

Comments and Reviews

**“NARRATIVE INGENUITY” ABOUT
BULGARIA AND THE HOLOCAUST –
ABSENCES, DISTORTIONS, SINKINGS**

(A Review of the Book of Nadège Ragaru “*And So the Bulgarian Jews Were Saved...*” – *History of Knowledge About the Holocaust in Bulgaria*”, Sofia: Critique and Humanism Publishing House, 2022, 514 pp., in Bulgarian)

I am starting this review with a personal memory. It is related to the beginning of my professional interest in the March events of 1943. It was on the 70th anniversary when I had to organise a round table on the topic. Since I had been professionally engaged in other issues, completely unrelated to the Second World War and the Holocaust, I began to study the literature more closely, to follow what was published, and to familiarise myself with published archival materials and historical sources. At that time, several conferences were held in the country about “saving the Bulgarian Jews”. Rumen Avramov’s book on anti-Semitic legislation and state policy from 1940 onwards was just released. The two volumes by him and Nadia Danova, dedicated to the deportation of Jews from Aegean Thrace, Vardar Macedonia and Pirot, have not been published yet, but they have already given some interviews and published the first texts on the topic. I can share what made the strongest impression on me against the background of the official memory (as of 2013, and it seems to continue in no small measure until 2023, and in some of its distortions it even worsens) the fate of the Jews in Bulgaria during the Second World War, for the survival/salvation of those from the old borders of the kingdom, as well as for the deportation of those from the “new lands”.

The first thing that struck me was how little is known, without being completely silent, about the anti-Semitic legislation that was passed in December 1940 and in the following years. It hardly went into detail about the actions of the Bulgarian

state power against its subjects of Jewish origin. Information about this was, as a rule, omitted, and in no small measure continues to be absent from the narrative that prevails in our media.

The second thing that I couldn’t miss was that the story about the “salvation of the Bulgarian Jews” completely drowned out (and this year it was so) the part about the deportation of the Jews from the “new lands” occupied by Bulgaria and preliminary annexed in April 1941. As Nadège Ragaru has brilliantly demonstrated in her book, the very events of March 1943 and the tentative cancellation of deportation (the uncertainty of which provoked Dimitar Peshev’s action in the following days, the actions of the Holy Synod, the parliamentary speeches of Nikola Mushanov, Petko Stainov and Todor Kozhuharov) cannot be told without the parallel ongoing and unwavering deportation of Jews from Aegean Thrace, Vardar Macedonia and Pirot.

It cannot be hidden that the very bringing of the Aegean Jews from the “new lands” at the beginning of March 1943 to temporary camps in Dupnitsa and Gorna Jumaya (Blagoevgrad) to a great extent provoked the next very missing moment in the narrative. It was related to the fact that the Jews themselves, Bulgarian subjects, were the ones who took the first step to inform the Kyustendil notables about the danger hanging over their compatriots. Because if the story of “salvation” has to start somewhere, it is precisely from this moment. Without this step, no one knows whether the Kyustendil action of March 8 and the subsequent tentative cancellation of the

deportation to the “old lands” of March 9 and 10, will be called one day the “salvation of the Bulgarian Jews”, would have happened.

Here I come to the other moment that made a strong impression on me. Reading the diary of Prime Minister Prof. Bogdan Filov, I found that what happened on March 9–10, 1943 was not seen by him as a fatal downfall of some preliminary plans and failure of some already conceived policy. For the prime minister, it was more important to note that the deportation was actually happening, it was continuing, and King Boris III was still insisting on “a firm course” on the “Jewish question”. However, on March 17, 1943, Filov explicitly noted his strong irritation with D. Peshev’s letter, threatening that the consequences for the deputy speaker of the parliament would be serious. And they were like that in the following days.

The other thing that was missing from the narrative is the famous meeting of March 26, 1943, in which – apart from the removal of D. Peshev from his position – the already mentioned opposition MPs N. Mushanov, P. Stainov, and T. Kozhuharov raised the question not only about the Jews from the old borders of the kingdom but also for the ongoing deportation of their compatriots from the “new lands”. The disparaging speeches of opposition politicians refuted any claims today that the “lifting” (mass midnight arrests), transport, conveying and handing over of the detained Jews to the Nazis happened unnoticed and there was no time to be perceived. Moreover, they refuted the suggestions that the public was uninformed about what was happening too.

And here I return to N. Ragaru’s book and I want to say – buy this book and read it. All these missing moments from the already official narrative in our country have been brought to light. It targets them and seeks to illuminate not only the distortions in it but also the tricks by which they are achieved. I am referring to the discussions surrounding the history of the Second World War and the Holocaust, the fate of Bulgarian Jewry and the fate of the so-called Jewry from the “new lands”. This N. Ragaru manages to illuminate originally. Those arguments that are most often put forward in connection with the story of the “salvation of the Bulgarian Jews” and the spared deportation from the “new lands” are also pre-

sent. That is why, after reading it, one can hardly remain unconvinced of the validity of her point of view and conclusions.

The reader can bravely say that from the position of expertise and documentation of the “hard facts” N. Ragaru manages to achieve the clearest, most convincing and multifaceted descriptions of both the “salvation of the Bulgarian Jews” and the deportation of the Jewish population by the territories occupied by the Bulgarian state. About what happened to the Jews in the pre-war borders of the kingdom, the French historian notes: “Protests by Jews and non-Jews, expressed by local leaders, by deputies and high dignitaries of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, however, made the Minister of the Interior Petar Gabrovski – perhaps after coordination with the head of the Bulgarian government Bogdan Filov, with members of the office of King Boris III or with the monarch himself – to order on March 9 the end of the “liftings” and the release of those already detained.” Again, in a few sentences that seem to say it all, we also find what was said about the deportation: “Requested by the Reich services, negotiated with the Bulgarian government through the mediation of the German legation in Sofia, organised by the Commissariat for Jewish Affairs (KEV) – an institution established at the end of August 1942 to coordinate anti-Jewish measures – with the help of the special envoy of Adolf Eichmann, SS-Hauptsturmführer Theodor Dannecker, the mass arrests, i.e. the “liftings” were carried out by the Bulgarian police in close coordination with the Bulgarian army and the occupation authorities. These measures were authorised by decrees of the Bulgarian Council of Ministers. German police officers took part in the export of the convoys from “old” and “new” Bulgaria to the death camps in Treblinka; The Gestapo also monitored the temporary detention camps.” Of course, N. Ragaru is also clearly aware of the remaining unresolved issues. Among them are: whether one or two were D. Peshev’s meetings with Interior Minister P. Gabrovski. Did the latter ask for Prime Minister B. Filov’s consent to stop the “liftings”, i.e. ending arrests from old state borders? From whom exactly came the order “from above” mentioned in the report of the German police attache Adolf Hoffman to end the

action in the pre-war borders of Bulgaria? Was it not King Boris III himself?

However, beyond establishing the facts surrounding the survival of Jews from the old lands and the deportation of those from the new ones, this book is much more. It is a study of the conditions under which facts are produced and then circulated. N. Ragaru emphasises that sometimes they are “true” simply because they are “universally believed”. With her virtuoso and sophisticated analysis, she traces how something without necessarily being kept silent could be made practically invisible. The text convincingly introduces us to the specific production of knowledge, meaning and narratives in separate historical, legal and political fields. The French historian plunges us into what she calls “the history of stories that have been tirelessly told”, presenting them in the form of “arts of creation and silence”, using the action of “narrative ingenuity”. Along with this, being sufficiently aware of modern understandings of the archive and historical knowledge (which are so lacking in the naive public documents disclosed even recently by Bulgarian historians), the author does not conceive her book as some kind of inventory of errors in interpretation, to which she opposes “restoration of the truth about the past”. I will also say that the source material used by her is also impressive and rare for Bulgarian researchers, which includes testimonies found in libraries and archives in Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Serbia, Germany, Israel, and the USA. All of them are available in Bulgarian, Macedonian, Serbian, German, and English, although less often even in Russian and Hebrew.

Another great achievement of the book is that it manages to convince us how telling the story of the Bulgarian Jews and the Holocaust is related to problems and most importantly stakes, which at first glance seem to have nothing to do with the state policy on the Jewish issue itself. Among them are, for example, the fate of Bulgaria at the Paris Peace Conference in 1946; how the Patriotic Front, dominated by the Communist Party, will succeed in consolidating its power and legitimizing its right to establish a new communist Soviet-type regime; the fate of the Jews who remain in Bulgaria and of those who emigrate to their new homeland Israel; intra-Jewish disputes and conflicts; the clash of the two blocs in the

years of the Cold War; the anti-Semitic elements in the late Stalinist politics; the tensions between the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic. In the end, before us is also the big stake related to the rehabilitation of King Boris III and the quest for idealization of the pre-communist history of the monarchy. Last but not least, the reader can see how in the exchange of energies between Bulgaria, Israel, the FRG, the GDR, and the Republic of (North) Macedonia, the topic of the Holocaust crosses national identities, political loyalties and projects for the future. It is also outlined in detail how in recent years the Bulgarian-Macedonian stakes make it even more difficult to get to the real story, as well as to the different and multifaceted aspects of this topic.

Here is the place to say that N. Ragaru manages to organise his monograph in an inimitable way, going through the work of the VII Chamber of the People’s Court; the discussions of the film “Stars” in the late 1950s; the life and uses of an original documentary tape from the deportations of Jews from Aegean coast in March 1943 and footage of their presence in the temporary camps in Dupnitsa and Gorna Jumaya (Blagoevgrad); the exhibitions that were organised at the end of the 1970s and the attempts at cultural diplomacy of the Bulgarian state in the 1980s; the stakes in the 1990s with the confrontation between communism and anti-communism; the gradual appearance also of the subject of the deportation of the Jews from the new lands, after having been completely marginalised or suppressed for a long time; the subject of deportation and Bulgarian-Macedonian relations. In all these moments, the French historian manages to convince us of one thing – the deportation that we are interested in here was never a topic by itself, and always the other stakes, already mentioned, played an important role in shaping the narrative of what happened.

It is convincingly outlined how from the meetings of the VII Chamber of the People’s Court in 1945, the picture of Bulgaria as completely dependent on Germany was being built. According to this picture, Bulgarians, who were non-Bulgarians because they served the Germans, were responsible for both the anti-Semitic policy and the deportations. As a counterpoint to this group of rulers, the innocent Bulgarian people and the

resistance led by the Communist Party stand out. In the end, the activity of the court demonstrated how instead of establishing individual responsibility, the theme of collective innocence was developed – an idea that still defines public narratives about the Holocaust in Bulgaria today. The reader is convinced how the fear that possible Greek claims, supported by London, could also question the borders of the “old” kingdom, pre-determines the elements of the forged narrative. It can also be seen the role of the allies’ promise that the signing of the peace treaties would consider the attitude of the respective country towards the minorities. This makes it clear that prosecuting anti-Jewish crimes could lead to political dividends. It is illustrated how, excluding the bureaucracy of the Commissariat for Jewish Affairs (KEV), the apparatus of the Bulgarian state (police, intelligence, tax services, BDZ or Bulgarian state railways company, as well as the army) remained largely out of prosecution, including around the implementation of the “liftings”. It is pointed out how the army’s support for the coup itself on September 9, 1944, as well as its role given the current needs of the front and the finale of the war against Nazi Germany, was not without importance in this case. It is particularly emphasised how, despite the wealth of evidentiary material, in the end, the mentioned panel of the court read insignificant verdicts (especially when compared to the extremely harsh ones of the I and II panels). This led to “an almost obliteration of Bulgarian responsibilities” and an emphasis primarily on the German role. It is not by chance that even here the president of the court pointed out that Bulgaria did not have sovereignty over the new lands. As a final result, a judicial panel created to deal with the unique nature of anti-Jewish crimes produced a narrative of the anti-fascist solidarity of Bulgarians and Jews, which became the basis for their coexistence in the future People’s Republic. It is covered up that it was the parliament that in June 1942 gave full power to the rulers of the Jewish question in the “new lands”, and the “liftings” themselves became possible thanks to a series of orders of B. Filov’s government itself from the beginning of March 1943. The narrative of innocence and the absence of any real Bulgarian involvement in both anti-Semitic politics and deportation re-

mained an enduring feature for decades to come. In one case it was in the interests of the ruling Bulgaria Communist-dominated Fatherland Front on the eve of the coming Paris Peace Conference, and in the other of the candidate and member of the EU and NATO at the beginning of the 21st century against the background of the interesting development of Bulgarian-Macedonian relations.

The Bulgarian uneasiness with the subject is also clearly visible in the chapter, which traces the artistic and ideological discussions surrounding the Bulgarian-East German film from 1959 “Stars” (director Konrad Wolf, scenario Angel Wagenstein). Here, N. Ragaru traces in detail how the expectations of the Bulgarian cinematography for a film with an anti-fascist theme did not come true. However, it is far more revealing how, despite the recreation of the transit camp of the Greek Jews in the Bulgarian city, the Bulgarian policemen guarding them were gradually deleted during the work on the script. Moreover, this was done twice – once upon their arrival at the camp and a second time upon their departure for Poland from the Danube port. Efforts were made to have the escorting in the film itself done solely by Nazis. Certainly, for the heads of Bulgarian cinematography from the end of the 1950s, one could not speak of any responsibility of Bulgaria for the deportation of the Jews from Northern Greece. Then on the East German side, it made an impression on the reluctance of the Bulgarian side to take a more critical look at the past, as well as to make an effort to reflect on the issue that is still relevant today – what could have been done, and what was not done. The communist culturtrregers of the time were hardly hiding their displeasure that the film had to put Nazis and Greek Jews against each other, and this obscured the anti-fascist struggle film preferred by the regime in Sofia. It was no coincidence that in practice this remained the only work from the time of communist Bulgaria, which was somewhat discretely dedicated to anti-Jewish persecutions. Only after the changes of 1989, did the emphasised commitment of A. Wagenstein himself to the recognition of Bulgarian responsibility for the deportations made the tape a work about the extermination of the Jews.

The next chapter of the book centres on a miraculously preserved documentary tape from March 1943 that only surfaced after more than

20 years in the mid-1960s. The reason for this was the trial in West Germany against the Nazi plenipotentiary minister in Bulgaria, Adolf-Heinz Beckerle. N. Ragaru follows in detail the reversal of the meaning of these footages – from a tape showing convoys of deported Jews, guarded by Bulgarians, to footage testifying that there were Jews who were not deported and the role of the Bulgarian state in this. It was true that the film captures the Bulgarian guards and signs of the BDZ, quite recognizable footage from Gorna Jumaya, Dupnitsa and Lom today, and the communist regime in Sofia was deliberately trying to place the responsibility for the committed atrocities on the monarchy. In the end, somehow this responsibility for the deportation itself slipped to the actions of Beckerle, who was supposed to symbolise “German guilt”. A little later, already in the 1970s and 1980s, the same photos from the “liftings” and deportations, which illustrated the anti-Jewish violence and the perpetrators of it, were already used in Bulgarian cultural diplomacy to point out the innocence of the Bulgarian people, who “saved the Bulgarian Jews”. In a 1977–1978 documentary by Haim Oliver, the facts surrounding the deportation were “attributed to the Germans and their local ally, the King”. In any case, it is directly suggested how “complete masters were the Germans”. The passive voice used in the voice-over helped to conceal the identity of the actors during the “liftings”. The restrictions against the Jews after January 1941 were not listed in detail. However, the prepared role of the dictator Todor Zhivkov was not omitted, which took place in the factual fabric of the Jewish protest demonstration of May 24, 1943. From here, the theme of the uniqueness of the “rescue of the Bulgarian Jews” was to dominate, as in the narrative in the 1980s the story would have a relatively similar form to the one created in 1945. It was only the theme of national tolerance that was added to it, ironically, at the time of the implementation of the so-called “Revival Process” (the politics of the Communist regime in Bulgaria to assimilate the Turks in the country). This event, in the successful expression of N. Ragaru, was “a politics of violent imposition of identity, which could also claim exceptionalism”.

There is also one more interesting detail. When organizing an exhibition in Germany in

1984, any German documents that could undermine the Bulgarian thesis and suggest that the Nazis took a more reactive position in anti-Jewish repression than the proactive position of their Bulgarian ally were parried in the arrangement of the materials by entering under the general framework “1943-Saving the Bulgarian Jews”. As for the footage captured on the documentary tape of March 1943, they, deprived of their context, already testified only to what could have happened, but did not happen. After all, both communist and post-communist history had these common features, crimes were externalised as “the work of the Germans”, and good deeds were nationalised, as “uniquely Bulgarian”.

In the last two chapters, N. Ragaru traces the developments after the changes of 1989. Then the anti-communist emigration appeared on the scene, which had its alternative reading of the past, and the Jewish emigration settled in Israel. A consensus was quickly and expectedly reached that the salvation attributed to T. Zhivkov had nothing to do with the facts. However, anti-Jewish crimes also appeared, and it was important for the BSP to remind them, but after the aforementioned “Revival Process”, its subscription to anti-fascism was already problematic. In these bets, right-wing intellectuals idealised the inter-war period, and the figure of the King was used to symbolise the lustre of that time and Bulgaria’s then occupation of its rightful place in Europe. The “salvation” itself began to be attributed to the “bourgeois elite, whose beheading by the People’s Court in 1945 seems even more challenging”. From the narrative of communism, the “rescue of the Bulgarian Jews” was taken over. In the anti-communist discourse, there was a new distribution of the roles, as T. Zhivkov was replaced by King Boris III, who should also personify the “good Bulgarian people”. However, although Bulgaria managed to achieve success in its cultural diplomacy during the middle and second half of the 1990s, the inclusion of Jews from Macedonia and Aegean Thrace, as well as world Jewish organisations, despite the cooperation of Bulgarian Jews from Israel, made difficult the retention of the Bulgarian narrative that was established over the years. In 2000, the names of King Boris and his spouse Joanna were removed from the “Bulgarian Forest” in Israel. However,

the survival of Jews from the Old Kingdom, the People’s Court and the “Revival Process” continued to provide arguments for the other side. Parliamentary debates in Sofia still pointed out the presence of protests in 1943 compared to the time of the “Revival Process” of 1984–1985. It also emphasises how the People’s Court convicted D. Peshev and his merits for saving the Jews were hidden for decades. His figure began to be associated with democracy and humanism, and this was achieved, in the words of N. Ragaru, through a “slight distortion of the facts”. At the same time, being tried by the People’s Court, in the words of the French historian, “the conservative politician perfectly embodies the narrative of the past adopted by anti-communist politicians and intellectuals.”

Probably, there are already people who see in N. Ragaru’s book some almost extreme left-wing criticism directed against the polished image of pre-communist tsarist Bulgaria. However, one has to say that they are mistaken. The French researcher does not pay attention to how the People’s Court, and especially its I and II chambers, were encroachments on the concepts of independent and impartial justice. The reader can also learn how Georgi Dimitrov in a “close dialogue” with Stalin determined the sentences “before and above the court hearings”. The author does not miss the sentences pronounced against defenders of the Jews such as D. Peshev and N. Mushanov. Even the purges in the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the judiciary since the fall of 1944 were not passed over (but not without covering up previous interventions of the authorities in judicial procedures, especially after the establishment of the personal regime of King Boris III in 1935). It clearly and in detail demonstrated how additional footage and language behind the scenes added by the Regime in Sofia in the second half of the 1960s became part of its struggle against the rehabilitation of King Boris III and the former monarchy. Alongside, in the book T. Zhivkov is everywhere a “dictator”. N. Ragaru also reports how, in a command socialist economy, extras for a film are easily secured for a pittance. She also reveals to us the concerns of cultural activists from the late 1950s – when discussing “Stars” – how Bulgarians and Germans live too peacefully in the film, as well as from the shown abundance

of food on the market from 1943. She also does not miss that while in 1945 Angel Wagenstein attributed the deportations to Germany, after 1989 he proposed a rereading, assigning an equally exceptional role to the Bulgarians.

Regarding Macedonia and the Bulgarian-Macedonian dispute, the author is sufficiently distant and balanced in her assessments. She does not miss the fact that the construction of the national state in Macedonia was so connected to the Yugoslav past that the political elites “see in the questioning of the communist canon after 1991 a danger of a rupture in the very foundations of the nation”. Conflicts with neighbours and the crisis of 2001 led to “more moderate changes in the policy toward and in the writing of history.” Even the VMRO-DPMNE narrative, notes the French historian, presents the resistance and the liberation of Skopje in a way that is close to that of communist historians in Yugoslavia. During the authoritarian regime of Nikola Gruevski, the suffering of the local Jews began to become a metaphor for Macedonian suffering itself. The Jews, who in Yugoslav communist times were simply “victims of fascist terror” and participants in the anti-fascist struggle, are now retroactively nationalised as Macedonian Jews. Moreover, the author does not keep silent even about the favourite topics of those who defend the Bulgarian narrative about innocence. She emphasises the absence of solidarity among the local population in Macedonia towards their Jewish fellow citizens as well as the justifications in the Yugoslav Macedonian historiography for the speed of the Bulgarian authorities in the arrests. The reader can also learn how the Macedonian public discourse around the persecution of the Jews is focused on the claims of the collective innocence of the Macedonians, leaving only for the narrow circle of specialists the cases of the reluctance of some Macedonian partisan units to accept Jews fleeing deportations. Perhaps one should have started with the author’s remark that in 1944 “the Macedonian nation was officially recognised for the first time and the literary standardization of the Macedonian language began”, as well as the silence in the Macedonian historiography of identity uncertainties and the presence of Bulgarian identity in the past. Both Bulgarian and Yugoslav Jews, however, have been forced over the decades to adjust their

memories according to national moulds (Bulgarian and Yugoslav/Macedonian).

This impartiality ranks the author among several foreign specialists on Bulgarian studies who, when giving assessments and formulating these, are not influenced by the divisions left and right, as well as by positions related to the time before and after September 9, 1944. We can say that she stands to authors such as Frederick Chary (“I did not say that the Communist Party saved the Jews, but I did not give credit for it to the King either.”) and Mary Newberger (looks at the “community of Bulgarian-German interests” as a factor that certainly contributed to “partial cooperation in the Nazi “Final Solution”). What N. Ragaru presents is indeed a book written at the level of the best achievements of the last ten years in historiography, in the social sciences and humanities, in things that are related to achievements in fields such as archives, narratives, policies of memory etc. Finally, I do not want to miss the translators Antoaneta Koleva and Rumen Avramov, thanks to whose efforts and professionalism this necessary book is now available to the Bulgarian reader.

The French historian is not unaware of the difficult path to the recognition of responsibility.

It is no coincidence that right at the beginning of the book we read about Boyko Borisov’s visit to Skopje on March 12, 2018, and Sofia’s assumption of this responsibility, which did not happen then. She also reminds us that on July 16, 1992, French President François Mitterrand attended for the first time a commemoration dedicated to the 50th anniversary of the “liftings” of 12,884 Jews from the Velodrome d’Ivres without making a speech. But only three years later, his successor Jacques Chirac recognised the role of the French state in the persecution of the Jews. No matter how different the cases of the collaborating Vichy regime in occupied France and Reich-allied Bulgaria are, there are some points of contact in the commemorations in both countries. The complexity, politically, legally and morally, of the Bulgarian state is increasing due to its complicity, which is irrefutably proven in this book, in the form of the Bulgarian police in close coordination with the Bulgarian army and occupation authorities, in the “lifting”, detention in temporary camps, the transportation and handing over to the Nazis of 11,343 Jews who later died in Treblinka.

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