

### **Bulgaria**

In the aftermath of World War I, Bulgaria was bruised and battered. Not only was it bitter over the loss of Vardar Macedonia, but the Balkan Wars had cost it 140,000 lives, and financial losses were estimated at 90 million pounds sterling — all for naught. Bulgaria experienced a number of coups (in 1923 and again in 1934), and in 1935 King Boris III seized most of the powers of government. The sense of anger and resentment, coupled with economic hardship, served as added fuel for the extremist wing of Bulgarian nationalism. The fact that many Bulgarians now rejected all foreigners and held them responsible for the country's problems caused the antisemitic movement to thrive.

227 Oren, *Monastir*, p. 42.

228 Pass Friedenreich, *Jews of Yugoslavia*, p. 162.

229 See, for example, Oren, *Monastir*, pp. 81, 90–91, 97–98.

230 Lador-Lederer, "Jews of Croatia, 1753–1945," p. 117. See also *YIVO*, RG 348, folder 162 for a memorandum written by Lucien Wolf in January 1938, entitled "The Jewish Situation in Yugoslavia".

In 1923, 48,105 Jews were living in Bulgaria, dispersed among 33 localities. The largest community was that of the capital, Sofia, numbering 15,702 Sephardim and 1,625 Ashkenazim, followed by Plovdiv with a total of 11,180 souls. Nikopol, with 50 Jews, was at the bottom of the list.<sup>231</sup> In 1926, the population of Bulgaria as a whole totaled 5,478,441, of whom 46,565, or 0.85 percent were Jews.<sup>232</sup> Based on a survey conducted in 1926, 50.4 percent of the Jewish work force engaged in trade (including peddling); 39.42 percent were craftsmen, manufacturers, or transportation workers; 4.94 percent were members of the free professions; and the remainder worked in domestic service, farming, or various civil service positions in government offices.<sup>233</sup>

Hayim Keshales estimates that less than 30 percent of Bulgaria's Jewish community enjoyed an adequate level of income during this period and until as late as 1940; the remainder, in his view, could be defined as "poor."<sup>234</sup> Furthermore, the Jews did not achieve any degree of influence whatsoever in Bulgarian public life. Nonetheless, they made a point of identifying with Bulgarian nationalist goals both externally and within the community. Thus, for example, Bulgarian Jewry continued to express its identification with the cause of Bulgarian Macedonia,<sup>235</sup> to contribute to patriotic causes,<sup>236</sup> and, of course, to serve in the Bulgarian army.<sup>237</sup>

231 Archives of Kyustandil Community, BSA, f. 1568, op. 1, file 8944, sn. 12, p. 1 (TAU DP, Bulgaria Archives, doc. 519). This document, along with other documents prepared by the Central Consistory, was sent to the Jewish community of Kyustandil for the conference of Jewish communities of Bulgaria, which took place on July 4, 1926.

232 Keshales, *History of the Jews of Bulgaria*, vol. 2, p. 38.

233 Ibid., p. 58.

234 Ibid., pp. 59–61.

235 See note 137, above. See also the invitation from the Ilinden Society in Kyustandil to the president of that town's Jewish community to participate in the ceremony celebrating the anniversary of the Ilinden uprising on August 2, 1925 (Archives of Kyustandil Community, BSA, f. 1568, op. 1, file 8944, sn. 9 [July 20, 1925] [TAU DP, Bulgaria Archives, doc. 273]).

236 See, for example, the announcement circulated by the Consistory on November 19, 1925, to all Jewish communities, informing them of the opportunity to purchase a bust of the Bulgarian King (ibid., sn. 9 [TAU DP, doc. 335]); an appeal to the Jewish community of Kyustandil to donate money for construction of a monument commemorating the late Teodor Alexandrov (ibid., sn. 9 [February 13, 1925] [TAU DP, doc. 333]); cover letter to minutes of a meeting of representatives of all charitable and patriotic societies in Kyustandil where aid to military musical groups was solicited (ibid., sn. 9 [December 15, 1925] [TAU DP, doc. 348]).

237 J. Illel, "The Participation of Bulgarian Jews in the Wars of 1885, 1912–1913 and

Nevertheless, and, it would seem, in spite of the actual conduct of Bulgarian Jewry, antisemitism continued to flourish in the state. Bulgarian antisemitism between the two world wars should not be seen as a new invention but as, at most, a variation on an old theme. If at the close of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, the Bulgarians “excelled” mainly at blood libels and the accompanying publications, from the end of World War I onward, the chief accusation directed against the Jews was that they were to blame for Bulgaria’s entry into the war and, of course, for the resulting hardships. The Agrarian Union Party (the ruling party at the time) and its leader, Alexander Stambuliski, were the standard-bearers of the antisemitic offensive in the early 1920s. From 1923 onward, antisemitic organizations began to be established, particularly among retired officers; during this period, an antisemitic youth organization was also founded (1924). *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* was translated into Bulgarian and the antisemitic press mushroomed. Beginning in 1923, incidents of physical attacks became more frequent; these often culminated in loss of property and, in some cases, even loss of life.<sup>238</sup>

The Central Consistory reacted to the wave of antisemitism from the end of World War I onward in an extremely conservative fashion. As early as March 10, 1920, it had called upon all Jewish communities to act with modesty and restraint in their lifestyle as a whole — whether in their social lives, their political lives, or their economic activity — so as not to draw the attention of those who sought to harm them.<sup>239</sup> Circulars in a similar vein were distributed repeatedly, on December 22, 1922,<sup>240</sup> November 23, 1923,<sup>241</sup> and June 6, 1924.<sup>242</sup> The circulars did not fall on deaf ears, and the leaders of the communities continually reminded their members of the “commandments” of caution and modesty.<sup>243</sup> At times, the advice offered to

1915–1918,” *Annual* 22 (1987), pp. 121–176. See also a letter asking the president of the Synagogue Board of Kyustandil to send a rabbi to the swearing-in ceremony for the young soldiers joining the Rila battalion on April 25, 1926 (*ibid.*, sn. 10 [April 24, 1926] [TAU DP, doc. 384]).

<sup>238</sup> Keshales, *History of the Jews of Bulgaria*, vol. 2, pp. 113–130.

<sup>239</sup> Central Consistory Circular no. 173, *BSA Vidin*, f. 9K, op. 1, file 110, 1.7–8.

<sup>240</sup> Central Consistory Circular no. 2341, *BSA Vidin*, *ibid.*, 1.10–11.

<sup>241</sup> Central Consistory Circular no. 2372, *BSA Vidin*, *ibid.*, 1.13.

<sup>242</sup> Central Consistory Circular no. 1058, *BSA Vidin*, *ibid.*, 1.15.

<sup>243</sup> See announcement of Community Council of Sofia dated June 20, 1924 (circular no. 1436, *BSA Vidin*, *ibid.*, 1.17), which followed the circular of June 6, 1924, cited in note 244 above.

the various communities in the wake of the Consistory's decisions conveyed a strong sense of submissiveness and fear. Thus in 1925, for example, the leadership of the Plovdiv community issued a call for all Jews of the city to conduct themselves modestly; refrain from any displays of wealth; and avoid, as much as possible, venturing outside the Jewish quarter or holding parties in clubs or restaurants. Women were instructed to avoid sitting in cafés, particularly in large groups. Young people were told to go hiking less frequently and to make a point of acting with humility.<sup>244</sup>

The circular distributed by the Consistory to the Jewish communities on January 12, 1928, employed particularly strong language. It called attention once again to the poor impression created by some members of the community through continual displays of wealth. Even though most of the Jews were poor, the letter stated, a small number of wealthy individuals were upsetting the Bulgarians by their behavior, causing them to be envious and inspiring antisemitic sentiments that harmed the Jews as a whole. For this reason, the Consistory suggested that the communities educate their members to understand the special situation of the Diaspora and the proper way to conduct oneself there.<sup>245</sup>

These circulars convey the firm impression that the Jewish leadership of Bulgaria was suffering from a type of "victims' syndrome"; that is, they placed the blame for any troubles on the behavior of the Jews themselves. It is entirely possible that the constant pressure did indeed evoke the feeling that "if everyone hates us, there must be a good reason." It should be recalled in this context that the Jewish leadership was aware of the spread of antisemitism in neighboring countries as well, and fully understood the phenomenon in its global context. This may have been the reason for the policy of "inconspicuousness" that it adopted within the community. There did not appear to be a suitable haven anywhere else, and the evil seemed to have spread everywhere.<sup>246</sup>

But the Consistory operated on other levels, and in other ways as well. Since the Jewish press tended to debate the merits of antisemitic publications and assorted manifestations of antisemitism, and the Consistory anticipated

244 BSA Vidin, *ibid.*, file 110.22.

245 Central Consistory Circular no. 694, BSA Vidin, *ibid.*, file 110.28.

246 Appeal from Synagogue Board of Vidin to local Jewish community concerning pogroms conducted against the Jewish population in Oradea Mare and Kluj (Romania) on December 6–7, 1927, BSA Vidin, *ibid.*, file 110.29.

that this type of controversy would further aggravate the situation, it was decided on March 24, 1925, that the editors of all papers would be asked to publish only items signed by the Consistory or its member communities, by the Zionist Federation of Bulgaria, or by the local Zionist organizations. In this way, the Consistory apparently thought that it could force the various Jewish organizations to be more responsible about what they published and, hopefully, to attach greater importance to Jewish responses to antisemitic incidents.<sup>247</sup>

The Consistory assembled information on antisemitic incidents throughout the kingdom and demanded that the Bulgarian government put an end to such occurrences and punish those responsible. The official response was extremely unencouraging. Indeed, the Consistory's protests against the distribution of antisemitic pamphlets by the Rodna Zashtita (National Defence) organization proved unsuccessful, to cite but one example. Moreover, the Bulgarian prime minister even informed the Parliament (Narodno Sobranie) that he was having the Consistory sued for slander so that it would bear the burden of proof regarding violence committed against Jews.<sup>248</sup> In an atmosphere such as this, the continuation — and even intensification — of expressions of antisemitism was virtually a foregone conclusion. Antisemitic organizations sprouted everywhere and were highly active. And in 1937, a law was issued prohibiting Jews from being accepted into the officers' training school of the standing army.<sup>249</sup>

It should be emphasized nonetheless that antisemitism in Bulgaria cannot be defined as an inherent characteristic of the majority of the population. Many were strongly opposed to the spread of antisemitism, but as is often the case, organizations and individuals favoring this or similar ideologies did not hesitate to break the law or to engage in violence or other means that would be rejected by "honorable" people whose voice was usually lost in the general commotion.

In the archives of the city of Vidin on the banks of the Danube, a group of documents has been preserved that deals entirely with various antisemitic incidents that took place there between 1928 and 1933, as well as the actions

<sup>247</sup> Central Consistory Circular no. 417, *BSA Vidin*, *ibid.*, file 110.19.

<sup>248</sup> Letter no. 1166 from Central Consistory to Ministry of Foreign Affairs (April 30, 1926), *BSA Vidin*, *ibid.*, file 110.20; Central Consistory Circular no. 119 (May 13, 1926), *ibid.*, file 110.23.

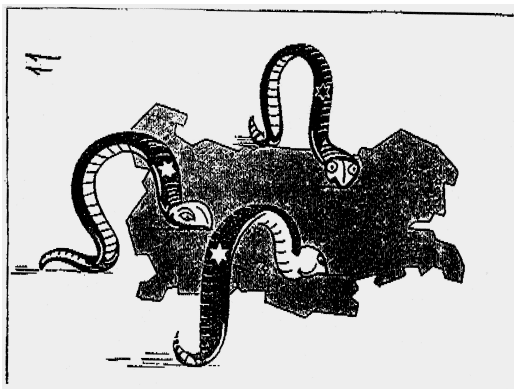
<sup>249</sup> Keshales, *History of the Jews of Bulgaria*, vol. 2, pp. 113–130.



30a. (No. 13). "The New Promised Land of the Jews"  
(see appendix 2, no. 30a).



30b. (No. 15) "Why and How  
the Jews Love Bulgaria"  
(see appendix 2, no. 30b).



30c. (No. 11) "You Bulgarians!  
Jewish Bloodsuckers Suck [Up  
the Fruits of] Your Labor"  
(see appendix 2, no. 30c).

Caricatures published by the Fascist organization *Ratnitsi za napredaka na balgarshtinata* (Р.Н.Б = Ратници за напредъка на българщината) (Defenders of the Bulgarian Spirit) and disseminated in the city of Vidin in the 1930s.  
(BSA Vidin, f. 20k, op. 04.1, a.e., file 22, a.8–16.)

of Jews and Bulgarians in connection with these events. It should be noted here that the time frame of this correspondence is entirely arbitrary as it is based on the blocks of documents that we were able to locate in the archives. Nevertheless, they offer us a glimpse into the relationship between Jews and Bulgarians between the two world wars.

The series of incidents recorded in the archives is only one chapter in a long chain of similar events that occurred periodically in the city. From 1931 onward, however, such incidents followed more closely upon one another, creating a highly strained atmosphere. During the first week of March 1931 (apparently on March 4), a number of students distributed an antisemitic newspaper, *Prelom* (Turning point), in the streets of Vidin. The students called upon passersby to read about acts of fraud committed by the “Yids” of Vidin from the liberation of Bulgaria to the present, and shouted that the Jews were all spies, that they should all be sent to Palestine, and so forth. The police were summoned, and although they came, they did nothing.<sup>250</sup> It appears that complaints about antisemitic incidents in Vidin continued to reach the Central Consistory in the following months as well, but the community sought to minimize their importance.<sup>251</sup>

November 27, 1932, was the anniversary of the Treaty of Neuilly. It was customary for the president of Vidin’s Jewish community to be included among the speakers at the annual rally protesting the agreement, but in 1932 a representative of the Otets Paisii nationalist organization (named after Father Paisii, one of the founding fathers of the Bulgarian national renaissance) was invited to speak in his stead. The night before the gathering, the walls and sidewalks of the city were covered with antisemitic graffiti. The president of the Jewish community successfully pressed the district governor to have the slogans removed. An investigation by the Jewish community revealed that the industrious graffiti writers were students from Vidin’s high school. The principal did not deny the nationalist leanings of some of his students, nor the leftist tendencies of others, and promised to do everything in his power to prevent the spread of antisemitism in his school. It emerged that an agitator by the name of Sargiliev, who had only recently arrived

250 Testimony of Refael Arie (Aryeh), March 5, 1931, *BSA Vidin*, f. 9K, op. 1, file 110.30; testimony of Mr. Isakov, March 5, 1931, *ibid.*, file 110.31; testimony of Bito Yarhi, March 6, 1931, *ibid.*, file 110.32; testimony of Lazar Kalish, March 12, 1931, *ibid.*, file 110.33.

251 From Jewish community of Vidin to Central Consistory, January 2, 1932, *BSA Vidin*, *ibid.*, file 110.34.

in Vidin, was operating within the city's antisemitic movement. In their written recounting of this episode, the community representatives stressed in particular the fact that the majority of Vidin's residents had expressed anger over the incident. They had also voiced their bewilderment, asserting that such things had never before taken place in Vidin.<sup>252</sup>

This last statement is, of course, incorrect,<sup>253</sup> although it indicates the desire of Vidin's Jews to maintain some sort of *modus vivendi*. During this same period, another antisemitic pamphlet entitled "An Appeal to All Good and Upright Bulgarians," was distributed in the city. Compared to this leaflet, the one put out by the Makedoniki Ethniki Organosi in Salonika appeared almost tame. The Bulgarian pamphlet had everything: sex, money, nationalism. Its authors declared that the anti-Jewish graffiti that had recently been seen around the city was only a "fair and just expression of the rage of Bulgarians that has been seething for years in the wounded Bulgarian soul." The Bulgarians were called upon to express their hostility toward the despicable and pretentious Jews, who corrupted and demeaned them.

The pamphlet went on to include a detailed discussion of sexual matters, enumerating the transgressions of two Jews accused of sexually exploiting Bulgarian girls, and two others accused of raping their Bulgarian maids. The authors pointed to the cases of Lom and Vratsa, cities where (according to them) the local residents took just revenge on the Jews for the death of Bulgarian children — an obvious reference to the blood libels that had taken place in these cities.<sup>254</sup> Finally, they called upon all parents to protect their children from the Jews, to boycott all Jewish stores, and to scorn all things Jewish, since "this is the evil from which our beautiful homeland and the entire world is suffering."<sup>255</sup>

Of particular interest is the pamphlet's extensive use of sexual motifs. Themes of this type are aimed at man's basest instincts. In effect, those who utilize such motifs convey the message that there is a direct threat to the fundamental goal of human existence: the perpetuation with one's genetic heritage. The immediate consequence of the pamphlet was that students

252 From Central Consistory to Jewish community of Vidin, December 5, 1932, *BSA Vidin*, *ibid.*, file 110.35; from Jewish community of Vidin to Central Consistory, December 7, 1932, *BSA Vidin*, *ibid.*, file 110.36.

253 See above, pp. 204–205.

254 See above, p. 204.

255 *BSA Vidin*, *ibid.*, file 110.37; see also *ibid.*, file 110.38.



from Vidin's high school attacked younger Jewish students who happened to be passing by and beat them severely.<sup>256</sup>

Certain of Vidin's Christian residents thought that things had gone too far; they issued a dissenting tract in which they expressed the opinion that the publishers of the first pamphlet had been motivated by economic competition masquerading as nationalist sentiment. Those who commit criminal acts must be punished, but the crimes of individuals cannot serve as justification for attacks on an entire population.<sup>257</sup>

The Jewish community's response to these episodes was extremely interesting. They did not content themselves with the above manifesto. Representatives of all the Jewish organizations and the Community Council met together and reached the following decisions: to assign the Standing Committee the task of organizing a struggle against the burgeoning antisemitism in the city; to cooperate with the authorities in locating the culprits and bringing them to justice; and to select a group of young boys to follow persons suspected of antisemitic activity. The president of the community was directed to report on the activities of the antisemitic movement to the Consistory and it was stressed that all counteractions must be coordinated with the Community Council.<sup>258</sup>

As a result of this move on the part of the Jewish community, a delegation from the Consistory came to Vidin to look into the situation.<sup>259</sup> Following complaints by the community and the Consistory, the governor of the district was ordered by the Interior Ministry to investigate the antisemitic incidents in the city.<sup>260</sup> The high school students who had been involved in the attack on the younger boys were sentenced by the Teachers' Council to a punishment of an unspecified nature; no indication was given as to whether this punishment was ever carried out.<sup>261</sup>

In addition, the community demanded that the aforementioned agitator, Sargiliev, be expelled from the city. According to them, he had been

256 Jewish community of Vidin to principal of State High School for Boys, January 6, 1933, *ibid.*, file 110.42.

257 Pamphlet dated January 1933, *ibid.*, file 110.39.

258 January 3, 1933, *ibid.*, file 110.40.

259 From Central Consistory to Jewish community of Vidin, January 5, 1933, *ibid.*, file 110.41.

260 From Central Consistory to Jewish community of Vidin, January 11, 1933, *ibid.*, file 110.46.

261 From State High School for Boys to president of Jewish community of Vidin, February 27, 1933, *ibid.*, file 110.47.

interfering in the criminal trial of a Jew accused of sex crimes, attempting to impute this individual's crimes to the entire community. In the meantime, the accused was found guilty, and Sargiliev incited a mob to lynch him when he exited the courthouse. The police prevented the lynching, and the authorities gave the agitator a warning, but he claimed that he had been attacked by the Jews. For its part, the community argued that only Sargiliev's expulsion from the city would prove to society as a whole that those who tried to harm relations between Bulgarians and Jews would not be tolerated.<sup>262</sup>

This brief glimpse into a provincial community's struggles over its relationship with Bulgarian society, and the tension within the constellation of the Vidin Jewish community, the Central Consistory, the Bulgarian government, and the city of Vidin, allows us to make several important observations. In 1933, the community itself, as well as the Consistory, adopted an openly aggressive stance with regard to the Jews' right to a life of dignity within Bulgarian society; on the other hand, a major effort was made to avoid drawing the attention of the larger, non-Jewish society unnecessarily. When viewed in combination of the Vidin documents, what seems to be meek behavior on the part of the Consistory in response to the upsurge of antisemitism, looks more like the product of a carefully calculated policy. Bulgarian society itself was not of one mind with regard to the Jews: alongside the worsening atmosphere of antisemitism, there were still numerous Bulgarians who recoiled from this trend and openly denounced it.

But the most important observation that we can make is with regard to the major role played by the Central Consistory in consolidating the civilian status of the Jews of Bulgaria. Bulgarian Jewry's readiness to submit to a central authority afforded them greater room to maneuver and the chance to mount a far more effective struggle than that of the Jews in the neighboring countries. Between the two world wars, Bulgaria's Jews were well organized and efficient; consequently, they were able to provide their children with a proper education and to fight for their rights with relative success, even under steadily worsening conditions.<sup>263</sup>

262 From Jewish community of Vidin to Central Consistory, January 11, 1933, *ibid.*, file 110.48; from Central Consistory to Jewish community of Vidin, March 1, 1933, *ibid.*, file 110.49; from Central Consistory to Jewish community of Vidin, March 9, 1933, *ibid.*, file 110.50; from president of Jewish community of Vidin to Central Consistory, March 10, 1933, *ibid.*, file 110.51.

263 Regarding the policy of the Jewish leadership on the eve of World War II, see

The organizational ability and efficient, centralized administration of Bulgarian Jewry, as demonstrated in the establishment of the Consistory, was only partly reflected in the functioning of the General Zionist Federation of Bulgaria, whose activities ceased in 1941, with the passage of the Law for the Protection of the Nation. Approximately once every two years the Federation held conferences at which the problems of Bulgaria's Jews were discussed and decisions were made about the best way of dealing with them. Out of this process came guidelines for the Federation's branches and for the Zionist representatives in all the Jewish institutions and organizations. Even if there were differences of opinion among delegates to the conference, its decisions were binding upon everyone. And, surprisingly enough, they were carried out without protest until at least the mid-1920s. This unity and solidarity made it possible for the Zionists to take over the leadership of the various Bulgarian communities and to exercise control over Jewish education throughout the country. The central role that education played in the life of this community, combined with its social and organizational cohesiveness, resulted in the molding of a very special Bulgarian-Zionist Jew, and, in fact, determined the community's future.<sup>264</sup>

This achievement was not obliterated by the conflicts among the different ideological trends within the Zionist Federation that emerged in 1926, when the Revisionist stream insisted on taking a stronger line against the Mandatory government, and pushed for a declaration that the objective of Zionism was the establishment of a Jewish state on both banks of the Jordan. But even the Revisionists were willing to join forces with the General Zionists against the Po'alei Zion, who in their view, had sold out Zionism in favor of international socialism. The battles among these three groups continued until the summer of 1938, when it became clear that the days of Zionism in Bulgaria — and perhaps of the community itself — were numbered.

S. Shealtiel, "The Policy of the Jewish Community Leadership in the Face of Bulgaria's Changing Reality, 1939–1941," in volume 2 of the present work, pp. 219–238; idem, *Me-Erez Huledet la-Moledet: 'Aliyah ve-Ha'apalah mi-Bulgaryah ve-Darkah ba-Shamim 1939–1949* (From birthland to homeland: emigration and illegal immigration to Palestine from Bulgaria and via Bulgaria in the years 1939–1949) (Tel Aviv, 2004), pp. 32–48.

<sup>264</sup> Chorapchiev, "Jewish Educational System in Bulgaria," Conclusion.

In 1939, the 23rd Conference of the Jews of Bulgaria was not allowed to take place. In that year, a Zionist organization existed in every city where there was a Jewish community. The number of active members — not counting the youth groups — totaled 4,500.<sup>265</sup> We do not have in our possession precise statistics on the membership of the Zionist youth groups, but after piecing together various sets of figures, I have arrived at a similar total, i.e., slightly over 4,000.<sup>266</sup> The Bulgarian Jewish community numbered 49,320 in 1939,<sup>267</sup> making the Zionists approximately 19 percent of the total population. In relative as well as absolute terms, the number of Zionists in Bulgaria during this period exceeded that of any other of the Ottoman Empire's successor states.

<sup>265</sup> Keshales, *History of the Jews of Bulgaria*, vol. 2, pp. 306–326.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 415–492.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.