

Questions

Thrace and Macedonia

Beginning in March 1943, 11,343 Jews from Macedonia and Thrace, territories then under Bulgarian control, were deported to the death camps of Treblinka and Majdanek. King Boris III did not act to prevent the deportation. While Jews living in Bulgaria proper were saved, the king was complicit with the Nazis in murdering the Jews of other lands.

Whether the deportations occurred as a result of German pressure, which some argue was harder to refuse in dealing with non-Bulgarian citizens, is debated today.

Even as we recall the rescue of Jews from within Bulgaria's border, we remember and mourn the murder of Jews in these territories. We cannot forget.



Credit: US Holocaust Memorial Museum

The deportation of the Jews from Thrace and Macedonia

This brochure is based on research from Michael Bar-Zohar's *Beyond Hitler's Grasp* (Holbrook, MA: 1998). Additional sources include Frederick B. Chary's *The Bulgarian Jews and the Final Solution 1940-1944* (Pittsburgh, PA: 1972) and Angel Wagenstein, "Collective Memory: the Bulgarian Case," in *History and Memory. Bulgaria: Facing the Holocaust* (London: 1972). Thanks to Nir Baruch for his valuable input.

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Bulgaria Today

In central Sofia, within a few hundred meters of one another, sit three places of worship of different religions: the metropolitan Bulgarian church "Sveta Nedelya," the central Jewish synagogue, and the Turkish mosque "Bania Bashi." Their proximity symbolizes equality and sacred tolerance.

Will the power of this symbol be enough to preserve for ages to come tolerance and respect for human dignity as integral parts of the national self-consciousness of all Bulgarians? Can others learn from the Bulgarian example?

The Thanks To Scandinavia Foundation

Thanks To Scandinavia (TTS) is an educational institution that commemorates the rescue of Jews in Scandinavia, Bulgaria, and other European countries during World War II. TTS awards scholarships to young people from these countries in lasting gratitude and in an effort to build new bridges of friendship. Thanks To Scandinavia has granted over 3,000 scholarships to teachers and students for study in the United States, Israel, and within Europe and helped to promote understanding of the history of rescue and its enduring message about courage and human dignity.

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Thanks To Scandinavia is an institute of the American Jewish Committee (www.ajc.org).

The true story of how almost 50,000 Jews were saved during World War II because of the efforts of the Bulgarian people and their church.

Jews in Bulgaria During World War II

A little-known history



Credit: Michael Bar-Zohar, author, *Beyond Hitler's Grasp*

Bulgarian Jewish woman, wearing the yellow Star of David, second to the right, with her non-Jewish friends in a Bulgarian village.

Thanks To Scandinavia

An institute of the American Jewish Committee

1939
1945

The Holocaust

Hitler and his Nazi party came to power in Germany in 1933 and remained until 1945—only twelve years in total. And yet, by the end of Hitler’s regime, the world had been plunged into global world war, Europe was in shambles, and tens of millions of people had died. Among the dead were six million Jews—men, women, and children—who were systematically slaughtered because of the Nazis’ racist ideology. Jews first arrived in Bulgaria in 70 A.D. The community, which expanded again in the fifteenth century with Jews seeking refuge from Spain, lived in peace until the start of World War II. The following tells the story of how ordinary Bulgarians and the Bulgarian Orthodox Church took extraordinary steps to protect the Jews and to save many from deportation and murder.

Bulgaria: How Church and People Said “No” to Hitler

Bulgaria

As a result of peace treaties ending World War I—the Treaty of Versailles and the Treaty of Neuilly—Bulgaria lost three important territories to neighboring countries: the northern plain of Dobrudja to Romania, Macedonia to Yugoslavia, and Thrace to Greece. The Bulgarians considered this loss an insult and wanted the lands restored.

Germany also contested these peace treaties. When Adolf Hitler rose to power, he tried to win Bulgarian King Boris III’s allegiance. In the summer of 1940, Hitler hosted diplomatic talks between Bulgaria and Romania in Vienna. On September 7, an agreement was signed for the return of Dobrudja to Bulgaria. The Bulgarian nation rejoiced.

The Threat

But the price for the return of Dobrudja was the adoption in late December 1940 of the anti-Jewish “Law for the Protection of the Nation.” Bulgarian Prime Minister Bogdan Filov and Interior Minister Peter Gabrovski, both Nazi sympathizers, were the architects of this law, which restricted Jewish rights, imposed new taxes, and established a quota for Jews in some professions. Bulgarians protested in letters to their government.

In March 1941, Bulgaria signed the Tripartite Pact and joined the Axis coalition in hopes of regaining the territories of Macedonia and Thrace. As an ally of Germany, Bulgaria was not occupied and was allowed to keep its sovereignty. After the signing, Filov was handed secret letters promising that at the end of the war, Italy and Germany would recognize Bulgaria’s aspirations in Macedonia and Thrace.

Soon after, the Wehrmacht launched two lightning offensives: one against

Greece and the other against Yugoslavia. Both countries capitulated. Six weeks later, the Germans invited the Bulgarian army to occupy Macedonia and Thrace. Hitler needed all his troops for the invasion of the Soviet Union, launched on June 22, 1941. Administration of these territories was handed over to the Bulgarian authorities.

In 1942, after the Wannsee Conference in Berlin, measures against the Jews worsened considerably. Jewish property was seized and anti-Jewish propaganda increased. A Commissariat for the Jewish Problem in Bulgaria was established. The anti-Jewish campaign, however, drew the opposition of peasants, city dwellers, intellectuals, and the Orthodox Church.

In November 1942, Adolf Beckerle, the German ambassador to Bulgaria, reported: “Partly raised with Greeks, Armenians, Turks, and Gypsies, the average Bulgarian does not understand the meaning of the struggle against the Jews, the more so as the racial question is totally foreign to him.”

On April 5, 1943, the German legation in Sofia sent a confidential report to SS headquarters about the difficulty of deporting the Jews from Bulgaria. A member, Volf Oshlis, concluded: “Bulgarian people are democratic and practice re-

ligious tolerance. Bulgaria is a country without anti-Semitism and respects the achievements of other people.”

In 1943, the Bulgarian government took further steps to crack down on the Jews. Interior Minister Gabrovski and Theodor Dannecker, the Third Reich’s special adviser on Jewish affairs, signed a secret agreement to deport 20,000 Jews to German territories. The pact called for rounding up over 11,000 Jews from Thrace and Macedonia and another 8,000 from Bulgaria’s old borders. The remaining Bulgarian Jews were to be deported later.

Deportations Halted

The initial roundups were to begin on March 9, 1943. In Kyustendil, a town on the western border, the boxcars were lined up. But as the news about the imminent deportations leaked, protests began throughout Bulgaria.

In the morning of March 9, a delegation from Kyustendil, comprised of eminent public figures and headed by Dimitar Peshev, the deputy speaker of the National Assembly, met with Interior Minister Gabrovski. They threatened to expose the scheme, which was certain to enrage the Bulgarian people. Finally, Gabrovski relented. The same day he sent telegrams to the roundup centers cancelling the deportations.

In fact, Gabrovski’s decision was not taken on his own “personal initiative.” Peshev’s eleventh-hour initiative, combined with the staunch support of the church and the intellectual elites, had shaken him and King Boris III. At the risk of direct confrontation with the Reich, they refused to deport the Jews. Four hours before the deadline, the order was cancelled.



The Outcry

Knowing that the Commissariat for the Jewish Question would be furious, Peshev moved to prevent any future surprises. He had 42 members of parliament sign a letter protesting the deportation plan and sent it to Prime Minister Filov. Similar letters came from groups of writers, lawyers, physicians, and army officers.

Orthodox Church leaders in Sofia and Plovdiv also spoke out. Bishop Stephan, the head of the Sofian church and the highest-ranking Bulgarian church official, and Bishop Kiril, head of the church in Plovdiv, vigorously opposed the anti-Jewish campaign. Bishop Stephan sent messages to the king pleading: “Do not persecute so that you yourself will not be persecuted.... God will keep watch over your actions.” In person, he warned: “If the persecution against the Jews continues, I shall open the doors of all Bulgarian churches to them.” And in a public statement, he said that the trains to deport Jews would have to pass over his body.

In northern Bulgaria, farmers threatened to lie down on the railway tracks

to prevent passage of the trains. Elin Pelin, the president of the Bulgarian Writers Association, wrote: “The conscience of the Bulgarian people hangs in the balance. The stain cast on our fellow citizens by the expulsion of our Jewish neighbors will not be erased for generations to come.”

Nazi pressure on King Boris continued. At the end of March, Hitler invited the king to visit him. Upon returning home, King Boris ordered able-bodied Jewish men to join hard labor units to build roads. Conditions were very poor.

Bulgaria’s opposition came to a head at the last official meeting between Hitler and King Boris in August 1943. Reports of the meeting indicate that Hitler was furious at the king for refusing to join the war against the USSR and to deport the Jews. Two weeks later King Boris III died. Rumors circulated that he was poisoned on Hitler’s orders.

The Red Army entered Bulgaria in September 1944, ending the threat against the Jews.



King Boris III and Bishop Stephan

Credit: Bulgarian State Archives

Credit: US Holocaust Memorial Museum