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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Troebst, S. (2013). Macedonian Historiography on the Holocaust in Macedonia under Bulgarian Occupation. *Südosteuropäische Hefte*, 2(1), 107-114. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-360907>

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Stefan Troebst

Macedonian Historiography on the Holocaust in Macedonia under Bulgarian Occupation

At the end of the interwar period, 7,762 Jews were living on the territory of today's Republic of Macedonia. In late March 1943, 7,136 of them were rounded up and interned by Bulgarian police and deported by train from Skopje to the German extermination camp of Treblinka in occupied Poland where most of them were killed instantly. After the war, in what since 1944 was the People's Republic of Macedonia within the Democratic Federative Republic of Yugoslavia only 200 Jews were left.¹

In this presentation I will look at how the industrial annihilation of the Jews of Macedonia is reflected in Macedonian historiography. I add that by "Macedonia" I mean Vardar Macedonia, here in particular the part occupied in 1941 and in 1942 annexed by Bulgaria until 1944. And by "Macedonian historiography" I have in mind research results published in Skopje. In the following, I concentrate on the historiography of the Communist period, that is, the years up to 1991, when the Socialist Republic of Macedonia was a constituent part of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia.

In general, it can be said that up to the mid-1980s, historians in Skopje—with very few exceptions—neglected the Holocaust completely. To cite a prominent example: The authoritative three-volume *Istorija na makedonskiot narod* ("History of the Macedonian People") of 1969, the first overall history published in Skopje, leaves it at a single sentence:

"[...] the Jews in Macedonia, in contrast to the Jews who lived in Bulgaria, were handed over to the Germans and have been deported from Macedonia on 11 March 1943, so that they would suffer the fate of their co-nationals [*sonarodnici*] of the territories occupied by Fascist Germany."²

And that was it. (It is telling that here not the Macedonians, but Jews in other parts of Europe are labeled as 'co-nationals' of the Jews from Macedonia.) Yet, even biographic publications on the small number—less than one hundred—of Macedonian Jews who fought in the ranks of the communist Tito partisans against Bulgarian occupation forces and the Wehrmacht avoided any reference to the Holocaust. This goes, for example, for the biography of Estrea Ovadia, a Jewess from Bitola proclaimed in 1953 "National Heroine of Yugoslavia". She had joined the partisans under the *nom de guerre* of "Mara" and was killed in August 1945 at the age of 22 in a skirmish with Bulgarian troops on Mount Kajmakčalan on the border to Greece.³ In the late 1940s and in the 1950s, at a time when *bratstvo i edinstvo*—Brotherhood

¹ Quoted after Case, Holly (2013): The Holocaust in Macedonia. In: Bringing the Dark Past to Light. The Reception of the Holocaust in Postcommunist Europe. Edited and with an introduction by John-Paul Himka and Joanna Beata Michlic Lincoln NE: University of Nebraska Press (in print).

² Institut za nacionalna istorija (ed.) (1969): *Istorija na makedonskiot narod*. Vol. 3: Periodot megu dvete svetski vojni i Narodnata Republika, 1918-1945 [History of the Macedonian nation. vol. 3: Interwar period and People's Republic 1918-1945]. Skopje: NIP Nova Makedonija, p. 287.

³ Ristevski, Stojan (1978): Estrea Ovadia-Mara. Životni put i revolucionarno delo [Estrea Ovadia-Mara. Life course and revolutionary deed]. Gornji Milanovac: Dečje novine.

and Unity – of the ‘peoples of Yugoslavia’ was on the agenda, ethnic differentiation below the level of the titular nations of the six republics seemed to be not appropriate. To the contrary, on the federal level supra-ethnic *jugoslavenstvo* – Yugoslavism – was the slogan of the day, and on the republican level the top-priority project was building a new and unified Macedonian nation.

In historiography things did not change even when in 1961 the leading Skopje daily *Nova Makedonija* published a series of article on “The Tragedy of the Jews from Macedonia” which gave a rather detailed picture on the events of 1943.⁴ Already in March 1958, a monument to the deported and exterminated Jews of Bitola – “our fellow citizens, victims of fascist terror” as the inscription read – had been erected. Despite the fact that in official politics of history and culture or remembrance the Holocaust from now on figured in Yugoslav Macedonia, in publications by Macedonian historians it did not. Jews still were mentioned exclusively as communist resistant fighters against the ‘fascist’ Bulgarian and German occupiers and as ardent supporters of what was called ‘the national liberation of Macedonia’ from foreign oppressors, that is Bulgarians, Germans, Albanians and Italians as well as Serbs although they for understandable reasons the latter were not explicitly mentioned.

The one and for a long time only exception to this rule was a lengthy article entitled “The Tragedy of the Jews from Macedonia” by the historian Aleksandar Matkovski, the leading expert on the Ottoman period at the Institute of National History in Skopje (and most probably also the author of the series in *Nova Makedonija* mentioned above). Matkovski’s article was published in 1958 in the institute’s official periodical *Glasnik* (“Review”)⁵, and in 1959 an English translation followed under the title “The Destruction of Macedonian Jewry in 1943” in the internationally influential yearbook of Yad VaShem in Israel.⁶ In 1962 then, Matkovski enlarged his article and turned it into a brochure, entitled again “The Tragedy of the Jews from Macedonia”.⁷

However, that was it for another twenty years. With Matkovski’s publications, the chapter Holocaust was opened and at the same time closed again in Macedonian historiography. Among the possible reasons for this two are quite obvious: First, in 1967 Yugoslavia cut off diplomatic relations with Israel due to the Six-Days War, and second, at the same time neighboring Bulgaria stepped up its campaign for the inclusion of the history of Macedonia into Bulgarian national history. Party officials, media and historians in Sofia argued that up to 1945 no such thing like a Macedonian nation had existed. In this perspective, the inhabitants of Macedonia had been predominantly Bulgarians and the history of the region from late antiquity to the end of World War II was considered to be a constituent part of the history of Bulgaria and the Bulgarian nation.⁸

⁴ Tragedijata na Evreite od Makedonija [The Tragedy of the Jews of Macedonia] (1961). In: *Nova Makedonija*, March 1961.

⁵ Matkovski, Aleksandar (1958): Tragedijata na Evreite od Makedonija [The Tragedy of the Jews of Macedonia]. In: *Glasnik na Institutot za nacionalna istorija* 2 (2).

⁶ Matkovski, Aleksandar (1959): The destruction of Macedonian Jewry in 1943. In: *Yad VaShem Studies* 3, p. 203–258.

⁷ Matkovski, Aleksandar (1962): Tragedijata na Evreite od Makedonija [The Tragedy of the Jews of Macedonia]. Skopje: Kultura (Istorijsko-popularna biblioteka. Edicija Od istorijata na NOB).

⁸ Troebst, Stefan (1983): Die bulgarisch-jugoslawische Kontroverse um Makedonien 1967-1982. München: R. Oldenbourg Verlag; Macedonian translation: Trebst, Stefan (1997): Bugarsko-jugoslovenskata kontroverza za Makedonija 1967-1982. Skopje: Institut za nacionalna istorija.

As a result, all historians in Skopje were ordered to counter Bulgarian claims on which ever epoch and period of Macedonian history.⁹ It is, of course, true that the deportation of Macedonian Jewry by Bulgarian occupation authorities in World War II would have been a welcome leverage for attacking Sofia, but due to Tito's pro-Arab stand the Jewish card could not be played by Skopje. Although a dozen or so of detailed studies on various aspects of the Bulgarian occupation of Vardar Macedonia in World War II were published by the Institute of National History there particularly in the 1970s, the Holocaust and Bulgarian anti-Jewish measures in annexed Vardar Macedonia were generally not covered.

It was once more Matkovski, the historian of the Ottoman centuries, who in 1983 broke the ban by publishing the first Macedonian-language "History of the Jews in Macedonia" (*Istorija na evreite vo Makedonija*) which contained an update of his 1962 brochure in the form of a 100-pages chapter on "The Deportation and Liquidation of the Jews of Macedonia".¹⁰ Here, Matkovski made ample use of Yugoslav as well as Bulgarian archival material available in Yugoslavia. He described in detail the diplomatic, political and legal preparation of the deportation of the Jews of Bitola, Skopje, Štip and other towns by Bulgarian authorities and their German allies, the personnel and the organization of the concentration camp for Jews in the Tobacco Factory in Skopje and the three transports by Bulgarian State Railway to Treblinka. Matkovski put a special focus on the liquidation of Jewish property – a topic until rather recently neglected not only by Bulgarian but also by German historiography on the Holocaust. The first systematic account on "the microeconomy of governmental antisemitism in Bulgaria" was published by Rumen Avramov just last year¹¹ whereas Götz Aly's book on how 'ordinary' Germans profited from the property of deported Jews appeared in 2005.¹² According to Matkovski, in the case of occupied Vardar Macedonia it were almost exclusively Bulgarian military and civilian authorities as well as the German School of Skopje which took over Jewish property, not, however, the Macedonian neighbors of the deported. If that indeed was so, it would come as a surprise having in mind the behavior of Germans, Bulgarians and others towards Jewish property.

Please allow me a personal reminiscence on Aleksandar Matkovski with whom I had quite a number of cups of coffee in the cafeteria of the Institute of National History in Skopje while being a graduate exchange student there in 1979 and 1980. The cafeteria, called *bife*, was the ideal place for *muabet* – a casual conversation – in an otherwise rather stiff and official surrounding. Matkovski, a white-haired gentleman born in 1922 in the wealthy mountain town of Kruševo, struck me as being decidedly urban, at least in the company of his predominantly rural colleagues. 'Matko', as everyone called him, was well-mannered and polyglot, and thus was the only historian of the institute who regularly published in West German, Soviet, Turkish, US and other periodicals. Being an Ottomanist and Orientalist

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Matkovski, Aleksandar (1983): *Istorija na evreite vo Makedonija* [A History of the Jews of Macedonia]. Skopje: Makedonska revija. See also idem (1982): *A History of the Jews of Macedonia*. Skopje: Macedonian Review Editions. Already in 1980, another Skopje historian had published a short overview on "the deportation of the Jews in 1943 and some other events" based on Matkovski's previous publications. See Budimovski, Dragoljub K. (1980): *Deportacija na Evreite 1943 godina i neкои drugi nastani*. In: Apostolski, Mihailo et al. (ed.): *Skopje vo NOV 1943-1945. Materijali od naučniot sober*. Skopje : Gradski odbor na SZB od NOV, p. 722.

¹¹ Avramov, Rumen (2012): „Spasenie“ i padenie. Mikroekonomika na državniia antisemitizim v Bilgariia 1940-1944 g. [“Rescue” and fall. The microeconomy of state-antisemitism in Bulgaria 1940-1944]. Sofia: Universitetsko izdatelstvo „Sv. Kliment Okhridski“.

¹² Aly, Götz (2005): *Hitlers Volksstaat. Raub, Rassenkrieg und nationaler Sozialismus*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer.

trained in Zagreb, Belgrade, Kairo, Bagdad and Istanbul, the range of his scholarly interest was much wider than the 500 years of what was called ‘the Turkish yoke’, encompassing not only the Holocaust, but also topics like the Skopje earthquake of 1963, early modern Macedonian mercenaries in Ukraine, the history of tobacco in the Balkans, Macedonian heraldry, and, in particular, foreign travelogues on Macedonia. I do not know whether his interest in Jewish history and the Shoah stems from a personal experience and at the time I missed the opportunity to ask him. I know that as a young man during the Bulgarian occupation he was a political prisoner and later on joined the Tito partisans. Maybe that explains something. He died in 1992. There is an interesting portrayal of Aleksandar Matkovski’s life and oeuvre on Youtube.¹³

Matkovski’s update of 1983 with its focus on the economic deprivation of the Macedonian Jews and the looting of their property then served as a blueprint for a document edition of 1,500 pages published in 1986 by the Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts entitled “The Jews in Macedonia during the Second World War Two (1941-1945)” (*Evreite vo Makedonija vo Vtorata svetska vojna, 1941-1945*). Co-editors were the historian Vera Veskovik-Vangeli of Cyril and Methodius University Skopje and the ethnographer and former Jewish partisan Žamila Kolonomos, whose *nom de guerre* was “Andžela”.¹⁴

The archival basis of this voluminous collection are documents from Macedonian and other Yugoslav archives as well as document copies from Bulgarian, German and other European archives in the possession of Yugoslav archives. The editors did not have direct access to archives in neighboring Bulgaria.¹⁵ While the 732 documents of this collection all are in Macedonian, there is a detailed English-language introduction¹⁶ as well as equally detailed document summaries in English.¹⁷ The publication of the collection was funded by the Fund “11 March 1943” donated by Alfred Melamed, a former citizen of Skopje then residing in Vienna¹⁸, and Simon Wiesenthal contributed an epilogue in Macedonian, English and German.¹⁹

Of particular importance is a 250-pages annex with “Lists of persons of Jewish origin in the concentration camp Skopje” containing the personal data of 7,148 Jews from Bitola, Gegvelija, Kumanovo, Skopje, Štip, Strumica, Veles and Udovo in Vardar Macedonia as well as from Preševo, Momčilgrad and Vranje in Bulgarian-occupied former Serbia who were

¹³ Ristoska, Roza (2001): Aleksandar Matkovski 1922-1992. Tetovo. URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XHoACA4fTZc>, last access: 29.07.2013. For biographic data on Matkovski see Georgievski, Taško (ed.) (1992): Spomenica posvetena na počiniot Aleksandar Matkovski, redoven člen na Makedonskata Akademija na Naukite i Umetnostite [Festschrift presented as a memorial to Aleksandar Matkovski, member of Macedonian Academy of Science and Arts]. Skopje: MANU.

¹⁴ See an oral history interview with Žamila Kolonomos taken by Jaša Almuli in Skopje on 24 November 1994 on the website of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum. URL: <http://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn512718>, last access: 29.07.2013.

¹⁵ Redakcija (1986): Voved [Introduction]. In: Kolonomos, Žamila, Vera Veskovik-Vangeli (ed.): *Evreite vo Makedonija vo Vtorata svetska vojna (1941-1945)*. Zbornik na dokumenti / The Jews in Macedonia during the Second World War (1941-1945). Collection of Documents. Skopje: Makedonska akademija na naukite i umetnostite, vol. 1, p. 5-6, here p. 5.

¹⁶ Ibid., vol. 1, p. 73-132. Whereas for the English-language introduction no author’s name is given, for the Macedonian version of the introduction Žamila Kolonomos’ name is given (Kolonomos, Žamila: Predgovor, ibid., vol. 1, p. 7-70, here p. 70).

¹⁷ Brief summaries of the documents arranged in chronological order, ibid., vol. 1, p. 235-333.

¹⁸ Ibid., vol. 1, p. 4.

¹⁹ Ibid., vol. 2, p. 1423-1426.

deported via Skopje to Treblinka. The lists contain first names, patronyms and surnames, exact addresses and birthdates as well as information on sex, kinship relations, profession and citizenship.²⁰ The lists have been compiled by Bulgarian and German authorities in the temporary concentration camp in Skopje in March 1943 and were handed over to the administration of the Treblinka extermination camp once the transports from Macedonia had arrived there.

Whereas Matkovski, while mentioning Jewish participation in the resistance movement against the occupiers, had spoken (in Macedonian) of “the *tragedy* of the Jews from Macedonia” and in English even of “the *destruction* of Macedonia Jewry”, the title of the 1986 collection, “The Jews in Macedonia during the Second World War”, was much less explicit, even neutral—and this despite the fact that the overwhelming number of the documents published here related to antisemitic legislation, to pressure on Jews by provincial and municipal authorities, to the looting of Jewish property and to the deportations to the Treblinka death camp in particular. How is that to be explained? The answer is given in two chapters of the introduction entitled “The Macedonian Jews in the National Liberation Movement and the Revolution” and “The first Partisan Detachments and the Jewish Participation in the National Liberation War”.²¹ The ‘dark history’ of the extermination of the Macedonian Jews is here in a way counterbalanced by the ‘bright history’ of anti-Fascist resistance of Jewish partisans, men and, in particular, women, like Estreja Ovadia mentioned above, Stela Kamhi, Adela Faradži and, last but not least co-editor Žamila Kolonomos herself. The collection of 1986 was a milestone for Macedonian historiography and could have been one for international Holocaust studies, had the document section not been exclusively in Macedonian, a language hardly accessible even to those non-Balkan scholars who read Polish or Russian.

While studying in Skopje in Tito’s time and later on working there for the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (nowadays OSCE) in the early 1990s, I did not have the possibility to meet Žamila Kolonomos personally, but I have watched the video of her long and impressive life history interview available on the website of the US Holocaust Memorial Center. I was, however, acquainted with Vera Veskovik-Vangeli, a liberal Marxist, ardent feminist and erudite Germanophile of Montenegrin origin and married to a Vlach who owned the largest collection of Meissen porcelain in Macedonia, if not in all of Yugoslavia. Vera’s role model was Rosa Luxemburg, the Polish-Jewish-German women’s lib activist and socialist theoretician to whom she dedicated a number of articles.

After 1991, the year the Republic of Macedonia rather involuntarily became an independent state, public interest in the Jewish history of the region and in the Holocaust rose considerably, and this both inside and outside Macedonia. Accordingly, a number of foreign publications on the topic were published in Macedonian and other languages, among them Aaron Assas book *Macedonia and the Jewish People* in 1994, which was first published in Jerusalem in 1972 in Hebrew²² and then 1994 in Skopje in English, Jennie Lebel’s *Tide and Wreck. History of the Jews of Vardar Macedonia*, first published in Israel in 1986 in Hebrew and

²⁰ Spisok na evreite, deportirani od Makedonija vo koncentracioniot logor Treblinka vo Polska / Register of the Jews deported from Macedonia to the Treblinka concentration camp in Poland. Ibid., vol. 2, p. 1161–1422.

²¹ Ibid., vol. 1, p. 96–118.

²² Assa, Aaron (1994): *Macedonia and the Jewish People*. Skopje: Macedonian Review.

in 2013 in Macedonian translation²³, and several others.²⁴ Of particular importance was the creation of the Holocaust Fund of the Jews from Macedonia and the founding of the Memorial Centre of the Holocaust of the Jews from Macedonia, both of which developed an intense publication activity.²⁵ As a consequence, in today's Republic of Macedonia the Holocaust is not only an important field of research for historians, but also a prominent feature in governmental politics of history and public culture of remembrance. Scholars of the communist era like Aleksandar Matkovski, Žamila Kolonomos and Vera Veskovik-Vangeli have contributed considerably to this favourable situation.

²³ Lebl, Ženi (1990): *Plima i slom. Iz istorije Jevreja Vardarske Makedonije*. Gornji Milanovac: Dečje novine; English translation: Lebel, Jennie (2008): *Tide and Wreck. History of the Jews of Vardar Macedonia* Bergenfield, NJ: Avotaynu; Macedonian translation: Lebl, Ženi (2013): *Plima i slom. Od istorijata na Evreite vo Vardarska Makedonija*. Skopje: Fond na holokaustot na Evreite od Makedonija.

²⁴ Birri-Tomovska, Kristina (2012): *Jews of Yugoslavia 1918-1941. A History of Macedonian Sephards*. Bruxelles et al.: Peter Lang.

²⁵ See, *pars pro toto*, Alboher, Šlomo (2010): *Evreite of Monastir. Makedonija. Životot i vremeto vo koe živeeše nekogašnata evrejska zaednica vo Monastir* [The Jews of Monastir, Macedonia. The life and times of the departed Jewish community of Monastir]. Skopje: Fond na holokaustot na Evreite od Makedonija; and Berenbaum, Michael (n.d.): *The Jews in Macedonia during WWII*. Skopje: Holocaust Fund of the Jews from Macedonia.

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