When Jews were perceived as a greater religious, racial, economic, and political threat or challenge to non-Jews, popular anti-Semitism has attained higher levels³⁴.

Following the Nazi ascension to power and the expansion of Nazism in Europe, the status of the Jews was increasingly undermined on an international scale. With the spread of anti-Semitism on the whole continent the very basis of Jewish existence was shattered. It became the official or semi-official policy in many European countries. Some fascist and Nazi radical right-wing organizations appeared which undertook anti-Semitic actions. Jews were discriminated and were frequently subjected to cruel persecution, which paved the way for their mass slaughter and extermination during the World War II³⁵. As a response to hostility some Jews emigrated to Palestine, others became members of the East European Communist parties. This, in turn led to a bigger dissemination of anti-Semitic propaganda.

The Bulgarian Case

None of many aspects of anti-Semitism - religious, racial, economic, political, were typical for Bulgaria. As a defeated country after the World War I, it was deprived of territories with compact Bulgarian population and popular attention was sensitive to its status and the struggle for realization of the national ideal. That is why the country was interested to adopt and strictly fulfill the international acts for the protection of minorities. Bulgaria did not sign separate treaties in this sense, but in accordance with Section IV, entitled "Protection of Minorities" (Art. 49-57) of the Treaty of Neuilly, it assumed the obligation to protect minority rights – national, religious, linguistic and cultural³⁶.

These articles were not in contradiction with Turnovo Constitution; in fact they repeated its basic principles. They declared the legal equality of Jews with other citizens and observed the civil rights and liberties in the country. The principle of protection of minorities as religious groups was observed, two more components – ethnos and language – were introduced in addition. Another new element was that protection of minorities was put under the guarantee of the League of Nations. That is how the minority issue was transferred from a domestic political agenda to international level³⁷.

³⁴ BRUSTEIN, KING 2004b: 39.

³⁵ ALMOG 1990: 121; *Оцеляването* 1995: 57.

³⁶ КРЪСТЕВА (състав.) 1998: 70; ПАУНОВСКИ, ИЛИЕЛ 2000: 71.

³⁷ КОЕН 2000: 10.

Because of the unsolved national question nationalism remained the dominant ideology of interwar Bulgaria and that issue was the main theme of the country's internal and international political life. After the Unification with Eastern Roumelia in 1885 it was reduced mostly to the Macedonian Question. The Jews were a group in the country without an irredentist or separatist aspiration that could threaten the nation state in which they were living. They were not the main concern of the political elite of the country. That elite feared and resented the Turkish Muslim population, and was obsessed with the "Macedonian" issue after the World War I, not the Jews.

The last supported the political agenda of the majority group. The national catastrophe after World War I affected the Jews too. In September 1919 they took part in the mourning rally in Sofia, protesting against the unfair Neuilly Treaty. The magazine *Pro causa Judaica* published a big editorial, entitled *The Mourning of the Bulgarian Jews*, in which the Allies were accused for the loss of Western Thrace, the outlet on the Aegean Sea, South Dobrudzha and the Western Outskirts – the equivalent to one-tenth of Bulgarian territory – and for the imposition of the excessive reparations, amounting to 20% of the whole national wealth³⁸.

At all international forums Bulgarian Jews kept raising their voice for the protection of the Bulgarian minorities left outside the country's boundaries. At the Paris Peace Conference they delivered reports for the situation of the minorities inside Bulgaria and of Bulgarian minorities outside the country³⁹. There was a Jewish delegation from Bulgaria to the International Congress of the Minorities in Europe, held in Geneva, Switzerland in 1927. It was headed by Colonel Avram Tadjer who was the chairman of the Central Consistory of the Jews in Bulgaria. There he declared that the rights of the Jews in Bulgaria were respected and expressed his concern for the situation of the Bulgarian population in Macedonia. This defense of the Bulgarian national cause was well accepted from the Bulgarian public and was a real evidence of the good relationship between both ethnos living in the country⁴⁰.

The devotion of the Jews to the Bulgarian cause during and after World War I can be explained with their identification with the Bulgarian national interests. Bulgarians and Jews struggled together against the occupation of Macedonia and Thrace from Serbia and Greece and for their liberation and annexation to the Bulgarian state. The interests of the Jews were to incorporate all their brothers from the Old Bulgarian territories in one state and to achieve their political and national emancipation. This coincidence of the national interests of Bulgarians

³⁸ *Pro causa Judaica*, 1, br.15, 5.X.1919.

³⁹ Централен държавен архив (ЦДА) (*Bulgarian State Archive*), оп. 6, а.е. 1087, л. 29-30.

⁴⁰ БАРУХ 1960: 92; ПАУНОВСКИ, ИЛЕЈИ. 2000: 181; КОЕН 2000: 27.

and Jews vis-à-vis Macedonia was one of the main factors for the absence of anti-Semitism in the Bulgarian lands. Jews were perceived not as a foreign element in the country, but as a factor contributing to the struggle for national unification⁴¹.

That is how the Jews found themselves in not an easy situation: as loyal citizens they accepted Bulgaria's national propaganda, but at the same time they had to protect their own minority rights. Yet conflicts were rare and the explanation can be sought in the governments' liberal and tolerant policy on minority issues, in the Jews' acceptance of the values of the Bulgarian national doctrine and their close integration into the Bulgarian nation⁴².

Another reason for the lack of serious "Jewish issue" in Bulgaria in the interwar period was the fact that the Jews constituted a relatively small proportion of the overall population and were not greatly visible in socio-economic terms. According to the 1926 official census the number the Jews was 46,000; in 1934 (according to the last pre-war census) – 48,000, and in 1940 – 50,000, i.e. Jew amounted to only 0,8% of the whole population⁴³. Bulgarians were around 80%, and 20% were minorities and ethnic groups. Among them Jews came third, together with the Armenians and after the Turks and the Gypsies⁴⁴.

In comparison to the Bulgarian population, which in the period between the two world wars was predominantly rural, Jews were mainly urban one⁴⁵. But nevertheless, they represented only 3,6-4,3% of the cities' population. Around half of them were concentrated in the capital⁴⁶ and the rest were living in the biggest economic and administrative centers – Plovdiv, Russe, Varna, Bourgas, Vidin, Kyustendil, Dupnica, Yambol, etc. There were thirty one Jewish communities in the country. Most of the Jews were born within the boundaries of present day Bulgaria and only 10% were emigrants from Thrace, Macedonia and Dobrudzha. Ninety-two percent of all Jews living in Bulgaria were Bulgarian citizens⁴⁷.

After 1918 the severe economic crisis in the country and the mass impoverishment of the population affected the Jewish minority group too. The situation

⁴¹ КАЗАКОВ 1999: 108-109, 110-112, 114.

⁴² There are some theories (mainly of Jewish origin) that during the interwar period in Europe the Jews have always been accepted as "enemies", whatever their behavior might be. They were "dangerous" even when they were integrated in society because that gave them a chance "to undermine it from within". But that was not the case of Bulgaria where the Jews were considered as "allies" of the Bulgarians on the national issue. See КАЗАКОВ 1999: 108.

⁴³ In the 1920s and 1930s it was between 4,5-6 million people. See *Статистически годишник: 66; Проучвания* 1980:159-160.

⁴⁴ ALMOG 1990: 128; ПЕШЕВ 2004: 205.

⁴⁵ 97% of them lived in the cities, and only 3% in the countryside. See КОЕН, Давид. (състав.) 1995: 57-58.

⁴⁶ Sofia's population was about 10% Jewish, and by World War II half of the Jews in Bulgaria lived in the capital (around 25,000). See CHARY 1972: 29.

⁴⁷ ТОНЧЕВ 1938: 33; КОЕН, Давид 1995: 12.

worsened after the great depression of 1929, and Jewish crafts were seriously affected. The Jews reacted by developing their own cooperative movement. Loan banks were created in Sofia in 1920, and other places. But the role of Jews in the country's banking system was limited. There was only one bigger Jewish bank in Bulgaria – “Geula” – but even it had a cooperative character and a limited capital⁴⁸. The economic activity of Jews was concentrated in trade, industry, crafts, credit and insurance, services, and free professions. They were occupied mainly in commerce⁴⁹ – predominantly retail trade, but there were quite a number of wholesale dealers.

All that had reflection on the social structure of the Jewish community: 35% were ordinary workers; the lower middle class comprised 15%; the middle-class made up 32%; and 17% were intellectuals. The upper bourgeoisie (bankers, businessmen, etc.) represented only 1-2%⁵⁰. The data shows that the bulk of the Bulgarian Jews – around 84% of them – belonged to the poor and middle classes. In general, Jews in Bulgaria were part of the lower social stratum which made all the difference to the rest of Europe⁵¹. For instance, in 1940 Jews comprised fewer than 5% of Bulgarian doctors and less than 3 percent of Bulgarian lawyers⁵². Overall, during the interwar period they did not have leading positions in the Bulgarian economy, quite opposite – it was marginal. Competition between Jews and Bulgarians in business, professions, and for jobs were rare, and not a great cause of concern. Thus it should come as no surprise that the Nazi accusation during the interwar period and World War II that Jews were the agent of worldwide capitalist exploitation failed to get a widespread acceptance in Bulgaria. There were no economic, ideological or racial preconditions to put the Jewish question on the political agenda⁵³.

Contrary to the prevailing opinion in the scholarly literature, which emphasizes the role of modernization to explain the rise of anti-Semitism in Europe⁵⁴, that

⁴⁸ Its name was “Sofia Cooperative Jewish Bank”. Many credit cooperatives were created in that period to help in economic terms the small entrepreneurs – mainly craftsmen and traders. See BENBASSA, RODRIGUE 1995: 95; КЪОСЕВА 1999: 89-102; ПЕШЕВ 2004: 212.

⁴⁹ But the Jewish tradesmen represented only 9% of all merchants in the country. See ТОИЧЕВ 1938: 39.

⁵⁰ *Проучвания* 1980: 169, 180, 181; КОЕН 2004: 179.

⁵¹ Even in Romania they were middle-class. See БАПУХ 1991: 53; ВАСИЛЕВА 1992: 6; КОЕН (състав.) 1995: 58, 104.

⁵² In contrast to Romania where in Bucharest alone Jews were nearly 80% of employees of banks and commercial enterprises, 40% of lawyers and 99% of the brokers on the Buchares Stock Exchange. See BRUSTEIN, KING 2004a: 696.

⁵³ ТОИЧЕВ 1938: 34-37; ТОШКОБА 1997: 29; BRUSTEIN, KING 2004a: 695.

⁵⁴ Modernization embodied the emergence of liberalism and capitalism, which led to the political, social, and economic emancipation of the Jews. Jewish competition provoked fears among many non-Jews, reinforcing anti-Semitic attitudes. See BRUSTEIN, KING. 2004b: 36-37.

did not happen in Bulgaria. Unlike much of Europe, economic anti-Semitism did not gain a popular support in the country. Elsewhere on the old Continent, anti-Semites aroused resentment toward Jews because of their wealth. In Bulgaria Jews did not possess such and did not dominate key sectors of the economy. In fact, in direct contrast to Romania where Jews often served as intermediaries between the landowners and peasants and as rural money lenders, in Bulgaria these roles were overtaken by Christian Bulgarians. In the literature on late nineteenth century Bulgaria agrarian conflicts, there is little mention of rural anti-Semitism⁵⁵. Bulgaria was an agrarian country and the peasants were more preoccupied with the issue of the “traditional” enemies - Turks and Greeks, not Jews. The Turks were the most numerous minority in the country, and the Greeks before 1920 were as sizable as population as the Jews. Most Bulgarians actually had little contact with Jews⁵⁶. Rural anti-Semitism in Bulgaria did not have an economic basis because the oppressors of the Bulgarian peasants were the Bulgarian moneylenders. Urban anti-Semitism was of greater importance, because the cities, not the countryside, ruled Bulgaria. But this modern anti-Semitism was insignificant in the country until the 1920s.

All minorities were well treated in the interwar period. Jews had the possibility to observe freely their religious rituals, to develop their culture, to form organizations, etc. Some of them made military career during the wars of 1912-1913 and 1914-1918, others published books, magazines, newspapers, built synagogues, schools, libraries, hospitals, cooperatives, as well as quite active Zionist organizations. They were also well represented in arts, science, and free professions. Prominent representatives of the Jewish community occupied high positions in the state apparatus, others played important role in the political and cultural life of the country, etc.⁵⁷.

Jews were greatly affected by the social changes and modernization of the interwar period. While keeping the family traditions and stereotypes within the community, they were eager to move out of their isolation. Well integrated in the Bulgarian society, they were working and living together with Bulgarians, and their emancipation reached high level. The number of children in their families was not exceeding two or three, and women started to work outside home. Jewish families were not isolated either territorially or linguistically. They accepted Bulgarian culture and language as their own. All newspapers, magazines, etc. published by Jewish organizations at that time (including Zionist ones) were in Bulgarian⁵⁸.

⁵⁵ BRUSTEIN, KING 2004a: 695.

⁵⁶ CHARY 1972: 33.

⁵⁷ Prof. Josip Fadenheht was minister of Justice, Boris Shac – director of the Art Academy, Dora Gabe – a famous poetess, etc. See *Проучвания* 1980: 161-162.

⁵⁸ Many Jews knew the Judeo-Spanish dialect, but they all spoke Bulgarian. Between 1880 and 1932 there were more than 50 newspapers in Judeo-Spanish, seven in Hebrew, and over 70 in Bulgarian. See ASTRUKOV 1980: 17; BENBASSA, RODRIGUE 1995: 113; TODOROV 2001: 31.

In the struggle for emancipation and in the subsequent effort to consolidate citizenship rights, many Jews, especially in Western and Central Europe, began to adopt the nationality of the country in which they resided, thereby considering themselves as, for example, Bulgarians of the Jewish faith. These integrationists maintained that Jews were adherents of a different religion but not members of a separate nation. They considered themselves as a part of the Bulgarian nation, and the Bulgarians also perceived them in that way. All that can explain the close relations between the both ethnic groups.

As urban population Jews were among the best educated in the country. Many of them were going to Bulgarian schools, but some preferred Jewish ones. The Law for Education of 1920 allowed the creation of private Jewish schools⁵⁹. Their number increased from 12 in the 1880s to 42 in the 1930s⁶⁰. The children of the rich Jewish families were sent also to the prestigious American, French, German and Italian schools in Bulgaria. The state gave some subsidies to the Jewish schools, recognized their educational programs and almost did not interfere in their management. They were governed by Jewish School Boards. The state control was executed mainly through the issuing of the diplomas⁶¹. The textbooks were also approved by the Ministry of education. But in spite of some restrictive measures, the policy of the Bulgarian state in the sphere of minority education was quite liberal⁶².

Jews enjoyed also religious freedom. In the 1920s and 1930s there were three big synagogues in Sofia – two Sephardic and one Ashkenazi, plus five smaller ones in the suburbs. In the mid-1930s Jews had 44 synagogues in the country. Besides their clerical functions, they also provided national and social services. The Jews in Bulgaria were not Orthodox and not very religious⁶³.

According to the temporary law of 1880 which proclaimed freedom of religion in Bulgaria, some prerogatives were given to the Chief Rabbi, who was the supreme spiritual leader of the Jews in Bulgaria, and the head of all Rabbis in the country. According to the law, the Central Consistory was established as a consultative body to the Chief Rabbi. Jewish communities were sending their representatives

⁵⁹ They were mainly primary ones. Their program was copying the Bulgarian one, plus additional subjects in Jewish language, religion, history, culture, etc. In these schools studying Bulgarian language was an obligatory subject. See ТОНЧЕВ 1938: 32, 40; КОЕН 2000: 16-18.

⁶⁰ In 1939 in Bulgaria there were 15 Jewish kindergartens, 22 primary schools, 5 secondary schools, and 15 Sunday schools for studying of Jewish language (with 4,000 pupils and 150 teachers all together). See Н. БАРУХ 1991: 41; ХРИСИМОВА 2003: 192.

⁶¹ The children did not receive such automatically, but had to pass exam in front of a particular state commission.

⁶² *Jews in the Bulgarian Hinterland* 2002: 369-370, 382.

⁶³ КОЕН 2000: 20-22; ХРИСИМОВА 2003: 197.

to form the Consistory. For the national government the last was the legitimate representative of the Jews in Bulgaria as an ethnic and religious group. It existed since 1902 and up to 1919 was headed by the Chief Rabbi. The last was helped in his activities by the Supreme Spiritual Court⁶⁴.

At the beginning of the 20th century there were three generations of Bulgarian Jews: the old Sephardim, who grew up in the Ottoman times; the Westernized, Francophile, well-educated second generation; and the Zionist, Jewish nationalist third generation. The middle generation ruled the community, but as the younger Jews grew in power, they started to “fight” the older leaders, the “notables”. The strengthening of the Zionist organizations at the beginning of the 20th century led to an open conflict with the Chief Rabbi. Zionists wanted the Consistory to be a civil and not a religious organization of the Bulgarian Jews. The dispute lasted for more than two decades. Gradually the Consistory became the main Jewish administrative and civil representative. The Chief Rabbi lost part of his powers and became dependent on the decisions of the Consistory⁶⁵.

In 1920, the First Constituent Assembly of the Bulgarian Jews took place, in which the Zionists had overwhelming control. The Jewry needed an act of law regulating its status as a minority. That is why the Assembly voted “*The Rule Book on the Structure and Management of the Jewish Municipalities and the Consistory in Bulgaria*”, which was dealing with issues such as the creation, organization and functions of the Consistory, Jewish communities, the status of the rabies and the Chief Rabbi, Spiritual Courts, Jewish education, etc. The Assembly defined the distinction between the secular and the religious functions of the Consistory, elected its members and approved the publishing of its newspaper *Bulletin of the Central Consistory of the Jews in Bulgaria*⁶⁶.

According to this Rule Book the Jews in Bulgaria had a status of a minority, organized in Jewish communities on national and religious grounds. The communities had to take mainly non-religious functions - cultural, social, educational, charitable, etc. The synagogues became local administrative centers. Since 1920 the Chief Rabbi was only the spiritual head of the Jews and chairman of the Higher Ecclesiastic Court⁶⁷. The Rule Book was amended in 1932 by the Second Constituent Assembly and again in 1934, it was being observed by the Bulgarian Jews in the whole interwar period, but has never been endorsed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Religious Denominations. The last showed the tendency to

⁶⁴ *Jews in the Bulgarian Hinterland* 2002: 331-332, 350.

⁶⁵ CHARY 1972: 30-31; H. БАРЫХ 1991: 39.

⁶⁶ KOEH 2000: 13.

⁶⁷ The fact that the election of the Chief Rabbi was not necessarily approved by the state authorities shows that there was no direct state intervention in the spiritual activities of the Jewish community. See *Jews in the Bulgarian Hinterland* 2002: 350.

limit the relatively broad autonomy of the Consistory and to exert stricter control over the Jewish institutions. The reason was that the Zionists were becoming very strong and the government wanted to supervise the Jewish activities in the country. But in the interwar period this was the official policy towards all minorities, not only to the Jews⁶⁸. The problem was that the Consistory tried to impose the notion that the Bulgarian Jews were a national minority ruled by civil institution such as it itself, while the Ministry for Foreign Affairs treated them as religious group. This conflict was prolonged without being solved until the introduction of the Defense of the Nation Act in 1940, when the last hope that the Rule Book should be approved died⁶⁹.

Jewish political activity in Bulgarian public life was not very high. Jews were elected to Parliament; they had their representatives in different state delegations to international events (such as the Bulgarian delegation to the Peace Treaty negotiations after the First World War), etc. Jews could be found not only in Jewish nationalistic organizations, but in almost all Bulgarian political parties.

Some of the high Jewish social strata joined the right political forces in the country (People Progressive Party, Democratic Party, National Liberal Party, etc.). But as a rule in ideological sense these political parties were not friendly to the Jews. After the coup d'état of June 9, 1923 the Military League came to power. A right wing dictatorship was established in the country, which continued with small interruptions (1931-1934) until 1944. During this time many fascist groups and organizations appeared which were anti-Semitic in ideological terms⁷⁰.

Part of the Jews assumed that the social revolution will solve their national problem, so they joined the Bulgarian Communist Party or other left wing forces in the country – the Radical Party, the Social-Democratic Party, etc. which had a great influence in the Bulgarian political life after the World War I. For a country that had less than 10% of its population employed in industry on the eve of World War II, Bulgaria's strong socialist movement comes as a big surprise. In election after election during the early interwar period the Bulgarian communist and socialist parties typically drew from one-sixth to one-quarter of the popular vote (combined). The Leftist parties' struggle for more democracy in the country would better guarantee the rights of Jews. The internationalism of the Socialist movement was another reason. Some of the educated Bulgarian Jews joined the modern for its time Socialist movement. A Jewish Socialist Union was created, which had its sections not only in the capital, but also in Plovdiv, Dupnica, Shu-

⁶⁸ КРЪСТЕВА (състав.) 1998: 69.

⁶⁹ ТОШКОВА 1997: 18; КОЕН 2000: 14-16.

⁷⁰ КОЕН 2000: 34.

men, Pazardzhik, Yambol, Sliven, etc. As a whole, Jews sympathized more to the Social-Democratic movement than to the Communist Party because the last was hostile to Zionism⁷¹.

The socialist or Marxist groups, which steadily gained prominence in Europe from the end of the 19th century led to a wave of political anti-Semitism on the continent. But the Jews were not overrepresented in the Bulgarian Marxist movement and were not seen as playing important role in it, which explains the lower level of anti-Semitism in Bulgaria. In contrast to the Communist parties of Eastern Europe the Bulgarian one did not have Jews as leaders. Bulgarians comprised the backbone of the Bulgarian Communist party throughout the whole interwar period⁷².

Modern nationalism emerged among the Jewish community in Bulgaria, but that happened in a fierce struggle between the two main ideological streams – the Unionists (adherents of the assimilation of the Jews in Bulgarian society) and Zionists (whose followers stressed the primary importance of the national problem and saw its solving in the creation of an independent Jewish state).

Zionist ideas started to be disseminated in the Bulgarian lands as early as the 1880s-1890s. Here the Jews even formed a Zionist association before the emergence of the World Zionist Organization (Rousee, 1895 – two years before the Basle Zionist Congress). This organization had its Rule Book from 1926, Art. 1 of which stated that it was just a part of the international Zionist organization, whose purpose was to create a Jewish state in Palestine. From 1920 on, the Central Consistory also had as a basic principle in its program the creation of an independent state of the Jews.

During the whole interwar period Zionism was quite strong in Bulgaria and won many followers⁷³. But it was not anti-Semitism in the country that provoked it. The crucial role in the awakening of Jewish national consciousness was played by Bulgarian nationalism from its early stages, with its anti-Ottoman struggle, and its victory with the creation of the national state and complete independence. The local Jews projected this example onto Palestine, and identified with the course of Bulgarian nationalism. Actually, the Zionism was one of the facets of Jewish modernization⁷⁴.

There were many Zionist organizations all over the country whose propaganda was directed towards emigration to Palestine. The main arguments were the wors-

⁷¹ *Проучвания* 1980: 145-146.

⁷² BRUSTEIN, KING: 2004: 691, 696-697.

⁷³ On the eve of the World War II 10,000 people were affiliated to the Bulgarian Zionist Federation, which represents 25% of the whole Jewish population in the country. See BENBASSA, RODRIGUE 1995: 151.

⁷⁴ BENBASSA, RODRIGUE 1995: 118, 154.

ening material conditions of living of the Bulgarian Jews⁷⁵. From the beginning of the 20th century until the 1940s Zionists had a predominant influence and took up the leadership of the Jewish communities⁷⁶. Their adherents dominated in all institutions: the Consistory, schools, synagogues, etc.⁷⁷ Bulgarian society showed sympathy to the struggle of the Jewish people to create their own state in Palestine and did not question the loyalty of the Bulgarian Jews towards the state even when they showed a will to emigrate in their old motherland⁷⁸.

The opponents of Zionism were for the Jews' complete integration into the Bulgarian society. Of course, there were numerous Jews who remained outside the two mentioned major social-political streams. After Hitler's rise to power, the Jews in Bulgaria remained divided. Those who had chosen the "left way" participated actively in the partisan movement against the Germans and their Bulgarian collaborators during the World War II. The champions of Zionism with very little exceptions were simply waiting for the end of the war⁷⁹.

In the 1920s and 1930s anti-Semitism was quite weak in Bulgaria, as it was during the centuries. In contrast to Europe, it did not mark the relationship between Jews and Bulgarians. There were no organized anti-Jewish outrages in the country like the ones in Central and Eastern Europe. There was no declared anti-Semitism,

⁷⁵ Emigration was seen as a chance for prosperity. See КРЪСТЕВА (състав.) 1998: 227.

The adherents of the "anti-Semitic theory" in interwar Bulgaria used the popularity of Zionism as their strongest proof. They were arguing that if the situation of the Jews in Bulgaria was that great, they would not want to emigrate to Palestine. For them the economic argument was not convincing, since the situation in Palestine was not very promising (permanent unrest with the Arab majority and the first struggles with a difficult land (lack of water and desert instead of soil), etc.

⁷⁶ The Zionist's hegemony in the community lasted until 1942, when all Zionist organizations were dissolved. See BENBASSA, RODRIGUE 1995: 152.

⁷⁷ In 1923 the Zionist polled 90% of the votes in elections for synagogue councils and schoolboards and thus began to dominate the community scene. See BENBASSA, RODRIGUE 1995: 151.

⁷⁸ Actually the mass emigration to Israel happened after the end of the Second World War in an atmosphere of growing animosity between communist Bulgaria and the newly established state of Israel, which was demonstrating its orientation toward the United State. The greater part of the Bulgarian Jews (around 35,000) emigrated in 1948 – 1949 with no right to return. Just 5-7,000 Jews remained in Bulgaria. That gave the wrong impression to some scholars who claim that the Jews left Bulgaria after the war because they were not well treated in the interwar period. Actually, the main reason was the shock of Communism imposed in the country in 1944 and the fact they had already their own state. Those who stayed had to "forget" their ethnic identity and religion, to integrate into a monolithic "socialist nation", and to take part in the building of socialism. After 1944 a real process of de-Judaization occurred. Communists banned almost all pre-war Jewish organizations, synagogues were closed and nationalized, etc. The number of Bulgarian Jews dramatically decreased with time – to 6,400 in 1956 and 3,400 in 1992 according to the official censuses. See KOEH 2000: 25-28; BAROUH (ed.) 2003: 43; KOLEVA 2009: 188-191.

⁷⁹ И БАПУХ 1991: 46-47; KOEH 2000: 32-33.

or, if it existed at all, it was limited just to the extreme right political parties and organizations. A replica of National Socialism, it did not play an essential role and never became a central element in their ideological system. In the 1920s the Italian example was predominant in Bulgaria; the Nazi borrowings appeared in the programs of these organizations only in the 1930s, when local nationalists tried to attract the attention of the German ruling circles to the solution of the Bulgarian national question⁸⁰. That explains why there was no Jewish emigration from Bulgaria – in 1918-1938 only around 133 people per year were leaving the country. Moreover, after the victory of Nazism in Germany, the Anschluss of Austria and the occupation of Bohemia, a considerable number of Jews from those territories found refuge in Bulgaria. For many of them it was a stopover on their way to the democratic world⁸¹.

Particularities of Bulgarian Anti-Semitism

If there were some expressions of anti-Semitism, they were sporadic and exceptional. Modern anti-Semitism as a European political and social movement on an ideological foundation did not exist in the country. Here Anti-Semitism was on a low theoretical level and the racial issue was not on a daily agenda⁸². Very important is that this was not a policy of the state. The leading politicians did not promote anti-Semitism as was the case in Romania and Austria. The rare manifestations of anti-Semitism were limited and they were by no means provoked by government or state bodies. As a rule, the displays of anti-Semitism throughout Bulgarian history have not been state-inspired; they were more a manifestation of hostility towards people of another religion or ethnos. This applies to all regimes from 1878 onwards⁸³.

The fact there was no state (official) anti-Semitism in Bulgaria until the beginning of World War II, does not mean that there was no popular anti-Semitism, even though it was not as wide-spread as in the most countries of the world⁸⁴. The prevailing tolerance and sympathy for the Jewish population of Bulgaria should not be idealized or exaggerated. Beginning from the Middle Ages there had been cases of discrimination, displays of hostility, fear, etc. Already in the 19th century anti-Semitism on the level of “feelings” became a fact in some cities of Bulgaria

⁸⁰ ПОППЕТРОВ 2008: 112-113.

⁸¹ *Проучвания* 1980: 160; ТОШКОВА 1997: 22.

⁸² With the exception of very few people, the theory of racial purity did not have followers. See ETTINGER 1974: 1-2; ПЕШЕВ 2004: 208.

⁸³ Whether anti-Semitism in Bulgaria was a popular or a state supported ideology remains rather a controversial issue in historiography. See Н. БАПУХ 1991: 38; PAROUSHEVA 1995: 307; ПАУНОВСКИ, ИЛЕЈ 2000: 71.

⁸⁴ GROTH 1971: 92-100.

and developed on a propaganda level in various journals, such as the paper *Otbrana* (Defence), published since 1898, *Nov Otviv* (New Echo) since 1897, *Bulgaria bez Evrei* (Bulgaria without Jews) since 1893, etc.⁸⁵

At the beginning of the 20th century the anti-Semitic actions took shape of breaking shop-windows, hooliganism, etc. Several anti-Semitic incidents were reported in the period 1885-1905⁸⁶. But these were isolated cases, influenced mainly by the outrages of the anti-Semitism which grew up in the cities of Central Europe at that time⁸⁷. The appearance of some urban anti-Semitic groups was a “fashion” imported from European capitals, an imitation. It reflected an alien middle-class attitude rather than native peasant anti-Semitism. The main instigators of these pro-fascist groups were some industrial-commercial circles, extreme nationalists and military organizations and their members – predominantly young people, frequently members of different students’ nationalistic groups⁸⁸. They copied their literature from foreign sources, predominately German. In the 1920s the dissemination of the anti-Semitic propaganda was growing⁸⁹. In 1924 Boris Geshakov’s book *Freemasonry and Its Activists* was published in Stara Zagora. Several more books appeared in 1928-1929 in Sofia, dedicated to Pan-Judaism. The Jews were accused of participating in Masonic lodges and of fighting for universal domination through international revolution and Communism. Another accusation was that they had concentrated almost all the wealth in their hands and were playing an unfavorable role in the economic life of the country. Of course, in the Bulgarian case these were all obvious lies and exaggerations aiming at discrediting the Jewish community⁹⁰.

After the coup d’etat of 1923 anti-Semitism settled permanently in the ideology of the fascist organizations in Bulgaria. In 1922 Krum Mitakov founded “The Fascist Union”⁹¹, which consisted of reactionary ex-officers. It was re-founded in 1923 under the new name of “Kubrat” organization⁹². Its offspring was the “Rodna

⁸⁵ A comprehensive overview on anti-Semitic publications in Bulgaria between 1878 and 1945 can be found in Benjamin Arditi’s book *Антисемитската литература в България* (Anti-Semitic Literature in Bulgaria), that appeared in Tel Aviv in 1972.

⁸⁶ Pazardzhik 1895, Sofia 1884, Vratsa 1890, Lom 1903, and they reached their peak in 1904 with a pogrom in the town of Kyustendil, which ended with the death of six Jews.

⁸⁷ ПАУНОВСКИ, ИЛЕЛ 2000: 179.

⁸⁸ СОХЕН 1984: 64; ПЕШИЕВ 2004: 205.

⁸⁹ In that period many anti-Semitic publications appeared, most of them were translated articles, books and brochures of German origin. They were addressed to the most retarded strata of the population and were with little circulation. See *Jews in the Bulgarian Hinterland* 2002: 49-50; ПОППИЕТРОВ 2008: 113.

⁹⁰ Н. БАРУХ 1991: 53; *Jews in the Bulgarian Hinterland* 2002: 154-162.

⁹¹ Immediately after Mussolini came to power in Italy in 1922. See СОХЕН 1984: 65.

⁹² It was headed by the same leader and General Ivan Shkoinov. See *Jews in the Bulgarian Hinterland* 2002: 134.

zashtita” (National Protection) organization (1924-1936)⁹³. Soon it merged with “National Social Movement”, another fascist organization led by Aleksander Tzankov. In the 1920s some other nationalist organizations with anti-Semitic character appeared too, like: “Otetz Paisii” (1927-1944), “Brothers of Omurtag”, the “Bulgarian National Students’ Union”, the “Federation of the Reserve Army”, the “Union of Champions of the Bulgarian National Spirit”, the youth organization “Brannik”, etc.⁹⁴

Many pro-fascist and anti-Semitic groups emerged in Bulgaria in the 1930s under the direct impact of similar tendencies then prevailing in Europe, mainly Germany. Anti-Semitism in Bulgaria was actually dependent on the tightening of the relations between the country and Nazi Germany⁹⁵. The two main nationalistic organizations with anti-Semitic ideology in Bulgaria were “Sajuz na balgarskite nacionalni legioni” (Union of Bulgarian National Legions)⁹⁶ (1930-1944) and “Ratnik za napredak na balgarshtinata” (Guardians of the Advancement of the Bulgarian National Traits)⁹⁷ (1936-1944). After the Nazis came to power in Germany, they took a course of National-socialism and established close relations with the Nazi leaders. The basic slogan of these organizations was the “struggle against freemasonry”, Jews and all other minorities (Greeks, Armenians, etc.) in the country. Adapting the racist theories to native soil, its members popularized the idea of the peculiar racial belonging of the Bulgarians which made them different from the Slavs⁹⁸. For a very short time even a “National-Socialist Party” (1932-1934) existed in Bulgaria with its “fuhrers” H. Kunchev and later H. Tahov. It also copied the platform of the German National-Socialist Party. In addition, the league “Workers for the Progress of Bulgaria” (1937-1944) backed the pro-German policy of the Bulgarian governments and had contacts with Himmler and other Nazi leaders⁹⁹.

These organizations, however, had never managed to unite or to get successful because of the struggle for predominance and political power among them. They

⁹³ It was established by General Shkoinov and some other officers in retirement. See ПОППИЕТРОВ 2008: 24.

⁹⁴ *Проучвания* 1980: 146, 158-159; COHEN 1984: 65.

⁹⁵ BENBASSA, RODRIGUE 1995: 173.

⁹⁶ The leaders of the “Sajuz na balgarskite nacionalni legioni” were the generals Nikola Zhekov (commander-in-chief of Bulgarian forces in World War I) and Hristo Lukov (minister of war in 1935-1938). The “Sajuz” remained the oldest, most influential, and one of the most vicious pro-Nazi organizations in Bulgaria. See CHARY 1972: 8.

⁹⁷ It was founded by the ex-officer Assen Kantardziev. Most of the members of this organization reached important state positions, and one of its leaders, Nikola Gabrovski, was appointed the Minister of Internal Affairs. See КОЕН (състав.) 1995: 74.

⁹⁸ ЦДА, ф. 1498, оп. 1, а.е. 3, л. 9-10; ПОППИЕТРОВ 2008: 90-91, 251-252.

⁹⁹ ПЕШЕВ 2004: 205.

did not have long life and big influence in the country. On May 19, 1934, when a military coup took place and monarchic dictatorship was established, all parties and political organizations were disbanded. That allowed the King to concentrate all executive power in his hands. Some right-wing nationalistic organizations continued to exist, being convenient to the governments and the King, but their activity was put under police surveillance¹⁰⁰.

The anti-Semitic actions in that period found expression in individual or group attacks, murders, hooliganism, etc. Bombing and some other terrorist acts took place in different cities of the country and anti-Semitic propaganda was disseminated at schools¹⁰¹. In 1930 anti-Jewish signs appeared on the walls of some of Sofia synagogues and the central Jewish school in Sofia, organized by the fascist organization “National Protection”¹⁰². In 1932 there were anti-Jewish demonstrations on the streets of Sofia. Some windows-shops were broken; there were also attacks on Jewish houses. In 1933 “Federation of the Reserve Army” organized an anti-Communist exhibition in Sofia, which also had an anti-Jewish character. Racist outrages took place also in the autumn of 1934¹⁰³.

When in the eve of World War II Bulgaria formed close ties with Germany both politically and economically and became heavily reliant on German loans, trade¹⁰⁴, and armaments, the most significant of anti-Jewish acts and pogroms occurred. In March 1938 the “Union of the Bulgarian National Legions” attacked the Military Club in Sofia, where the eminent Bulgarian biologist, Professor of Sofia University, Methody Popov had a public lecture opposing the original (Anti-Slavic) racial theories of the Nazis¹⁰⁵. In March 1939 fascists assaulted the Bulgaria Concert Hall, where a famous Jewish conductor Bensusan was concerting. In August they destroyed several Jewish shops in the centre of the capital. On September 19, 1939 “Workers for the Progress of Bulgaria”, “Ratnik” and the “Legion” organized an anti-Semitic demonstration in the centre of Sofia. Windows

¹⁰⁰ COHEN 1984: 66.

¹⁰¹ ЦДА, ф. 1498, оп. 1, а.е. 2, л. 99.

¹⁰² Yet in 1926 there was an attempt of the “National Protection” members to interrupt the holy mess in the main Sofia synagogue. See ТОHЧЕВ 1938: 28; KOEH 2000: 37-39.

¹⁰³ Н. БАРУХ 1991: 51.

¹⁰⁴ Indeed by 1939, 68% of foreign trade was with Germany.

¹⁰⁵ He published two books in 1938: *Bulgarians among the European Races and Peoples and Heredity, Race, and People*. He was the first one who did not copy the racist theory of the National-Socialists but created his own, which admitted the Slavic character of the Bulgarian nation and did not exaggerate its proto-Bulgarian element. That was the reason he was hated by the “authentic” racists who thought the proto-Bulgarians were dominating the political and cultural life of Medieval Bulgaria, so his lectures were subject to attacks and provocations. See ЦДА, ф. 1, оп. 4, а.е. 17, л. 1; ф. 173, оп. 6, а.е. 1087, л. 263-264; ЕЛДЪРОВ 2010: 279-280

of Jewish shops were smashed. The police did not interfere, but many prominent Bulgarian public figures condemned the accident¹⁰⁶.

At the outbreak of the war Bulgaria declared neutrality but the pressure from Germany to join the Three Partite Pact (Germany, Italy, Japan) became very strong. This was seen as the best way to regain what Bulgarians saw as their 'rightful territories' which they lost after the World War I. Bulgarian irredentism was concentrated towards Macedonia and Thrace. So, the economic dependency and the national issue led to an inevitable commitment of the country to the Axis Powers and this had serious consequences for the fate of the Bulgarian Jews. Anti-Semitism was not just a political fashion, but a practical decision. As a result, after the beginning of the World War II anti-Semitism became a state policy and was tightly connected with the international orientation of the country. Its legal basis was laid in October 1940 when the Bulgarian parliament voted the Nation Defense Act which could be recognized as a beginning of the political anti-Semitism in Bulgaria¹⁰⁷.

The Jewish community campaigned vigorously against the bill and gained widespread support from organisations and individuals both outside and inside parliament (including the Bulgarian Orthodox Church). This was reflected in a series of open letters, petitions, and declarations of position. This in turn mobilised public sympathy and the majority of public opinion was against the bill. However, it was supported by the members of the pro-Government majority in the Parliament and passed into law in January 1941¹⁰⁸. That was part of the deal with Berlin; it stripped Jews of all their legitimate rights – civil, political and economic. It was based on the Nazi Nuremberg Race Laws, except that 'Jews' were defined by religion, not 'blood'. Restrictions were imposed upon residence, property ownership and the right to practice certain professions¹⁰⁹.

In February 1941 there was a serious preparation for a German advance into Bulgaria¹¹⁰. Boris III faced a choice between occupation or alliance and opted for

¹⁰⁶ KOEH 1969: 62.

¹⁰⁷ The text of the law was drafted by Alexander Belev, a lawyer working for the Ministry of Internal Affairs and a leading member of *Ratnik*, later the Bulgarian Commissioner for Jewish Questions. He spent the summer of 1940 in Germany studying the issue. See TODOROV 2001: 4-5; КАЛЧЕВА 2008: 115.

¹⁰⁸ This Act was passed by the National Assembly on December 24, 1940 and it was promulgated in the *Official Gazette* and enforced in January 1941. See *Държавен вестник*, 1941, бр. 16, 23.01.1941.

¹⁰⁹ The law would register all Jews in the country and limit their right to participate in Bulgaria's economic, political and social life. It introduced Jewish property tax, required "yellow star" to be worn, forbade "mixed" marriages between Jews and Bulgarians; etc. It was the first step of the violation of human rights of the Jewish community in Bulgaria and remained in effect until the Communist seize of power in September 1944. See ПЕЛИЕВ 2004: 211, 223.

¹¹⁰ Following Italy's defeat by Greece in December 1940, Hitler felt it necessary to move his troops through Bulgaria to assist Mussolini.

the latter. On January 20, 1941 his Council of Ministers approved the German passage and on March 1 the Prime Minister signed a treaty of adherence to the Axis Powers. On the same day Southern Dobroudja was returned to Bulgaria. After the successful campaigns against Yugoslavia and Greece in April 1941 Thrace, Aegean Macedonia and the Western Regions were occupied by the Nazis and turned over to Bulgarians for administration, with the perspective that the country would annex them upon a Nazi victory. This was, after all, the major reason for its alliance with Nazi Germany. The longstanding nationalist dream of a 'unified Bulgaria' was finally realized.

The official attitude to local Jews changed abruptly in accordance with the German policy. The right-wing elements started a propaganda war against them. The government applied the Nation Defense Act not only to Bulgaria proper, but after April 1941 to the annexed territories in Greece and Yugoslavia. After the clear formulation of German policy at the Wannsee conference in January 1942, the pressure for the deportation of the Bulgarian Jews to the Nazi death camps in occupied Poland became stronger. The government was fully aware of German intentions and began to prepare the ground for transports. A critical point was reached with the arrival in Sofia of Adolf Eichmann's special envoy, the SS Officer Theodor Dannecker. On February 22, 1943, he signed an agreement with Aleksander Belev, the Bulgarian Commissioner for Jewish Questions, to deport 20,000 Jews 'as a first step'. Originally the text referred explicitly to Jews from Thrace and Macedonia (12,000)¹¹¹, the remaining 8,000 had to come from Bulgaria proper¹¹².

Conclusion

In accordance with this agreement, in March 1943 12,000 Jews from the "newly-liberated lands" (firstly from Thrace, and then from Macedonia) were arrested by the police and sent through Bulgarian territory to be exterminated in German death camps in Poland, mainly Auschwitz and Treblinka, where they were all killed¹¹³. Although Sofia regarded these territories as part of the kingdom, Berlin recognized only Bulgarian military administration over them¹¹⁴. Very similar was the case of Romania, where Jews may have been expelled from the occupied ter-

¹¹¹ The government order from June 5, 1942 stated that the citizenship in these regions does not apply to individuals of Jewish origin. This put them into a state of statelessness which was the most dangerous for them during the war period. See TODOROV 2001: 5-6

¹¹² BENBASSA, RODRIGUE. 1995: 175.

¹¹³ On March 4 and 11 started the deportation of 4,200 Jews from Thrace and Piroto, and on March 11 – around 7,100 of Macedonia. See КОЕН (състав.) 1995: 204; ХАДЖИЙСКИ 2004.

¹¹⁴ For Germany they have never been annexed from Bulgaria. In German maps from that time for Macedonia and Thrace was written "Unter Bulgarische verwertung", i.e. "under Bulgarian administration".

ritories (Northern Bukovina and Bessarabia which were lost to the Soviet Union in 1940 and recovered in 1941) but the German request to deport the Jews of 'Old' Romania (Regat) was refused¹¹⁵.

But the Jews from "old Bulgaria" could count on support from Bulgarian population. According to the secret agreement from February 1943, the deportation from Bulgaria proper was decided to take place on March 10. But two days before that, a deputy, lawyer Dimitar Peshev¹¹⁶ learned about the planned action and initiated a sharp protesting manifesto to the Prime-Minister Bogdan Philov, arguing for the illegality of deporting Bulgarian Jewish citizens. He gained the support of 42 his colleagues who also signed the document. So, on March 9 the order was revoked by the Minister of Interior Petar Gabrovski¹¹⁷. It is true that on May 23, 1943 r. 20,000 Jews were driven from the capital, which was the climax of their persecution¹¹⁸. But by October, Sofia's Jews were allowed to return. Henceforth the king under the pressure of some representatives of the Orthodox Church, popular politicians, prominent intellectuals, public figures, and ordinary citizens refused any further deportations from Bulgaria. Anti-Jewish policy had totally failed in Bulgaria proper.

Prominent representatives of Bulgarian economic, political, cultural and intellectual elite protested publicly against anti-Semitism and insisted that the Jews had to be treated as equal and full-right Bulgarian citizens. Yet in the 1930s the newspapers *Narod* (People), *Pladne* (Mid-day), *Vreme* (Time), *Zname* (Banner), *Nezavisimost* (Independence), etc. declared themselves against the anti-Jewish provocations in the country. A lot of public meetings were organized, where speakers stated the crimes of nationalists were alien to Bulgarian spirit and could discredit the nation and the state. There was a strong pressure on the authorities to interfere and not to allow anti-Jewish actions. A large section of Bulgarian

¹¹⁵ But there were great differences between the two neighboring countries which was due to the presence of a genuine fascist movement and widespread anti-Semitism in Romania. See CHARY 1972: 196.

¹¹⁶ He studied law at Sofia University, worked as a judge in Sofia and Plovdiv, later as a public prosecutor, and from 1932 as a lawyer. In 1935-1936 he became Minister of justice, in 1938 - Vice Chairman of the XXIV Ordinary National Assembly and in 1940 he took the same position in the XXV Ordinary National Assembly.

¹¹⁷ Peshev's action in 1943 was quite unique in European's context. He was not definitely the only person to have helped the Jews, but he was the only one who has led a legal, parliamentary action in their defence. He fought not for several individuals but for the group as a whole. Because of his initiative Peshev was removed from his office at the end of March, and later in 1946 the „People's Court“ sentenced him to 15 years of prison „for fascist activity and Anti-Semitism“. He died in 1973. See BENBASSA, RODRIGUE. 1995: 175; TODOROV 2001: 7, 24.

¹¹⁸ By the end of June 1943, around 19,000 of the 25,000 Jews of the city had been removed from the Bulgarian capital. Half of the remaining 5,000 Jews were sent to forced labor camps where they were subjected to harsh measures.

intelligentsia was committed to fighting the growth of anti-Semitism. In 1937 with the support of the Consistory a special questionnaire was published, called *Survey on Racism and Anti-Semitism*, which targeted former ministers, prime-ministers, professors, generals, politicians, etc. and explored their attitudes towards racism, anti-Semitism, democracy, human rights, etc. All the sixty three answers denounced racism as ideology and inflammation of racial hatred. As anti-Semitism was concerned, most of the questioned answered that Bulgarian people, who itself had suffered for five centuries under foreign domination, could not approve persecution of any other people on racial or national grounds¹¹⁹.

The Bulgarian Orthodox Church (headed by Mitroplits Stefan Sofijski and Kiril Plovdivski) was among the very few official institutions that could raise its voice against racism and anti-Semitism in inter-war Bulgaria. In the 1930s it made no official declarations, but did protest in an indirect way by rejecting all racial, national, and social differences between people who had the same “divine essence”. In 1939-1940 Mitropolit Stefan published in the Church press several articles against German National-Socialism and Russian bolshevism. And from 1940 onwards the Holy Synod protested openly against the Nation Defense Act¹²⁰.

The Consistory was the other official institutions that could oppose that policy. In 1933 it created a Commission whose purpose was to follow all anti-Semitic actions in the country and to take the necessary measures, including legal ones, against their initiators. Its members were not only Zionists, but also Bulgarian intellectuals like Prof. Assen Zlatarov, the writer Anton Strashimirov, Ekaterina Karavelova, etc., who later, during the war, raised voices against the anti-Jewish legislation. This Commission frequently made protests to different members of the government – to the defense minister, to the minister of foreign affairs, of internal affairs, of justice, etc. outraged by the increasing anti-Jewish actions, as well as the inertness of the police¹²¹. But as a whole the Consistory was not firm enough in its opposition to the regime; in many cases its recommendation was “submission”. In 1940 when the bill of the Nation Defense Act was debated in the Parliament, it abstained from protesting, in contrast to numerous deputies, ministers, public figures, etc. Even after the introduction of the law, the Consistory appealed to the Jewish population “to obey the laws of the country”¹²².

¹¹⁹ The interview was conducted by the Jewish journalist Buko Pitti and was published in a brochure in 1937 – Пити, Б. Българската общественост за расизма и антисемитизма. Анкета между видни представители на българската общественост, наука, литература, изкуство, София, 1937. The brochure was confiscated on authorities’ order in the publishing house, but several hundred copies anyway reached the public. Вж. Н. БАПУХ 1991: 52.

¹²⁰ MOSSEK 2001: 280-298; ЕЛДЪРОВ 2010: 277-303.

¹²¹ Н. БАПУХ 1991: 52.

¹²² ТОШКОВА 1997: 19-20.

Interestingly, the Bulgarian Communist Party did not take a stand against the anti-Semitic ideas disseminated by the right-wing political organizations, nor did it become a protector of the violated “Jewish rights”. It is true that at that time the Party was subjected to political repressions; yet the more important reason was the influence of the policy of the Soviet Union, where in the 1920s and 1930s racist theories and anti-Semitism gained popularity¹²³.

There was no anti-Semitism in the villages since there were no Jews there, and peasants were around 80% of Bulgarian population in the interwar period. If they had any inter ethnic conflicts, they were with the Turks and the Gypsies, not with the Jews. For them anti-Jewish outrages were completely out of reality¹²⁴. The relative lack of anti-Semitism among the Bulgarian peasants and the active objection from large segments of Bulgarian society led to the prevention of the deportations. Even after 1934 the Parliament was not disbanded in the country, and that gave a chance for an official parliamentary resistance. During the war there was “political anti-Semitism”, not the “social one”. The public debate in old Bulgarian territories, and the lack of German troops in the country created a context in which the Final Solution did not take place. Unlike Greece and Yugoslavia the country was not overrun by the German army which gave some autonomy to the local government¹²⁵.

Berlin was sending at that time millions of Jews to concentration camps in Poland from all over Europe but it had difficulties not only with Bulgarian, but also Romanian and Hungarian ones. After 1943 Germany’s position in the war was too weak to put pressure on Bulgaria to carry out deportations, so they never became a serious question for Bulgaria. In the spring of 1943 Hitler’s victory was not so obvious as it had once appeared to be. In that moment Boris did not want to compromise Bulgaria’s relations with the US and Great Britain which were opposing strongly the Nazis’ anti-Jewish policies. Under the pressure of the Allies and the Red Cross he decided not to proceed with the deportations. He could not also ignore the public opinion at home. Peshev’s intervention in the National Assembly showed that one-third of its members were ready to oppose the government on the Jewish question. The King could not ignore that new balance of power. His death in August 1943 completely changed the political scene and convinced the government to amend its anti-Jewish policies.

In conclusion we may assert that in the 1920s and 1930s there was little radical, racist anti-Semitism in Bulgaria, and it did not strike deep roots in Bulgarian public mind. In fact, some individuals and insignificant groups did hold anti-Semitic views and try to preach anti-Semitism in the country. But they remained on the

¹²³ ЕЛДЪРОВ 2010: 282.

¹²⁴ Н. БАРУХ 1991: 53.

¹²⁵ CHARY 1972: 198-199; BENBASSA, RODRIGUE. 1995: 177-178.

fringe and did not acquire a mass base. During the entire pre-war and war period there was no fascist movement in Bulgaria, or a unified political party. There were many separate fascist organizations with little popular support, struggling for power and influence¹²⁶. Their ideas were not original, but a compilation of Italian fascism and German National-Socialism. Their excesses were not tolerated by the government and most of the society rebelled them. All of them were kept away from power by Tsar Boris who did not want to share his dictatorial rule over the country with any potential rivals¹²⁷.

The Bulgarians remained indifferent to the efforts of spreading anti-Semitism and the anti-Jewish propaganda. The intelligentsia had the most important role to oppose the infiltration of this ideology in the country. Anti-Semitism was not tolerated by the majority of the political elite of the country, so it did not have deep roots as in some neighboring and European countries. In contrast to them, these ideas never became part of Bulgaria's everyday public culture and were rejected by the society as a whole. Broad social circles, even if they did not sympathize with the Jews, were not against them. Although there were some anti-Jewish ill-feelings at the Universities in late 1930s, no Jews were expelled, even physical assaults were rare. The general spirit of tolerance in the Bulgarian lands and the confined influence of religion were among the favorable psychological factors which played their role for the saving of the most Bulgarian Jews during the period of World War II.

One of the historical sources of information on Jews and Jewish issues is the American Jewish Year Book (AJYB) which has been published annually since 1899 and contains the leading news on Jews from around the world. It shows there was no media attack on Bulgarian Jews, almost no laws against them, and very few riots with vandalism, destruction of property, physical assault and/or murder of Jews. The Bulgarian press, in contrast, wrote about Jews in a favorable context¹²⁸. The Jews themselves, when questioned, always stated they had enjoyed full civil, political and religious rights in Bulgaria before World War II. According to the conclusion of the World Jewish congress, which took place just before the war, "there was no legislation abusing the rights of minorities" in Bulgaria and when some anti-Semitic actions took place, they had mainly economic, not political character. The attempts of some extreme groups in the interwar period to follow the "anti-Semitic tendencies" of the classic Nazi movement were not

¹²⁶ They were significant only because among their leaders were such personalities such as Petar Gabrovski and Aleksandar Belev who later had a direct impact on anti-Jewish policies. See CHARY 1972: 7-8.

¹²⁷ The Bulgarian government at the time was authoritarian, not fascist. See ПИИИИЕТРОБ 2008: 8, 117.

¹²⁸ BRUSTEIN, KING 2004a: 700, 703.

substantial. The establishment of such organizations, according to the Congress, did not find grounds among the majority of the Bulgarians¹²⁹.

Anti-Semitism was not a significant factor in the country in the interwar period. While there was some anti-Jewish sentiment it did not find an organized mass base or reach an intensity that could threaten Jewish life. The situation was much better than in Central or Eastern Europe in that time. In Bulgaria Jews did not face any significant threat to their existence until the World War II. So, even if some anti-Jewish forces had been present in Bulgaria, they never became influential enough to execute exterminatory policy.

The saving of Bulgarian Jews during the Second World War is an indisputable fact. Seen in a historical perspective, it was not a "miracle". The Jewish problem had been introduced in the country quite artificially and it was later, during the war, promoted to the rank of an official policy under the Nazi pressure. Bulgarian regime copied the Nazi ideology, its theory of the races and its anti-Semitism and thus, for the first time in Bulgarian history, introduced them to Bulgarian political scene after 1940. That is why anti-Semitism can be viewed only within the framework of the Bulgarian alliance with Nazis, and therefore be interpreted as a response to German demands¹³⁰.

The decision of the government to introduce the new anti-Semitic policy during the war was dictated by the high national interests, not humanitarian principles. Bulgarian ruling circles ahead with the King knew that the small countries have to come to terms with greater ones. Hitler had the power; thus some of his demands had to be accepted. So, the government chose to deport the Jews from the occupied territories but not those from "old Bulgaria"; temporary to expel the ones from Sofia but not from the country. Concerning Thrace and Macedonia, Bulgarians were not "involved" with the Jewish issue there. The indifference to their fate was because they were considered as "outsiders" and "foreigners"¹³¹. It

¹²⁹ ХРИСИМОВА 2003: 189-190.

¹³⁰ That is the prevailing view in the contemporary historiography. With the German troops outside Sofia, and Gestapo agents in the capital the government did not have choice and had to deal with the artificial "Jewish question", imposed from Berlin. Bulgaria was a country-satellite, in which the influence of the German secret services and agents was important. So, the fate of the Bulgarian Jews depended more on the military fortunes of the Wehrmacht in Europe than the anti-Semitism of the Bulgarian government. See CHARY 1972: 3; LEVY 1993/1994: 10; MOUTAFCHIEVA 1995: 50; ПЕШЕВ 2004: 216-217; КАЛЧЕВА 2008: 115-116.

But some critics, mainly foreign authors, suggest that Bulgarians tend to exaggerate the fact the Germans were in charge of the anti-Jewish measures taken in these areas. As a proof of their thesis of the strength of Bulgaria's pre-war anti-Semitism they give the anti-Jewish legislation implemented in January 1941 and the beginning of deportations in March 1943 from the newly liberated lands where the Bulgarian government enjoyed "broad support and cooperation" among the population. See ATAOV 1994: 51-56.

¹³¹ The same happened in Romania, where the Romanians refused to deport their own Jews, but behaved with ferocity towards the "foreigners" from the newly occupied territories. See BEN-BASSA, RODRIGUE 1995: 178.

was a calculated move, designed to stay on the side of the powerful of the day. The government managed to save four-fifths of Bulgaria's Jewish population at the expense of the remainder. Further on, the failure of Germany on all battle-fields, the exit of Italy from the fascist block, and the victories of the Soviet Army led to the collapse of the Jewish policy at the end of the war and helped objectively the efforts of Bulgarian society to save its Jews¹³².

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¹³² TODOROV 2001: 23, 29.

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Jewry Related Discourse in Bulgaria Between the First and the Second World Wars

U razdoblju od oslobođenja pa do Drugog svjetskog rata manjine su u Bugarskoj uživale velike slobode u izražavanju svojih etnokulturnih prava, prakticanju svoje vjere i služenju svojim jezikom. Trnovski ustav stvorio je uvjete podesne za vjersku, političku i civilnu emancipaciju bugarskih Židova. Potpuno tolerantna službena politika bugarskih vlada bila je usmjerena na njihovu integraciju u bugarsku naciju i nacionalnu državu. Kao posljedica, židovska je zajednica nakon 1878. postupno postala sastavni dio bugarske nacije.

Nijedan od brojnih vidova antisemitizma - vjerskog, rasnog, gospodarskog, političkog - nije bio tipičan za Bugarsku. Ona je kao poražena zemlja nakon Prvog svjetskog rata bila lišena svojih područja naseljenih bugarskih stanovništvom. Zbog neriješenog nacionalnog pitanja nacionalizam je u međuratnoj Bugarskoj ostao prevladavajuća ideologija i to je pitanje bilo glavna tema u unutarnjem i vanjskom političkom životu zemlje. Židovi nisu bili glavna preokupacija političke elite u zemlji. Ta je elita strahovala od muslimanskog turskog stanovništva i bila ogorčena na njega, a nakon Prvog svjetskog rata bila je opsjednuta "makedonskim" pitanjem, a ne Židovima.

U dvadesetim i tridesetim godinama 20. stoljeća antisemitizam je u Bugarskoj bio prilično slab, jednako kao i stoljećima prije. Za razliku od Europe, on nije obilježio odnose između Židova i Bugara. Sukobi su bili rijetki, a objašnjenje za to moguće je tražiti u brojnim aspektima. Ponajprije, to je bila liberalna i snošljiva vladina politika oko pitanja manjina. U međuratnom razdoblju Židovi su imali mogućnost slobodno obdržavati svoje vjerske rituale, razvijati vlastitu kulturu, ustrojavati organizacije, itd. Bili su i dobro zastupljeni u umjetnosti, znanosti i slobodnim zanimanjima. Dobro integrirani u bugarsko društvo, radili su i živjeli s Bugarima, a njihova je emancipacija dosegla visoku razinu. Bugari i Židovi zajedno su se borili protiv srpske, odnosno grčke okupacije Makedonije i Trakije i za njihovo oslobođenje te pripajanje bugarskoj državi. Židovsko prihvaćanje vrijednosti bugarske nacionalne doktrine i njihova bliska integracija u bugarsku naciju može objasniti bliske odnose između te dvije etničke skupine. Drugdje u Europi antisemitizam je izazvao ogorčenost prema Židovima zbog njihova bogatstva. Židovi u Bugarskoj nisu imali takvo bogatstvo niti su dominirali ključnim sektorima gospodarstva.

Nije bilo organiziranih protužidovskih ispada u zemlji u međuratnom razdoblju kakvih je bilo u Srednjoj i Istočnoj Europi. Nije postojao deklarirani antisemitizam i, ako ga je uopće i bilo, bio je ograničen na političke stranke i organizacije krajnje desnice. Replika nacionalsocijalizma, nije igrao bitnu ulogu i nikad nije postao središnji element u njihovu ideološkom sustavu. U dvadesetim godinama 20. stoljeća u Bugarskoj je prevladavao talijanski primjer, a posuđenice od nacista

pojavile su se u programima tih organizacija tek u tridesetim godinama kad su lokalni nacionalisti pokušali privući pozornost njemačkih vladajućih krugova u vezi s rješavanjem bugarskog nacionalnog pitanja. Mnoge profašističke i antisemitske skupine nastale su u Bugarskoj u tridesetim godinama 20. stoljeća pod izravnim utjecajem Njemačke. Ako je i bilo izraza antisemitizma, oni su bili ograničeni, iznimni i ni na koji način ih nije poticala vlada niti državna tijela. Moderni antisemitizam kao europski politički i društveni pokret na ideološkim osnovama u zemlji nije postojao. Tijekom čitavog predratnog i ratnog razdoblja u Bugarskoj nije bilo fašističkog pokreta niti jedinstvene političke stranke. Postojale su mnoge odvojene fašističke organizacije s malo narodne potpore, koje su se borile za moć i utjecaj. Njihove ekscese vlada nije tolerirala i glavnina društva je ustala protiv njih. Sve njih je daleko od vlasti držao car Boris koji nije želio dijeliti svoju diktatorsku vladavinu nad zemljom s potencijalnim suparnicima.

Bugari su ostali nehajni prema nastojanjima da se proširi antisemitizam i protužidovska propaganda. Inteligencija je imala najvažniju ulogu u protivljenju da se ta ideologija infiltrira u zemlju. Glavnina političke elite u zemlji nije tolerirala antisemitizam pa tako nije uhvatio duboke korijene kao u nekim susjednim europskim zemljama. Za razliku od njih, te ideje nikad nisu postale dio bugarske svakodnevne javne kulture i odbilo ih je društvo u cjelini. Iako je bilo nekih protužidovskih resantimana u kasnim tridesetim godinama 20. stoljeća, rijetki su bili čak i fizički nasrtaji. Prilike su bile mnogo bolje nego u Srednjoj ili Istočnoj Europi u to vrijeme.

Židovi u Bugarskoj nisu bili suočeni sa znatnijom prijetnjom svojoj egzistenciji sve do Drugog svjetskog rata. Opći duh snošljivosti u bugarskim zemljama i sputani utjecaj vjere tvorili su neke od povoljnih psiholoških čimbenika koji su odigrali ulogu u spašavanju većine bugarskih Židova u Drugom svjetskom ratu. Gledano iz povijesne perspektive, to nije bilo „čudo“: Židovski problem uveden je u zemlju na prilično umjetan način i kasnije je, tijekom rata, promaknut pod nacističkim pritiskom u rang službene politike

Keywords: Bulgarian Jews, anti-Semitism, Bulgaria, interwar period, anti-Jewish outrages, Nazism, Germans.

Ključne riječi: bugarski Židovi, antisemitizam, Bugarska, međuratno razdoblje, protužidovski ispadi, nacizam, Nijemci

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ZAGREB 2013.

RADOVI ZAVODA ZA HRVATSKU POVIJEST
FILOZOFSKOGA FAKULTETA SVEUČILIŠTA U ZAGREBU

Knjiga 45

Izdavač / Publisher

Zavod za hrvatsku povijest
Filozofskoga fakulteta Sveučilišta u Zagrebu
FF-press

Za izdavača / For Publisher

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Ovi su Radovi tiskani uz financijsku potporu
Ministarstva znanosti, obrazovanja i športa Republike Hrvatske

Časopis je indeksiran u sljedećim bazama/The Journal is indexed in the following databases:
Directory of Open Access Journals, EBSCO, SCOPUS

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Iva Mandić

Grafičko oblikovanje i računalni slog

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Tisak

Zrinski d.d. Čakovec

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