

The Jews and Bulgaria's "rescue" narrative

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During the Second World War, 48,000 Bulgarian Jews avoided being deported. By analyzing a wide-range of previously unavailable sources, Ragaru shows how a collective narrative was constructed around this fact—one that has been used for political purposes down to the present.

Reviewed: Nadège Ragaru, *"Et les Juifs bulgares furent sauvés..." Une histoire des savoirs sur la Shoah en Bulgarie* ("And the Bulgarian Jews were saved": A history of Shoah knowledge in Bulgaria), Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, 2020, 382 p., 29 €.

The starting point of Nadège Ragaru's book is the presumed "exceptionalness" of Bulgaria's trajectory in avoiding the deportation of the near-totality of its Jewish community--some 48,000 Jews--during the Second World War, when the country was an "ally" of the Third Reich. While the Jews of the "old" kingdom (that is, Bulgaria prior to the redrawing of its borders in 1941) did avoid deportation, this was not the case for Jews in the territories that Bulgaria occupied between 1941 and 1944 (namely, northern Greece, the Serbian district of Pirot, and the current Republic of North Macedonia). Though the fate of these Jewish populations was complex, a narrative emerged and was transmitted that focused on "the rescue of Bulgaria's Jews," in a way that rendered invisible deportations in the occupied territories as well as the "old" kingdom's anti-Jewish policies.

The book endeavors to reconstruct the conditions of production and circulation of the dominant "rescuing the Bulgarian Jews" narrative, bringing to light the plurality of possible interpretations and uses of the past arising as much from the diversity of actors as from the variety of geographic levels (local, national, and transnational). The book's structure reflects these heterogeneous forms of knowledge production, forged at the intersection and/or confrontation of judicial, artistic, activist, and academic spaces. Each of the five chapters is presented as a stop on an exploratory journey through these various spaces (p. 229). While there exists no "unified vision" of how to write about the past, these different forms of knowledge production (judicial, cultural, fictional, and historical) nonetheless "circumscribe the realm of the thinkable and the believable" (p. 16) concerning anti-Jewish persecution and crimes during the Second World War. The multiple approaches converge on a narrative thread that privileges Bulgarian exceptionalism, collective innocence, and the country's heroic past.

Spatial-temporal horizons

The story of the "rescuing the Bulgarian Jews" belongs to a long history. Though it is possible to follow, thanks to the book's meticulous reconstruction, the evolution of knowledge production over seventy-five years (from 1944 to 2019), it is never presented in a linear and homogeneous fashion. The narrative and its uses were shaped by social, (geo)political, and diplomatic contexts. The postwar context was marked by the denunciation of fascism and by revolutionary enthusiasm, which assigned the heroism of the Bulgarian people a leading role. Later, in a context defined by the Cold War, the "rescue" narrative served to legitimate the ruling communist regime and its main leader, Todor Zhivkov. The end of communism brought to light other ways of viewing the past and using the "rescue" motif. Anti-communist discourse, as articulated notably by exiles who had returned to Bulgaria, reshuffled "heroic roles" (p. 249) and rehabilitated old regime elites. As Bulgaria, in the early 2000s, took its first steps towards joining the European Union, the "rescue" narrative contributed to the process of establishing the country as a credible EU partner.

The book's rhythm is hardly conventional. Sometimes it dwells extensively on specific moments. This is the case, for instance, of the foundational moment that produced the earliest judicial knowledge: in 1944--almost contemporaneous with the

events themselves--one of the first special jurisdictions in Europe for handling crimes against the Jews was established. It can also be seen in its focus on the 1959 film *Zvezdi/Sterne* (Stars). The book thus dwells on turning points--but not only. Ragaru also traces the "social lives" of a particular object: images from the Greek territories in 1943, which are the only visual source relating to the deportations. These images were initially documentary recordings of the events, but in the 1960s, they became legal evidence during the trial of the former Nazi minister to Sofia, Adolf-Heinz Beckerle. Finally, beginning in the 1980s, the pictures served to support the "rescue" thesis, notably in museums and cultural institutions throughout the world, such as the exhibit catalog of West Berlin's Kunsthalle in 1984 and a screening at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington in 1988. The odyssey of this visual archive can thus be considered as "a passageway through socialist era" (p. 220). In the last two chapters, we leave the socialist period, but past, present, and future continue to collide.

Like her approach to temporality, Ragaru's understanding of spatiality is particularly fruitful. To constitute her object of research, she chose to examine the various spaces in which actors are inscribed, as well as their stories. Bulgaria thus becomes "a knowledge production space" (p. 19). This approach raises several methodological issues. Ragaru has traveled extensively, collecting an impressive number of sources along the way. In addition to interviews with the knowledge producers, her exploration of archives in Bulgaria, Macedonia, Serbia, Germany, Israel and the United States as well as her translations allow for a thorough reconstruction of what happened. The book examines the paths spanning national, regional, and international spaces through which the nationalization of the past circulates (p. 151). The landmark 1945 trial in the seventh chamber of Sofia's People's Court, established to judge the perpetrators of the "persecution of the Jews" (p. 27), participated in political dynamics extending beyond Bulgaria itself, notably "international demands" arising from "the international circulation of conceptions of the postwar" (p. 36-37). The analysis of the film *Zvezdi/Sterne*, which was coproduced in 1959 by Bulgaria and East Germany, sheds light, in turn, on the "international circulation of the symbolization of Jewish suffering" (p. 141), just as the distinct trajectory of the visual archive of the 1943 deportations reveals a "topography of connections" and acts as "point of intersection between Bulgaria, West Germany, Israel, and the United States" (p. 151). The book has much to say about circulation, but also about the transnationalization process. Thus European expansion in 2004 and 2007 shaped the production and mobilization of knowledge of the Shoah. European institutions were particularly targeted as transnational arenas in which "rescue" diplomacy could redeploy. The European Union also became the arena to which historical

disagreements were brought, as evidenced in the study of the diplomatic conflict between Bulgaria and the Macedonian activists who demanded that the responsibility of the Bulgarian state in the deportation and extermination of Jews be recognized.

An array of actors and knowledges

Over the course of her demonstration, Ragaru presents an extensive array of protagonists, promoting variations and interpretations of the "rescue" narrative based on their own distinct interests: cultural figures (museum curators, filmmakers, writers) legal actors (judges, lawyers), academics (notably historians), agents of the Bulgarian state (intelligence officers, diplomats, legislators), journalists, archivists, and officials of European and international organizations.

The book calls attention to the importance of multiple and divided "Jewish worlds" in the production of knowledge about the Shoah. Jewish survivors were key actors. For instance, a network of Jewish Bulgarian communists worked to bring the presumed perpetrators of crimes against the Jews to justice. We discover the internal debates of the Bulgarian Jewish community, which was polarized between challenging the narrative and denouncing Bulgaria's complicity, on the one hand, and celebrating the "rescue of the Bulgarian Jews", on the other. Definitions of Jewishness diverged, particularly between communists and Zionists. Divisions tend to be generational--especially now that descendants of Bulgarian and Macedonian Jews who migrated to the United States and Israel are beginning to write about and remember wartime experiences. To these divisions must be added the competition between commemoration initiatives in different geographic spaces--between Jewish communities in the Balkans, Israel, and the United States.

Bulgarian academic circles, particularly historians, are also central to knowledge production. The post-1989 political context contributed to a reorganization of the production of historical writing about anti-Jewish persecution in Bulgaria, with the creation of private research centers and a "European knowledge economy" (p. 288) and the digitization of archival materials. While the author notes that the mid-2000s were characterized by "significant internal differentiation in the academic field itself" (p. 282), she also identifies an increasing overlap between scholarly research and commemorative initiatives occurring at this time. This intersection between expert, academic, and activist knowledge rejoins the larger questions the book raises about

the co-production of knowledge. From the outset, Ragaru declares that she seeks to go beyond sterile dichotomies between "profane knowledge" and "professional knowledge." She does not contrast the allegedly erroneous memory of actors to the "transcendent" work of researchers striving for veracity. Since "facts and narratives are viewed as coproducers of factuality" (p. 17), one wonders where the study will lead and how this deconstruction of the "rescue" narrative will be received.

Making silence speak

By studying the production of knowledge about the past, the book offers a particularly stimulating reflection on silences, euphemisms, and obliterations--in several different realms. The court's verdict in the 1945 trial failed to recognize the exceptional nature of the violence against the Jews, laying the groundwork for the "theme of collective innocence that to this day remains constitutive of public narratives about the Shoah in Bulgaria" (p. 33). Postwar Bulgarian cinema examined these silences but was also silent itself. Hence the responsibility of Bulgarian authorities in the deportation of Jews from northern Greece is ignored in *Zvezdi/Sterne* and the persecution of Jews is downplayed.

Silences also raise methodological questions. How does one make silent archives speak? How does one bring back visual materials and sounds? Ragaru offers original proposals--and this is one of the great merits of her book. By reconstituting the attendance of trials with the help of photographs, one has the feeling of "entering the courtroom" (p. 51). Along the same lines, the minutes of the parliamentary session relating to the impeachment of the vice president of the Bulgarian National Assembly in July 2000, with its noises and rejoinders, creates the momentary sensation that we are witnessing these debates. Through a judicious comparison of the same scene of *Zvezdi/Sterne* in the initial script, the storyboard prior to filming, and the film's final version as Ragaru subtly transcribes it, one sees the different cuts and elisions that occurred. Through "exercises in estrangement" (p. 152) in archival inventories before a return to cinematic shots, she explores techniques of "verbalizing images" (p. 151) from the visual archive of 1943.

With its rich cartography of actors and sites of knowledge production, the book makes one eager to learn more about a rare level of analysis that it fails to consider: the personal, intimate, and familial level. One wonders, along the lines of the questions

raised by Raphaëlle Branche's recent study of "family silences" during the Algerian War,¹ what role these domains played in passing on the "rescue" narrative? By complicating the dominant narrative about the "rescue of the Bulgarian Jews," Ragaru's book opens new and extremely fruitful avenues in the historiography of the Shoah (in southeastern Europe) and the Cold War, as well as in the methodology, epistemology, and politics of representing the past.

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¹ Raphaëlle Branche, *Papa, qu'as-tu fait en Algérie ? Enquête sur un silence familial*, Paris, La découverte, 2020.