

PERCEPTIONS OF THE RESCUE OF THE JEWS AND THE HOLOCAUST IN BULGARIA TODAY¹

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"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.

Abstract

Over the last 20 years the perception of the Holocaust in Bulgarian society, including by various historians, is perhaps one of the most complex subjects in the national public space, and even beyond. The lack of consensus regarding the assessment and perception, as well as in the presentation and interpretation of historical facts, i.e. of the stories about what happened and what did NOT happen, prevents a structured history of the events from 1940 to 1944 in the Kingdom of Bulgaria. In various versions, that are often diametrically opposed, the persecution of Jews is presented using a hybrid mixture of facts from Bulgarian history of the same period (political, military, economic relations with Germany and Italy, the partisan resistance movement and relations with Soviet Russia, the specifics of political parties and political life in Bulgaria, actions of the Royal Palace and the Parliament), which either have nothing to do with the so-called 'Jewish question' or are only indirectly related to it. False theories of the 'salvation of the Jews' continue to be fabricated from this hybrid mixture of facts into an amalgam, which has many followers who believe these historical legends and myths over the past two decades.

In this article I will look at some of these recent theories and discuss the reasons for their spread and, possible motives for the persistent desire within certain circles to impose on society these "alternate" interpretations of the salvation of the Jews.

Key words: *Holocaust, Jews, deportation, rescue, memory, interpretation, labour camp, Law for the Protection of the Nation*

WAS THERE A HOLOCAUST IN BULGARIA?

The very term *Holocaust* provokes resistance and disagreement among many, when it comes to the fate of the Jews in Kingdom of Bulgaria during the period 1940-1944. After 1944, this term *Holocaust* was carefully avoided in the Bulgarian historiography. Immediately after the events of

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September 1944, when the Red Army entered Bulgaria, a politically pragmatic and socially acceptable version of the historical events was concocted reflecting Bulgaria's efforts to eradicate the stain of its four-year alliance with Nazi Germany. The survival of 48,000 Jews within the old borders of the Kingdom of Bulgaria was an argument by which the Bulgarian delegation tried to influence the negotiations at the 1947 Paris Conference, which was determining the status of the individual states that cooperated with Nazi Germany. The term '*Holocaust*' came into socio-historical use in Bulgaria only after 1989, when, along with attempts rewrite contemporary Bulgarian history, the facts and circumstances surrounding the fate and persecution of Jews were reconsidered.

It must be acknowledged that the concept of the *Holocaust* is somewhat confusing when it comes to the treatment of Jews in the Kingdom of Bulgaria because, as Michael Berenbaum points out, "at the same time within the Kingdom of Bulgaria some Jews were saved, others - persecuted, and others - deported and destroyed."³ If the literal meaning of the word '*Holocaust*' is applied (from ancient Greek - destruction by complete incineration), then this tragic event has happened only to Jews in the territories that were occupied by Bulgaria - Macedonia and part of northern Greece. However, the broader understanding of the *Holocaust* saw it as a process whereby Jewish civil rights were first destroyed, then Jewish property was confiscated, Jewish cultural and architectural heritage liquidated, and finally the annihilation of the Jews themselves. While the liquidation physically destroyed 12,000 of the 60,000 Jews within the Kingdom of Bulgaria after 1941, that is 20% 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 of the Holocaust Museum in Skopje in 2012, in memory of the 7,000 Macedonian Jews exterminated in Treblinka, became an occasion for heated debates about the role of the Bulgarian state in this tragic episode and even aggravated political relations between Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia.

In the same context, '*deportation*' is another controversial term. According to the international rules of law, it means the forcible transfer of certain groups of the population from their place of residence to another country, usually to places of forced isolation. Undoubtedly, this is exactly what happened within the Kingdom of Bulgaria, when 7,000 Jews from Macedonia and 4,000 from northern Greece were deported to Treblinka and Auschwitz.

THE STRATEGY OF FABRICATING A "RESCUE TERMINOLOGY"

During the last twenty years a new terminology has been created in order to defend the lack of complicity of the Bulgarian state in those actions perpetrated by the Bulgarian administrative bodies, army and police in 1943. The term '*administered territories*' was invented to replace the term '*occupied territories*' applied in 1941 to the parts of of the former Yugoslavia (present-day

³ Michael Berenbaum, "The Jews in Macedonia during WWII"

Northern Macedonia and a small part of Serbia) and parts of northern Greece that were now subsumed into the Kingdom of Bulgaria. The doctrine positing the innocence of the Bulgarian state in the deportations of Jews has been scientifically refuted in many publications including the study of Dr. Zdravka Krasteva "Legal Aspects of the State Anti-Jewish Policy in the Kingdom of Bulgaria (1940-1944)",⁴ as well as arguments in books and publications of Dr. Albena Taneva⁵, Rumen Avramov⁶, etc. They prove not only that the Bulgarian state seized these territories, but also that it was the Bulgarian army and police that deported the 11,343 Jews to their extermination. In the case of the Macedonian Jews, they were deported from 'occupied territories' by the Kingdom of Bulgaria according to some interpretations, and 'administered territories' according to others. On the other hand the 4,000 Jews from northern Greece which was also subsumed into the Kingdom of Bulgaria, were deported first to intermediate camps in Gorna Jumaya or Lom which were located within the old borders of the Kingdom of Bulgaria, and from where they were then transported through Austria to concentration camps in occupied Poland.

Over the last twenty years, the policy of denial has degenerated into unacceptable interpretations of these tragic facts, some of which have gained official recognition and deserve to be mentioned.

- One such interpretation is the thesis of Dyanko Markov, former representative of the Union of Bulgarian National Legions, which was a fascist organization before the war, and after 1989 one of the flag wavers of anti-communism. Markov was convicted in 1947 by the communist authorities for pro-fascist activities and spent some time in an internment camp. In 2000, he delivered a speech before the National Assembly as an elected Member of Parliament (MP) of the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) stating that "the deportation of a hostile (Jewish) population from Macedonia and northern Greece by Bulgarian authorities was legal and not a crime". His statement provoked strong protests from all of the Jewish organizations in Bulgaria as well as from abroad. The UDF disavowed his declarations, but the statement continued to be defended by segments of the Bulgarian right. Thus, in 2014 Member of European Parliament (MEP) Andrey Kovachev from the Citizen for European Development of Bulgaria Party (GERB) organized a special session in the European Parliament in honour of Markov, during which he was presented as a 'fighter against communism'. Open sympathy for Dyanko Markov was also shown by other political parties including members of the country's coalition government. In 2018 the former Union of Bulgarian National Legionnaire and creator of the doctrine of "legal deportation of the hostile Jewish population" was awarded a medal from the Ministry of Defense by Minister Krassimir Karakachanov, a representative of the far-right Bulgarian Macedonian Revolutionary Organizationparty (VRMO), a coalition partner of GERB in the government of former Prime Minister Boyko Borisov for four years⁷.

⁴ Dr. Zdravka Krasteva "Legal Aspects of the State Anti-Jewish Policy in the Kingdom of Bulgaria (1940-1944)" ed. Ecstasy, Berlin 2018

⁵ Dr. Albena Taneva, "Гласове в защита на гражданското общество", изд. „ГАЛ-ИКО“, 2002

⁶ Rumen Avramov, "Спасение и падение", изд. „Св.Климент Охридски“, 2012

⁷ GERB lost as a party the last parliamentary elections in October 2021, and VMRO only achieved of 3.64% of the votes, denying it entry into the parliament.

- After 2008, the GERB government continued the efforts of the party of the former crown prince and heir to the Bulgarian throne, Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha to deny the historical responsibility and any guilt of Kingdom of Bulgaria in the deportation of the almost 12,000 Jews from northern Greece and Macedonia. This was expressed not only in personal statements by former Prime Minister Boyko Borisov, Foreign Affairs Minister Ekaterina Zaharieva, and Defence Minister Krasimir Karakachanov among others, but also by ordering governmental sponsored books, articles, exhibitions, TV shows, translations of propaganda texts in English and Spanish, and organized tours abroad, etc. Gradually and by efforts not only of governmental bodies, but also with the complicity of some academic institutions such as the Bulgarian Academy of Science (BAS), some professors from Sofia University, the New Bulgarian University (NBU) and the University of the City of Veliko Tarnovo (VTU), the government imposed the thesis of the complete and unconditional rescue of the 48,000 Jews in Bulgaria. This rescue was accomplished with the participation of all segments of the social pyramid, starting with the Bulgarian King Boris III, along with the ministers of his last government, the MPs and finally - the Bulgarian people.

Apart from the fact that this social pyramid was, and remains upside down, it also includes completely irrelevant elements from a historical point of view. This upside down pyramid has been refuted not only by Jewish organizations, the Yad Vashem Holocaust Research Centres in Israel, the Holocaust Museum in Washington, but also by a number of researchers in Bulgaria, Israel, France, etc. in their publications and books⁸. In their works and publications, these researcher unanimously acknowledge several particularly circumstances.

IMPORTANT FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE RESCUE OF THE MAJORITY OF THE JEWISH POPULATION IN BULGARIA FROM THE ‘FINAL SOLUTION’

This Bulgarian ‘final solution’ was decided by Prime Minister Bogdan Filov and German Minister of Foreign Affairs von Ribbentrop.⁹ They agreed on the deportation of the Jewish population from the Bulgarian territories, and this was supported and consented to by King Boris III for up to 25,000 ‘undesirable’ Jews.

The contributing factors to the rescue of the Jews were the following:

- The relatively low level of anti-Semitism among the Bulgarian population, offered the Jews the opportunity for help from their Bulgarian fellow citizens.
- There was a general lack of interest of a large part of society in the ‘final solution’. 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 Croatian Jews

⁸ Nikolay Poppetrov, Albena Taneva, Zdravka Krasteva, Angel Chorapchiev, Rumens Avramov, Nadia Danova, Nadège Ragaru, prof. Dalia Offer and many others.

⁹ This was outlined in the correspondence and documents during the period August-September 1942 preserved in the Bulgarian National archives.

were not spared, given the sharp anti-Semitic attitude of the Croatian population, while the Bulgarian Jews had much better chances.

- The strong integration of the Bulgarian Jewish population in the national social and professional life, which led to personal ties that offered the protection by professional organizations with Bulgarians and Jewish members (artisans and merchants, lawyers, writers). They were among the first to react sharply against the Protection of the Nation Act, which deprived their Jewish colleagues of their professional rights.
- A remarkable level of religious tolerance in Bulgaria, which had led to peaceful coexistence and even friendly relations between different religious groups. The role of the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, the most consistent defender of the Jews throughout 1940-1944, is widely known. Its leaders did not hesitate to defend the Jews but also to oppose the instruments of the state and the King himself, with the resulting positive consequences.
- The role of individual politicians and prominent public figures such as the majority MP Dimitar Peshev, the industrialist Atanas Burov, Ekaterina Karavelova the wife of former Prime Minister Petko Karavelov, and others who unhesitatingly used their personal connections and authority to prevent the deportation of the Jews.
- And finally, the active role of the Jews themselves, who, thanks to their integration in Bulgarian society, had the capacity and resources to influence events, albeit to a limited extent.

RESCUE OR SURVIVAL?

This question is a small part of the terminology war when discussing the fate of the Bulgarian Jews during the period 1940-1944. However, the disputes are extreme and the positions of the disagreement are irreconcilable. On the one hand, a national myth is being put forth about a universal effort to save the Jews, however, this myth has one significant drawback. Namely – it does not answer the question: From whom was it necessary to save the Jews? Additional contradictions arise, namely:

- The Law on the Protection of the Nation was passed in 1940, when Bulgaria had not yet joined the Axis, and practically no political pressure was being put on the government. On the contrary, in September 1940, through an official act by Nazi Germany, Bulgaria received as a generous gift, Southern Dobruja, which comprises the northwest portion of contemporary Bulgaria. In March-April 1941, shortly after the Kingdom of Bulgaria joined the Fascist-Nazi coalition Bulgaria received Macedonia, a small part of Serbia, and northern Greece.
- Contrary to the belief that the Germans insisted on "purging Bulgaria of Jews", the demands were rather the reverse: Bogdan Filov's government initiated correspondence with von Ribbentrop for a 'purging' plan (*Jüdenrein*). The plan called for the Bulgarian government to pay Germany 100 Reichmarks per deported Jew. Transportation was to be provided by Bulgarian Railways (BDZ), with logistics services by the Ministry of Interior, Commissariat for

Jewish Affairs, and the Royal Touristic Company "Balkan". The necessary funds were obtained from the sale of Jewish owned, who in fact paid for their OWN destruction.

- Despite being a Nazi ally, there were practically no German troops in Bulgaria except for those who transited in the direction of Greece. They received a warm, friendly welcome from the Bulgarian population and authorities. After this troop transit to Greece, the German representation was reduced to a small number of observers and diplomats, as well as advisers with special functions to the Bulgarian authorities, such as the Gestapo representative Hoffmann or the deportation consultant von Daneken, sent from Berlin as supervisor.

The Bulgarian official policy towards the Jews was by no means coercion, but a voluntary synchronicity with the official policy of Nazi Germany, and in some cases even predated it, as was the case with the Law for the Protection of the Nation of 1940.

From the opposite side, when considering these same historical events, we see controversial arguments emerging in Bulgaria. Bulgarian society, which for many years identified with the thesis *'We are all saviours of the Jews'*, when faced with the real facts prefers to reject them and interpretes them instead as a virulent attack against the sacred myth of the unique salvation of the Bulgarian Jews.

The result is the fabrication of a sub-mythology, which leads to the creation of misinterpretations and facts about the story of rescue/survival. Here are a few examples.

THE ROLE OF DIMITAR PESHEV

It is paradoxical that the icon of salvation, its acclaimed champion and hero, recognized as 'The Righteous Among the Nations' by the State of Israel in 1973, the dissident MP from the ruling majority of King Boris III and Bogdan Filov, Dimitar Peshev is in a sense the first victim in the distorted narrative of the fate of the Jews.

Historiography obsessively repeats the story of his famous letter of March 17, 1943 in defence of the Jews, in which Peshev added in his own handwriting the names of 42 deputies and sent it to the Prime Minister and the Chairman of the National Assembly. The significance of his intervention in the turbulent events of early March 1943 is highly questionable, given the facts. Namely, that on March 4th the Jews from Northern Greece were 'gathered' to be transported to the concentration camps via Bulgaria, on March 9th the Macedonian Jews were taken to the Monopole warehouses in Skopje to be deported by the end of March on three BDZ transports to Treblinka. After protests by Bulgarian citizens in Kyustendil and Plovdiv, the planned deportation of 8,000 Bulgarian Jews on March 10th, was postponed indefinitely. Why was it necessary for Dimitar Peshev to write an urgent, alarming letter on March 17th if, as the myth of salvation recounts, the postponed deportation of the Bulgarian Jews already occurred on March 10th. Peshev's letter only advocated for postponement of deportation of the Jews in the old borders of Bulgaria.

The answer is not complicated in the context of Peshev's overall commitment to the Bulgarian Jewish community. This commitment is far from limited to his letter, which in fact proves that he

was not in the least mistaken of the intentions of the Bulgarian state and did not think at all that salvation of the Jews had already taken place. As with other liberal jurists, Dimitar Peshev consistently defended positions rejecting anti-semitism. For example, the Prosecutor General, Assen Golyubov, in 1933 demanded sentences for members of the fascist organization "Rodna Zashchita", later renamed the Union of Bulgarian National Legions, including in the indictment "the act of anti-Semitism". Peshev, in his position as Minister of Justice (1935-1936) and later as a private attorney often defended Jews against antisemitic acts. For example, in this capacity he acted as defense attorney in the 1936 defamation case by Jacques Aseov, an influential Jewish tobacco magnate and financier and owner of the largest Bulgarian tobacco company *Balkantabak*, against Yanaki Pochekanov, the owner of the Dupnitsa newspaper *Polet*. Encouraged by a group of radical right-wing anti-Semites, Pochekanov was fighting a defamatory war against Aseov, not sparing anti-Semitic arguments. At the broadly publicized trial held in the regional tobacco producing center of Kyustendil, Peshev explicitly emphasized the anti-Semitic nature of the campaign against Aseov. Aseov ultimately won the case and Pochekanov was convicted. This trial outlines two antagonistic camps in Bulgarian society of that time: an opportunistic union of the far-right and some left-wing elements (Pochekanov was a communist), united by anti-Semitic rhetoric, against a liberal community of industrialists and public figures led by Dimitar Peshev.

Another striking episode was Peshev's personal opposition in October 1942 to the draft law against speculation by 'foreign elements' personally submitted by King Boris III to the National Assembly. Since the draft law was submitted by the King, the MPs were required to prepare a response in which they must either approve or reject the proposed law. Dimitar Peshev expressed his wish to participate in compiling the response. The State Archives Agency preserved the original text in support of the King's proposal prepared by the majority, on which Peshev has handwritten his remarks and corrections in many places. He was adamant that such a law was repressive, as the current legislation provided protection from speculators, and did not hide his fear that the law proposed by the King would be directly aimed against the Jews. Despite his intervention, the law was quickly approved by the King's Parliamentary majority, and as early as November 1942 the first arrests of prominent Jewish industrialists were made, and only months later some were convicted of serious sentences, including the death penalty.

Due to the existing selectivity in historiography in the public discourse, the full picture of Dimitar Peshev's resistance and his consistent behaviour supporting the Jews during the decade 1933-1943 with the rise of fascism in Bulgaria, remains hidden from the Bulgarian society. The most probable reason for this is the intention to obscure the role of the King in the persecution of the Jews, who is arbitrarily and unjustifiably placed by his supporters at the top of the pyramid of salvation.

THE FACTS AND 'ALTERNATIVE FACTS'

Until November 10, 1989 there was a fairly acceptable consensus in Bulgaria about the rescue of the Jews, attributing it to the Bulgarian people. Sporadic attempts by the Communist Party and some of its leaders, such as Todor Zhivkov, to take historical credit, were not taken seriously even

among communists, much less abroad. Significantly, the honorary list of the ‘The Righteous Among Nations’ in Yad Vashem does not include a single Bulgarian communist functionary.

This reading has changed significantly since 1989, especially after the rehabilitation of various politicians and public figures, some of whom were on trial for persecuting Jews. Efforts by pro-monarchist circles to rewrite this history became a goal after the political return to Bulgaria of King Boris III's son Simeon, and the establishment of his National Movement Simeon Second (NMSS) party. The NMSS won the 2001 Parliamentary elections and Simeon became prime minister. During his term we began to see a concerted public relations campaign in Bulgaria and abroad to enhance the image of King Boris III as the saviour of the Jews. This thesis was sceptically received by the international community and completely rejected by the state of Israel, as well as by the international Holocaust research centres. However, both the government of Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha and his GERB political successors, continued to fabricate evidence in the monarchy's defence. I will present some of this ‘evidence’ below.

THE REVOKED RESCUE VISAS

Around 2017, a fictional version of ‘salvation through visas’ was created, which stated that about 15,000 European Jews (20,000 according to a statement by Prime Minister Boyko Borisov) were rescued by the Bulgarian government of Bogdan Filov after having been issued transit visas to leave Bulgaria via Turkey, and from there to Palestine. This ‘fact’ was mentioned not only in publications produced by pro-monarchist circles, but was also officially quoted by the Bulgarian Foreign Minister Zaharieva and by Prime Minister Boyko Borisov himself.

A detailed inspection of historical documents established the following:

The visas in question were indeed requested through the Swiss Red Cross by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with Minister Shishmanov, according to lists provided by the Geneva-based Jewish Agency. However, no trace of Jewish emigrants with such visas have been found anywhere, nor transport documents that they passed from Bulgaria. I personally participated in a thorough inspection of the Red Cross archives of this period that are housed in the Swiss Ministry of Foreign Affairs, together with a professor of history at the University of Lausanne and an expert from the Swiss Archives Directorate. The results of this inspection completely disproved this myth of ‘salvation through visas’. Indeed, in the period from March to the end of 1942 the Jewish Agency tried, with the cooperation of the Red Cross, to transit through Bulgaria a number of Jews, mostly minors, from Hungary, Croatia and Romania in an attempt to avoid having them shipped to concentration camps. In some cases, the Bulgarian Foreign Ministry granted transit permits, which it then systematically CANCELLED without explanation, most likely after consultations with Berlin.. Dozens of such annulments issued by the embassy in Bern or directly by the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Denominations were found in the Swiss archives. Furthermore, our team found that the visa lists contained the same names, repeated many times, i.e. a new attempts were made after each cancellation. Checking these lists proved relatively simple because they were only 75 names, with indication of the nationality and ages of the Jews. The number 75 was chosen not randomly, but

reflected the number of seats in one BDZ passenger wagon with which the Jews were to be transported. Only one confirmation of such transport of 75 Jewish minors who transited Bulgaria to the Turkish border was found in the archives.. The record of their crossing states that two of them were detained by the German border patrol between Bulgaria and Turkey because they were over 16 years of age. They were immediately sent to Auschwitz, for which a report was attached to the border crossing documentation found in archives.

These documents have not yet been published in Bulgaria, thus the legend of ‘salvation through visas’ continues to be used, although it is obviously contrary to the facts.

DEPORTATION AND LABOUR CAMPS AS ‘SALVATION’

After the failure of Alexander Belev's, Director of the Commissariat for Jewish Affairs, initial plan to deport 20,000 Jews to Poland and the King's agreement to deport of 25,000 ‘undesirable Jews’ with economic and social influence, Bogdan Filov's government assigned a new strategy to the Commissariat. This strategy was centered around internment of the Jewish population already forced into the ghettos in the big cities, scattering them to small settlements, mainly in northern Bulgaria close to deportation centres such as the ports of the Danube. By doing this it was anticipated that the Jews would not benefit from the social support from their hometowns (Sofia, Plovdiv, Kyustendil, Dupnitsa, etc.), where the Jewish population was highly integrated and could rely on the support of their fellow Bulgarians. The plan was carried out in stages and in complete secrecy. The Jews of Sofia were gathered at the train station at 11 o'clock in the evening, away from curious witnesses, and were deported to northern Bulgaria on the night of May 27, 1943.¹⁰

At the deportation sites the Jews were placed in terrible conditions, accommodated in houses and barracks in the Roma and Turkish neighbourhoods, without the right to move and without any means of subsistence or household goods. They lived in these conditions until the Red Army entered Bulgaria in September, 1944. After this they began their chaotic return home, which they found occupied and their belongings robbed. They did not have any cash, as their bank accounts were blocked as early as 1941 and subsequently confiscated in favour of the Commissariat for Jewish Affairs, and all money and valuables were also seized. The restoration of their rights and property proved to be long and complicated process, significantly hampered by the new rules introduced by the communist government, which did not pay much attention to their experiences and introduced new restrictive rules on private property valid for the entire Bulgarian population. It is for this reason that the vast majority of Bulgarian Jews took advantage of the opportunity provided by the Jewish Agency to leave their Bulgaria homeland in the late 1940s and emigrate to the historical Jewish homeland of Palestine, even before the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.

In the last three years, publications have appeared coming from the aforementioned right wing circles rewriting the history of salvation, and claiming that the expulsion of Jews from their home

¹⁰ My family archive includes the original order in Bulgarian from the Commissariat for my parents and I to report on this date.

cities and their deportation to ghettos were conscious salvation measures taken by the Bulgarian authorities for the explicit purpose of hiding the Jews. However, these publications do not explain who the Jews were supposed to be hiding from, since the instrument of their displacement and economic devastation was the same Commissariat for Jewish Affairs that in March 1943 deported 11,343 Jews to Treblinka and Auschwitz.

Similar attributions about the forced labour camps for Jewish men, that operated from May 1942 to September 1944, have also appeared in recent years. There have been publications, books and exhibitions suggesting that these camps, through which more than 15,000 Jewish men between the ages of 20 and 45 passed, were places to hide the Jews, and were a rescue strategy devised by the Bulgarian authorities and by the army. This thesis was set out even in a publication of the Bulgarian edition of Deutsche Welle, dated January 7, 2012, in the Bulgarian newspaper "Trud", as well as in a specially organized exhibition in 2018 in Plovdiv, opened by former Deputy Prime Minister in the GERB government Valeri Simeonov in the presence of former Prime Minister Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha. This false narrative also finds a place in a book published in 2021 by the ex-military officer Dimitar Nedyalkov, which, according to an official statement of the Ministry of Defence, was not only sponsored and supported by the Ministry, but also translated into English as propaganda material for abroad.

In all these efforts, elementary facts have been neglected and selectively omitted, as well as long-standing research, including by Yad Vashem's Angel Chorapchiev's research on Bulgarian labour camps.

Ever since the 1920s when Prime Minister Alexander Stamboliiski introduced the Labour Service into the Bulgarian army, Jewish men by law were mobilized for military service only in compulsory labour groups and for 2 years were obliged to participate in construction works such as road construction, etc. Despite this discriminatory treatment by the Bulgarian military of Jewish men since they could not have weapons and could not be promoted to ranks, they were considered to be part of the Bulgarian army and provided with the appropriate uniforms and the resulting rights and obligations. The supporters of the "Salvation of the Jews from the Army" narrative often use material from this period that lasted until October 1941, including photos taken during inspections by the Red Cross and other human rights organizations from Geneva, to prove the good treatment of the Jews. However, after the Law for the Protection of the Nation, came into force on August 12, 1941, Ministerial Decree No. 53 was issued and signed by all the governmental ministers, requiring removing Jewish labourers from the army, stripping them of military uniforms and the right to be commanders of work groups (to be replaced by Bulgarian officers) and placing them under special restrictions. All the Jewish labourers were obliged to wear a yellow star of David patch, were housed in tent camps near the sites and in complete isolation from the outside world. The labourer groups were formed by "recruiting" Jewish men interned in the Jewish ghettos. They worked on the most difficult construction sites, mainly road construction, to realize King Boris III's ambition to create a large strategic road network in Bulgaria to turn it into a major military centre in the Balkans. The conditions in these camps were severe, as documented in many archival materials,

including photographs and they continued to operate until September 1944. It is not surprising that this type of forced labour was recognized by post war Germany on an equal footing with the concentration camps. At the insistence of the Claims Conference and negotiations between the state of Israel and Germany, in the late 1990's the survivors of these labour camps were paid compensation.

Final thoughts

The bias, not only in Bulgaria but also in other European countries, to the creation of myths and legends about the salvation of the Jews in Europe during the Holocaust is understandable. To a large extent, it reflects a desire to establish moral values that will serve as an example for future generations. Such examples exist in many places in Europe; they are venerated in Bulgaria as well. The righteous images and deeds of personalities such as Dimitar Peshev, of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church bishops Kiril and Stefan, and of hundreds of ordinary Bulgarians are sufficient grounds for pride of the Bulgarian people and the Bulgarian state. However, the fabrication of fictional narratives, characters, facts and "events", which in the last two decades, especially after the political return of Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha to Bulgaria, creates a parallel false historical reality and hides the affirmation of the cases of real heroism during one of the darkest pages in modern Bulgarian history. It is this affirmation that should be held up as the shining example for future generations.

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