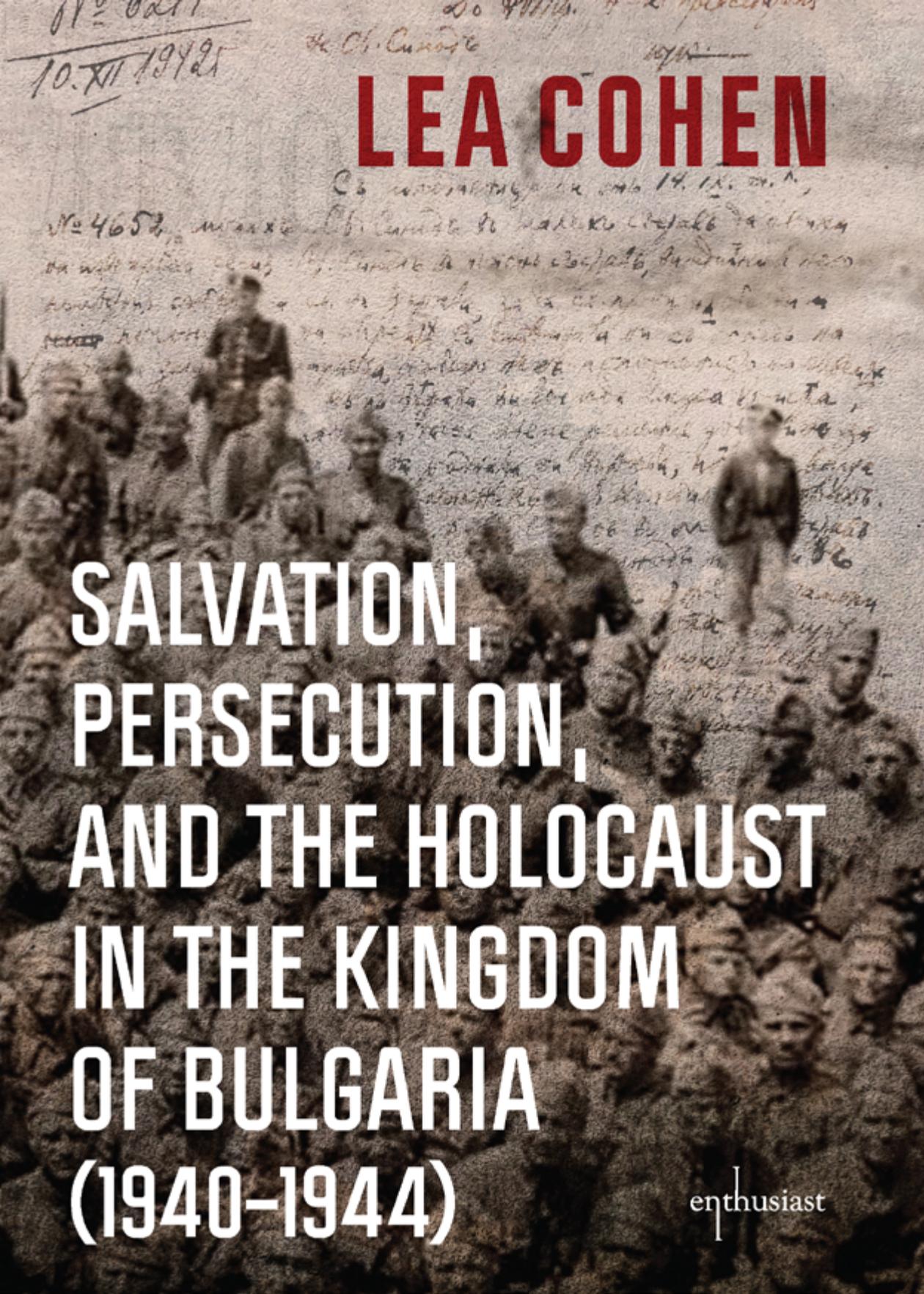


10. XII 1942

# LEA COHEN

# SALVATION, PERSECUTION, AND THE HOLOCAUST IN THE KINGDOM OF BULGARIA (1940-1944)

enthusiast



Cover photos:

Bulgarians in Western (Greek) Thrace, Infantry Company, regular reserve, 1941, from the collection of P. Kolev (front cover photo)

Letter by Georgi Uzunov, President of the College of Chartered Accountants in Kavala, Greece, addressed to the Prime Minister and expressing gratitude for the Government's decision to deport the Jews. Kavala, March 11, 1943. CSA. ЦДА, ф.ф. 1449, он. 1, а.е. 187, л. 112 (back cover photo)

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PERSECUTION,  
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OF BULGARIA  
(1940-1944)**

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Sofia, 2023

This publication was specially prepared for the 80th anniversary of the salvation of the Bulgarian Jews.

Lea Cohen  
Salvation, Persecution, and the Holocaust in the Kingdom of Bulgaria  
(1940–1944)

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## ABBREVIATIONS USED

ASA	Archives State Agency
BDZ	Bulgarian State Railways
BNFA	Bulgarian National Film Archive
BOC	Bulgarian Orthodox Church
CJA	Commissariat for Jewish Affairs
CSA	Central State Archive
EMP	European Parliament Member
GERB	Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (Bulgarian initials)
LNP	Law for the Protection of the Nation
NDSV	National Movement for Stabilization and Progress (Bulgarian initials)
OJB	Organization of the Jews in Bulgaria
UDF	Union of the Democratic Forces
VMRO	Internal Macedonian Organization (Bulgarian initials)

## Introduction

by His Excellency Ambassador Stuart E. Eizenstat  
Special Adviser to Secretary of State Blinken on Holocaust Issues  
Chairman of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council, the Governing  
Board of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C.



**M**y late wife Fran and I became close friends of Lea Cohen during the period we were ambassadors from our respective countries to the European Union – she from Bulgaria, and I, from the United States – during the Clinton Administration (1993–1996). In addition to being an excellent ambassador for Bulgaria leading up to its membership in the European Union, we learned that she was a concert-quality pianist and a historian. She played the piano for us and for our guests at our official American residence in Brussels.

Beyond her major contribution in laying the groundwork for Bulgaria’s membership in the European Union in 2007, she has done critically important historical analysis of the history of the Bulgarian Jewish community during the Nazi era. Her beautifully written, compelling new book *Salvation, Persecution, and the Holocaust in the Kingdom of Bulgaria 1940-1944* is the product of extensive research into archives, including those in Switzerland, and sheds important new light on Bulgaria’s role in both saving and deporting Jews. It will fittingly be published around

the time of the 80th anniversary of the deportation of the Jews in Royalist Bulgaria to Treblinka.

Lea Cohen discusses what she calls the widely held myth, both within and outside Bulgaria, that the Bulgarian King Boris III and the Bulgarian government, notwithstanding Bulgaria's role as part of Nazi-Axis powers from 1940–1944, saved the Jews of Bulgaria. In fact, her book describes how around 12,000 of the 60,000 Jews within the Kingdom of Bulgaria were sent to their death, deported from Macedonia and northern Greece to Treblinka and Auschwitz, by the Bulgarian army and police on the Bulgarian railway with the support of King Boris III. She also relies on findings which validate her conclusions by the Yad Vashem Holocaust Research Centers in Israel, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington (whose governing United States Holocaust Memorial Council I chair), and researchers in Bulgaria, Israel, France, and elsewhere.

In her book, Lea Cohen finds that the Bulgarian “Final Solution” was decided by Prime Minister Bogdan Filov and German Foreign Minister von Ribbentrop and consented to by King Boris III for up to 25,000 “undesirable Jews.” Yet, this is a balanced book. The majority of Bulgarian Jews were saved due to relatively low levels of anti-Semitism among the Bulgarian population that gave Jews help from their Bulgarian fellow citizens; large parts of Bulgarian society did not support the “Final Solution” for their fellow Jewish citizens; Bulgarian Jews were well integrated into the national social and professional life of Bulgaria, which offered protection by professional organizations; the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church consistently defended Jews throughout the Nazi period; individual political and public figures, such as Member of Parliament Dimitar Peshev and Ekaterina Karavelova, wife of former Prime Minister Petko Karavelov, used their personal connections and authority to prevent the broader deportation of the Jews; and the active role of the Bulgarian Jewish community itself.

But that being said, her book concludes that members of Bulgarian society were not all saviors of the Jews; that King Boris III's role was not the heroic one portrayed after the War; that the “salvation through visas” did not happen; that Jews were not deported to labor camps as a “salvation,” but were brutally treated; and that the effort by Bulgarian Jews to reconstitute their property after the War was long, complicated, and incomplete.

I have devoted a good deal of my life to trying to obtain justice for Hol-

ocaust survivors and families of victims in negotiations during the Clinton Administration (1993–2001) with Swiss and French banks, German and Austrian slave and forced labor companies, and European insurance companies; the restoration of artworks through the Washington Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art, and then in the Obama administration (2009–2027) through the Terezin Declaration with 45 countries; the Best Practices and Guidelines on the Restitution and/or Compensation of Real (Immovable) Property Confiscated by the Nazis and their Collaborators; Lithuanian compensation; and payments for those deported on the French railway with the French government. I have also served since 2009 as Special Negotiator for the Jewish Claims Conference in their negotiations with the German government.

But with the billions we have recovered for Holocaust survivors, as survivors and eyewitnesses pass away, memory and the lessons of history become crucial. That is why as President Carter's Chief White House Domestic Policy Adviser I recommended to the President the formation of the Presidential Commission on the Holocaust chaired by Eli Wiesel, which led directly to the creation of the United States Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, now with 34 countries – including, to its credit, Bulgaria (in 2018) – to promote Holocaust education. And it is the reason why in the Clinton Administration, we released studies of the role of neutral countries, including Switzerland, Turkey, and Portugal, in World War II and encouraged over 20 countries, including the United States, to study their own roles in the Holocaust.

Countries are stronger when they can confront difficult parts of their history. No country had an unblemished record during World War II. For all the bravery of our soldiers in helping to win the War, the Roosevelt administration did far too little to help save the Jews of Europe by opening the door to refugees. Lea Cohen's important new book will help Bulgaria deal with its complicated history during the Nazi era in a transparent way.

Stuart E. Eizenstat

## Preface

“It is a responsibility of each generation to remember and to learn from history so as not to allow the mistakes of the past to happen again.”



The story of the fate of the Jews under Bulgarian governance in the years of the Second World War is a topic of interest to both Jews and non-Jews in Bulgaria and around the world. Unfortunately, in recent years, under the pressure of national populism in Bulgaria, it has been subjected to serious attempts to distort the historical truth by concocting various myths and legends. We have witnessed repeated attempts to downplay the role of the Bulgarian people and the Bulgarian Orthodox Church in favor of an alleged “national project” by the Bulgarian authorities of the time aiming to

save the Jews, while at the same time dismissing altogether the issue of the Bulgarian state’s complicity with the crimes of the Nazi regime.

Lea Cohen’s book *Salvation, Persecution, and the Holocaust in the Kingdom of Bulgaria (1940–1944)* is the first study to offer a thorough examination of the time preceding the adoption of anti-Jewish legislation in Bulgaria and

the subsequent restrictions and persecution to which Bulgarian Jews were subjected. At the same time, the book pays special attention to the tragic fate of the Jewish population from the newly annexed territories of northern Greece and Vardar Macedonia, who were deported to the death camps by the German authorities with the active assistance of the Bulgarian government. Cited sources include the Bulgarian Central State Archive; the Yad Vashem Institute in Jerusalem, Israel; the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC; and the records of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, published under the editorship of Albena Taneva and Ivanka Gezenko.

The book's introduction by His Excellency Ambassador Stuart Eizenstat, special adviser to the last six American Presidents on the issue of the Holocaust, is impressive, and especially so with its intriguing concluding statement: "Countries are stronger when they can confront difficult parts of their history. No country had an unblemished record during World War II."

What makes the book extremely valuable is that it presents objectively existing facts and documents (photographs and facsimiles), with some 200 historical sources cited and referenced. Although it is also a study that expresses the author's personal opinion, it is free from emotional bias or arbitrary interpretations, such that characterize the texts of many a contemporary "expert" on the subject in Bulgaria. After all, history is neither only black or white (or "rosy"). The story of the fate of the Bulgarian Jews, similar to that in the rest of the countries of Europe, is a combination of heroism and humanity on the one hand, and suffering and sorrow on the other.

It is Lea Cohen's achievement in this book that she manages to present in a highly balanced way both the positive story of the salvation and its traumatic side – that of the suffering, the persecution, and the tragic lot of the Jews of northern Greece, Vardar Macedonia and the town of Pirot. Expectedly, framing the book is the story of the salvation: detailed accounts of the role of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, with special attention to Metropolitans Stefan and Kiril; the actions of politicians and public figures, with particular emphasis on the contribution of Dimitar Peshev; the activities of professional organizations and hundreds of ordinary people commiserating with their brothers and sisters of Jewish origin over their suffering. Certainly, in almost every country across Europe, some Jews were rescued; however, the way this happened in Bulgaria is remarkable. Thus, for example, while in Europe Jewish lives were saved by individual members of the clergy, in Bulgaria it

was the entire higher clergy who took a stand in support of the Jews. The salvation of nearly 50,000 Bulgarian Jews from the so-called “old territories” is therefore unique in and of itself, as well as being an example of the power of civil society and the role of its spiritual leaders in times as difficult as those.

But alongside the pretty story, which is justifiably a source of national pride, lies the one connected with the adoption and enforcement of anti-Jewish legislation which started at the end of 1940 and the beginning of 1941. Included in it was the creation of a special Commissariat for Jewish Affairs – the crucially important instrument for the persecution and suffering of more than 60,000 Jews under Bulgarian control at the time. The policy of the Bulgarian state, in accordance with that of Nazi Germany, was consistently directed against its Jews; moreover, many of the documents included or referred to in the book also point to the personal hostility of the state’s leaders towards the Jewish population. Importantly, a special place in the study is dedicated to the fate of the Jews from the newly annexed territories of northern Greece, Vardar Macedonia, and the town of Pirot, who were denied Bulgarian citizenship and consequently deported to the death camps.

*Salvation, Persecution, and the Holocaust in the Kingdom of Bulgaria (1940–1944)* reaches four important conclusions, which are also integral to the official position of the Organization of the Jews in Bulgaria “Shalom”:

During the years of World War II, the Bulgarian Jews were subjected to persecution and suffering as a consequence of the Law for the Protection of the Nation adopted at the beginning of 1941, as well as of the subsequent anti-Jewish legislation.

The Bulgarian Jews were saved from deportation to the Nazi death camps. Their salvation came as the result of the actions undertaken by the larger part of the Bulgarian people, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, and the non-fascist segments of Bulgarian society. Bulgarian Jews will forever be grateful for this act.

The deportation of Jews from Aegean Thrace (northern Greece), Vardar Macedonia, and the town of Pirot during World War II is a historical fact that cannot be denied. Blame for the deportation of Jews from these territories lies with the German authorities together with the Bulgarian pro-Nazi government.

The historical facts about the fate of the Jews during World War II in the Kingdom of Bulgaria and the territories under the administration of the

Bulgarian pro-Nazi government cannot be a reason for any anti-Bulgarian propaganda today or in the future. The peoples of a new, united Europe have understood the lessons of the Second World War and are building their relationships on the basis of mutual understanding, respect, and looking towards the future, without attributing responsibility to today's generations.

As President of the Organization of the Jews in Bulgaria "Shalom," I express my gratitude to Victoria Biserova, as well as to Enthusiast Publishers, for their untiring efforts to preserve the historical truth about the fate of the Jews under Bulgarian rule during the years of the Second World War.

Dr. Alexander Oscar  
President of the Organization of the Jews in Bulgaria "Shalom"  
Vice-President of the World Jewish Congress

*Yako Moshov was the first Jewish soldier and non-commissioned officer in the Bulgarian army. He was born in 1855 in the town of Pleven. Immediately after our liberation and the beginning of the assembly and formation of our young army, following his insistent requests addressed to our first officers, he succeeded in gaining admission and joined with the second call-up. Having distinguished himself by his conscientiousness, goodness, and diligence, he was selected and admitted to the non-commissioned officer command. After successfully completing his term, he was allowed the opportunity to serve on re-engagement. He fought in the Serbo-Bulgarian War, from which he returned with three medals for bravery. Yako Moshov's service in the Bulgarian army lasted for twenty-six years. He was not only decorated with medals for bravery, but he also had the great distinction of serving as orderly for Prince Alexander of Battenberg.<sup>1</sup>*

Yako Moshov was my great-grandfather, the father of my grandfather Moshe (Mois) Yakov, a participant in the Balkan wars and their hero, and the grandfather of my mother, Tinka Mois Yakova. This book is dedicated to them – Bulgarian patriots and Jews.

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<sup>1</sup> “Първият еврей-войник и погофицер в българската войска.” В: Възпоменателен сборник: Изпълнен отечествен дълг, посветен на българските евреи, участвали във войните. София: Т. Т. Дразиев и С-ие, 1939, с. 69. [“The First Jewish Soldier and Non-Commissioned Officer in the Bulgarian Army,” in Commemorative Collection: National Duty Fulfilled, Dedicated to the Bulgarian Jews Who Participated in the Wars]

Уви, така година великият празникъ на българската просвета за мене, па и за хиляди столичани, мина подъ знака на сълзи. Отъ раника зарази, както Ви казахъ на колебеня, десетки лъде отъ еврейски произходъ окупираха Митрополитата ни и за насъ лице търсеха парехата милостъ, убедени, че ще види Царя ни на колебеня и ще му предаде тѣхната гореща молба, която отзивчивото Царево сърце ще чуе и разбере.

Най възпителна сѣме делегацията на двамата равнини, единиятъ отъ тѣхъ г-из Ханакелъ, следъ горещи сѣпки за човѣчностъ и милостъ, ме помоли, ако пакотина е държавна необходимостъ да има повече въ Софийа евреи, да изпроси отъ Негово Величество последния за тѣхъ милостъ да сѣдатъ завити и погребани въ България, тѣхното мило и любимо отечество, добавяйки думитѣ: "нико ниви нѣма да напуснемъ Софийа".

Следъ колебеня взимитѣ на интервантитъ лъде станаха чести и огромни!

Какво да правя?

На колебеня говорихъ на Министаръ-Председателъ. Отъ него узнахъ, че така заръчи въ една отъ синагогитѣ еврейтѣ се противопоставили на полицията ни, поради което кнало наса арестуваха. Казахъ, ако това е тъй, значи думитѣ иматъ: ние отъ Софийа ниви нѣма да издѣлваме се оправданитъ въ лоша сѣквѣтъ, следователно нивъ, зацѣтничиятъ на правдата и човѣчността, отиватъ възможността да ги сравнимъ и зацѣдаваме, сѣква всѣко хѣдѣтайство.

Какво се оказва?

Никакво противодействие не е правено на полицията! Дълга така декларация отъ наши лъде: офицери отъ санъ, протестантски пастори и наса православни българи и отъ клетвеното твърдение на кръстени и некръстени евреи...

Тогава?

Чрезъ Васъ, двабескочтими г-из П. Груевъ, най близкия на Царя ни съветникъ и най-добросъвестния му служителъ, прося отъ Негово Величество милостъ, отечества милостъ за еврейтѣ!

Моего сърце е раздрако! Имахъ и имамъ усѣти, че нѣдо страшно иде върху насъ за дѣлата ни къмъ еврейтѣ, които дѣла пакотина не сѣ усѣди Богу и сѣ вредя намъ.

Кръвта на невинитѣ вика за отицѣние. Сѣзатѣ на беззащитнитѣ сѣ оказатъ, който погубва виновитѣ.

" Не гонете да не сѣдете гонени", зацѣто казва Христосъ: "сѣ каквото нѣрка нѣрите и Вамъ ще се нѣри."

Ивашете за дѣрвостъта ни да Ви обеспокоя сѣ тѣхъ радосте, които



On May 24, 1943, Metropolitan Stefan of Sofia, deeply and sincerely shaken by the government's order to forcibly relocate all Sofia Jews out of the capital (around 20,000 in number), wrote the following letter to the Head of the Royal Chancellery, Pavel Gruev, with a request to King Boris III to rescind the order, which had been agreed upon and approved by the monarch personally:

*Alas, for me and for thousands of residents of the capital the great holiday of Bulgarian enlightenment this year passed under the sign of tears.*

*From early dawn, as I told you at the prayer service, dozens of people of Jewish origin occupied my office, looking for royal mercy in my person, convinced that I would see our King at the service and that I would convey to him their ardent request, which the King's obliging heart was sure to hear and understand.*

*Most impressive was the delegation of the two Rabbis, one of whom was Mr. Hananel, who after fervent appeals to humanity and mercy began begging, if it really were a necessity of state importance to have no more Jews in Sofia, that I plead for the following kindness from His Majesty: that they be slaughtered and buried in Bulgaria, their dear and beloved homeland, adding the words, "we will not leave Sofia alive."*

*After the prayer service, the waves of tormented people became frequent and enormous!*

*What could I do?*

*At the prayer service, I talked to the Prime Minister [Bogdan Filov]. From him I learned that this morning, in one of the synagogues, the Jews defied our police, because of which there were mass arrests. I said that if this is so, it means that their words, "we will not leave Sofia alive" are justified in a bad sense and*

*consequently we, the defenders of the rights of humanity, if the opportunity for us to protect and defend them is removed, have only intercession as a last resort.*

*What did it turn out to be?*

*No opposition had been made to the police at all! I owe this declaration made by our people: officers from the reserves, Protestant pastors, and masses of Orthodox Bulgarians, and by the sworn statement of baptized and unbaptized Jews...*

*Then?*

*Through you, highly esteemed Mr. P. Gruev, our King's closest adviser and his most conscientious servant, I beg of His Majesty mercy, patriotic mercy for the Jews!*

*My heart is torn! I had and I still have the feeling that something terrible is coming towards us for our actions towards the Jews, of whom I hesitate to say whether they truly are not worthy to God and are harmful to us.*

*The blood of the innocents cries out for vengeance. The tears of the defenseless are an ocean that brings ruin to the guilty.*

*"Do not give pursuit in order that ye not be pursued," because as Christ says, "with whatever measure you measure, it will be measured to you."*

*Pardon me for my boldness in disturbing you with these lines, which are a paltry outlet for an immeasurable pain.*

*May God bless you! In God's name, I beg you to bear witness before our beloved King to my sorrows and pain.*

*You ever-devoted servant of prayers, humble in Christ.  
Metropolitan of Sofia*

*[the day of] Saints Cyril and Methodius, 1943*

*I beg pardon for my clumsy letter, written in haste!*

## How We Perceive the Holocaust Today

“The Holocaust is not in the past, it is also the present.

Many of the survivors are still alive, as well as their children and grandchildren, for whom the Holocaust continues to be a personal and family history.”

(Yehuda Bauer, Professor of History at Yad Vashem in an interview with *Le Monde*, 3 April 2012)

In the history of the persecution of the Jews during the Second World War, Bulgaria presents a more complex case, as within the borders of the Bulgarian Kingdom during the 1940s, Jews were saved, persecuted, and destroyed all at the same time. One of the most paradoxical coincidences is that on March 4, 1943, 4,000 Jews were sent to certain death,<sup>2</sup> while on March 9, actions were taken to save 8,000, and the next day, another 7,000<sup>3</sup> were “raised,” each destroyed to the last one! This striking contradiction creates a veritable chaos of opinion, which usually moves between two extremes: an idealization of the fact of the salvation to the status of a national heroic movement, and a corresponding demonization of the sending of 11,343 people to the gas chambers of Treblinka and Auschwitz. The first thesis, about the absolute salvation, tries to forget the deportation and accordingly, the death of nearly 20 per cent of the Jewish population in the Kingdom of Bulgaria (together with the “incorporated territories”), while the second sometimes minimizes the fact of the deliverance, as a result of

<sup>2</sup> 4,254 from Western Thrace and 186 from the town of Pirot, according to the report of the Commissariat for Jewish Affairs for the period from Jan. 1 –March 31, 1943, CSA. ЦДА, ф. 190К, оп. 3, а.е. 347, л. 53.

<sup>3</sup> 7,381 from Bitola, Skopje, and Štip, CSA. ЦДА, ф. 190К, оп. 3, а.е. 347, л. 53.

which 48,000 innocent human lives were preserved. Hundreds of publications and studies are devoted to each of these two versions, in which the same facts (or a selected portion of them) are presented according to the individual authors' preferences.

The reception in Bulgarian society of the events of that era is perhaps one of the most complicated subjects in the national public discourse (and even outside of it) within the last twenty years. The consensus sought as regards the assessment and perception of the historical facts, as well as their presentation and interpretation – i.e. in the accounts of what happened and what did NOT happen but is nevertheless present in them – prevents a structured history of the events between 1940 and 1944 in the Kingdom of Bulgaria concerning the fate of its Jewish population. In different versions, often diametrically opposed, of the story of the persecution of the Jews, events in Bulgarian history from the same period are selectively chosen and amalgamated. They typically include political, military, economic relations with Germany and Italy, the partisan movement and relations with Soviet Russia, the specifics of the political parties in Bulgaria and the country's political life in general, the actions of the Palace and the Parliament. These are events that do not always bear a direct relationship to the so-called Jewish question, most often standing in an oblique dependence to it. However, this resultant amalgam gives rise to a continual fabrication of false theories and even myths about the “salvation”, while at the same time, facts and persons with a truly positive and even unique role in the context of the events of 1940–1944, and even before that, are ignored.

Here I intend to examine some of the newer “points of view” and the objections that have arisen in relation to them, as well as to name the reasons for their dissemination and the possible motives harbored by certain circles to impose on society controversial and sometimes false interpretations about the salvation of the Jews.

## Was There a Holocaust in Bulgaria?

When it comes to the fate of the Jews in the Kingdom of Bulgaria in the period 1940–1944, the very term “Holocaust” provokes opposition and disagreement among many. Shortly after September 9, 1944, Bulgarian historiography began carefully avoiding the term.<sup>4</sup> The reason is that following that crucial date in Bulgarian history, which put an end to collaboration with Nazi Germany, a version was quickly made up – a politically pragmatic and somewhat understandable one, given Bulgaria’s efforts to clear the stain of a four-year alliance with Nazi Germany. The survival of some 48,000 Jews within the old borders of the Kingdom of Bulgaria was one of the arguments with which the Bulgarian delegation tried to tip the scales in the negotiations at the Paris Conference of 1947, which would determine the status of the individual states that had cooperated with Hitler. The Bulgarian delegation, headed by Kimon Georgiev, used this argument (supported by a letter from the Jewish Consistory),<sup>5</sup> as well as Bulgaria’s participation in the last phase of the war on the side of the anti-Hitler coalition, and received a relatively favorable outcome in the signed treaty. The term “Holocaust” came into socio-historical use in Bulgaria only after 1989, when, along with the attempts to re-read contemporary Bulgarian history, the facts and circumstances surrounding the fate and persecution of the Jews were also subjected to a reconsideration.

It must be acknowledged that when trying to make sense of the treatment of Jews in the Kingdom of Bulgaria, the concept of the Holocaust creates a certain confusion, because, as has been pointed out, “at one and the same time within the Kingdom of Bulgaria some Jews were saved, others – persecuted, and still others – deported and destroyed.”<sup>6</sup> If the word Holocaust is applied in its literal meaning of destruction by complete incineration, as in ancient Greek, then that tragic event befell only Jews from the Bulgarian-occupied territories – Macedonia and part of northern Greece. However, the broader understanding of the Holocaust views it as a multi-stage process

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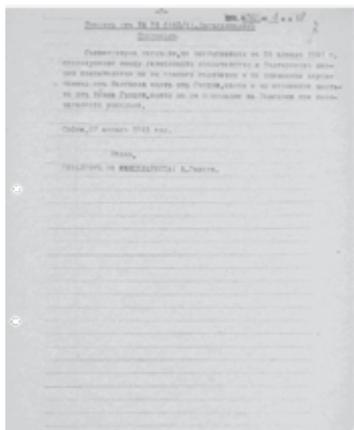
<sup>4</sup> The term “holocaust” (from Greek ‘complete incineration’) was already in use in 1941 regarding the fate of the Jews, but it did not enter into wide usage until ten years later. Applied alongside it is also the term Shoah, a Hebrew word meaning ‘catastrophe’.

<sup>5</sup> CSA. ЦДИА, ф. 622, оп. 1, а.е. 88, л. 162 – 166.

<sup>6</sup> Berenbaum, Michael. *The Jews in Macedonia During WWII*. Skopje: Holocaust Fund of the Jews from Macedonia, 2012.

starting with the removal of Jewish civil rights, followed by the confiscation of Jewish property; at the next stage, Jewish cultural and architectural heritage was liquidated, as were finally the Jews themselves. So while the liquidation physically destroyed 11,343 of the 60,000 Jews within the Kingdom of Bulgaria after 1941,<sup>7</sup> that is, some 20 per cent of their total number, the previous phases of the Holocaust were experienced by the entire Jewish population. However, the public and political attitude in Bulgarian society to this day tacitly disagrees with the use of the term and perceives it as an attack against the Bulgarian state. The establishment in 2012 of the Holocaust Museum in Skopje in memory of the 7,000 Macedonian Jews exterminated in Treblinka turned into an occasion for heated debates about the role of the Bulgarian state in this tragic episode and even negatively impacted political relations between Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia.

## The Salvation Terminological Strategy



Orders for the occupation of Macedonia, Serbia, and Greece (here and on the next page)

To defend the innocence of the Bulgarian state in the actions carried out in 1943 by the Bulgarian administration, its army and police, various terminological shields have been invented over the last 20 years. One such is the substitution of the concept of occupation with the term administered lands, specially created to be applied to the policy of the Kingdom of Bulgaria from 1941 onwards in parts of what had hitherto been the state of Yugoslavia (present-day North Macedonia and a small part of Serbia) and parts of northern Greece. This replacement is surprising, given that it was the term occupation that was used at the highest political levels in the period 1941–1944. Thus,

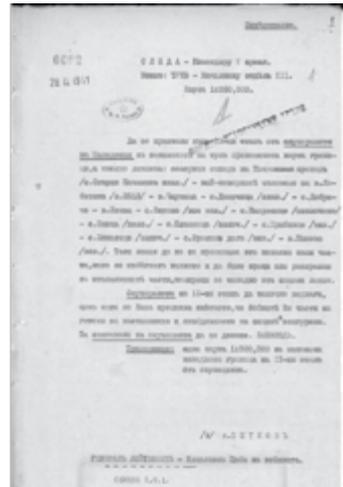
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<sup>7</sup> The Protocol of the Wannsee Conference of January 20, 1942 is often cited unscrupulously, with the number of Jews in the Kingdom of Bulgaria given as 48,000, which does not take into account another 12,000 in the Bulgarian-occupied Macedonia, northern Greece (Aegean Thrace), and part of Serbia. This error was corrected at the request of the government of Bogdan Filov.

in his speech from the throne of October 1942, King Boris III praised and thanked “our occupation troops.” The term was also applied in all military documents. For example, in letter No. 1203 of the Ministry of War dated April 22, 1941 (strictly confidential, Military Historical Archive), the Chief of Staff of the Army ordered the commander of the 5th Army’s “Sixth Infantry Division to begin its concentration for the occupation of Macedonia”; in all other state documents of the same period, the term “occupation” is also consistently used. After the completion of this process, it was used interchangeably with the term “newly liberated lands.”<sup>8</sup>

Another controversial term applied in the same context is deportation. According to international legal norms, it means the forcible transfer of certain population groups from their place of residence to another country, usually to places of forced isolation. There is no doubt that this is precisely what happened within the borders of the Kingdom of Bulgaria when 7,000 Jews from Macedonia and 4,000 from northern Greece were deported to Treblinka and Auschwitz.

In her book Dr. Zdravka Krasteva<sup>9</sup> provides the necessary evidence not only that the Bulgarian state from that period seized the respective territories by force and military means, but also that it was its representatives alone who made possible the realization of the technical aspects of the deportation of some 12,000 Jews, which led to their extermination. And if, in the case of the Macedonian Jews, they were deported



<sup>8</sup> Bogdan Filov, reply to the speech from the throne of November 11, 1941, during the Ninth Meeting of the Third Extraordinary Session of the 25<sup>th</sup> Ordinary National Assembly.

<sup>9</sup> Кръстева, Здравка. Правни аспекти на сръжавната антиеврейска политика в Царство България (1940–1944 г.). Берлин: Екстаз, 2018. [Krasteva, Zdravka. Legal Aspects of the State Anti-Jewish Policy in the Kingdom of Bulgaria (1940–1944)]

106

  
МИНИСТЕРСТВО  
на  
ВЪШНИТЕ РАБОТИ И НА ИЗПОВЪДАНИЯТА

*Шифрована телеграма*

Отъ \_\_\_\_\_ Царската Легация въ БЕРЛИНЪ \_\_\_\_\_

За \_\_\_\_\_ Министерството на Въшните Работи \_\_\_\_\_

Изпратена на 27 април 1941 \_\_\_\_\_ подъ изх. № ? 18.15

Получена на 28 април 1941 \_\_\_\_\_ подъ вх. № 739/8.00

Дадено е нареждане за окупиране съ  
наши войски западно отъ Вардара до линията  
Битоля-Бродъ-Тетово-Качаник. На западъ отъ  
тази линия ще даемемъ, следъ като се оттеглятъ  
наширацитъ се тамъ италиански войски.

ДРАГАНОВЪ

*[Handwritten signature]*  
28. IV.

Telegram from Parvan Draganov, Bulgarian Minister Plenipotentiary in Berlin, to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Religious Denominations about the occupation by the Bulgarian troops of the area west of the Vardar along the Bitola – Brod – Tetovo – Kachanik line. Apr 27 1941. CSA. ЦДА, ф. 176К, on. 1ш, а.е. 204, л. 106.

from a territory “occupied” according to one interpretation (King Boris III), “liberated” according to another (Bogdan Filov) or “administered” according to a third one (today’s political vocabulary), 4,000 Jews from northern Greece were deported from those lands first to places within the old borders of the Kingdom of Bulgaria (intermediate camps in Gorna Dzhumaya or Lom) and were then sent via Austria to camps in occupied Poland.

The claim asserting absence of guilt in the deportations of Jews on the part of the Bulgarian state has been refuted by scholarly historical research in many specialized publications.<sup>10</sup>

The politics of denial persists, however, and over the last twenty years has even degenerated into certain ugly forms. Since some have assumed an official character of sorts, I will briefly examine them below.

- One of these is the thesis of Dyanko Markov, a former representative of the pre-war far-right organization of the Union of Bulgarian National Legions (Markov was convicted after 1944 for pro-fascist activities and spent some time in a prison camp). In 2000, in his capacity as MP from UDF, he delivered a speech in the National Assembly, in which he stated that the “deportation of a hostile population” (i.e. Jewish) from Macedonia and northern Greece by the Bulgarian authorities was legal and did not constitute a crime according to international law. His statement caused violent protests by all Jewish organizations in Bulgaria and abroad. UDF distanced itself from his claims and declarations, but they continued to be defended by segments of the Bulgarian right. Thus, in 2014, MEP Andrey Kovachev from the GERB party organized a special session in the European Parliament to honor Markov, during which the latter was presented as a “fighter against communism.” Markov himself did not engage in any public or political activity during the years of communism. He became involved in political life only after 1989, when he took part in the restoration of the Union of Bulgarian National Le-

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<sup>10</sup> Chary, Frederick. *The Bulgarian Jews and the Final Solution, 1940–1944*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1972. 260 p.

Дубова, Ларуса и Георгий Чернявский. *Опыт беды и выживания. Судба евреев Болгарии в годы Второй мировой войны*. София: Изг. Проф. Марин Дринов, 2007. 425 с. [Dubova, Larisa and Georgiy Chernyavskiy. *Experience of Misfortune and Surviving: The Fate of Bulgarian Jews during World War Two*]

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

UNITED STATES  
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Tsetska Tsacheva Dangovska  
President of the National Assembly  
National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria  
2 Narodno sabranie Square  
1169 Sofia  
Bulgaria

April 2, 2013

Madam Speaker:

We are writing to you in order to express our serious concern about recent developments which show that the Bulgarian government and the Bulgarian parliament tried recently to distort the truth about the history of the Holocaust in Bulgaria.

It is a historical fact that the Bulgarian Jewish community, while suffering from considerable discriminatory measures, survived World War II intact. Credit goes to some Bulgarian politicians and members of the clergy who, indeed, were instrumental in helping their fellow citizens survive. However, their admirable deeds should not be tainted by the distortion and the denial of the Bulgarian state's responsibility in the round up, deportation, and ultimately, in the murder of 11,343 Jews from Thrace and Macedonia. Meeting political challenges does not bestow the right upon any official to manipulate history.

It is unacceptable for representatives of the Bulgarian state to say that Bulgaria was a "Nazi-occupied country" and to affirm that the territories occupied by Bulgaria "from Northern Greece and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia were at the time under German jurisdiction."

The historical record, as demonstrated by the rich documentation available in Bulgarian archives, clearly demonstrates that it was the Office for the Commissar for Jewish Questions, within the Bulgarian government, which enforced discriminatory legislation against the Bulgarian Jews and against the Jews of Thrace and Macedonia. Similarly, it was the Bulgarian government which introduced the measure that all Jews under its jurisdiction—be they Bulgarian or foreign—wear the Jewish star. It was the Bulgarian government which refused to grant citizenship to the Jews of Thrace and Macedonia (while it granted citizenship to non-Jews from these territories). It was the Bulgarian Minister of the Interior, together with Commissar Belev, who deported the Jews of Thrace and Macedonia. Finally, it was the government of Bulgaria who paid for the train tickets of the Jews who would soon be murdered. It is absolutely true that the Germans applied considerable pressure on the government to carry out the deportations. But, as we know, when the Bulgarian authorities opposed the deportations they were very successful in their endeavor. As an ally of Nazi Germany, Bulgaria was a sovereign country in control of its legislation and its legal measures.

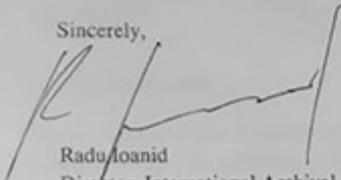


Letter from the Holocaust Museum in Washington to the Speaker of Parliament Tsetska Tsacheva.

The callous and devious attempts to distort the history of Bulgarian Jewry is insulting to the victims of the Holocaust and is damaging to the image of Bulgaria, which, until recently, was perceived as a country which approached correctly the dark shadows of its past.

In accordance with its congressional mission, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, a federal agency of the U.S. government, will continue to closely monitor this unfortunate trend. We trust that the new government of Bulgaria will demonstrate a more measured approach in dealing with historical facts, and will not allow itself to be manipulated into following a direction which is detrimental to its reputation.

Sincerely,



Radu Ioanid  
Director, International Archival Programs Division  
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

cc: Elie Wiesel, Founding Chairman, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum  
Martin Schulz, President of the European Parliament  
Senator Benjamin L. Cardin, Co-Chairman, U.S. Helsinki Commission  
Philip T. Roeker, Deputy Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs  
Marcie B. Ries, United States Ambassador to the Republic of Bulgaria  
Rabbi Andrew Baker, Director, International Jewish Affairs, American Jewish Committee  
Daniel S. Mariaschin, Executive Vice-President, B'nai B'rith International  
Abraham H. Foxman, National Director, Anti-Defamation League  
Rabbi Abraham Cooper, Associate Dean, Simon Wiesenthal Center

gions. Dyanko Markov's doctrine found support, however, among some public figures. Undisguised sympathy for him was also shown by some political parties, including those in government, and in 2018 the former legionnaire and creator of the doctrine of the "legal deportation of the hostile Jewish population" was awarded the Official Badge of the Ministry of Defense by Minister Krasimir Karakachanov, representative of the far-right party VMRO and for four years a coalition partner of GERB in the government of former Prime Minister Boyko Borisov.

- After 2008, the GERB government continued the efforts of the party of former Bulgarian King Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha to understate the historical responsibility of the Kingdom of Bulgaria and deny it any guilt in the deportation of approximately 12,000 Jews. This was expressed not only in personal statements by former Prime Minister Borisov and members of his cabinet such as Ekaterina Zaharieva, Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Minister of Defense Krasimir Karakachanov, among others, but also in the considerable material resources spent on promoting this claim (ordering books and articles, organizing exhibitions, TV shows, translations of propaganda texts in English and Spanish and organized tours abroad, etc.). Gradually and helped not only by political bodies but also by academic institutions such as the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, or by professors from Sofia University, New Bulgarian University, and Veliko Turnovo University, the thesis that was given official endorsement was of the complete and unconditional salvation of 48,000 Jews in Bulgaria. This salvation, the claim went, involved the participation of all segments of the social pyramid, starting with the Bulgarian King Boris III, down through the ministers of his last government, the MPs, and finally the Bulgarian people.

Apart from the fact that this pyramid was and to this day remains wholly and fallaciously reversed, it also includes elements completely irrelevant from a historical point of view. It has been refuted not only by Jewish organizations, including the Yad Vashem Holocaust Research Center and the Holocaust Museum in Washington, but also by a number of researchers in Bulgaria, Israel, France, etc. in their publications and books.

There are several particularly important factors for the salvation from the "final solution" of a large part of the Bulgarian Jewish population.

As can be seen from correspondence and documents preserved in the Bulgarian archives, the deportation of the Jewish population from the newly

annexed Bulgarian lands was agreed upon between Bogdan Filov and von Ribbentrop in the period August-September 1942 and was supported by the consent of King Boris III for a total of 25,000 “undesirable” Jews. It was not carried out due to a number of factors, diverse in their nature:

- The relatively low level of anti-Semitism among the Bulgarian population, which gave the Jews a huge chance of receiving support from their Bulgarian fellow citizens.

- The practical lack of interest in the “final solution” on the part of a large part of the society. According to Holocaust researcher Arno Lustiger, the chances of Jews being saved throughout Europe were inversely proportional to the level of anti-Semitism. It is for this reason that where Croatian Jews were not spared, given the intense anti-Semitic attitude of the Croatian population, the Bulgarian Jews had a much better chance.<sup>11</sup>

- The high degree of integration of the Bulgarian Jewish population in the social and professional life of the country. This resulted in the creation of natural ties and hence, in protection by professional organizations with both Bulgarian and Jewish membership (of artisans, traders, lawyers, writers). They were among the first to express a sharp reaction against the Law for the Protection of the Nation which deprived their colleagues of their professional rights.

- The presence of religious tolerance in Bulgaria, which led to normal coexistence and even friendly relations between different religious groups. Widely known is the role of the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, the most steadfast defender of the Jews throughout the period 1940–1944, when its leaders did not hesitate not only to stand for the Jews but also to oppose the instruments of state and the monarch himself, with all the resulting consequences.

- The role of individual politicians and prominent public figures such as the majority MP Dimitar Peshev, the industrialist Atanas Burov, the wife of former Prime Minister Petko Karavelov – Ekaterina Karavelova, and others, all of whom used their connections and social esteem unhesitatingly to prevent the deportation of the Jews.

- And last but not least, the active role of the Jews themselves, who, thanks to their integration in the society, had the capacity and the resources to influence events, albeit to a limited extent.

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<sup>11</sup> Lustiger, Arno. *Rettungswiderstand. Über die Judenretter in Europa während der NS-Zeit*. Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2011. 462 p.

## Salvation or Survival?

This is only one aspect of the terminological war, as regards the fate of the Jews from the period 1940–1944.

Here the disagreement has reached its extreme, and the positions of the opposing sides have remained irreconcilable. On the one hand, there is the actively promoted myth about the whole nation coming out in a united effort to save the Jews. This myth, however, has one significant drawback, namely: it does not answer the question from whom it was necessary to save the Jews. But it also gives rise to other contradictions such as the following:

- The Law for the Protection of the Nation was passed as early as 1940, when Bulgaria had not yet joined the Axis, and was practically under no pressure to do so. Quite the opposite, in fact – in September 1940, through an official act, under the format of negotiations organized by Berlin between Romania and Bulgaria, it acquired from the hands of Nazi Germany a great territorial gift – Southern Dobrudja. This was a desire expressed before the Germans by the Bulgarian government and supported by a personal letter to Hitler from the former King Ferdinand.

7 July 1940

*Your Excellency,*

*You will understand the enthusiasm with which I, as the former head of a country that fought with unwavering loyalty during the World War [WW I, Ed.] on the side of the Allied German Army, and above all in my capacity as a Prussian Field Marshal, have followed the rise of the German armed nation led by Your Excellency's exceptional genius.*

*It brought me indescribable satisfaction to witness the defeat and punishment of the countries of the former Entente, which have always been my mortal political enemies and which brought so much misery and calamity to the world, especially to small Bulgaria. I express to Your Excellency my sincere and warmest heartfelt wishes for the undreamed of and unprecedented deeds and successes of Our political and military leadership!*

*The victories achieved, which open the way to treaties of peace, give me occasion to submit to Your Excellency for benevolent perusal the following thoughts of mine. The acquisition of Dobrudja was one of the most important military goals of Bulgaria during the World War. Despite its population being purely Bulgarian, Dobrudja was again separated from Bulgaria, for reasons incomprehensible.*

*It would be wholly in the interest of the traditional friendly relations between Bulgaria and Germany, and in accordance with the national-political ideas of Your Excellency, if it is by German hands that this lost part of the Bulgarian body were returned to Bulgaria, rather than by the hands of another country which seeks to harness Bulgaria to its wagon through such a proposal.*

*I need not indicate here what consequences for the further development of the Balkans the resolution of this question in one way or another may have. A just settlement of the Dobrudja question at this moment could amount to both personal and moral satisfaction and a confirmation and justification of my policy of the time.*

*From the point of view of Bulgaria's status in those days as the center of the Balkans, it would be in the interest of the security of the German advance to the east if the positions of Bulgaria were strengthened, by returning to it the lost Bulgarian regions and its outlet to the Adriatic Sea.*

*On behalf of the brave Bulgarian soldiers under my command, who perished in the World War, and on behalf of the Bulgarian people who suffered so badly at the time and who consider me the sole culprit for the national catastrophe of those days and its consequences, I ask that the injustice caused to Bulgaria by the Entente be removed!*

*With sincere loyalty, Ferdinand*

Hitler responded cordially with the following letter:

*Headquarters of the Führer – 02.08.1940*

*To His Majesty  
King Ferdinand of Bulgaria, Coburg*

*Your Majesty,*

*The very friendly words with which Your Majesty has mentioned the German successes make me sincerely happy. Please accept my warm thanks for this.*

*Regarding the other content of Your Majesty's two letters of July 7, I am obliged to say that I have always viewed the Bulgarian revisionist claims with particular sympathy. Perhaps the time is not far away when they will find their fulfillment.*

*Your Majesty's most devoted, Adolf Hitler*

After signing the Treaty of Craiova, Bulgaria received from Berlin a promise that it would later be awarded other territories, which did happen in March-April 1941, shortly after the kingdom entered the fascist-Nazi coalition.

- Contrary to the belief that it was the Germans who insisted on “purging Bulgaria of Jews,” the demands came rather from the opposite direction: in August 1942, Bogdan Filov's government initiated a correspondence with von Ribbentrop concerning a plan for such a “purging” (Jüdenrein), including paying the corresponding price for this action (100 Reich marks per deported Jew, transportation by the Bulgarian State Railways (BDZ), organization of the transport for the operation by the Ministry of Interior, the Commissariat for Jewish Affairs, BDZ, and the Balkan Royal Tourist Association. These were funds obtained from the sale of the property of the Jews, who thus paid for their own destruction).

- In Bulgaria, as an allied country, there were practically no German troops (except for the ones who passed through Bulgaria in 1941 on their way to Greece and were given a warm and friendly welcome by the Bulgarian pop-

ulation and authorities).<sup>12</sup> After this transit, German presence was reduced to a small number of observers, including ones from the military intelligence of the Abwehr (Otto Wagner from the Doctor Delius Bureau, diplomats, as well as advisers to the Bulgarian authorities with special functions, such as the Gestapo representative Hoffmann, or the specialist in Jewish deportations Theodor Dannecker, sent as a consultant-observer by Berlin.).

The official Bulgarian policy towards the Jews was adopted and pursued less under coercion than in voluntary synchronicity with the official policy of their ally, Nazi Germany, and in some cases even as its imitation implemented ahead of time, as was the case with the Law for the Protection of the Nation of 1940.

Even before the Law for the Protection of the Nation, Bulgaria imitated the legislation of Nazi Germany. Thus, 1936 saw the adoption of the Legal Ordinance for Combating Venereal Diseases<sup>13</sup>, which incriminated homosexuals, with forms of punishment that included imprisonment and sentencing to correctional labor.

Bulgarian society has long identified with the formula “We, the saviors,” and treats the actual facts as an attack against the sacred myth of its uniqueness, a myth often appropriated by circles with no relation whatsoever to the salvation or survival of the Jews.

In recent years, however, it is members of precisely those circles that have been most active in fabricating a sub-mythology which sometimes creates blatantly false interpretations and facts surrounding the story of rescue/survival. Below are some examples of how this has happened.

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<sup>12</sup> Speech by Bogdan Filov of November 11, 1941, before the 25<sup>th</sup> National Assembly.

<sup>13</sup> Approved by Decree No. 263/27.06.1936 and Resolution of the Council of Ministers No. 1, minutes 99/1936, publ. in the *State Gazette* 157/16.7.1936

Lea Cohen  
SALVATION, PERSECUTION, AND THE HOLOCAUST IN  
THE KINGDOM OF BULGARIA (1940 – 1944)

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СО И

112

Господи́нъ Министъръ Председателя

Копие Господи́нъ Министъръ Габровски

Отъ името на Счетоводителската колегия граде нивъ качеството на нейнъ Председатель изказватъ сърдечна благодарность за идеално проведената противоеврейска акция по изселванието на истинските на- ни и стопански вредители Держайтъ Българь народъ е съ Васъ №12

Председ.

*[Handwritten signature]*  
*[Handwritten signature]*

This book is the result of more than 20 years of research and is based on documents, testimonies, and letters.

- Was there a Holocaust in Bulgaria;
- The regulatory basis for the legalization of the persecutions;
- The role of King Boris III;
- The women and their written testimonies;
- Salvation or survival?
- The contribution of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church to the rescue of the Jews.

*Countries are stronger when they can confront difficult parts of their history. No country had an unblemished record during World War II.*

**Stuart E. Eizenstat,**  
Special Adviser on Holocaust Issues,  
Chairman of the United States  
Holocaust Memorial Council