

Stefan Detchev

Deportations from Macedonia and their Place in Bulgarian-Macedonian Relationships

Bionote: Stefan Detchev is an Associate-Professor in history and anthropology at New Bulgarian University. His interests cover history of political culture, nationalism and identity, history of sexuality, food and foodways. Among his major publications are "Who are the Bulgarians? "Race", science and politics in fin-de-siècle Bulgaria – In: *We, the people. Politics of National Peculiarities in South-East Europe* (2009); *Politics, Gender and Culture: Articles and Studies on Modern Bulgarian History* (2010, in Bulg.); *In Searching of the Bulgarianness: The networks of national intimacy XIX-XXI* (2010) *Between Slavs and Old Bulgars: "Ancestors," "Race" and Identity in Late Nineteenth-Century* In: Geary, P., Klaniczay, G., *Manufacturing Middle Ages. Entangled History of Medievalism in nineteenth-century Europe*, Joep Leersen Series "National Cultivation of Culture". (2013); *Shopska salat": The Road from an European Innovation to the National Culinary Symbol*, In: *From Kebab to Ćevapčići. Eating Practices in Ottoman Europe* *Interdisziplinäre Studien zum Östlichen Europa*. (2018); "The Hidden History. Polemics (2019, in Bulg.); *Public Catering in Communist Bulgaria – 1950s-1980s – Food and History*, vol. 18, 1-2, 2020; *Stambolov after Stambolov: History, Politics and Memory 1895-2020* (2022)

New Bulgarian University

stdetchev@yahoo.com

Abstract: The proposed article reveals how the very deportation of Jews from Macedonia in March 1943 is intertwined and strongly depends on the ideas and memory in the two neighboring countries - the Republic of Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia - for the period of 1941-1944, the Holocaust itself, the subsequent time of communist rule, and the transition period after late 1980s and the beginning of 1990s. It shows how a peculiar beginning of the entry of the problem of the deportation of the Jews into the diplomatic quarrel along the Sofia-Skopje axis appeared in 1998. The following first decade of the new 21st century was distinguished by the strong and tangible presence of various Jewish worlds and narratives about the Jews of Macedonia and the old borders of Bulgaria during the Second World War. As a result the narratives about the deportation of Macedonian Jews and the salvation of Bulgarian ones fight each other. In recent years the international Jewish community, more often indirectly than directly, has played an important role in rounding, smoothing and refining both positions - the Bulgarian and the Macedonian one – with necessary corrections in both narratives.

Keywords : Bulgarian-Macedonian relations, Holocaust, historical narratives, antisemitism, Bulgarian nationalism, Macedonian nationalism

The subject of the deportation of the Jews from the territory of today's Republic of North Macedonia¹ was not always essential and important for the relations between

¹ See more in Frederick B. Chary, *The Bulgarian Jews and the Final Solution: 1940-1944* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1972); Nadège Ragaru, "Et les Juifs bulgares furent sauvés ..." *Une histoire des saviors la Shoah en Bulgarie*, (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2020), 134-166, esp.154-158.

Skopje and Sofia. For many decades these represented just one of the many numbers of Jews deported from former Yugoslavia. As Nadège Ragaru points out in her new book, in communist Yugoslavia, the Jews were mostly victims of „fascist terror.“ Along with this, they were also participants in the resistance. That is why a tangible presence of partisans was definitely noticeable among the surviving Jews.² The hard-to-hide non-solidarity of the local population in Yugoslav historiography was justified by the pace of the arrests during the so-called “lifting” done by the Bulgarian authorities in March 1943.³

The deportation was not mentioned by the Yugoslav delegation (in which Dimitar Vlahov was a representative from the Popular Republic of Macedonia) during the Peace Conference in Paris in 1946.⁴ Even after the end of the 1960s, with the particular aggravation of the conflict between the two Balkan countries, because of the Macedonian issue, the deportation did not become a central topic in Yugoslav foreign policy. The situation was similar in Bulgaria, where the growing nationalist discourse did not affect it, and the communist regime itself continued to hide the Bulgarian complicity in the deportation in March 1943. In practice, the beginning was set only at the end of the 1990s, and here, rather, the Jewish communities around the world, as well as Jews originating from Macedonia, were the main reason for opening the topic.⁵

² Quoted according to Nadège Ragaru, “*I balgarskite bjaha spaseni ...*”. *Istoria na znanijata za Holocosta v Balgaria* (Sofia: Kritika i Humanism, 2022), 408-410. All the references to Ragaru’s book are done following this edition on Bulgarian language.

³ *Ibid.*, 411.

⁴ Stefan Detchev, “Ako gi njasmashe Stalin i Chervenata armija,” *Svobodna Evropa* (Sept 13, 2023).

<https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/bulgaria-bez-stalin/32591285.html>

⁵ Ragaru, “*I balgarskite evrei bjaha spaseni*,” 434.

One has to point out immediately that the very deportation of Jews from Macedonia in March 1943 is intertwined and strongly depends on the ideas and memory in the two neighboring countries - the Republic of Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia - for the period of 1941-1944, the Holocaust itself, and the subsequent time of communist rule. In today’s Republic of North Macedonia, this was strongly influenced by the understanding of the anti-fascist foundations of Macedonian statehood, which began its life in 1944 in Tito’s Yugoslavia. In this sense, it is surprising how, despite its declared anti-communism, the opposition from VMRO-DPMNE almost repeats the 1941-44 period of the communist anti-fascist narrative of SDSM (the party of former communists).⁶ Otherwise, in Bulgaria, from the beginning of the 1990s, a polishing of the image of tsarist Bulgaria began, as a result of which the topic of the „salvation of the Bulgarian Jews“ became central. Likewise, at the same time, the former Bulgarian communist dictator Todor Zhivkov and the Bulgarian Communist Party were replaced in the role of “saviours” by Tsar Boris III, the conservative politician from the parliamentary majority Dimitar Peshev and the Bulgarian Orthodox Church.⁷ The entry after 2001 of the exiled monarch Simeon of Saxe-Coburg Gotha into Bulgarian politics, as well as the creation, in 2005, of the triple coalition between the Bulgarian Socialist party (BSP, former Communist party), Simeon’s NDSV and Movement for rights and freedoms (DPS), made the former Bulgarian communists in the second decade of the new century part of this sweet consensus.⁸

⁶ *Ibid.*, 437.

⁷ Stefan Troebst, “Spasenie, deportirane ili Holokost? Polemikite predi i sled 1989 g.” in *Istoria, mitologia i politika* (Sofia: VI “Sw. Kl. Ohridski,” 2010), 493-511.

⁸ Stefan Detchev, “Kak se promeni balgarskata pamet za Holokosta prez godinite,” *Svobodna Evropa* (February 04, 2022).

One can say that the Second World War for both Bulgaria and Macedonia was a time of a series of opportunisms.⁹ In the end, however, the victory was on the side of the Macedonian partisans, and in the public space of the country during the last three decades, this was impossible to be avoided in a popular discourse directed against the „Bulgarian fascist occupation.“ But even in the 1970s and 1980s, despite the worsening of relationships between Sofia and Skopje, anti-Jewish persecutions during the Second World War continued to be outside of the dispute between the two countries. Such a topic continued to be absent in the first half of the 1990s, as well as at the beginning of their second half. By and large, in Skopje, firstly, the participation of Jews in the struggle of the Macedonian people was praised, and secondly, the anti-Jewish persecutions were attributed specifically to the Bulgarian occupier and his fascist patrons. For Ragaru, the specificities of Jewish crimes were still silent in the historiography carried out in the newly independent state after 1991.¹⁰

It seems that a peculiar beginning of the entry of the problem of the deportation of the Jews into the diplomatic quarrel along the Sofia-Skopje axis appeared in 1998. Then, in Washington, a „Conference on the assets from the time of the Holocaust“ was held, which was coordinated for the US Department of State by the USHMM (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum). As many as 44 governments and 13 NGOs participated. For the first time, a Macedonian delegation with the participation of Jews was

<https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/31686441.html>

⁹ Stefan Detchev, „Koj babuva na makedonskata darzhava i ezik,“ *Svobodna Evropa* (Oct 02, 2020). <https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/30870811.html>

¹⁰ Ragaru, „I balgarskite evrei bjaha spaseni,“ 410, 412, 414, 416.

also represented. At this international event, the members of the delegation from Skopje did not miss the opportunity to point out the Bulgarian responsibility for the economic expropriation of the Jews from Macedonia during the war.¹¹ Already here, in 1998, the future project of the Holocaust Memorial Center of the Jews of Macedonia was mentioned for the first time.¹²

The following first decade of the new 21st century was distinguished by the strong and tangible presence of various Jewish worlds and narratives about the Jews of Macedonia and the old borders of Bulgaria during the Second World War. While some celebrated the „salvation,“¹³ others emphasized Bulgaria's complicity in the deportation, which was kept silent in Sofia.¹⁴ At the same time, American Jewish organizations, in opposition to Bulgarian cultural diplomacy, were demanding that Sofia clarify the facts.

At this time, Skopje seemed to be increasingly turning to the subject of the Holocaust and the fate of „Macedonian Jews.“ They were increasingly seen, not as a part of the Jews of the former Yugoslav space, but exactly as „Macedonian ones.“ This focused on their fate during the Bulgarian rule, which carried a powerful charge to worsen relations in view of the state of the Bulgarian narrative about

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 434

¹² *Ibid.*, 435.

¹³ See for example: Vladimir Mutafov, „Carjat-Obedinitel i spasjavaneto na evreite v Obedinena Balgaria,“ *Media Times Review* (April 2004). And many others.

¹⁴ Angel Vagenstain, „Spasi li Bgaria vsichkite si evrei?,“ *Trud* (March 5, 2003), Reprinted in *Mediapool* (March 06, 2003). <https://www.mediapool.bg/spasi-li-bulgaria-vsichkite-si-evrei-news20338.html>

Albena Taneva, Vanja Gazenko, *Glasove v zashhita na grazhdanskoto obshetsvo* (Sofia, GAL-IKO, 2002); Ivan Hadzhiski, *Sadbata na evrejskoto naselenie v Belomorska Trakia, Vardarska Makedonia i Jugozapadna Bgaria prez 1941-1944* (Dupnica: Devora-Bi, 2004) and some others.

World War II at the time. These developments were, to a large extent, the result of the contestation of the Macedonian identity by their neighbours, especially Greece and Bulgaria. In the Republic of Macedonia, a Holocaust Fund of the Jews of Macedonia was established, with Samuel Sadikario at the head of the organization. In September 2005, the foundation stone of the **Holocaust Memorial Center for the Jews of Macedonia** was laid in the former Jewish quarter of Skopje.¹⁵ The implementation of the Holocaust Museum continued after 2005 for the next six years. Meanwhile, the coming to power of Nikola Gruevski's DPMNE in 2006 led to a de-Yugoslavization and a strong and significant "antiquization," which seems to have been applied in order to reject any suspicions of Bulgarianism left over from the years of Lyubcho Georgievski, as well as to „throw down the gauntlet“ to Greek claims and intransigence. In this way, according to Ragaru, there was a „Macedonianization of heroism,“ which went along with the „Macedonianization“ of „historical suffering.“¹⁶ This continues to carry the potential for future tensions with Bulgaria, insofar as the impossibility at that time, to ignore the influential figure of Simeon of Saxe-Coburg Gotha, affects and continues to affect the developments and the complete dominance of the narrative of „saving the Bulgarian Jews“ in the Bulgarian public space.¹⁷

The actions of the international factor in the face of Jewish organizations should not be overlooked either. Already on January 26, 2010, the Speaker of the Bulgarian Parliament, Tsetska Tsacheva, donated to the Auschwitz-Birkenau Mu-

seum documents, which centered on the „salvation“ of the Jews from the Kingdom of Bulgaria.¹⁸ Sofia, now a member of the EU, also began an important rapprochement with the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), an organization created to fight negationism and anti-Semitism. In 2012, Bulgaria received observer status in this organization.¹⁹ In June 2017, it also became a corresponding member (liaison). In the end, in November 2018, Bulgaria was able to boast its status as a full member of IHRA.²⁰

Already in 2012, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) publicly called on the Bulgarian authorities to reevaluate their policy towards the history related to the deportation of the Jews in March 1943 and Bulgarian responsibilities for the Holocaust.²¹ Meanwhile, the action of international factors and the fact that the Bulgarian-Macedonian dispute could not, and still cannot, be completely isolated as a dispute between Sofia and Skopje lead to the partial victories of the Jews of Macedonia in the international arena. In 2009, in the permanent exhibition at the Yad Vashem memorial, at the insistence of the „Committee of Immigrants from Monastir“ (Bitola) and the „Association of Macedonian Jews of the Next Gen-

¹⁸ "Tacheva dari dokumenti na muzeja Auschwitz-Birkenau," *24 chasa*, (January 27, 2010). <https://www.24chasa.bg/mezhdunarodni/article/358374>

Birkenau," *24 chasa*, (Jan 27, 2010). Bojko Vasilev, "Pamet za sloto I spomeni za spasitelite," BNT (January 29, 2010). https://bntnews.bg/bg/a/22044-pamet_na_zloto_i_spomen_za_spasitelite_ae_reportaj_ot_aushvic_i_parij

¹⁹ "Bulgaria sas statut na nabljudatel v ITF" - *Posolstvo na Izrael v Bulgaria* (Oct. 15, 2012) <https://embassies.gov.il/sofia/NewsAndEvents/Pages/Bulgaria-becomes-an-ITF-observer.aspx>

²⁰ "Bulgaria e prieta za palnopraven chlen na Mezhdunarodnia alians za vazpomenanie na Holokosta," *Republika Bulgaria, Ministerski syvet* (November 29, 2018). <https://ncceci.government.bg/bg/node/234>

²¹ Ragaru, "I balgarskite evrei bjaha spaseni," 442.

¹⁵ Ragaru, "I balgarskite evrei bjaha spaseni," 434.

¹⁶ Ibid., 416.

¹⁷ Stefan Detchev, "Kak se promeni balgarskata pamet."

eration," against the name Bulgaria, the number of Jewish victims during the Second World War went from a glamorous 0 (zero) to being replaced by the number 11, 343.²² In the former Yugoslav republic, analogies between the Jewish and Macedonian sufferings were already persistently drawn. The reason for this was also the commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913, which led to the fragmentation of the Macedonian people between four countries - Greece, Serbia, Bulgaria and Albania.²³

In the first years of the second decade of the new century, it seems that the Jewish efforts met, apparently with their own and not always coincidental motivation, a response also from Macedonian governmental circles. They increasingly began to pay attention to the Bulgarian deportation of the Jews. These developments were also reflected in the academic establishment. Thus, in 2013, at a conference dedicated to the 70th anniversary of the deportation of the Jews from the „new lands," MANU chairman Vlado Kambovski explicitly pointed out how „the Macedonian people best understand the fate of the Jews, because being subjected to biological and national extermination has a similar historical experience."²⁴

There were two other events that were relevant to our topic. First of all, this was the second meeting of the

²² Ibid., 441-442.

²³ Desislava Ushatova, "Vazmushtenie v Makedonia ot chestvaneto na Balkanskite vojni," *Actualno* (Oct. 29, 2012).

https://www.actualno.com/balkani/vyzmushtenie-v-makedonija-ot-chestvane-to-na-balkanskite-vojni-news_405073.html

²⁴ "Kambovski: Makedoncite naj-dobre ja razbirat tazhnata sudbina na evreite," *A1ON.mk* (March 12, 2013).

https://a1on.mk/macedonia/kambovski-makedoncite-najdobro-ja-ra/?fbclid=IwAR-37G1O61AHSiejxvF8khlVofFb-st8UW5Bdh3idHApPhF8Kd-VRKK_QaU

Macedonian and Jewish past, which was happening physically through the realization of the urban project "Skopje-2014." On March 10, 2011, opposite of the Museum of the Macedonian Struggle for Independence, the Holocaust Memorial Center of the Jews of Macedonia appeared and was opened,²⁵ although still incomplete. The opening ceremony was attended by the Prime Minister of the country, Nikola Gruevski, and guests from Israel, the USA and Germany were also present. The center was going to acquire its final form only in 2015, and for the moment the exposition was only sketched out. The story of the Bulgarian occupation was told, as well as of those 7,144 Jewish lives taken during the war. The of the Bulgarian authorities for the deportation was clearly stated in the museum exhibition responsibility. It also exhibited a special wagon with the inscription BDZ, which is said to have been left over from the deportations themselves in March 1943.²⁶

The very idea of building a museum dedicated to the deportation and extermination of the Jews from Macedonia, in which the Bulgarian pro-Nazi government at the time was clearly complicit, led to visible irritation among the political and public circles in Bulgaria, as well as among nationalist-oriented Bulgarians,²⁷ including those who have already become accustomed to, and internalized the image and self-perception of „the only country that saved all of its Jews." The first headlines in the Bulgarian media at the time were particularly telling - „Near Vardar

²⁵ "Memorialen Centar na Holocousta,"

<https://navicup.com/object/balkan-grand-tour/holocaust-memorial-center-226548/bg>

²⁶ Ragaru, "I balgarskite evrei bjaha spaseni," 435.

²⁷ Spas Tashev "Skopie palni sas falshifikati muzeja si na Holkousta," *NEWS.BG* (November 12, 2012).

<https://news.bg/your-voice/skopie-palni-s-falshifikati-muzeya-si-za-holokosta.html>

they equated the Bulgarians with Hitler,²⁸ „Skopje fills its Holocaust museum with forgeries.“²⁹ It is interesting that 12 years later, when marking the 80th anniversary of the events of March 1943, the headlines seem to sound identical - „The Skopje wagon and the lie,“³⁰ „BDJ blossomed on a death wagon at the Skopje Holocaust Museum.“³¹ As Ragaru notes in her monograph, despite the fact that the Holocaust Museum was a different initiative that had nothing to do with Gruevski's policy, in the opening of the memorial, Bulgaria saw proof that the Republic of Macedonia did not seek knowledge about the facts related to the Holocaust.³² The installation of a Yugoslav wagon instead of an authentic Bulgarian one, as well as the BDZ logo on it, which it was to impose only in 1964, was used by the Bulgarian media and polemicists to put under doubt the credibility of the facts presented in the museum altogether, as well as the Bulgarian complicity in the deportation itself. Along with this, other voices in the country were looking for commercial motives in the behavior of the Jews from their southwestern neighbour. According to similar voices, the Macedonian Jews were primarily looking for compensation from Bulgaria, having calculated the amount at 18 million euros.

The tension between Sofia and Skopje increased even more with the appearance of the news of the shooting of

²⁸ „Kraj Vardar priravnih balgarite s Hitler,“ 24. chasa (October 09, 2012).

<https://www.24chasa.bg/mezhdunarodni/article/1580159>

²⁹ Tashev, Skopje palni ...

<https://news.bg/your-voice/skopie-palni-s-falshifikati-muzeya-si-za-holokosta.html>

³⁰ Silvia Avdala, „Vagonat v Skopie I lazhat,“ *Voina i mir* (February 15, 2023).

<https://voinaimir.info/2023/02/vagonot-skopie/>

³¹ Silvia Avdala „BDZ cafna varhu vagon na smartta v Muzeja na Holokosta v Skopie,“ *Marica* (February 28, 2023).

<https://www.marica.bg/svqt/bdj-cafna-varhu-vagon-na-smartta-v-muzeq-na-holokosta-v-skopie>

³² Ragaru, „I balgarskite evrei bjaha spaseni,“⁴¹⁷.

a new film entitled „The Third Half.“³³ It was the work of the Macedonian director Darko Mitrevski and was mainly devoted to the deportation of the Jews from Macedonia, and the Bulgarian occupation over it during the Second World War. The film was generously financed by the state with 1 million euros, as well as by the Macedonian Film Fund with another 50,000 euros. Funding also comes from the Holocaust Fund of the Jews of Macedonia, the Jewish community in the Republic of Macedonia, as well as the Film Fund of the Czech Republic. Thus, the total budget of the film was 2.15 million euros. The Prime Minister Gruevski personally visited the shooting site in October 2011. The film was released in September 2012, and, according to Ragaru, confirmed the conviction of the authorities in Sofia that the government of Gruevski had decided to conduct an „anti-Bulgarian campaign“ on the grounds of the history of the Holocaust.³⁴ The official premiere of the film took place at the Millennium Cinema in Skopje. In a statement on Channel 5 to the reporter Lidia Bogatinova, then Prime Minister Gruevski stated that the film was excellent and that it deserved an Oscar.³⁵

The work is considered by Sofia as a kind of peak in the deliberate anti-Bulgarian campaign of the Prime Minister. Along with this, the film introduced the sensitive topic of Bulgarian complicity in the deportation, which was presented as an enthusiastic Bulgarian initiative. All through-

³³ Viktor Kanzurov, „Treto poluvreme“ - koktejl ot futbol, Holokost I propaganda sreshtu balgarite,“ *E-vestnik* (October 13, 2012.)

<https://e-vestnik.bg/15859/filmat-treto-poluvreme-koktejl-ot-futbol-evrei-i-propaganda-sreshtu-balgarite/>

³⁴ Ragaru, „I balgarskite evrei bjaha spaseni,“⁴¹⁷.

³⁵ Kanzurov, „Treto poluvreme ...“

<https://e-vestnik.bg/15859/filmat-treto-poluvreme-koktejl-ot-futbol-evrei-i-propaganda-sreshtu-balgarite/>

out the film, suggestions were made about Bulgaria's exceptional responsibility. Through the old Jewish woman Rebecca and her return to Skopje, the film also sought to promote and confirm the "Skopje 2014" project. In Bulgaria, the different ways in which the nearly 20-year-old Serbian rule in Macedonia, and the several-year-old Bulgarian one were presented in the film caused irritation. While in the first part the author used parody, the second part began with gloomy black clouds and a dramatic tone that did not stop until the end. Moreover, the Bulgarians were presented as bloodthirsty. The Germans were also absent from the film, as the Nazi power was associated with the Bulgarians. At that time, a Bulgarian political observer noted that, unlike other works such as the Polish "Katyn" by Andrzej Wajda, where there was at least one good Russian, there was not a single good Bulgarian in "the third half."

It cannot be denied that both the film and the initiative surrounding the Holocaust Memorial in Skopje lead to a change in the tone and the political line of Sofia towards its Southwestern neighbour. Along with this, after its entry into the EU in 2007, Bulgaria also had 18 MPs, who could confirm membership, act in favor of and clarify the Bulgarian position. In this case, Andrey Kovachev from GERB, Evgeni Kirilov from BSP and Stanimir Ilchev from GERB referred the European Commissioner for Enlargement, Štefan Füle, to the „manipulation of history“ done by Skopje.³⁶ The action also showed that the triple coalition led

³⁶ About the Bulgarian MP's position see Borjana Kamenova "Makedonski filmi sreshtu Balgaria," *BNT* (October 28, 2011). https://bntnews.bg/bg/a/63036-makedonski_film_sreshtu_bulgarija On the reply done by D. Mitrevski see "Rezhisjorat na propagandistkia makedonski film "Treto poluvreme"plashi sas zatvor balgarski evrodeputat," *Dnes+* (Noem. 8, 2011).

to a change in the position of the BSP towards the past, and the regime of 1941-44. At the turn of the two first decades of our current century, in most cases, the Bulgarian representatives expressed regret for what happened to the Jews of the Aegean sea coast, Vardar Macedonia and Pirot, and, together with that, expressed their decisive rejection of any Bulgarian responsibility and complicity in March 1943 in the deportation itself.³⁷ At the same time, they did not miss the opportunity to point out that Skopje hid the actions of a number of factors in Bulgaria related to the survival of the entire Jewish community from the old borders of the kingdom. In this case, the developments took place at a time when the BSP was promoting its anti-fascist past less. Moreover, in post-communist Bulgaria, and among its political class, there was, rather, more interest in the issues of communism and the former secret services than the Holocaust.

After all, „the third Half“ caused excitement in Bulgaria before it was seen, but it was hardly the only thing to do so. In Autumn of 2012, the annual report on Macedonia's progress towards the EU drew attention to the misunderstanding between Macedonia and Bulgaria.³⁸ One month later, Sofia, together with Paris and Athens, joined the countries that, in 2012, expressed reservations to the start

https://dnesplus.bg/es-i-svyat/rezhisjorat-na-propagandistkiya-makedonski-film-treto-poluvreme-plashi-sas-zatvor-balgarski-evrodeput_546762 About the position of Doris Pack, chairman of the Commission on culture and education in the European Parliament see "I Doris Pak dade gol za makedonskoto "Treto poluvreme"," *Vecer*, (Nov. 28, 2011).

<https://web.archive.org/web/20160305004947/http://vecer.mk/kultura/i-doris-pak-dade-gol-za-makedonskoto-treto-poluvreme>

³⁷ Interview with Andrey Kovachev, *Fokus* (December 02, 2011).

³⁸ *Rapport de la Commission au Parlement européen et au Conseil, Ancienne République yougoslave de Macedoine*. Strasbourg (April 16, 2013).

of negotiations from Macedonia. Already an EU member, Sofia managed to include in the EU Council resolution the mention of the importance of Macedonia maintaining good neighborly relations with its neighbours.³⁹

In the following years, the Holocaust, in the context of the development of Bulgarian-Macedonian relations, carried on to preoccupy the Bulgarian MPs. The European Parliament continued to be the place where the North Macedonian government, with much energy, strives to reach. On November 27, 2012, there was a hearing of the Macedonian Foreign Minister Nikola Poposki, in which he declared: „Let's leave history to the historians!“ It was criticized immediately by the Bulgarian MP Kovachev, who exclaimed that the Macedonian politicians and statesmen were the ones who didn't leave it to the historians, as the whole city of Skopje, as such, was surrounded only by history.⁴⁰

The positions of the international Jewish community, and the politics related to the memory of the Holocaust, lead to the emergence of a new challenge to the Bulgarian authorities in connection with the deportation of Jews from Macedonia, as well as from the Aegean sea and Pirot. On December 4 2011, the Organization of Jews in Bulgaria, „Shalom,“ came out with a declaration in which it spoke about the responsibility that the German authorities had for the deportations, but also about the complicity of the then Bulgarian government. The atmosphere and debates

³⁹ *Council conclusions on enlargement and stabilisation and association process* (3210th general affairs council meeting) https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/genaff/134234.pdf

⁴⁰ Andrey Kovachev's speech at the European Parliament <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7XtLnJAwJQU>

in Bulgaria apparently led to the appearance in the text of a wording about the „absence of resistance of the local population“ in Macedonia itself, which could be seen, to some extent, as a concession to Sofia. However, the document categorically demanded that today's Bulgarian government had to take clear „moral responsibility for the actions of the pro-Nazi government towards the Jews in the period 1941-1943.“⁴¹ In the following months and years, this pressure only intensified. In October 2012, at a conference in Sofia, scientists insisted that Bulgaria should recognize its historical responsibility for the deportations, with the American researcher Michael Birenbaum speaking overtly on this sense.⁴²

One must add to all of this not only the different readings that Sofia and Skopje usually gave to the period 1941-44, as either „liberation“/“administration“ or „occupation“ but also; the different views of the character of the regime in Sofia at the time („fascist“ or just „authoritarian“); of the anti-Semitic policy in 1940-1944, as well as for the communist period in Tito's Yugoslavia and Zivkov's Bulgaria. In fact, during these years, in Macedonia, with the museum, the above mentioned film, and with the activity of the Memorial Center headed by Goran Sadikario, there were, according to Ragaru, three priorities - to recognize at the local and international level the persecution against the

⁴¹ „Pozicia na „Shalom“ po povod sadbata na evreite pod balgarsko upravljenje,“ *Shalom PR* (January 31, 2013).

<https://shalompr.org/poziciya-na-oeb-shalom-po-vprosa-za-sdbata-na-evreite-pod-balgarsko-upravljenje>

⁴² „Izpravjaneto pred nelicepriyatnite fakti ot minaloto e izraz na sila ...,“ *Balgarski Helzinski komitet*,

<https://www.bgghelsinki.org/bg/news/pressobshenie-izpravyaneto-pred-nelicepriyatnite-fakti-ot-minaloto-e-izraz-na-sila-ne-na-slabost-na-nasheto-demokratichno-obshestvo>

local Jews through the Holocaust; to assert their identity precisely as „Macedonian Jews“; to publicize the role of the Bulgarian state.⁴³

During these years, the position of the Organization of Jews in Bulgaria, „Shalom,“ as well as the international Jewish organizations, became increasingly clear and insistent. The change in leadership in 2016,⁴⁴ as well as the accession of Bulgaria to the IHRA, and the policy of organizations such as the WJC, all created new parameters for the policy of Sofia. On August 29, 2017, Shalom issued a new statement that slightly edited the previous one from December 04, 2011. At the request of the Macedonian side, the mention of the weak solidarity of the Macedonian population with the local Jews was abandoned. Along with this, it was clearly stated at the beginning how „these territories were under Bulgarian administration.“⁴⁵ Ragaru suggests that the leaders of the World Jewish Congress (WJC) played an essential role in reformulating the problem. In March 2018, around the 75th anniversary, the president of the organization R. S. Lauder, pointed out how the Bulgarian authorities should recognize the complicity of the Bulgarian government in the deportation of March 1943.⁴⁶

During the commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the March events in 1943 in Sofia, the aspiration for full

⁴³ Ragaru, „I balgarskite evrei bjaha spaseni,“ 439. She emphasizes how it is more difficult to revise the Macedonian public discourse focused more on the collective innocence of the Macedonians in anti-Jewish persecutions and the existing solidarity between the Jews and the rest of the local population. Ibid. 439-440.

⁴⁴ D-r Aleksandar Oskar e novijat lider na „Shalom,“ 24 chasa (April 20, 2016). <https://www.24chasa.bg/bulgaria/article/5439462>

⁴⁵ Ragaru, „I balgarskite evrei bjaha spaseni,“ 449.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 449-450.

membership of Bulgaria in the IHRA led to the invitation of the Holocaust Memorial Center for the Jews of Macedonia, as well as the Macedonian ambassador, to Sofia. It is becoming increasingly apparent that one can no longer speak only of the „salvation“ of Jews from the „old lands“ without also conjuring a narrative that covers the deportation from the „new.“ On March 12, 2018, at a ceremony commemorating the 75th anniversary of March 1943, the director of the Center for Academic Studies of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), Paul Shapiro, pointed out to journalists how „Bulgarians“ were the perpetrators of the abductions and deportations from Macedonia.⁴⁷ From here, the possibilities for a one-sided Bulgarian narrative became more and more difficult.

On the same day, the Bulgarian prime-minister Boyko Borisov was in Skopje. For the first time, a high representative of Bulgaria paid tribute to the 7,144 Jews from Macedonia. Recognition of responsibility for the „lifts“ and deportations by the Bulgarian state was expected for the first time after 75 years. Silent worship with the offering of a wreath occurred in the Tobacco Monopoly in Skopje. However, the expected words were not heard at all.⁴⁸ There was an advance arrangement between Borisov, representatives of the Jewish communities in Macedonia and Bulgaria and leaders of the World Jewish Congress over what the text would contain. Nevertheless, a previously prepared text

⁴⁷ Pol Shapiro quoted in Georgi Koritarov, *Televizija Evropa*, Svobodna zona (March 03, 2018). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6oz_M5ePPFQ

⁴⁸ For a response among the contemporary Jewish community in the Republic of North Macedonia see the conversation between Georgi Koritarov and Victor Mizrahi, *Televizija Evropa*, Svobodna zona (March 03, 2018);

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ommppl_fibDU;

See also the representative of „United Patriots“ in Koritarov's program as well https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V_a5Qio-V3Q

was not read.⁴⁹ The prime minister improvised and spoke only of salvation, and how here the Nazis were at work. However, one of the reasons why Borisov was here was very well known. It was Bulgaria's desire for full membership in the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), where, as we mentioned, the country had the sole status of a candidate member. Bulgaria's full membership became a fact in November 2018. This led the country to include in its legislation, in October 2017, a definition of anti-Semitism, adopted previously by the IHRA in 2016, and to announce that Deputy Minister Georg Georgiev (who considers liberalism as a dirty word),⁵⁰ would be the Bulgarian coordinator of these activities. Ironically, Bulgaria's membership in this organization, since the end of 2018, further narrowed the possibilities for maneuvering around the deportation of 11,343 Jews from the „new lands.“⁵¹

We can definitely say that the international mediation, mostly of Jewish organizations and institutions, left less and less room for Sofia to maneuver around the alliance with the Third Reich and its complicity in the deportation of the Jews from the „new lands.“ At the same time, it also limited the possibilities of the Macedonian country claiming only elementary abuse at the level of deportation, and for instilling anti-Bulgarian hatred and burdening one nation with fascist responsibility and the other one with anti-fascist righteousness. It was no coincidence that Bulgaria's path to the IHRA went together with the signing of

the contract with the Republic of Macedonia on August 1, 2017, as well as with the change of the exposition in the Holocaust Museum in Skopje after March 2018. After its reconstruction and enrichment, the visitor already meets in the museum the general context of the Holocaust with the presentation of Nazism, which was before the „Bulgarian occupation of 1941-44.“ The mobilization for the salvation of the Jews from the old borders of the kingdom of Bulgaria was not omitted anymore. In this way, as Ragaru pointed out: „The understanding of Bulgaria's role is close to the one accepted in international historiography.“⁵² Even the carriage that caused so much controversy between Sofia and Skopje after 2018 was already indicated to have been reconstructed and donated by the Macedonian Railways.

In both countries, however, history continues to be written and changed according to the concerns of the present. The late 2020 Bulgarian veto at the beginning of the negotiations of the Republic of North Macedonia with the EU has led to a very significant hardening of the tone on both sides of the border. The presence of „United Patriots,“ and especially Karakachanov's VMRO in the Bulgarian government, contributed to this. During Krasimir Karakachanov's time as Minister of Defense, the Military TV Channel produced the documentary „The Last Half“ (2021),⁵³ which went to unheard of extremes in erasing the persecution of Jews in the Second World War and the Bulgarian complicity in their deportation from Macedonia. In the end, the aim was to completely whitewash the image of Tsar

⁴⁹ Ragaru, „I balgarskite evrei bjaha spaseni,“ 32.

⁵⁰ „Georg Georgiev: Dnes si svoboden na volja da slovobludstvash, liberalni otcerugatelju,“ *Faktor* (January 06, 2021). <https://faktor.bg/bg/articles/georg-georgiev-s-ostar-komentar-po-debata-za-mazhko-to-horo-za-bogoyavlenie>

⁵¹ Ragaru, „I balgarskite evrei bjaha spaseni,“ 450-452.

⁵² Ibid. 437-438.

⁵³ „Posledno poluvreme,“ *Voenen televisionen kanal*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JGcFVo7bskl>

Boris III and the Bulgarian authorities at the time. The film presented today's dominant public view in Bulgaria about the former Macedonia as partitioned into „German occupation zones divided into administrative districts.“ It was done in order to avoid any Bulgarian responsibility in the deportation from March 1943. All of this was the result of the image suggested by the film about German-occupied territories temporarily granted to the Bulgarian administration, which consisted of local people, and was subject to the final decisions of the German authorities. To a large extent, the documentary tape was related to the recycling of the then Bulgarian propaganda from 1941 and the following years. Even after Borisov's fall from power, political forces such as „Ima takav narod“ (ITN) and „Vazrazhdane“ also continue to stand behind a similar narrative. Such were the views shared by the co-chairman from the Bulgarian side of the mixed historical commission on April 19, 2021, Angel Dimitrov, in the program „History.BG,“ as well as the historiographical mainstream, which completely identified with the then line of Tsar Boris III and his prime-minister Bogdan Filov, and not with the anti-Nazi opposition from the conservative right through the center to the left.⁵⁴ It continued at the commemoration of the 80th anniversary with a letter from historians and their „general opinion“ on the absence of fascism in power in Bulgaria, which completely omitted anti-Semitic legislation and Bulgarian complicity in deportations.⁵⁵ It was followed by a new letter from „independent historians“ to

honour, in March 2023, the memory of Tsar Boris III as a „saviour.“⁵⁶ Even when a group of Bulgarian historians, in the end of February 2023, called on Bulgaria to recognize the responsibility for the deportation,⁵⁷ contemporaneously, and along with this, a new document by „independent historians“ was announced against these calls. The excuse for what had happened was sought in a more general context in the Second World War.⁵⁸

Conclusion

One can conclude that the Bulgarian official position, especially with regard to the development of Bulgarian-Macedonian relations, not only did not change significantly between 2013 and 2023, but was even, to a certain extent, further strengthened. This is indeed a fact, despite the greater coverage of the subject of deportation and Bulgarian complicity in the media, along with some history textbooks. Until the end, the topic of the fake wagon in the Holocaust Memorial in Skopje, which was allegedly supposed to erase the deportation itself and the Bulgarian complicity, was heating up. The suggestion was that the carriage was fake because the transportation itself was

⁵⁴ „Iniciativna grupa za dostojno otbeljavane na 80 godishninata ot spasjavaneto na balgarskite evrei: Otkrito pismo,“ *BTA* (Febr. 27, 2023).

<https://www.bta.bg/bg/news/bulgaria/oficial-messages/414515-initsiativna-grupa-za-dostoyno-otbelyazvane-na-80-godishninata-ot-spasyavaneto-n>

⁵⁷ „Ucheni prizovavat darzhavata da priznae otgovornostta si za presledvane i deportirane na evrei,“ *Mediapool* (February 28, 2023).

<https://www.mediapool.bg/ucheni-prizovavat-darzhavata-da-priznae-otgovornostta-si-za-presledvane-i-deportirane-na-evrei-news345336.html>

⁵⁸ „Stanovishte na istorici otnosno politikata na Balgaria po evrejskija vapros,“ *Institut za istoricheski izsledvanija*, BAN, (March 16, 2023).

<https://ihist.bas.bg/D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%89%D0%B5-%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%82%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B8%D1%86%D0%B8-%D0%B5%D0%B2%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%B9%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8-%D0%B2%D1%8A%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%BE%D1%81/>

⁵⁴ „Okupacija, spasenie ili prisadeinjavane,“ *BNT*, *Istoria.BG*, (April 19, 2021) <https://bnt.bg/news/okupacija-spasenie-ili-prisaedinyavane-balgarskoto-upravlenie-v-makedoniya-pomoraviето-i-zapadna-trakiya-1941-1944-g-294143news.html>

⁵⁵ Stanovishte na balgarski istorici po vaprosa „Imalo li e fashitski rezhim v Balgaria?“, *BAS* (November 23, 2022).

<https://www.bas.bg/?p=41867>

done with German wagons. The titles were also not accidental, such as „One museum, one wagon and a thousand lies.“⁵⁹ In March 2023, the co-chairman of the joint historical commission between the two countries from the Bulgarian side continued to deny Bulgarian responsibility for the deportation, and made efforts to generate „common opinions“ in order to hide behind them. Moreover, together with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it was the responsibility of the presidency to bar any alternative interlocutors from speaking on the topic in the Bulgarian media.

The Macedonian side realizes the strengths of its position regarding the deportation of the Jews as a convenient way to attack the Bulgarian position regarding the non-recognition of the Macedonian language and identity and to translate it into an internationally understandable and universal discourse. This happens at a time when neither Bulgarian historiography nor Bulgarian representatives from the joint commission on historical and educational issues can still present a reasonable, balanced, comprehensive and internationally acceptable account of the Second World War and the Bulgarian power in Macedonia. Along with this, however, Skopje's insistence on some original Macedonian anti-fascist righteousness, as well as the misuse of the deportation narrative for undisguised anti-Bulgarian purposes, could and should be questioned. It ignores the moments of opportunism in the behaviour of the Macedonian public in the first months of the Bulgarian occupation in April 1941, and the participation of leftist and communist political actors in them; the weak

initial resistance compared to those in other parts of Yugoslavia;⁶⁰ the passivity of a large part of the local population during the deportation in March 1943; and the cases of saved and surviving Jews and their reluctant acceptance into the formations of partisan resistance.⁶¹

This is why it is not at all accidental that in recent years the international Jewish community, more often indirectly than directly, has played an important role in rounding, smoothing and refining both positions - the Bulgarian and the Macedonian one. It demands that Sofia speak about the survival of the Jews from the old borders, but also about the deportation from the „new lands,“ thus taking responsibility for this at the state level. On the other hand, it insists that Skopje present the general context and the entire narrative of what was happening in Bulgaria at the time without misusing the occasion in order to foment superficial, anti-Bulgarian hysteria. Hopefully in the years to come, and rather sooner than later, this will lead us to a new memory of the Holocaust in the two neighboring Balkan countries who share very common history.

⁵⁹ Victoria Georgieva, „Edin muzej, edin vagon I hiljadi lazhi,“ *Ah, tezi medii* (July 20, 2022).

<https://ahtezimedii.com/2022/07/20/edin-muzej-edin-vagon-i-hilyadi-lazhi/>

⁶⁰ See more in: Stefan Detchev, „Bulgarian Historiography after 1989,“ in *Contemporary European History* (2023), in print

⁶¹ Ragaru, „I balgarskite evrei bjaha spaseni,“ 440.