

The Annihilation of Jewish Greeks from Eastern Macedonia and Thrace in context and perspective: Facts of the Past, Lessons for the Future

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During the night of March 3rd to March 4th, 1943, Bulgarian Occupation Forces swept the towns of Alexandroupoli, Komotini, and Xanthi in Thrace and the towns of Kavala, Drama, and Serres in Macedonia and, in one swift stroke, they apprehended all Jewish Greek inhabitants, rousing them in the middle of the night, confiscating their belongings and property. They assembled and held them in (mainly) tobacco warehouses. A few days later, they moved them to transitory points in Bulgaria proper. From there, they swiftly deported them outside the Bulgarian borders to the German Eastern Regions (sic), in accordance with the Dannecker – Belev Agreement signed in Sofia, on February 22nd, 1943. This sealed the fate of those souls and it marked the first ever instance of mass deportations and certain subsequent annihilation of Jewish Greeks from occupied Greek territory. This event took place a full ten days before the first death train left Thessaloniki, with destination the Auschwitz–Birkenau Concentration and Death Camp, on March 15th, 1943 on German initiative. This is factual History.

It is most appreciated and encouraging that, today, I stand amongst you, in Sofia, where I feel most welcomed both as a Jew and a Hellene. So, why should I look at the past? Well, I look at the past so that I do not forget, I look at the past so that I can learn, I look at the past in order to mine all those lessons and conclusions that will cement the foundations and ensure the continuance of the current and future most friendly ties and relations amongst all peoples in the region. I immerse myself in the past so that I can educate the current and future generations on the trappings to avoid and actions to encourage for the purpose and goal of reinforcing traits, habits, attitudes that lead to and maintain understanding and tolerance of the other, whoever that other may be.

How do I look at the past? The deportation and subsequent annihilation of the aforementioned souls in Treblinka understandably arouse feelings of grief and a temptation to describe for the nth time, albeit in my own words, their



predicament and travails; However, I would be repeating known facts without adding any information or shedding any light on the how this event took place in the middle of the 20th Century. Therefore, I will look at facts of the past in order to reach my conclusion via documented interpretative synthesis. Furthermore, the legacy of the event imposes upon all of us the responsibility to strive not to repeat the same actions and/or mistakes that led to that tragic finale. What are the lessons for the future in perspective? When, where, and how did all these start?

The *causa causans* is not lost to history, but can be traced in the final quarter of the 19th Century. Early in the Century, Greece – Hellas – revolted against the Ottoman yoke in 1821. The Principality of Bulgaria came to existence as an outcome of the Turkish – Russian war that ended in 1878 with the signing of the Preliminary Peace Treaty between the two main warring entities in San Stefano near Constantinople. The territory that was assigned with the Treaty to Bulgaria was much extended and encompassed large areas of what are now different, but friendly, states or parts of. Understandably, people affected by this, especially all but the Christian Bulgarians, opposed this treaty that put them under the authority of an untested new state entity which was created in the wake of a conclusion of war. Mind you, this was 1878 and, with Jewish populations as a paradigm, the documented track record of neighboring state entities such as Serbia and Romania left many things to be desired . . . Concepts like civil rights and/or political correctness were either completely absent or unheard of. Only one paragraph of Article VII of the treaty mentioned, incidentally, that “*In the localities where Bulgarians are mixed with Turks, Greeks, Wallachians (Koutzo-Vlachs), or others, proper account is to be taken for the rights and interests of these populations in the elections and in the preparation of the Organic Laws;*”. Now, this general statement, does not, most certainly, constitute a guarantee for civil rights, especially given the historic period of the time. Note how conspicuously Jews are absent and/or omitted, and, that the Treaty gives no definition of who is a Bulgarian, a Greek, and a Turk etc, nor does it elaborate what those rights and interests of these populations might be.

A few months later, the focus of European attention shifts to the Congress of Berlin which lasts for a full month and concludes with the signing of the Berlin Peace Treaty of July 13th, 1878. This Treaty limited severely the geographic boundaries of the Principality of Bulgaria compared with the territory allocated in San Stefano. It was a blow to the national aspirations of the Bulgarian people who were enthralled after San Stefano that they had achieved their goal in uniting all areas where the majorities were considered to be Bulgarians. Furthermore, due to pressure of various Jewish communities, Articles were inserted in the Treaty with the intention to



safeguard basic religious liberties and rights for non-Christian citizens of various states in the Balkans. One such was Article V stating that Bulgaria should take into account equal rights for all its citizens irrespective of religion as a basis for its public law. Another was Article IIIV for Serbia to honor the same. Am I allowed to conclude that the insertion of such clauses into a Peace Treaty proves and insinuates warranted cause? Nonetheless, these Articles refer to the rights of individuals and not groups, however defined.

In 1885 the Principality of Bulgaria was unified with Eastern Roumelia. An aggregation of letters and reports concerning the Condition of Mussulman, Greek, and Jewish Populations in Eastern Roumelia, totaling 322 pages was presented at the House of Commons, UK in 1880. This detail should not pass unnoticed since it conveys a feeling of established attitudes, comportments, and/or dealings with minorities in the region and at the epoch.

Jumping in time, we reach the second decade of the 20th Century and the Balkan wars. Those ended with territorial gains and enlargement of the Greek state territory and Aegean Sea access by Bulgaria. In less than a year the region was again engulfed in war, the First World War, which ended in 1918. For various reasons the end found Bulgaria from the side of the vanquished, the war losers. Bulgaria had to accept the terms of the victors and, in what pained her the most, was the loss of territories granted to her with the treaty of Bucharest of 1913.

The Peace Treaty between Allied and Associated Powers and Bulgaria was signed at Neuilly sur Seine on November 27, 1919. The onerous territorial losses were prominent. What is most interesting is the affluence of Articles pertaining to individual civil rights for all citizens of Bulgaria, albeit under the general heading of SECTION IV PROTECTION OF MINORITIES (of Part III Political Clauses of the Treaty). The insertion (and imposition) of those clauses, concerning domestic issues of the country in question, leads me to the conclusion that the record on human rights and religious liberties in Bulgaria, up to that date, was not the best. But there is more; [US President Thomas Woodrow] Wilson insisted on “national self determination”, with the subsequent creation of a multitude of nation-states, because he believed it would end the root causes that were most central in leading Europe to war in the first place. This had as an outcome the creation of artificial majorities and minorities and, thus, Wilson’s influence is most apparent in the Heading of the Articles as Protection of Minorities.

How does one define ethnicity, nation, and minority? One does not need to define the individual, the term is self explanatory. So, here, in this innocuous



heading, the Jew, the perennial outsider and occasional scapegoat, is left powerless and unprotected. The importance of the nation is exhorted, the group takes precedence over the individual, the individual is subordinated to the mass and, with the benefit of hindsight, that leads to the glory of the Volk, to the 1934 propaganda poster motto “Ein, Volk, Ein Reich, Ein Führer”, to the Jew who is the eternal enemy of the nation and, lastly, to the Final Solution of the “problem” – really, “whose” problem?

In Europe, usually, at least the shared common characteristics of language and that of the Christian religion defined various ethnic groups or nations. Minority groups, numeric wise, in one state would be the majority in others. There was always a Bulgarian state, a Greek State, a Yugoslav state but no Jewish state. Jews were just a religious minority in all states that they inhabited, and even considered by many as foreign bodies, irrespective of their centuries long presence. They were a minority with no “mother state” to claim them. The element of emancipation is lacking. Greece, from the beginning, incorporated into its successive constitutions those safeguards that were most akin to civil and individual rights and not group rights. It is interesting to note that the Greek Constitution never did recognize minorities; it only recognized that all Greeks are equal under the law. Citizenship should be based on social contract and not on the abstract notion of ethnicity.

The *causa causans*, which sprouted back in 1878, instead of vanishing now became the *causa causata*: It is very difficult to change the hearts and minds of people and eradicate centuries old ingrained misconceptions and/or bias. It takes time, the lifespan of a few generations, education, and dedication by the society and the state to achieve the goal that society at large should shed all its accumulated prejudices and conscientiously accept and fully integrate all persons in the national corpus. The unity of all in the national corpus should not remain only a Constitutional mandate, usually in many instances with no redeeming value, but should be realized fully and every day in practice and deeds and not only words. If that effort had started many decades ago all over the world and, especially, Europe, we wouldn't be here today.

Ingrained anti-Judaism remained in Bulgaria during the inter war period, even though it was not institutionalized but, nonetheless tolerated, if not subtly encouraged and maintained by the state. It is both interesting and important to point out that a full 7 months before the German Reich invaded Yugoslavia, two Anti-Semitic Laws were published in the official Government Gazette of Yugoslavia on October 5th, 1940. So much for either Constitutional and/or Treaty Article guarantees of equality and freedom of religion. Then, just 3 days later (!), as if it was prearranged, Gabrovski,



Belev and others, on October 8, 1940 according to a NY Times article, introduce Anti-Semitic Legislation which is immediately accepted by the Bulgarian Government and presented to the Parliament for voting. It becomes, officially, the Law for the Protection of the Nation, taking effect in January 23, 1941. It is self evident that Jews, even Jewish Bulgarians, suddenly do not belong to the Nation. Its further repercussions later for the Jewish Greeks under Bulgarian occupation was that they were barred from acquiring Bulgarian citizenship as inhabitants of the “New” Bulgarian territories. So here we have Yugoslavia trying to appease Hitler and, simultaneously, Bulgaria trying to please him. The conclusion was and is that both states considered their citizens of Jewish descent to be less Yugoslav or Bulgarian respectively than their Christian compatriots, and that these laws just crowned ingrained state latent Anti-Judaism. A consequential result was to make discrimination against the Jews more “palatable” for some segments of the population and dress with a veneer of quasi legitimacy future actions. Unfortunately, given such fertile ground, the distance from discrimination to persecution and genocide loomed very short.

In April 1941 the German Reich invaded the Kingdoms of Yugoslavia and of Greece. In a few weeks time the whole country (Greece) was occupied and, in the wake of the invaders, in no time, Bulgarian troops occupied territories ceded to them by the Reich. These were Southeastern Serbia of Yugoslavia and Eastern Macedonia and Western Thrace of Greece. Actually the “New” Bulgarian territories amounted with respect to Greece, more or less, to those territories lost in the period 1913–1919. The old dream was realized, aspirations were fulfilled; On the other hand, what was the price to pay to the “benefactor”?

The then rulers of Bulgaria embarked immediately on a drive of massive Bulgarization of the local Christian Greek population. No local Bulgarians existed as such in the region since the voluntary exchange of populations between Bulgaria and Greece in the early to middle 1920s. A prohibition was implemented that forbade the use of the Greek language and required the use of Bulgarian. Since the Law for the Protection of the Nation prohibited the granting of Bulgarian citizenship to persons of Jewish descent, besides the hardships they heaped upon and were endured by the population at large, they persecuted doubly the Jews by trying to coerce them to turn against their Christian Greek brethren. What came as a surprise, I am sure, was the resoluteness, the steadfastness, the tenacity with which, even in the face of terror and physical intimidation, the Jewish Greeks refused to either rescind their Hellenic identification, their adherence to their Greekness, or turn against Christian fellow Greeks, notwithstanding whatever means or sirens their occupiers tried to use. The answer is very simple; Jewish Greeks were



plain Greeks, no more but not less equal with other Greeks. The second class citizens of the late Ottoman Empire became, automatically, first class citizens of Hellas with no discriminatory clauses, on an equal footing with their Christian and Moslem brethren. After all, the Germans of the SonderKommando Rosenberg detachment in Greece were equally, unpleasantly, surprised, after their detailed survey of the Jewish presence in the whole of Greece in 1941, to discover for themselves that there existed no such situation as a “Jewish Problem in Greece” (sic)!

After two years of occupation, the time came for Bulgaria to pay the price of its IOU promissory note that of its territorial enlargement, to her creditor the German ally. What were the means to complete the barter transaction? None other than acquiescing to the persistent demands and wishes of the German Reich to deport the Jews inhabiting the New Territories of Bulgaria to the German Eastern Territory. So now the Jews became a commodity to be traded and/or bartered. Incidentally it also served Bulgarian expansionist policy of the time since having a non-Christian segment of the local population vehemently resisting Bulgarization was tantamount to defeating the whole process in its inception and core. Thus Jewish Greeks from Macedonia and Thrace were doubly persecuted both as Greeks and as Jews. They also had the dubious honor and distinction to be the first ever group (of Jewish Greeks) to be uprooted and deported for the sole purpose of their physical annihilation in Treblinka.

The 1959 East German – Bulgarian co-production film “Die Sterne” [The Stars] is a moving, eloquent, and poignant testament to all aforementioned events. The Jewish Greek teacher, on the way to her death, insists on teaching the younger generation (soon to vanish) the Greek Alphabet. She speaks German to the German non-commissioned officer and Ladino to the elders. We hear Ladino spoken and Hebrew while prayers are recited. I was and I am overwhelmed . . .

This effectively brings the narration to a close. It would be a gross omission from my part if, in conclusion, I did not emphasize the distance that separates me today, here in Sofia capital of friendly Bulgaria, from those events of the past. The distance is not only chronological but, most essential and significant, it is fundamentally foundational. I experienced first hand the genuine warmth with which Bulgarian society at large embraces its citizens of Jewish descent. The Bulgarian Constitution Article 6 for equality for all Bulgarians, today more than ever, is mirroring the de facto situation in Bulgarian society and not a de jure imposition of the goal of equality to be achieved in a future date. Last, but not least, I feel so welcome here also as a Greek, a Hellene, both from the state institutions but also, and especially,



from the people of Bulgaria in general. I take this opportunity to thank my hosts, the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee for having invited the Central Board of the Jewish Communities in Greece to this Conference that gave me the opportunity to stand before you today.

The events of the past can not be erased, they will never be forgotten. However, I bury them, encased in an transparent casket, so that I (we) can both remember them and extract our lessons and, use them as a springboard for the forging, cementing, and maintenance of tolerance amongst all people and most friendly relations amongst the various nations and states in the region. After all diversity is strength since homogeneity sometimes “misses” the novel, the different that might enhance the original like the salt of the earth.

I thank you very much.



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Power Point Links:

[https://www.dropbox.com/s/axr7tpjd2a7krqt/Hagouel-Facing%20our%20Past Annihilation%20of%20Jewish%20Greeks%20from%20Macedonia%20and%20Thrace_color%20 lock.ppt](https://www.dropbox.com/s/axr7tpjd2a7krqt/Hagouel-Facing%20our%20Past%20Annihilation%20of%20Jewish%20Greeks%20from%20Macedonia%20and%20Thrace_color%20lock.ppt)

Video clip of "*Die Sterne*" to play with a Presentation slide:

https://www.dropbox.com/s/3nzx5y2poglkthw/sterne_with_subs_trim_WMV%20V9.wmv

