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## Bulgaria Wasn't 'Second Denmark'

*Slave laborers, with documents revealing harsher treatment than thought, now eligible for reparations.*

Steve Lipman - Staff Writer

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OPINION  
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BOOKS  
CALENDARS  
CYBERSITES  
HEALTH  
KOSHER CUPBOARD  
LIFECYCLES  
NEIGHBORHOODS  
NEWSLETTER  
SABBATH WEEK  
SINGLES  
TRAVEL

JEWISH  
VACATIONS

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During the nearly six decades since the end of World War II, Bulgaria's behavior in the Holocaust era has stood out as a courageous but not widely known example of how a country refused to bend to evil — there was no Holocaust, no mass murder in Bulgaria.



The Balkan land, a wartime ally of Nazi Germany, refused to surrender its Jews to death camp deportations, the people taking a stand comparable in some eyes to better-known Denmark's, although the government did allow the Jews in the occupied parts of Greece and Yugoslavia to become part of the Final Solution.

Bulgaria, according to accepted history, passed anti-Semitic legislation but did not enforce it, had forced labor camps but did not run them as brutally as elsewhere in Nazi-occupied Europe, accepted Germany as an Axis partner but did not adopt its discriminatory philosophy.

Now, documents from the period that were obtained in the last few years by the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington and translated by scholars cast Bulgaria's record in a new light.

According to the records, which were classified during the country's communist regime that ended in 1989, the network of labor camps throughout Bulgaria was harsher and more extensive than once believed.

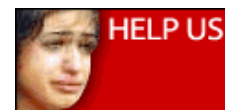
These documents not only aid the writing of history but have a more immediate effect — because of the revelations, the German government, which determines eligibility for the compensation payments administered by the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, ruled this week that Jews who were forced to work in Bulgaria's labor camps can receive one-time payments and monthly pensions.

The Bulgarian recipients, who must meet income and length-of-incarceration criteria set by Germany, will become the first Bulgarians to get such German reparations besides a handful who received one-time payments in the 1950s.

"This is a tremendous breakthrough," said Israel Singer, president of the New York-based Claims Conference. "The Nazi machine with its ugly local collaborators spared few Jewish communities in Europe. Unearthing the true history of the Holocaust is of the utmost urgency."

According to the Claims Conference research, an undetermined number of Jewish men — most likely in the tens of thousands — were forced to work at 112 labor camps around Bulgaria during the war in conditions of "malnourishment, exploitation, and brutal labor."

"The work consisted primarily of road and railway construction, often in difficult marshy locations, involving long work days, heavy work norms, and exposure to extreme temperatures," a Claims Conference report stated. "These prisoners faced frequent beatings by superiors, subsisted on an inadequate diet, and lacked the clothing or boots needed for working in the cold, rugged terrain."



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These claims of cruel conditions, obtained from official wartime reports and testimony filed subsequently by survivors, contradicted the earlier conception of relatively benign conditions in the Bulgarian labor camps.

The Claims Conference research in the Holocaust Memorial Museum's Bulgarian archives is "part of the effort to uncover aspects of the Holocaust that are unknown and to ensure the recognition for those who suffered," said executive vice president Gideon Taylor. "Stories emerge from thorough research. This assures that the history of what happened during the Holocaust will be saved."

To stave off German pressure to turn over Bulgarian Jews, King Boris in 1943 ordered the Jews deported to the interior of the country, where nearly 20,000 lived in cramped quarters and many men were put into forced labor.

"The conditions were severe" in the labor camps, Taylor said, adding however that "they certainly were not death camps."

"It was severe enough that the German government," with which the Claims Conference has negotiated for liberalized inclusions standards for compensation payments, "has accepted that these will be included in future Article 2 and Central and Eastern European Funds payments.

The Claims Conference report confirmed what Holocaust experts had already asserted — "that Bulgaria had a mixed record" in treating its Jewish population, said Michael Berenbaum, author and the first project director of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Berenbaum called the new allegations "a black mark for those who had been apologists for Bulgaria."

"Bulgaria had seen itself as 'The Second Denmark,' " citizens rising up against the Nazi ideology, he said. "Such claims were exaggerated."

In the labor camps under Bulgarian auspices, "there is no evidence of systematic torture" or of genocide, he said. "They were willing to torture, maim, persecute, harass — not kill. They had a red line. In the context of Nazi Germany, that was a virtue. In the context of anything else, that was a horror.

"You can now have an accurate history" of how nations behaved during the Holocaust, Berenbaum said.

The total number of men eligible for the German compensation payments, including those still in Bulgaria as well as those who settled in Israel, the United States and other Western countries, is probably less than a thousand, Taylor said.

Bulgaria, which had a prewar Jewish population of 48,000, had some 49,000 after the war. Most immigrated to Israel in 1948.

The Claims Conference will publicize the new eligibility standards for the Bulgarians in newspaper ads and announcements to groups of Bulgarian Jews, and on its Web site ([www.claimscon.org](http://www.claimscon.org)), Taylor said.

Members of the small Jewish community in Bulgaria — estimates range between 3,000 and 8,000 — are pleased that "the record is set" about what happened there during the war, said Jorge Diener, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee's country director for Hungary and Bulgaria.

"People are happy that the Bulgarians have been recognized to have the right to have compensation," Diener said. "They also suffered."

The Bulgarian Embassy in Washington did not return a request for comment from The Jewish Week.

For eligible survivors of Bulgarian labor camps, monthly pensions will be up to \$325. One-time payments for those who do not qualify for the monthly payments will be as high as \$9,000.

These sums are considerable for Bulgarian Jewry, which ranks with Romania as the continent's poorest Jewish community.

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"Your enormous and invaluable help will offer us the possibility to live our old days somewhat more peacefully," one labor camp survivor in Bulgaria wrote in a letter of thanks this week to the Claims Conference. n

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- [Faith Matters](#)  
*Nonpartisan interfaith prayer service turns into Bush-bashing session.*
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