

III

REVIEWS

PRIKAZI

NADÈGE RAGARU, AND SO THE BULGARIAN JEWS WERE SAVED...
RESEARCHING, RETELLING, AND REMEMBERING THE HOLOCAUST
IN BULGARIA, PARIS: PRESSES DE SCIENCES PO, 2020.

Zona Zarić and Ivica Mladenović

The history of the Jewish communities in the Balkans during the Second World War remains poorly addressed in the historiography – as compared to that of Jews in western and central Europe, as well as in the former USSR. Since the end of socialism, anti-Jewish persecutions in Croatia and Serbia have been documented through a series of major pieces of work. In the cases of the Republic of North Macedonia and Greece, however, the destruction of the Jews has long remained in the shadows. In Greece, the close temporal and historical links between World War Two and the civil war (1946-1949), and the controversies associated with the elucidation of these sensitive events were among the factors that account for the limited number of works dedicated to the predicament of Jewish communities until the 1990s – aside from key testimonies and writings by Holocaust survivors, especially in the immediate aftermath of the world conflict.

Since the 1990s, scholarship on the wartime occupation of Greece has significantly expanded, although a majority of the works have focused on German occupation zone, and, to a much lesser extent, on the Italian occupation

zone. Several important monographs have addressed the fate of Jews in occupied Greece.¹ Yet most of them have focused on the major sephardic metropolis of Salonica, Athens and Greek islands.² By contrast, researches

1 Giorgos Antoniou and A. Dirk Moses (eds.), *The Holocaust in Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Odette Vasson Vassard, *Des Sépharades aux Juifs grecs. Histoire, mémoire et identité* (Paris: Ed. Le Manuscrit, 2019); Steven B. Bowman, *The Agony of Greek Jews, 1940–1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); Rena Molho et al., *Der Holocaust der griechischen Juden: Studien zur Geschichte und Erinnerung* (Bonn: Dietz, 2016); Rika Benveniste (ed.), *The Greek Jewry during the Occupation* (Thessaloniki: Vantias, 1998) (in Greek).

2 Marc Mazower, *Salonica, City of Ghosts: Christians, Muslims and Jews, 1430–1950* (London: HarpersCollins, 2004); Steven Bowman, *The Holocaust in Salonika: Eyewitness Accounts* (New York: Sephardic House & Bloch Publishing Co, 2002); Daniel Carpi, “A New approach for Some Episodes in the History of Jews In Salonika during the Holocaust: Memory, Myth and Documentation,” in: Minna Rozen, ed., *The Last Ottoman Century and Beyond: The Jews in Turkey and in the Balkans, 1808-1945* (Tel Aviv: TAU Press, 2002), 259-289; Leon Saltiel, “Dehumanizing the Dead: The Destruction of Thessaloniki’s

dedicated to the Bulgarian occupation zone are sparse.³ In the case of the North Republic of Macedonia, the sheer extent of the destruction of Jews (about 98% of the community) has left few witnesses who might have recounted the predicament they experienced.⁴ Overall, the limited body of literature on the territories of Yugoslavia (Vardar Macedonia and Pirot) and Greece (Western Thrace and Eastern Macedonia) may have contributed to the resilience of a dominant representation of Bulgaria's policies towards Jews during World War Two – that of a country which acted as 'a savior of the Jews', as Hannah Arendt's eulogistic remarks in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963) attest.

For years, scholars and average citizens alike have not succeeded in reconstructing a history of the Jewish community of the Balkans that takes into account all the parties involved. Against this background, the recent of publication by Prof. Dr. Nadège Ragaru, a historian and political scientist at Sciences Po Paris (France), who specializes in the history and historiography of the Holocaust, as well as the historical sociology

of socialism in Southeast Europe, of a book titled "*And So the Bulgarian Jews were saved...? Researching, Retelling, and Remembering the Holocaust in Bulgaria*," appears timely. This work represents a major contribution to our understanding of the social production of knowledge about the Holocaust in Bulgaria, both domestically and internationally.

One of the main contributions of Nadège Ragaru's research lies in the fact that it completes what has until now remained a fragmented "puzzle", and made it impossible to offer a transnational and comparative analysis of the study, transmission and remembrance of the Holocaust in Southeast Europe. This observation applies to other historical configurations: in the case of the destruction of Yugoslavia, for example, research has focused so much on the Croatian and Serbian elites that it has considerably simplified the discussion. However, there are phenomena – including the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina – that would have been better understood if the role of the elites in Slovenia, Macedonia, Montenegro and Kosovo had been reincorporated into the analysis. This would have allowed the wider public to enter these subjects in a less problematic way, and read the history of this recent and polarizing period from a more enriching and less agonizing angle in these countries.

The Bulgarian story can be summarized as follows: albeit allied with the Third Reich during World War Two, Bulgaria refused to deport about 48,000 Bulgarian Jews, the near totality of its Jewish community. By contrast, in the Yugoslav and Greek territories under Bulgarian occupation between 1941 and 1944, an estimated 11,343 Jews were rounded up, interned in assembly camps, and deported to Nazi-occupied Poland. In the collective imagination, however, the country's name remains associated with the image of the "rescue of the Bulgarian Jews" only. Engaging in a vast

Jewish Cemetery in the Light of New Sources," *Yad Vashem Studies* 42 (2014): 1–36; Andrew Apostolou, "The Exception of Salonika: Bystanders and Collaborators in Northern Greece," *Holocaust Genocide Studies* 14 (2000): 165–196; Rena Molho, "The Close Ties between Nationalism and Antisemitism: The Hellenization of Salonika, 1917–1918," *Jahrbuch für Antisemitismusforschung* 24 (2015): 217–228.

3 Vasilis Ritzaleos, "The Fate of the Real Estate of Jews in Kavala before Deportation to Poland in March 1943," in: Nik. V. Roudometof (ed.), *Kavala and the Balkans. Kavala and Thrace* (Kavala: Tomos, 2012), 751–770 (in Greek).

4 Key exceptions include Aleksandar Matkovski, *Tragedijata na Evreite od Makedonija*, Skopje: Kultura, 1962; Zhamila Kolonomos et Vera Veskovic & Vangeli (eds.), *Evreite vo Makedonija vo Vtorata svetska vojna (1941-1945)*. *Zbornik na dokumenti*, Skopje, MANU, 1986.

documentary investigation, Ragaru purports to trace the origins of this historical narrative, its circulations in time and space, and the ways it has been perpetuated up until today. She explains why only one facet of a complex and contradictory past was given priority for transmission; how the deportations, without being obliterated, became secondary in public discourse, museums, history books and the arts; how the writing of the persecutions against the Jews in Bulgaria became hostage to the Cold War and then to the political and commemorative struggles of the post-communist period in the Balkans and beyond.

The book is structured in an introduction, a conclusion, appendices and five constitutive chapters that unravel congruently: 1. The judicial production of a narrative of anti-Jewish persecutions in the final months of the war; 2. The negotiation of an Eastern European way of remembering these events in the late 1950s, at the time of the making of a Bulgarian-East German feature film, *Sterne/Zvezdi*, dedicated to the deportations of the Jews from northern Greece; 3. The mysterious travels of a 1943 visual deportation archive from 1944 up until the end of the Cold War; 4. The memorial controversies of the post-1989 period; 5. And, finally, transnational mobilizations and the institutionalization of a space of dissensus. Profoundly original in its conception as in its writing, this historical investigation is an exemplary reflection on the silences of the past.

The facts are, as always, both simple and complicated. The official Bulgarian discourse has always been to say that Bulgaria was the only country where society stood up against the deportations. This statement, which is not entirely untrue, does present some difficulties. First of all, there were indeed protests from several segments of society against the deportation of the Bulgarian Jews (members of the political elite,

prominent figures, the leadership of the Orthodox Church). However, these initiatives cannot be attributed to the Bulgarian society as a whole. In addition, these protests in 1943 were not the only factor, which led the Bulgarian authorities to cancel deportation orders for the Bulgarian Jews and postpone their arrests. Of notable importance were the military losses of the Reich on the eastern front. The battle of Stalingrad, in particular, suggested that the military balance in the world conflict was gradually shifting. Later attempts by the Bulgarian Commissariat for Jewish Affairs to deport the Bulgarian Jews failed to gain support from the Bulgarian government and the king.

Moreover, as Ragaru points out, the word “rescue” poses a real problem, because the role of the Jews in their own survival has been eluded. As an example, in the accounts given in Bulgaria, great prominence is given to the March 1943 petition signed by 43 parliamentarians of the National Assembly, upon an initiative by vice-president of the Assembly, Dimitar Peshev. This presentation of factuality omits the diversity of Jews who frantically searched for connections in Parliament, government, and the entourage of the king, and prompted their Bulgarian friends and relatives into action. If we read Nadège Ragaru’s book, we will learn of the complexity of what was attempted in that period, that is to say, to have the crimes judged after the world conflict, and at the same time, because a Stalinist regime had been installed, to use the vocabulary that was put in place; and this vocabulary of “rescue” omits the fact that there were not passive victims floating around, but that there were initiatives of real people trying to stay alive.

That is the difficulty this book tackles, the problematic heritage of the discourse around the words ‘rescue’ and ‘saviors’. The other difficulty is that the official Bulgarian discourse says that

there were deportations from Yugoslavia and Greece, but this was said so elusively, that is to say, not very much at all, and always in a narrative which insisted that everything that could have been done was indeed done, reverting immediately to the emphasis on the 48,000 Jews with Bulgarian citizenship, that were saved, and that it was necessary to agree to arrest, transport to Poland and exterminate 11,343 Jews from Vardar Macedonia, northern Greece and the Serbian region of Pirot. And gradually, as the years went by, the place of these 11,343 became smaller and smaller. Moreover, even if the official discourse often uses the notion of exchange and the infamous “we had no choice” when we look at the archives consulted by Nadège Ragaru, we can also observe that the reality was far more intricate, because there were individualities in the Bulgarian government who favored deportation and supported the Nazis with enthusiasm, in particular the minister of the Interior, Petar Gabrovski. And so, what the author of this book is trying to do is to reveal this complexity and balance, to talk about those who survived and those who died, and show how a public discourse of self-valorization was produced.

It is crucial at this point to emphasize that this book is primarily a book *about our common knowledge of the Holocaust*, not *about the Holocaust in Bulgaria*. From the first to the last page, we clearly see the intention of the author in not wanting to judge the facts she unveils. She describes them a little bit in each chapter, so we learn about the historical facts incrementally; and especially at the end, when we read the conclusion, we have a clear idea about what happened. It is certain that the French public, but not only, would be lost without this conclusion, which portrays the author’s interpretation of the events and not just its representation. That is why we suggest to the reader – who is not

familiar with the history of the Holocaust in Bulgaria – to read perhaps first the introduction and the conclusion, and then the following chapters of the book. The author’s entire aim is to encourage the reader to conduct an investigation alongside her by showing them the evidence she has at her disposal, but without claiming to impose her reading of the facts. Moreover, it seems to us that the approach of Ragaru was to try to encourage the reader to understand the subject by themselves and for themselves and possibly afterwards, to arrive at a synthesis which could be different from her own.

The author, who sees herself as the narrator, is not the all-knowing, but learns with the others – this is exactly the epistemic thread of Nadège Ragaru. Indeed, the research is established as if it were an investigation, since each chapter, except the chapter on the trial, is constructed as an investigation. And each time, we find something novel and important for the better understanding of the subject and to advance an investigation. To do this, the author had to spend a lot of time and energy on forms of description that help visualize, and transpose oneself into the research place, suddenly seeing and reading differently when she talks about a film, or about visual archives. A lot of time is spent describing how one goes from words to representations in order to talk about the facts, and Ragaru tries to make the protagonists heard (when she reproduces, for example, a very long parliamentary debate, which could bore some readers, but which, in fact, is fascinating because after a while, we hear them, since something of the order of the rhythm of their speech ends up intersecting).

The main hypothesis of the author was that one never knows the reality only by words and in any case, if one knows it only by words, one deprives oneself a little of the senses. So, to bring

back the senses in the words, Nadège Ragaru finds a way to incorporate seeing and listening *a minima*. Nevertheless, an important part of the introduction of the book is quite difficult to read, because it is a hard social science that requires an interpretative framework, but afterwards, when one advances in the reading, one realizes that these are also individual human stories, that appear little by little throughout the chapters, often difficult and full of contradictions. We also see the great rigor of the author in respecting each subject of the analysis. For example, she evokes communists who really believed in their ideals and who nonetheless did not act accordingly. Basically, Nadège Ragaru makes sure that each individual who appears in the book has a place, that she does not judge.

Finally, as this is a region dominated by right-wing nationalists since the fall of real socialism, it is not unusual to worry about the difficulties of a simplistic reception throughout the Balkans that would reduce the complexity of the book's argument. Knowing what is stated in the book, it is highly likely that the author would be considered by the mainstream political discourse in Bulgaria as a traitor to the Bulgarian homeland in the national discourse. In Macedonia the book would be received rather favorably, due to the fact that the author highlights the fact that there were deportations in the Bulgarian occupied areas; but at the same time, she would not be considered sufficiently pro-Macedonian, in their dominant nationalist version, since she also raises the question of the responses of the Macedonian populations to the Bulgarian policy. The dominant Macedonian discourse is to say that Macedonia was occupied and that nothing could be done. But Nadège Ragaru demonstrates the practice where the Jews were deported while there was little support by the elite and the Macedonian population and when there was

spoliation of property and sale, people nevertheless bought. So, nobody is all good or all bad.

The answer in Serbia would be more positive in the sense that the book represents a curiosity about a point of view that had not really been seen, including even a part of the readers with more nationalistic inclinations finding proof in the book that all Bulgarians are nationalists, which is not at all the intention of the author. Because, Nadège Ragaru does not talk about Bulgarian nationalists, but about a complex and particular context. In Greece, the book could be seen as an important contribution that finally mentions the fate of the Greek Jews deported from the Bulgarian occupation zone. On the other hand, there is a chapter that speaks about it in an indirect way. So, it should be seen as rather positive, with the risk that one could potentially find oneself saying that finally, the Bulgarians were all bad, which is the Greek nationalist discourse, but this is very far from the author's depiction.

Bulgaria retains the image of "national exceptionalism" that it projected during the Second World War: although allied with the Nazis, as opposed to its neighbors, the Bulgarian state saved the lives of its Jewish communities. Based on a thorough historical, documentary and archival study, Nadège Ragaru reconstructs the origin of this image and analyzes how a complex and controversial past, often marked by deportations and persecutions, became the vector of reductive representations in the official Bulgarian memory, during the Cold War and also after the fall of real socialism. In other words, she has written a book that is neither against nor with anyone, and its main ambition, which we believe is very successful, is to try to understand from the existing sources the commemorative issues, even what happened and how it was written about in relation to the Shoah in Bulgaria.

To complete this subject even further, it seems to us that it would be useful to have another book that focuses essentially and more deeply on the question

of facts, so that a reader who does not know exactly what happened can better understand the representations so meticulously analyzed in this book.