

**NADÈGE RAGARU „ET LES JUIFS BULGARES
FURENT SAUVÉS...“ UNE HISTOIRE DES SAVOIRS
SUR LA SHOAH EN BULGARIE.**

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Nadège Ragaru’s monograph recounts socio-political meanderings or, as the author puts it, “the social life” of representations that have coalesced over time around several events related to Jewish populations in Bulgaria during the Second World War. The author sets herself to decipher how the persecutions of Jews in the “newly acquired” Bulgarian territories, which at the time encompassed parts of modern-day Greece, North Macedonia and Serbia (Pirot), were obfuscated (nationally and internationally) by the passage of time. The book inevitably also discusses an even more bewildering process in which the persecutions themselves were used to support the production of a long-prevailing representation of Bulgarian engagements aimed at protecting their Jewish population from pogroms within the core national territory (“the old kingdom”). Presented and praised as “exceptional” (“trajectoire historique exceptionnelle”, p. 13) in the European histories of Nazism, the rescue of Bulgarian Jews (“le sauvetage des Juifs bulgares”) during the Second World War has for a long time occupied a distinctive place in Bulgarian and European memories of the Holocaust. How it received, and eventually lost, this privileged place is the monograph’s main thread of analysis.

This is a remarkable book; the sources and the literature quoted are impressive. The *mélange* of data-gathering methods ranging from archival research (in various countries) to textual and visual interpretations, along with rich descriptions of events and in-depth interviews with various actors (also across several countries) is comprehensive. The breath-taking combination of insights and knowledge; theories and methods of political and social history; history of representations and ethnology; media studies and studies of memory, nationality and identity is singular in its coverage. But perhaps most remarkable of all is the author’s relentless ambition to investigate the topic exhaustively throughout the 75-year period since the original historical events took place.

The monograph is a brilliant example of how writing history continues to be shaped by “contemporary battles” (“les combats présents”, p. 324). But it goes beyond this rather frequent goal of contemporary historical analyses insofar as it also

sets out to establish facts and, in the process, painstakingly manages the available evidence (“l’établissement des faits et la patiente administration de la preuve”, p. 334). The parallel revelations of facts and the changing representations surrounding them over the past 75 years is organised as an investigation (“l’enquête”) that thoughtfully reassembles various elements of the puzzle while analysing them both separately and as a function of a larger, multilayered puzzle to be solved. Written in an elegant style that keeps the reader in suspense, this reconstruction of historical mis/representations of the treatment of Jews in Bulgaria during the Second World War evolves as a sort of detective’s inquiry, albeit without a climax. This is due to the fact that representations are reinvented in each new political, ideological and social constellation so that their reconstruction is an ever-growing *palimpsest* written anew by each period’s battles over the meaning of historical events. The author herself attests that “the past writes itself as a *palimpsest*” (“le passé s’écrit en palimpseste”, p. 249).

An additional originality of book is that it considers multiscalar agents of power that have produced and reshaped knowledge and representations of historical facts not only within national, regional, and European contexts but also among influential stakeholders/interested parties such as American and Israeli Jews. The book distinctly shows how competing interests and projects—whether they be focused on nation-making, maintaining the cold-war balance of power or creating a shared historical image of totalitarian regimes in the European Union—collide and ultimately re/shape local (national) imaginings and representations of historical events. Chapter 5 is particularly instructive in this respect. It offers convincing evidence of tensions and conflicts inherent in the Bulgarian and North Macedonian nation-building projects in the post-communist era and how they have, in the case of the latter, been partially resolved within a wider context of contemporary global processes such as rising antisemitism and contemporary ideas concerning the musealisation of the Holocaust.

Topics constitutive of the grand puzzle are dealt with chronologically. In Chapter 1 the reader is introduced to the first round of knowledge production operated by the judiciary through legal proceedings against the perpetrators of the deportation of Jews from Bulgaria’s “new boundaries” in 1943. These proceedings were carried out in 1945, only a few years after the historical events they were supposed to judge, and were among the first such legal prosecutions in postwar Europe. The chapter unequivocally shows how political and social concerns external to the court impacted the verdict and served as the “founding moment” (“le moment fondateur”, p. 82) for all later representations of these historical events. The next chapter deals with cultural productions from the 1950s and 1960s, most notably the film *Zvezdi/Sterne (Stars)*, which was the result of a joint production by East Germany and Bulgaria. The film is a fictional recreation of the Nazi era in Bulgaria. The analyses in this chapter focus on the East German and Bulgarian producers’ clashing visions of what the film was about. The clash was entirely due to the two countries’ differ-

ing political agendas. The third chapter delves into the destiny of a few minutes of poorly edited film footage taken in 1943 that documented the deportation of Jews from northern Greece. Their interpretation within the context of the Cold War of the 1960s and 1970s constitutes the gist of the analysis in this chapter. The fourth is a detailed analysis of the post-communist stakes in redefining the memory of the Holocaust in Bulgaria. In this context, the author introduces interesting material related to various aspects of Bulgarian society after 1989. The fifth, as already mentioned, refines that analysis by introducing a neighbouring actor, the Republic of North Macedonia, and the difficulties surrounding its nation-making process. This process was, in many respects, in direct conflict with the Bulgarian one. The conclusion rounds off the complex whole of the book while discussing some “challenges of writing” (“désfis d’écriture”, p. 351).

To sum up, we are confronted with a complex and multisited analysis of a difficult topic, one that has taken a long time to be treated properly not only by Bulgaria but also by other European countries that were complicit in the Nazi project to exterminate the Jews. The author has provided us with a detailed and honest account of the meanderings of historical interpretations that silenced some parts of history in order to promote only the desired and laudable parts. The end result is a *tour de force* of modern scholarship. It offers a lesson on how to write a fair and non-partisan account of the uses and misuses of history within national, regional and global historiographies. For all these reasons, Nadège Ragaru’s book ought to be translated into English. An English translation would make it accessible to a much broader public than the present French edition does. The book would thus find readers across the globe among both professionals and the lay public interested in the Holocaust, Eastern Europe and European struggles for a unified memory of its manifold pasts. In addition, this great methodological text, which uses rich descriptions and aspires to holism, will become accessible to English-speaking students of history, memory and (post-) communism world-wide.

Dr Jasna Čapo
Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research
Šubićeva 42
Zagreb
Croatia