



## Historical Background: the Holocaust in Bulgaria

Vital to understanding the story of *Stars* is its historical context. On the eve of the Second World War, the Bulgarian government included many with pro-German leanings. On March 1, 1941, Bulgaria signed the Tripartite Pact, primarily for military and territorial reasons, and became an Axis Power allied with Nazi Germany.

This alliance inevitably brought pressure to bear on the Jewish population. Later in 1941, the Law for the Protection of the Nation was passed, which introduced numerous legal restrictions on Jews in Bulgaria. A strong public outcry from different sectors of Bulgarian society, however, ultimately succeeded in cancelling the deportation of Jews living in Bulgaria proper, scheduled to take place in the spring of 1943. It was a stunning achievement that saved nearly 50,000 people.

After signing the Tripartite Pact, Bulgaria had participated in German-led attacks on Yugoslavia and Greece and had been given administrative control over the territories of Thrace (Greece) and Macedonia (Yugoslavia) by the Germans. The Jews from these territories were rounded up and deported in March 1943. In total, 11,343 people—all the Jews in Thrace and Macedonia—were brought to transit camps, then transferred to German control and deported to Auschwitz, Treblinka and other extermination camps. Only twelve survived.

### Timeline

**1939-40** Bulgarian government becomes increasingly pro-German and pro-fascist. King Boris appoints as Prime Minister pro-German Bodgan Filov in Feb. 1940.

**1940**  
**Sept 7** – An internationally-recognized agreement is signed, under the auspices of Germany, for the return of Dobrudja, a territory Bulgaria had lost to Romania after WWI.  
**Oct** – Interior Minister Petar Gabrovski announces the Law for the Protection of the Nation, based on the Nuremberg racial laws. Protests by the Jewish Central Consistory, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, and the public fail to hinder enactment of the Law.

**1941**  
**Jan 15** – The Law for the Protection of the Nation sent to King Boris for ratification, signed a few months later.

**Mar 1** – Bulgaria becomes an ally of Nazi Germany upon signing the Tripartite Pact.

**April** – Bulgaria participates in German-led attacks on Yugoslavia and Greece and is given administrative control over Thrace and Macedonia, both of which it had lost after WWI. With the German promise that these territories would be Bulgarian after the war, King Boris is hailed as the Unifier King.

**June** – Bulgaria refuses to join in Germany's attack against the Soviet Union, a historical ally.

**July** – Adolf-Heinz Beckerle, a fanatical Nazi and anti-Semite, becomes the German ambassador to Bulgaria.

1942

**Summer** – The Bulgarian cabinet institutes a Commissariat for the Jewish Question; in charge is Alexander Belev, an anti-Semite and Nazi sympathizer supported by Filov and Gabrovski.

1943

**Jan 21** - Theodor Dannecker, Adolf Eichmann's former representative for the "Jewish Question" in France, arrives in Sofia to play the same role in Bulgaria.

**Feb 22** – Belev and Dannecker sign a secret agreement to deport 20,000 Jews "from the new Bulgarian lands, Thrace and Macedonia, to the German eastern regions" by April 15. By setting the number at 20,000, they intend to ensnare 8,000 Jews living in Bulgaria in addition to those in the occupied territories.

**March 3-10** – Arrests of Jews living in Bulgaria begin in some towns as early as March 3. A public outcry erupts out as arrests of the one thousand Jews in Kyunstendil, near Sofia, begin on March 7. On March 8, a delegation from Kyustendil meets with Dimiter Peshev, the deputy speaker of the National Assembly and former justice minister, who is close to the Bulgarian Jewish community. On March 9-10, Peshev, some members of Parliament, and the Bulgarian Orthodox Church succeed in stopping the deportation of Jews from Bulgaria proper.

**March 4-29** –The deportation of all 11,343 Jews living in Thrace and Macedonia. On March 18-19, Jews in Thrace are taken to Lom, in Bulgaria; from there they are shipped to Vienna, then transferred to trains going to Auschwitz and Katowice. All Macedonian Jews are interned by March 11. On March 22 and 25, some are deported by train to Auschwitz; on March 29, the rest are deported to Treblinka. (\*)

**March 19** – A letter, initiated by Peshev and signed by 43 members of the majority party in Parliament, is delivered to Prime Minister Filov; it opposes all future delivery of Bulgarian citizens to a foreign power. Filov removes Peshev from his position as deputy speaker of Parliament.

**May** – Belev submits new plans to Gabrovski to deport all 50,000 Jews in Bulgaria by Sept. 30.

**May 18-24** – On May 18, Nissim Levy, a renowned lawyer and leader in the Bulgarian Jewish community who sounded the alarm in March, learns of Belev's plans and spreads the word. Metropolitan Stefan and other church leaders take decisive action. Thousands protest in the Jewish quarter and march to the palace on May 24.

**May 26** – Despite these protests, deportation of Sofia's Jews starts; but instead of being sent to Germany, they are interned in Bulgaria by order of the king.

1944

**Sept. 5** – The Soviet Union declares war on Bulgaria.

**Sept. 9** – The Bulgarian government collapses.

**October** – Bulgaria switches sides and declares war on Germany.

### Post-WWII

- 1945: the Jewish population of Bulgaria is still at its prewar level of about 50,000.
- 1948: over 35,000 Bulgarian Jews choose to emigrate to the new state of Israel.
- Bulgaria retains the territory of Dobrudja, acquired from Romania in 1940. Thrace is returned to Greece and Macedonia to Yugoslavia.
- Bulgaria's controversial role in the Holocaust is addressed by Bulgarian President Georgi Parvanov, on the occasion of his 2008 visit to Israel:  
*When we express justifiable pride at what we [did] to save Jews, we do not forget that at the same time there was an anti-Semitic regime in Bulgaria and we do not shirk our responsibility for the fate of more than 11,000 Jews who were deported from Thrace and Macedonia to death camps.*  
*(Haaretz.com, 5/21/2008)*

(\*) *Stars* opens with the deportation of the Greek Jews from the transit camp. The camera zooms into the waybill on the boxcar, which reads "from Bulgaria, to Poland" and the date "October 11, 1943." In his personal copy of the script (Feb. 17, 1958 version), Konrad Wolf crossed out the date "April 15, 1943" and wrote the following note: "In camera focus the year 1943 – the rain makes everything else unreadable." It is unclear why Wolf and Wagenstein did not use the actual dates of the events in the film. We are grateful to film historians Elke Schieber and Ralf Schenk for trying to unravel this mystery.

### Sources & for Further Reading:

- Bar-Zohar, Michael. *Beyond Hitler's Grasp, the Heroic Rescue of Bulgaria's Jews*. Avon, Massachusetts: Adams Media Corporation, 1998.
- Todorov, Tzvetan, *The Fragility of Goodness – Why Bulgaria's Jews Survived the Holocaust*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2001.
- United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website: [www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org)