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BULGARIANS AND JEWS THROUGHOUT HISTORY

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Slaves lie but free men tell the truth

Apolonius of Tyana

A persistent myth which still haunts official Bulgarian historiography and national psyche is that Bulgarians, unlike their unruly Balkan neighbours, are incapable of chauvinism and racism.¹ This self-righteous stance which makes Bulgarians exclusive and unique is clearly a product of an inferiority complex. It was shattered once again on 3rd October 2002 when CSKA, one of the leading Bulgarian soccer teams, met Blackburn. After the match UEFA decided to take strong disciplinary action again CSKA because Bulgarian fans threw bottles on the pitch and verbally abused a British player by calling him 'black ape'.

Another facet of this myth is the Bulgarian attitude towards Jews in general and towards its Jewish population in particular. Taking as a departure point the exemplary behaviour of many Bulgarians during World War II, until recently historians tended to toe the official line of neglect or underestimation of local anti-Semitism. Such agenda is tantamount not only to hypocrisy but also to conscious distortion of the past. In this sense Oscar Wilde is quite right

to claim that our only obligation to history is to rewrite it.

The ethnical name 'Bulgars' is mentioned for the very first time in the 5th century. They were a conglomerate of tribes of Iranian descent who were later turkized like the Huns, Avars and Magyars. They were mounted nomads before they settled down and formed their first state, known to the Byzantine chronists as 'Great Bulgaria', in the steppes between the Azov sea and the Kuban river in the 6th century. One of the Bulgar tribes headed by Asparoukh fled these regions due to strong Khazar pressure and set up a new state in the Balkans in 681. They found numerous colonies of Romelioti Jews who were part of the diaspora after the destruction of Jerusalem in 89-90 CE. The ruins of sumptuous 2nd century synagogues have been unearthed in Philipopolis (now Plovdiv),² Nikopol, Ulpia Oescus (now Gigen),³ Stobi (now in Macedonia)⁴ etc. In the 6th century the Byzantine historian Procopius mentions a tower named 'At the Jews' on the Danube in what is today Northwestern Bulgaria.⁵ When Judaism was declared the official religion in Khazaria between 800 and 809, some of the minor peoples in the khaganate, including the so called 'black Bulgars,' rebelled. They called on the Balkan Bulgars and the Magyars for help while the khaganate resorted to the Pechenegs as allies. The Bulgar army led by Khan Omourtag (814-831) lost the war which is reflected in a stone inscription.⁶

The second case of anti-Semitism in Bulgarian history dates to the autumn of 866. The Bulgarian Prince Boris who converted to Christianity a year earlier asked Pope Nicholas's advice on numerous issues. The 104th query concerned a Jew who, without any ordination as a priest, managed to baptise a number of natives before being exposed. In his reply the Pope said that any decision on this curious travesty depended whether the Jew was a Christian or a pagan.⁷ The possibility of this Jew being a pagan is out of the question but one wonders whether he was a Khazar or maybe a member of some unorthodox Christian sect. The fact that he failed to arouse any suspicion for a long time with his baptisms means that he was well trained for the job and fluent in Greek. After 885 the disciples of the Byzantine missionaries Cyril and Methodius who held theological disputes in Khazaria fled from Moravia to Bulgaria. On the basis of the newly created Slavonic alphabet a new literature and culture flourished in the Pliska-Preslav and Okhrid centres. The preserved sermons of its protagonist John the Exarch are virulently anti-Semitic. Other authors such as Kosmas the Presbyter and Constantine of Preslav insist that Jews are worse than pagans. Their bias stems from the Byzantine polemical

tradition, in which they seem to be steeped.⁸

In the Middle Ages Jews were often court executioners which hardly endeared them to the majority of the population. In 1230 when the Bulgarian Tzar Ivan Asen II routed the ruler of Epirus Theodore Comnen, he asked two Jews to blind him. For some obscure reason, they refused to obey this order and were executed themselves in the capital Turnovo.⁹

There is no information whatsoever that Jewish beliefs encountered more than verbal abuse in medieval Bulgaria. Suddenly, in the mid-14th century, tragedy struck. Tzar Ivan Alexander divorced his spouse Theodora and married a beautiful Jewish girl called Sarah. She converted and became a fervent patron of church art and architecture. The Tzar convened a council against the Jews and sentenced many of them to punishment and banishment. This upsurge of anti-Semitism is said to be a reaction to increased Jewish propaganda but it sounds most unconvincing.¹⁰ My explanation is that the dating of the council (1360) is erroneous. It was actually held in 1349 or 1350 at the height of the Black Death epidemic and was directly connected with widespread accusations that the Jews poisoned wells and fountains used by the Christians.¹¹ Another, more prosaic, reason for this persecution may be a desire to get rid of the great debts incurred by the Bulgarian aristocracy whose creditors were mostly Jews. This persecution is hardly accidental because it was accompanied by an ideological offensive. Recent studies of Russian copies of Byzantine anti-Semitic treatises establish that their originals were translated in Bulgaria in the 14th century.¹²

Between 1393 and 1396 Bulgaria fell under Ottoman occupation for nearly 500 years. The rumour still widespread to this day that Jewish traitors opened the gates of the capital to the invaders is based on the legend of a grave belonging to a 'zhid' (Jew in Old Bulgarian). In fact, *zhid* in the later medieval folk tradition stands for a race of mythical giants who inhabited the earth before humans.¹³ After 1492 the number of Bulgarian Jews was augmented by the influx of Sephardic Jews evicted from Spain.¹⁴ The following centuries saw the migration to Bulgaria of Eshkenazi Jews, mainly from the German lands, whose descendants now form only about 10% of local Jews. Jews were mainly traders, tax collectors, money lenders, manufacturers, doctors and bore the brunt of Ottoman oppression although they were freed from the head tax (*haraç*) and blood tax (*devşirme*) levied on the Christians. In some cases they were even allowed to mint their own gold and silver coins as those dated to the 14th-16th century and discovered near the mining town of Etropole indicate.¹⁵

Thus, Jews were considered by the Christian majority to be collaborators or allies of the ruling Turks. Such an attitude was enhanced by the similarities between the Jewish and Islamic religions which are quite different from Orthodox Christianity.¹⁶ Many Jewish traders were robbed or killed by bandits during their travels. In other cases Jews became easy targets for exacting ransom especially during wars as was the case in Skopje in 1688.¹⁷ Corrupt Turkish notables often extorted large sums of money for permissions to build or renovate synagogues.

Since most Bulgarians were illiterate during the time of the Ottoman bondage, they relied heavily on folklore as a means of communication. The image of the Jew in it is rather ambivalent.¹⁸ Some evident qualities of Jews such as intelligence, cleverness, thriftiness, industry are acknowledged but at the same time old pejorative stigmata persist and new ones are invented. Jews are contemptuously called ‘çifut’, ‘bazirgian’ or, in 16th century Constantinople, even ‘havrut’ (night-pots).¹⁹ Male Jews were obliged to wear yellow headgear, hence they were called ‘yellow Jews’ in common parlance. First, they were considered to be physically ugly, smelly and unclean. Second, motives for enmity and even hatred towards Jews were economic. Since church and monastery valuables were often left on deposit with money lenders for decades, Jews were painted as misers eager only for profit. In some folk songs they bet Bulgarians for reaching a goal and only a miracle helps the latter from losing their wives and property. In a number of proverbs Bulgarians, whose occupations were mainly agriculture and husbandry, expressed their dislike of Jews who were city dwellers and never toiled the land. Third, religion was a very strong differentiating factor. Jews were traditionally blamed as ‘God-killers’ and as people secretly bent on destroying the church and its officials. Numerous early Christian and Byzantine stories, in which people are saved supernaturally from Jewish treachery and ferocity, were copied by Bulgarian scribes until the 19th century.²⁰ After the return of parents from church with their newly baptised child, the rite of passage was concluded by exchanging the child three times over the home threshold between the godfather and the mother with the words: “I took it a Jew, I give it a Christian”. Traces of the blood libel are evident in songs and homilies which exhort the faithful to avoid Jewish food and drink because it is mixed with blood. The rite of confession in the Bulgarian Zaikov manuscript prayer book from the 14th century includes the question whether the Christian committed the grave sin of eating together with Jews “and other pagans”.²¹ Such ideas created intolerance and fear which

are hard to underestimate. They reach a hysterical pitch in a folk song, according to which a girl is being married to a Jew in spite of her will. She tears nine veils and nine chains and when she calms down a bit, she asks for a knife to cut an apple. With the knife the girl commits suicide, the ultimate sin for Christians, rather than adopting the ‘ungodly’ Jewish faith.²²

In the 19th century anti-Semitic sentiments began spreading among Bulgarians via books and newspapers. In this respect the appearance of the fiercely anti-Semitic work *The Service of the Jews* written by the former Rabbi Neophyt (Thessaloniki, Theodosii Sinaite, 1838) was important. It was translated from Greek and printed by the Bulgarian monk Theodosii of Sinai.²³ Accusations of blood libel mounted, especially during Passion week (Skopje, 1852, Samokov, 1859, Kyustendil, 1875 etc.), although the Orthodox church and the Ottoman authorities tried to dispel them. Revolutionaries were also divided. Vasil Levski in his vision of free Bulgaria saw all nations as equal while Khristo Botev and Lyuben Karavelov piled diatribes against “the great Jewish kings of capital” whom they saw as a source of all evil in the world. In his classification of cheating nations the writer Petko Slaveykov put the Jews in the second place after the Bulgarians and before the Gypsies and the Greeks.²⁴

A skeleton in the Bulgarian cupboard is the fact that during the war of liberation in 1877-1878 social pressure culminated in widespread atrocities against the Jews. Violence was done with the connivance of Russian troops which included many Cossacks. Jews were beaten up, their property was looted and their synagogues were burned down. Many Jews fled to other cities or abroad.²⁵ The Berlin treaty of July 1878 divided the Bulgarian lands into five parts, for which many blamed the British Premier Disraeli who was Jewish and strongly anti-Russian.

Liberated Bulgaria gave birth to such world figures as the painter Jules Pascin who was born in Vidin, and the Nobel Prize laureate for literature Elias Canetti, born in Rousse. Anti-Semitic psychosis was fueled by poverty and Jewish competition. A church activist called Traiko Bozhidarov took the initiative to translate from Russian and publish a series of virulent books against the Jews in the 1880s. His “example” was followed by Georgi G. Dimitrov (1894), Stoyan Shangov (1899), the bishops Seraphim of Sliven (1889) and Methodii of Stara Zagora (1894-1903). Tabloids such as *Bulgaria bez evrei* owned by the entrepreneur Nikola Mitakov (Sofia, 1893-1894), *Golgota* (Bourgas, 1889-1900), *Otbrana* (Stara Zagora, 1899), *Strandzha* (Bourgas, 1896-1899), *Rodopski kurier* (Khaskovo, 1899-1900) etc. specialised in vilifying and

demonising the Jews but their “proofs” were sensationalist and their audience was limited and ignorant. Blood libel court cases against Jews in Vratsa (1891) and Yambol (1898) dragged on for several years and failed.²⁶

During World War I Bulgarian troops raped Jewish women, killed other Jews and broke into Jewish houses in Adrianople (Odrin) but such cases were isolated.²⁷ 211 Bulgarian Jewish soldiers died during the war. In the next two decades anti-Semitism lingered in the national psyche in spite of education and it was stimulated by the influx of Russians persecuted by the Bolsheviks. The access of Jews to military schools, banks, state positions was gradually limited after the right wing takeover on 9th June 1923. The painter David Perets remembers that he was forced to eat pork bacon as a child and was beaten up because he resisted.²⁸ When the writer Angel Karaliichev published a story in 1930 about the ostensible Jewish “treason” in Turnovo in 1393 and when an exhibition against “Judaean-Bolshevism” was organised in 1933, the Central consistory protested.

In early 1939 nationalist Jews smashed and plundered Jewish shops in Sofia in imitation of the *Kristalnacht*. In spite of opposition from many quarters, in 1940 the Bulgarian parliament voted a so called ‘Law for defense of the nation’ which duplicated the Nurnberg laws of the Hitler regime. It came into force on 23rd January 1941. It postulated a tax on Jewish property, deprivation of political, civil and economic rights for Jews, removal of Jewish males to labor camps, imposition of the yellow badge, and the dispatch of the Jews to the Polish gas chambers. In March 1943 more than 11 000 Jews from the Aegean Thrace and Macedonia, occupied by the Bulgarian army, were taken away by the Nazis. They had no Bulgarian citizenship. The second step, the deportation of 48 000 Jews from Bulgaria itself, never took place because of strong protests by 42 MPs, the Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, the intelligentsia, most political parties. German failure on the Eastern front also played a role. Hundreds of Jews opted for Orthodox baptism and assimilation, including the family of the now world famous pianist Alexis Weisenberg, which was protected by Tzarina Ioanna. The ‘silent majority’ of the public watched the events passively. In Kyustendil many Bulgarian teachers refused to risk their reputation by teaching in the Jewish school. The mother of the poetess Ekaterina Iosifova was the only one who dared.²⁹ Hundreds of Jews joined the ranks of anti-fascist guerillas and 100 of them were killed in action. The Jews in the labour camps were freed when the Red army invaded Bulgaria on 9th September 1944.³⁰ 59 years after the salvation of Bulgarian Jews Jacky and

Lisa Comforty, relatives of the famous Bulgarian actor Leo Comforty, created a film titled *Optimists: The Story of the Rescue of the Bulgarian Jews from the Holocaust*. It received several major awards and opened at the Wilmette Theater in Chicago on 18th October 2002.

Bulgarian Jews welcomed the demise of fascism and a number of them joined the ranks of the Communist party and the secret police. Many others were jobless and poor but the restitution of their property was deliberately slow. After the visit of Ben Gurion to Sofia in December 1945 and the change of position in Soviet Russia, 32,106 Bulgarian Jews emigrated to Israel in 1948-1949.³¹ By 1951 some 7676 Jews remained in Bulgaria and by 1956 their number dwindled to 6431. They were mostly representatives of the intelligentsia and state officials.³² Most pre-war Jewish societies and unions were banned by the Communists and access of Jews to higher education and the army was limited by quotas. Synagogues and other buildings were nationalised or closed down.³³ In 1985-1989 when the Bulgarian Turks were subjected to forced change of identity, the Smolyan party committee proposed the 'Bulgarisation' of all Jews in the country but it was fortunately rejected.³⁴

The dawn of democracy after 1989 led to another exodus of Jews to Israel and other Western countries. According to the census of 1992, there are only 3461 Jews in Bulgaria. The former Premier Andrei Lukanov who was gunned down by Russian killers in late 1996 and several ministers, including the present foreign minister Solomon Passy, are Jews. On 4th September 2002 Passy received the award given to eminent statesmen by the American Jewish committee.³⁵ A major problem of contention has become the restitution of Jewish properties which is now in its final phase.³⁶ Jews are still being refused entry into some of their properties which have been taken over by the army but the situation is expected to be solved soon.³⁷

At present, minorities enjoy all their rights in Bulgaria in an atmosphere of religious toleration and open-mindedness which characterises the so-called Bulgarian ethnic model. This fact is acknowledged by numerous Jewish delegations which visited the country in the last few years.³⁸ Election support for far right and nationalist parties is slim. But a very disturbing feature of social life in the country in recent years has been the coordinated publication of a large number of Nazi and fascist books. This spate was first launched in the early 1990s by the Bulgarian emigrant in the US Nikola Nikolov whose anti-Semitic books written in a pseudo-scientific jargon came out in hundreds of thousands of copies. Relying on notorious fakes such as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, they introduced Bulgarian readers to the revived myth of "the Judeo-Masonic conspiracy" against humankind.³⁹ After the amateur-turned-historian Nikolov, two publishing houses *Zhar ptica* (Phenix) and *Zaharava 2002*

were set up in the 1990s which specialise in churning out Nazi, fascist and revisionist literature. Titles by Hitler, Musolini, Goebels, Henry Ford enjoy a remarkable distribution all over the country in very large quantities. The journalist Volen Siderov of the nationalist *Monitor* daily which is said to be owned by the Russian tycoon Denys Ershov published a much publicised book titled *The Boomerang of Evil* whose tone is viciously anti-Semitic and fundamentalist Christian Orthodox. Although some intellectual circles, human rights foundations and Protestant pastors issued mild protests, no steps were ever taken by the authorities against this type of printed filth which is forbidden by the 1990 Constitution. Soccer fans routinely use the Nazi salute and shout fascist slogans during matches. Russian journalists on a recent visit were startled when they saw the Red Army monument in Plovdiv covered in graffiti, many of them swastikas.⁴⁰ One hopes that that the small Jewish minority in Bulgaria will leave its isolation and oppose much more actively the current wave of racist and anti-Semitic propaganda. Let us ask the perennial question: *Quid bono?* One of the possible answers may be that a former super power is interested in spreading undemocratic ideas in Bulgaria at a crucial stage of its history and trying to prevent its expected entry into NATO and the EC.

¹Cf. the title of a German book by W. Oschlies, *Bulgarien - Land ohne Antisemitismus* (Erlangen, Nar Tamir Verlag, 1976).

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