

THE STOLEN NARRATIVE OF THE BULGARIAN JEWS AND THE HOLOCAUST



JACKY COMFORTY
WITH MARTHA ALADJEM BLOOMFIELD
FOREWORD BY OMER BARTOV

The Stolen Narrative of the Bulgarian Jews and the Holocaust Review Highlights

Comforty, an award-winning filmmaker and oral historian, has written a counter narrative of Bulgarian Jews and Bulgaria's role in the Final Solution, challenging the belief that the Bulgarian government prevented the deportation of its Jews to Auschwitz, except for those in the newly occupied lands of Thrace and Macedonia. Based on primary sources and interviews with more than 60 Bulgarian war survivors, Comforty argues that Bulgaria was an ally to Nazi Germany, and King Boris III, far from being the "Bulgarian Schindler," was prepared to deport the Jews of mainland Bulgaria to the death camps. Moreover, the Bulgarian parliament passed the Law for the Defense of the Nation in 1941 (effective until 1944), which applied Nazi racial laws to Bulgaria's Jewish population. The deportation law, which would have initially deported some 8,000 Jews from Bulgaria to Auschwitz, was temporarily suspended because of the intervention of Bulgarian parliamentarians and members of the Orthodox hierarchy. Comforty notes that Bulgarians were not as anti-Semitic as their government, and in 1943, the king's death and the war's turning tide in favor of the Allies saved the Jews of Bulgaria from being sent to their deaths. The book includes valuable pictures, a timeline of events, and an extensive bibliography. Recommended. General readers through faculty.

— Choice

Jacky Comforty and Martha Bloomfield have done a service for the rest of us in shining a light on the dark and complex history of the Balkans. In an era of disinformation and fake news, their painstaking research has reclaimed this terrible episode in Jewish history for a wider audience and pushed aside those adept at manipulating it. It is an accessible and interesting read.

— Jerusalem Post

"What I find so powerful and moving in this book is the fine and delicate balance that it strikes between rejecting the self-serving story of how Bulgaria, alone of all other countries in Europe (with the partial exception of Denmark), and headed by its wily king, 'saved its Jews' and letting scores of witnesses tell their heart-wrenching stories of how they lived through those times.

"This book is thus an important corrective to the existing scholarship; but it is also a major contribution to the literature on the Holocaust in that it brings back the voices of the community itself, thereby allowing members of Bulgarian Jewry to tell their own story."

— Omer Bartov, Brown University

Drawing on a rich collection of oral and visual sources, most previously unknown, this book presents an account of Bulgarian Jews and Bulgaria's role in the Final Solution like no other book on its subject. First-person oral testimonies and accompanying graphics make for engaging, gripping, reading. An historical narrative at its best!

— Alvin Rosenfeld, Indiana University

This valuable contribution to the history of Bulgarian Jews and those under Bulgarian rule during the Holocaust offers a patiently assembled and processed collection of individual voices which blend into a telling polyphonic narrative. The myriad personal memories convincingly demystify well-established canonical stories and pay a deserved tribute to human decency.

— **Roumen Avramov, Centre for Advanced Studies Sofia**

An excellent combination of rich documentation, critical study, responsible research and grounded insights. A flowing, important, fascinating historical narrative--the results of years of diligent work. Highly recommended!

— **Shlomo Shealtiel, Yad Yaari Center of Hashomer Hatzair Research**

Jacky Comforty is not only an avid collector of historical memories and visual sources of the Jews of Bulgaria, but also—as this book proves—the voice of the survivors. The book tells a story on the Shoah in the Balkans which is much more complex than the established varieties: a story of deportation and annihilation, but also one of solidarity and rescue.

— **Stefan Troebst, Leipzig University**

A compelling and very personal book whose rich, poignant testimonies provide a welcome addition to recent scholarship on writing and remembering Jewish history in Bulgaria. Alongside Jewish witness accounts, a wealth of photographs bring back to life the experiences of Jewish persecution during World War Two and successfully reclaim the Bulgarian Jews' roles in their own 'rescue.' The social lives of this collection of testimonies may also invite scholars to consider this volume as an object of research in its own right.

— **Nadège Ragaru, Sciences Po, Paris**

Documentary filmmaker Jacky Comforty explores this heartwarming story in *The Stolen Narrative of the Bulgarian Jews and Holocaust*, which he wrote with Michigan writer Martha Aladjem Bloomfield. Comforty traveled the world to interview historians, political scientists, military analysts and other experts to develop an unvarnished picture of Bulgarian actions during the war.

— **Detroit Jewish News**

The Stolen Narrative of the Bulgarian Jews and the Holocaust fills a lacuna in Holocaust history and in Bulgarian collective memory. It serves as a reminder of both the fragility of memory, its susceptibility to reshaping, and the gravity of memory, its ability to affect a population's view of itself and even affect a nation's international and political standing. Altogether, the book is an essential record of a narrative, the memories of the survivors—that have been repressed for far too long.

— **Sephardic Horizons**

The Story Behind The Story

A new book *The Stolen Narrative of the Bulgarian Jews and the Holocaust* by internationally acclaimed documentary filmmaker, Jacky Comforty, with award-winning author, Martha Aladjem Bloomfield, has come out this April 2021, published by Rowman and Littlefield, in the series, Lexington Studies in Jewish Literature.

Endorsed by scholars from the United States, Bulgaria, Israel, Germany, and France, this new book shares a complex tapestry of voices and memories previously underrepresented, ignored and denied.

“We offer this alternative perspective on the Holocaust in Bulgaria that includes stolen, silenced, but now reclaimed voices who experienced, witnessed and survived the tragedies,” said Comforty. “We include oral histories of our people and friends who helped them, which fills a void in the Bulgarian Holocaust literature--specifically first-hand accounts of memory of survivors, eyewitnesses, photographs, official publications, laws, and newspaper articles. We reclaim the Jewish narrative based on our peoples’ experiences, put faces and people in places, contextualize and personalize our history, reconstruct the puzzle, praise those who helped protect the Jews and share their exemplary acts of humanity for future generations.”

Bloomington, Indiana resident, Jacky Comforty was born in Israel in 1954 to Bulgarian Jews who had immigrated there in 1950. During the 1980s, as a young filmmaker of comedies, Comforty lived and worked in Stuttgart, West Germany. During the summers, his parents visited him from Israel in Stuttgart. They drove all over Germany, Austria and Italy, spinning stories and ideas for short no-budget silent comedies about heroes and anti-heroes, which they would film upon return. His dad and he wrote the scripts. He directed. His father acted. A friend filmed. His mom helped with production and costumes.

“During one of their visits, my parents told me, ‘You know, there is one story you must tell, which is how we were saved during the Holocaust.’ I had never heard their story before and started recording this conversation on an audio-cassette tape. The stories they told were exciting, anecdotal. I did not understand the context but became aware of their wartime experiences. Bits and pieces. It was September, 14, 1984. This was the beginning of my new journey. Upon their return to Israel, my parents began to collect literature for me on the subject.

“After the Holocaust, my grandmother, Rachele Comforty, emigrated from Bulgaria and settled in the ancient city of Jaffa, Israel, where she lived for the rest of her life.

“One summer afternoon in 1988, three years after her death, I went to her apartment to begin the task of sorting through her possessions. The apartment had been left untouched. Everything was covered with sheets for protection from the fine desert dust. We opened chests, drawers and closets and found shoe boxes filled with photographs, thousands of photographs, postcards, notes, letters, recipes. They were all about life in Bulgaria before and during the Holocaust. Here was my family at the turn of the 20th century, stiffly posed in photographers’ studios. Pictures included my grandfather and other family members as soldiers in World War I. And there was my grandmother, a young girl, playing the guitar on her front porch in 1923, cousins posing in their bathing suits at a Black Sea resort in 1937, my grandfather wearing the yellow Jewish star in 1943.”

Comforty decided to keep the photos and preserve them. In return, they guided him in his search for answers to a much larger story of survival amid genocide and ethnic cleansing. He began reading all he could find, building a library, narrowing down the stories about which he planned to collect information, and compiling lists of potential interviewees who represented the spectrum of the Jewish experience in Bulgaria. The journey took him to archives and people, stories, documents, artifacts, and images in many countries including USA, Bulgaria, Israel, Spain, Northern Macedonia, Greece, and Germany. A puzzle with endless pieces. He could not stop filming interviews and continues doing it today. He cannot stop collecting and preserving this history. His feeling is--what is not collected today, may not be here tomorrow.

For more than thirty-five years, Comforty gathered stories from Bulgarian Jews who survived the Holocaust in Bulgaria and eye-witnesses. The research and the primary evidence he has collected helps reconstruct and contextualize social and historical reality and aims to show how history not only affects common people, but also how common people can positively impact history. These peoples' stories provide invaluable examples of humanity amid cruelty, social justice, friendship, responsibility, and resilience during a time of institutional anti-Semitism, persecution, and planned annihilation.

So far, among his many documentaries, he has created two films about Bulgaria's Jews during the Holocaust: *The Optimists* and *Balkan Jazz*. *The Optimists* won numerous international awards including: the 2001 Peace Prize, Honorable Mention at the International Forum of New Cinema Berlin International Film Festival, the 2001 CINE Golden Eagle; the 2001 Best Documentary, Hope and Dreams Film Festival, 2000, First Prize, Jerusalem Film Festival, The Jewish Experience.

A number of years ago, Comforty received several emails with questions from Martha Aladjem Bloomfield, an East Lansing, Michigan resident, who was researching Bulgarian Jews and interviewing elderly Jews who survived the Holocaust in Bulgaria. She is an author, oral historian, researcher, and artist, who had retired from the Michigan Historical Museum with an abundance of skills and expertise. Comforty answered her and also realized she just might be able to help him with his myriad of projects so they met and decided to collaborate. She insisted, however, it was time for him to write a book on the Bulgarian Jews and the Holocaust to give the subject more visibility and accessibility. Authoring a book was a totally new concept for him since he identified himself as a filmmaker! But he was ready to take the giant step and she was ready to help based on her extensive experience writing books and in the museum world. Thus began their partnership in earnest.

"We had the foresight and insight to bring this important story to life in a book based on his oral history interviews and photographs and documents," Bloomfield said. "Our multitude of verbal and visual abilities would complement each others' and we could inspire one another to collaborate effectively, sensitively, resolutely and tenaciously."

"And this is only the beginning of our partnership," said Comforty. "Currently we are working on a multi-part documentary series based on the same content as this book."

The Authors



Jacky Comforty is an award-winning documentary filmmaker, oral historian and media creator who has worked for over thirty-five years creating films and videos in the United States, Germany, Israel, and Bulgaria. He has worked on groundbreaking films in Holocaust Studies, Inclusive Education and Applied Media. He is the owner of a large photographic, film and audio archives of historical and scholarly significance to Holocaust Studies, the history of World War II and more specifically the Jews in Bulgaria and their heritage. Recently, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum purchased his oral histories about the Holocaust in Bulgaria and Europe for archiving.

He is the director, editor, producer and distributor of three full-length documentaries about the Holocaust: two films about Bulgaria's Jews during the Holocaust: *The Optimists* (www.theoptimists.com) and *Balkan Jazz*, (www.balkan-jazz.com); and *In the Shadow of Memory* (<https://comforty.com/blog/in-the-shadow-of-memory>) about multi-generational effects of trauma. Currently, he is editing a new, multi-part documentary series about Bulgaria and its Jews. *The Optimists* won: the 2001 Peace Prize, Honorable Mention at the International Forum of New Cinema Berlin International Film Festival; the 2001 CINE Golden Eagle; the 2001 Best Documentary, Hope and Dreams Film Festival; and the 2000, First Prize, Jerusalem Film Festival, The Jewish Experience.



Martha Aladjem Bloomfield is an award-winning author, oral historian, artist and independent scholar, who has written several books about immigrants, migrants and the formerly homeless. In an effort to help dissipate prejudice and discrimination and foster civic engagement through positive dialogue, she conducts oral histories to discover peoples' voices and stories to share with others.

Her first book, *The Sweetness of Freedom, Stories of Immigrants* (co-author, Steve Ostrander) (Michigan State University Press, 2010) based on oral histories won a national IPPY Award (an Independent Publisher Book Award, Silver Medal for Multicultural Adult Non-Fiction) and a Michigan Notable Book Award, 2011. *My Eyes Feel They Need to Cry, Stories from the Formerly Homeless* (Michigan State University Press, 2013) is also based on oral histories as well as *Hmong Americans in Michigan*, (Michigan State University Press, 2014) a first book about Hmong people in Michigan. *Romanies in Michigan* (Michigan State University Press, 2019) is groundbreaking as it is the first book in the United States to include oral histories of Romanies.

We are available to give presentations and interviews about our new book. To explore options, or for more information please email us at info@the-stolen-narrative.org or visit our website <https://the-stolen-narrative.org>

Photos



Jewish and Bulgarian women do laundry at a stream ca 1910.
Photo courtesy of The Comforty Collection.



My Grandpa Rachamim Conforty as soldier sitting on the
back (L) of a camel for a group picture, 1917.
Photo courtesy of The Comforty Collection.



Braniks in uniform march towards the swearing ceremony with swastika.
Image courtesy of The Comforty Collection.



Bulgarian Braniks, in uniforms, salute in Nazi style.
Image courtesy of The Comforty Collection.



Rachel, Mimi , Aron and Rachamim Comforty in 1943. Their son, Bitush, is in a labor camp and missing from the picture.
Photo courtesy of the Comforty Collection.



Jewish forced laborers walk to work in 1942. In the background, we can see the tents of the labor camp. Every working day starts with a march from camp to the work site which was sometimes breathtaking but so was the hard work.
Photo Courtesy of the Comforty Collection.



The tobacco warehouse yard, in Dupnitsa. First, all the people left by foot to the train station. Lastly, this truck leaves loaded with a baby who was born in the warehouse, his family, and old people who had difficulties to walk to the Dupnitsa train station.

Image courtesy of The Comforty Collection.



Jews who were held at Balkan Tabak are walking to the Dupnitsa train station, accompanied by armed military.

Image Courtesy Comforty Collection.



Ika, (L) Vicky, and their father, Jacques, in the yard of the house they were living in the Ghetto in Pleven Between May 1943 and September 1944. Ika's Jewish star is visible.
Photo Courtesy Comforty Collection.



Jacky Comforty interviewed Ikonom Boris Kharalampiev in Pazardjik in summer 1990 who helped stop the deportations of the Jews of his hometown.
Photo courtesy of The Comforty Collection.

"Everyone is entitled to his own faith. No one should violate the intimate, spiritual life of another. That's how I think now, that's how I have thought in the past, and if I live any longer, that's how I'll think then." - Ikomom Boris Kharalampiev

Endorsed by scholars from the United States, Bulgaria, Israel, Germany and France.

What I find so powerful and moving in this book is the fine and delicate balance that it strikes between rejecting the self-serving story of how Bulgaria, alone of all other countries in Europe (with the partial exception of Denmark), and headed by its wily king, 'saved its Jews' and letting scores of witnesses tell their heart-wrenching stories of how they lived through those times.

This book is thus an important corrective to the existing scholarship; but it is also a major contribution to the literature on the Holocaust in that it brings back the voices of the community itself, thereby allowing members of Bulgarian Jewry to tell their own story."

— **Omer Bartov, John P Birkelund Distinguished Professor of European History, Department of History, Brown University**

Drawing on a rich collection of oral and visual sources, most previously unknown, this book presents an account of Bulgarian Jews and Bulgaria's role in the Final Solution like no other book on its subject. First-person oral testimonies and accompanying graphics make for engaging, gripping, reading. An historical narrative at its best!

— **Alvin Rosenfeld, Center for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism, Indiana University**

This valuable contribution to the history of Bulgarian Jews and those under Bulgarian rule during the Holocaust offers a patiently assembled and processed collection of individual voices which blend into a telling polyphonic narrative. The myriad personal memories convincingly demystify well-established canonical stories and pay a deserved tribute to human decency.

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An excellent combination of rich documentation, critical study, responsible research and grounded insights. A flowing, important, fascinating historical narrative—the results of years of diligent work. Highly recommended!

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A compelling and very personal book whose rich, poignant testimonies provide a welcome addition to recent scholarship on writing and remembering Jewish history in Bulgaria. Alongside Jewish witness accounts, a wealth of photographs bring back to life the experiences of Jewish persecution during World War Two and successfully reclaim the Bulgarian Jews' roles in their own 'rescue.' The social lives of this collection of testimonies may also invite scholars to consider this volume as an object of research in its own right.

— **Nadège Ragaru, Sciences Po, Paris**

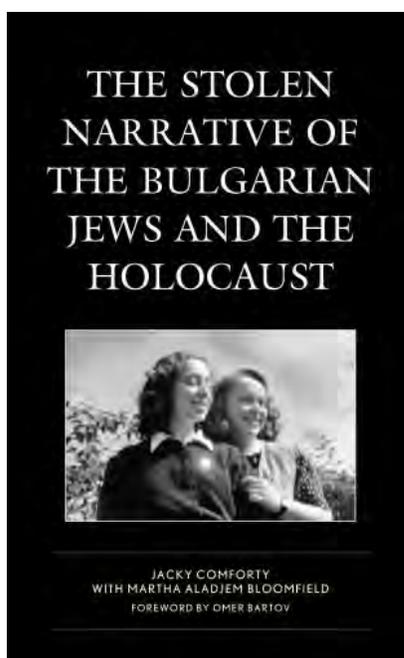


Jacky Comforty with Martha Bloomfield

THE STOLEN NARRATIVE OF THE BULGARIAN JEWS AND THE HOLOCAUST

Lanham: Lexington Books, 2021, ISBN: 978-1-7936-3291-3

Reviewed by Jason Hensley¹



Collective memory refers to a memory shared by a group of people. Oftentimes countries attempt to shape a collective memory for their populace, specifically of crucial events in that country's history. Memory is powerful. It can be used to inflame a population's fears or to inspire national pride. Yet, oftentimes, memory does not and cannot fully equate with history. History is complex while memory is often one perspective. History encompasses all motivations and memory often simplifies. *The Stolen Narrative of the Bulgarian Jews and the Holocaust* is an attempt by Jacky Comforty and Martha Bloomfield to add a further perspective to Bulgaria's memory, and the international community's memory, of what took place in Bulgaria during the Holocaust. It seeks to correct what Comforty and Bloomfield see as a nationalistic and inaccurate narrative of rescue and kindness towards Bulgaria's Jewish population. This distorted memory, the authors write, originated only a few decades ago in the early 1990s. With the fall of Communism, Bulgaria's King Simeon sought to regain power. After all, rewriting both Bulgaria's role and the world's memory of Bulgaria's role in the Holocaust could certainly enhance his prestige. Thus began a campaign to paint Bulgaria and its former king, King Boris III, as a nation and monarch that rescued and cared for its Jewish population, despite Nazi advances to the contrary (p. 305).

By looking at popular sources, one can easily establish that Bulgaria is seen as a nation that protected its Jews. In 2005, *HaAretz* reported that “more than 50 representatives of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations” commended Bulgaria’s 1943 decision to refuse the Nazi order to deport the

nation’s Jews.² In 2013, the Anti-Defamation League invited the President of Bulgaria to address its centennial gala. In his remarks, President Plevneliev dramatically professed Bulgaria’s rescuer role: “We, Bulgarians, made it clear that it is within the power of the civil society and ordinary people to change history; that through

unwavering determination and resolute resistance even the worst of evils may be averted.”³ A few years later, in 2017, President Plevneliev received the Friends of Zion award to acknowledge the 50,000 Jews that Bulgaria

saved during the Holocaust.⁴

Comforty and Bloomfield set out to correct the record. Using the transcripts of over one hundred interviews, the authors record the suffering that came upon Bulgaria’s Jewish population. Indeed, tens of thousands of people were not sent to Nazi death camps, but they were assaulted, hated, and incarcerated by their own government (pp. 118, 196, 213). This book provides a counter to the collective memory that has slowly seeped into society about Bulgaria and its role in the Holocaust. Through the transcripts of these interviews, the survivors themselves speak, powerfully relating their suffering and detailing their experiences. Their independent interviews corroborate one another, weaving together the “stolen narrative” of the survivors. This isn’t a government’s attempt to reshape memory. This is the people themselves giving their own testimony.

As indicated, this book is almost entirely transcripts from video interviews. Each interview includes a brief description of when and where it took place, and each chapter gives a short introduction that helps to tie the interviews together. The book is split into eight sections, each of which has a handful of chapters. The first section discusses Jewish identity in the Balkans and considers the community’s Iberian roots. The second examines the history of the Jewish community in Bulgaria from its origins to the early 1930s. The third considers life for the Bulgarian Jewish community starting in 1933, after Hitler came into power in Germany. After that, the community’s experience while Germany was initiating and carrying out the Final Solution is related in the next section. Part five is unique in that it follows the experiences of three specific survivors, detailing their harrowing experiences and afflictions. This section is devoted to unearthing that stolen narrative, to presenting to the world what Bulgaria’s Jews really did have to endure. The sixth part looks at the community’s experience after the war. Part seven considers the development of a new collective memory, Bulgaria’s rescuer narrative, described as “a myth” by Comforty and Bloomfield (p. 285). The final part contains reflections on the community’s experiences, survivors praise those who did help them and contemplate what their survival meant.

Overall, Comforty and Bloomfield succeed in challenging the popular narrative of Bulgaria and its government as rescuers. Instead, they demonstrate that antisemitism existed, and the government purposefully allied itself with the Nazis, deported over 10,000 Jews, and sent tens of thousands of its Jewish citizens to forced-labor camps. Comforty and Bloomfield’s method is extremely effective: one survivor after another speaks and supports what the survivors before and after them presented. The testimonies weave together to create a new narrative.

The largest challenge to this book, however, is not the opposing viewpoint. The testimonies recorded in the manuscript are strong enough to stand against the official narrative. Perhaps it is positive that the book’s greatest opponent is not opposing scholarship. Instead, the biggest challenge could be the misprints and typos, which unfortunately distract the reader and make it more difficult to follow the interviews.

The Stolen Narrative of the Bulgarian Jews and the Holocaust fills a lacuna in Holocaust history and in Bulgarian collective memory. It serves as a reminder of both the fragility of memory, its susceptibility to reshaping, and the gravity of memory, its ability to affect a population’s view of itself and even affect a nation’s international and political standing. Altogether, the book is an essential record of a narrative, the memories of the survivors—that have been repressed for far too long.

¹ Jason Hensley, PhD, teaches Holocaust studies at Gratz College. He is a fellow of the Michael LaPrade Holocaust Education Institute of the Anti-Defamation League, a member of Civic Spirit’s teacher education cohort, and the award-winning author of ten books. His work has been featured in *The Huffington Post* as well as the *BBC*, and he served as the historical advisor for a Holocaust documentary.

² “U.S. Jews Praise Bulgaria for Saving Its Jews,” *HaAretz*, February 15, 2005.

<https://www.sephardichorizons.org/Volume12/Issue1/Hensley.html>

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³ Rosen Plevneliev, quoted in “Remembering the Rescue of Bulgaria’s Jews,” Anti-Defamation League, March 12, 2018, <https://www.adl.org/news/op-ed/remembering-the-rescue-of-bulgarias-jews>.

⁴ Katrin Gendova, “The Unheard Story: Bulgaria’s Rescue of 50,000 Jews During the Holocaust,” *The Algemeiner*, September 20, 2017.

Book Review: 'The Stolen Narrative of the Bulgarian Jews and the Holocaust'

By Louis Finkelman - 04/21/2022 3:30 PM



Jews who were held at Balkan Tabak are walking toward the Dupnitsa train station. From there they would be shipped via Lom and Vienna to Treblinka. (Image Courtesy Comforty Collection)

A key part of the survival of nearly 50,000 Bulgarian Jews came from timing.

Compared with the fate of Jews in other European countries during the horrible years of Nazi conquest, a high percentage of the Jews of Bulgaria survived. The numbers of the Jewish population of Bulgaria in 1939 was 52,000. After expulsions, 48,000 remained. and 13,000 Jews were added from annexed territories.

Who deserves credit for the survival of the majority of Bulgarian Jews?

Various interested political interests have championed their favorite heroes in this story. In the immediate aftermath of the war, Bulgaria was a Communist state: school texts explained that the Communist Party had protected the Jews. When the Communists lost power in 1989, nationalists lauded the wartime King of Bulgaria, Boris III, as having saved his Jewish subjects by skillfully resisting German demands. Michael bar Zohar

agreed, declaring the King a rescuer in his 1998 book, *Beyond Hitler's Grasp*.

In 2003, the U.S. Congress put forth a more diffuse answer, claiming that the parliament, the king, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and the Bulgarian people as a whole protected their Jewish neighbors. A veteran of the Bulgarian army, Professor Dimitar Nadikov, recently published *The Bulgarian Army and the Rescue of Bulgarian Jews — 1931-44*,” touting the Bulgarian army as the heroes of this story.

According to each variation of this heartwarming story, an Axis power scored a victory in saving its Jews. Everyone claims a part of the victory. As President John Kennedy said, “There is an old saying that victory has a hundred fathers and defeat is an orphan.”



Jacky Comforty

Documentary filmmaker Jacky Comforty explores this heartwarming story in *The Stolen Narrative of the Bulgarian Jews and Holocaust*, which he wrote with Michigan writer Martha Aladjem Bloomfield. Comforty traveled the world to interview historians, political scientists, military analysts and other experts to develop an unvarnished picture of Bulgarian actions during the war.

Most significantly, Comforty, Israeli-born son of Bulgarian immigrants, interviewed his own parents and 150 Bulgarian Jews and non-Jews for their personal recollections of Jewish life in Bulgaria before and during the rise of Nazism. These interviews develop a darker portrait of Bulgaria.



Martha Bloomfield

At the start of the 20th century, Bulgaria contained a mix of religious and ethnic groups that had arrived as invaders, immigrants or refugees. The majority group, Eastern Orthodox Christians, lived in relative peace with Greeks, Turkish Muslims, Roma, Jews and others. The Jewish population also came from different waves of immigration: As Jewish life in other countries had deteriorated, the ancient Jewish community that spoke Yavanic (a Jewish language based on Greek) was joined by Ladino-speaking Jews from Spain and Portugal, and Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazi Jews from the north.

Located at a crossroads, Bulgaria, had some independent times but also was controlled over the centuries by the dominant Byzantine and Ottoman empires before it was liberated in 1878.

In the immediate pre-war period, the king wanted to regain control of Macedonia (from Yugoslavia), Thrace (from Greece) and Dobruja (from Romania), and any other territory that had belonged to Bulgaria in past centuries. A deal with Nazi Germany gave him that opportunity.

As the Nazi party grew and came to power in Germany, sympathizers in Bulgaria started their own National Socialist movement.

When the Germans invaded Poland in 1939, Bulgaria was officially neutral, but King Boris III had already committed to purchasing German arms and training its officers.

In March 1941, Bulgaria officially joined the Axis and allowed Germany to use its territory to attack Greece and Yugoslavia in April. The victorious Germans gave Bulgaria these territories, which were annexed in 1941.

The Jews in these territories were first counted as part of the Jewish population in the unified kingdom but were later denied the right to stay where they were born and were not granted Bulgarian citizenship — and were deported later.



The Jewish forced labor camp celebrates in December 1942. The first snow meant that soon they will be sent home for the winter. Jacky's father, Bitush Comforty, is on the right.

Image Courtesy Comforty Collection.

The Jews in Bulgaria

Beginning in 1941, Bulgaria instituted the classical list of Nazi anti-Jewish legislation. The new laws successively denied Jews their rights as citizens, their occupations, their freedom of movement. They were assigned special taxes and required to wear the yellow star, and then confined to ghettos. All Jewish males ages 20-40 were sent to Bulgarian slave labor camps. The Bulgarian government and the 1942-established Commissariat for Jewish Affairs planned the next step: deportations to German death camps.

On Feb. 22, 1943, Bulgaria and Germany signed a (unique) agreement to ship 20,000 Jews from cities throughout Bulgaria. The deportations began on March 3. Between March 3-12, the Bulgarian army, Gendarmerie and special forces rounded up some 12,000 Jews from the newly annexed territories and deported them to Treblinka, where they were annihilated.

The other 8,000 Jews destined for deportation were spared due to frantic efforts of the Jewish community, who succeeded in getting help from politicians and the church to delay the deportation.

Comforty details the efforts that the Jewish community made to intervene. Somehow, these efforts resulted in postponing — but not cancelling — the transport of Jews from inside Bulgaria. They got off the death trains.

Dimiter Peshev, vice president of the National Parliament in Sofia, apparently succeeded in delaying the deportations. The king and prime minister retaliated — the parliament voted to remove him from his post on March 26.

Jews from the newly acquired territories were deported to death camps. The Bulgarian government would not listen to appeals for those Jews.



Ika (the author's mom) and Vicki Ovadia in Pleven 1943.

Image Courtesy Comforty Collection.

Comforty interviewed Nir Baruch, who reported that 11,363 were deported from Macedonia, Thrace and the city of Pirot. Only 12 survived.

In negotiations with Von Ribbentrop in early April, Boris III agreed to the deportations and agreed to deport half of the remaining Jewish population. The next month, Jews from Sofia were forced to self-deport themselves to provincial towns as first step toward deportations. The death of the king stopped that second part from happening.

Some credit also belongs to Bulgarians who opposed the antisemitic laws and actions. In addition to Dimiter Peshev, the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and its metropolitan bishops as well as hundreds of other individuals tried to delay or derail the murder of the Jews.

But, as Comforty's informants made clear, a key part of the survival of nearly 50,000 Bulgarian Jews came from timing. On Aug. 28, 1943, Boris III died from heart failure. Bulgaria needed to organize a new government, which began to distance itself from the German war machine. During the next year, the Russian army approached and eventually took Bulgaria.

The experience of Jews of Bulgaria included all the steps of the horror of the Holocaust up to — but generally not including — the last one, getting murdered.

Survivors bear the scars of years of uncertainty, fear and deprivation. Historians, politicians and even the successor king of Bulgaria each get a few pages to explain their understanding of Bulgaria during the days of the Final Solution in Jacky Comforty and Martha Aladjem Bloomfield's *The Stolen Narrative of the Bulgarian Jews and the Holocaust*.

To learn more about the book and the authors' collaboration, go to www.the-stolen-narrative.org.

Louis Finkelman

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Canadian Slavonic Papers

Revue Canadienne des Slavistes

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rcsp20

The stolen narrative of the Bulgarian Jews and the Holocaust

by Jacky Comforty with Martha Aladjem Bloomfield, with a foreword by Omer Bartov, Lanham, MD, Lexington Books, 2021, xxxiv + 370 pp., US\$46.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-7936-3292-0

Ildiko Otova

To cite this article: Ildiko Otova (09 May 2024): The stolen narrative of the Bulgarian Jews and the Holocaust, Canadian Slavonic Papers, DOI: [10.1080/00085006.2024.2350304](https://doi.org/10.1080/00085006.2024.2350304)

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BOOK REVIEW

The stolen narrative of the Bulgarian Jews and the Holocaust, by Jacky Comforty with Martha Aladjem Bloomfield, with a foreword by Omer Bartov, Lanham, MD, Lexington Books, 2021, xxxiv + 370 pp., US\$46.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-7936-3292-0

This book by Jacky Comforty (with Martha Aladjem Bloomfield) is at once a research project about Bulgarian Jews during the Holocaust and an intimate narrative brought to life in evocative prose. I feel I owe it to the book's author and to all those who left the door to their memories ajar to keep my review on the borderline between the academic and the personal.

Here are the facts. At the end of 1940, the Bulgarian National Assembly adopted the Law for the Protection of the Nation; the Law imposed anti-Jewish measures and came into force in January 1941. These measures included, among other things, compulsory labour conscription for men and their forced imprisonment in labour camps. In compliance with its agreement with Nazi Germany, in early 1943 the Bulgarian government prepared for the deportation of the Jewish population. A group of parliamentarians, clerical leaders, and citizens exerted pressure to countermand this decision, however. On 24 May 1943, the deportation plan was put on hold and the majority of Bulgarian Jews survived. Those who escaped deportation were some 48,000 Jews holding Bulgarian citizenship from the so-called "old" territories, meaning those within the borders that had been in place prior to April 1941. In contrast, 11,343 Jews from the "new" territories – the lands of Yugoslavia and Greece occupied by Bulgaria from 1941 – did not hold Bulgarian citizenship and were sent to Treblinka and exterminated. Despite numerous documents available showing that the deportations were the responsibility of the Bulgarian state, the refusal to acknowledge these facts is striking. Not a single government or political leader has officially assumed responsibility for the Holocaust in Bulgaria.

In recent years, the fate of Bulgarian Jews and Jews from the territories under Bulgarian rule has sparked considerable research interest. Notably, the most outstanding studies originate outside of Bulgaria rather than inside the country. However, the events surrounding Jews' fate within Bulgarian territories have always been politicized. The dominant narrative of the rescue of Bulgarian Jews originated during state socialism. This could be seen as a cloaking device, in that the discourse about Bulgarian Jews covered the forced assimilation campaigns of citizens of Turkish origin. In the years following 1989 the rescue narrative came to dominate the Bulgarian state's attempts to construct positive images of Bulgaria in the world and to improve the self-esteem of Bulgarians. The more dominant this narrative, however, the more "stolen" the account of the Holocaust in Bulgaria becomes, especially in terms of asking from what or whom the Jews needed to be rescued during the war and what the fate of the deported turned out to be. The state purposefully deploys propaganda campaigns for its own exoneration, and these campaigns involve representatives from well-known scientific and academic institutions. These campaigns reached a climax during the recent commemoration of the 80th anniversary of the rescue orchestrated by the head of state, President Rumen Radev, and some heirs of King Boris III, royal courtiers, and individuals close to the former secret services of the Communist Party.

It is imperative to situate Comforty's work within these developments. Comforty endeavours to allow the survivors of the Holocaust in Bulgaria to honestly and frankly revisit their memories and to produce an unbiased counter-narrative that challenges

the state's myth-making machine, extends beyond the academic realm, and amounts to a vindication of the truth. Comforty's personal story is relevant here; Comforty is a descendant of survivors and a migrant child lost between Bulgarian and Hebrew and between silence and a lifting of the veil that covers the past. The inclusion of his own experiences lends additional legitimacy to his academic research. As the author himself writes:

The Stolen Narrative of the Bulgarian Jews and the Holocaust is about memories and forgetfulness and using hands and facial expressions to help tell a story, sometimes with limited language acquired as an immigrant or in a colorful, native language. Memories faded in front of our camera, constant dissonance and collision between public and private memory, official memory and propaganda, between post-trauma and amnesia. (xxviii)

As a filmmaker Comforty adeptly navigates us through the history of the Jews in the Bulgarian lands in order to tell us the story of who "we" are – of the ways the collective identity of Balkan Jews was formed. Ultimately, he compels us to confront Jews' fate during the dark years of World War II.

What is of most significant value in Comforty's book, though, are the stories of the people who survived. These stories acquire a new life through Comforty's text. This is the case with Rachel Israel Bali. Bali waited for the return of her husband, who was interned in a labour camp, with a child in her arms; her son met his father only at the age of two. We should remember, however, that the book is not only a story of survivors; it is also about those who resisted. Rachel's husband, Solomon Bali, for instance, was also a guerilla who resisted the regime. I am writing these lines in the days following October 7, when we had to encounter the truth that "Never again!" is actually happening right now. I believe the voices of those who fought evil in Comforty's book give us strength in these difficult times to deal with reborn menaces.

The research is also a vindication of rescuers who are genuinely worthy of praise because they lent a hand to friends and neighbours when they all lived together under the swastika. As such, the book moves us beyond the state propaganda machine that tries to decorate only the Communist leader Todor Zhivkov and King Boris III with the rescuer crown. For these reasons, this book represents a brave act of citizenship. It is an example of the kind of committed research we need, especially at a time when propaganda is becoming easier to disseminate and while post-truth is gaining ground.

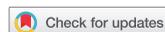
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<https://doi.org/10.1080/00085006.2024.2350304>



only a cameo appearance in the book, and readers see little artwork from the period. Except as a travelogue with some artsy maps, there is little to recommend this book. Readers interested in the women of the Ho Chi Minh Trail would learn more from Karen Gottschang Turner and Phan Thanh Hao's *Even the Women Must Fight* (1998). **Summing Up:** ★ Optional. General readers.—*J. Lembcke, emeritus, College of the Holy Cross*

CC 59-2378 DS463 MARC
Markovits, Claude. **India and the world: a history of connections, c. 1750–2000.** Cambridge, 2021. 275p bibl index ISBN 9781107186750 cloth, \$84.99; ISBN 9781316637456 pbk, \$25.99; ISBN 9781316899847 ebook, \$21.00

Rather than study European colonial impacts on India, as many historians have done, Markovits (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, France) uses “connected history” methodology to demonstrate India’s reciprocal, although asymmetrical, global interactions over the past 250 years. While Britain’s global empire and then Commonwealth inevitably provided key arenas for examination, Markovits innovatively expands his scope to include India’s engagement with Europe, Russia, the Americas, Africa, and the rest of Asia. He proceeds thematically with sequential chapters on India’s shifting roles in the world economy; emigration and immigration by diverse groups; Indian soldiers opposing or serving the British empire; India’s religious, intellectual, and political effects worldwide; the exportation of Indian high and popular culture (including literature, cinema, and other visual arts); and the often contentious interactions between immigrating Indians and their host societies. He features historiographical analysis, highlighting the controversial events of 1857 and 1947. His discussion includes the entire Indian subcontinent until 1947 but only the Republic of India thereafter (excluding Pakistan and Bangladesh). Markovits concludes by critiquing India’s currently predominant Hindu nationalist politics. Throughout, he balances the multiple ways India affected the rest of the world with how the rest of the world in turn shaped India. **Summing Up:** ★★ Recommended. General readers and lower-division undergraduates.—*M. H. Fisher, emeritus, Oberlin College*

59-2379 DS485 CIP
Shaikh, Juned. **Outcaste Bombay: city making and the politics of the poor.** Washington, 2021. 242p bibl index ISBN 9780295748498 cloth, \$99.00; ISBN 9780295748504 pbk, \$30.00; ISBN 9780295748511 ebook, contact publisher for price

This interesting book presents a socioeconomic and political history of poor people in the city of Bombay (today, Mumbai), covering 1896 to 1984. Drawing on archives, interviews, and regional Marathi literary sources, Shaikh (Univ. of California, Santa Cruz) explores the relationship between industrial capitalism, caste, class, gender, the built environment, and urban poverty. He focuses on Dalits (untouchables), a segment of the population that has been segregated and exploited by the upper castes for centuries, arguing that caste was seminal to the production of urban space, and urbanity was central to the making of Dalit cultural politics in Bombay. The analysis deals with Dalit industrial labor and Dalit exploitation, the lives of sex workers in slums, and the impact of Marxist ideology on the regional Dalit literature and how it stimulated Dalit revolutionary movements. Shaikh argues that urban planning was a limited response to the Dalit political movement in the city. Highlighting the nexus among caste, class, language, urban space, and the tensions within these categories, as well as how caste and class shaped the urban environment, this remarkable book contributes significantly to social/labor history and urban studies. **Summing Up:** ★★★ Highly recommended. Advanced undergraduates through faculty.—*D. A. Chekki, emeritus, University of Winnipeg*

59-2380 DS329 CIP
Soft power in Central Asia: the politics of influence and seduction, ed. by Kirill Nourzhanov and Sebastien Peyrouse. Lexington Books, 2021. 292p bibl index ISBN 9781793650771 cloth, \$110.00; ISBN 9781793650788 ebook, \$45.00

Scholar Joseph Nye’s concept of soft power, indicating the role of persuasion over coercion in global politics, needs no introduction. The term has been part of common scholarly and diplomatic language since he first proposed the idea 30 years ago. However, before *Soft Power in Central Asia*, there were few book-length examinations of the phenomenon in the region. This edited volume does much to not only elucidate Nye’s thinking but also to explore the role of external powers in Central Asia and the ways that Central Asians balance those relationships. Chapters explore the many ways the US, Russia, China, the EU, Turkey, and Israel advance their interests and influence in Central Asia through secular and Islamic education, television, religion, and the promotion of values, to name but a few methods. Those chapters are followed by one each on Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The contributions fit together well, and because each chapter addresses Nye’s arguments independently, they could be read individually. This collection would have benefited from a concluding chapter, but a comprehensive index and useful bibliographies guide readers. **Summing Up:** ★★ Recommended. Advanced undergraduates through faculty; professionals.—*V. Clement, Marine Corps University*

Central & Eastern Europe

CC 59-2381 DS135 CIP
Comforty, Jacky. **The stolen narrative of the Bulgarian Jews and the Holocaust,** by Jacky Comforty with Martha Aladjem Bloomfield. Lexington Books, 2021. 456p bibl index ISBN 9781793632913 cloth, \$125.00; ISBN 9781793632920 ebook, \$50.00

Comforty, an award-winning filmmaker and oral historian, has written a counter narrative of Bulgarian Jews and Bulgaria’s role in the Final Solution, challenging the belief that the Bulgarian government prevented the deportation of its Jews to Auschwitz, except for those in the newly occupied lands of Thrace and Macedonia. Based on primary sources and interviews with more than 60 Bulgarian war survivors, Comforty argues that Bulgaria was an ally to Nazi Germany, and King Boris III, far from being the “Bulgarian Schindler,” was prepared to deport the Jews of mainland Bulgaria to the death camps. Moreover, the Bulgarian parliament passed the Law for the Defense of the Nation in 1941 (effective until 1944), which applied Nazi racial laws to Bulgaria’s Jewish population. The deportation law, which would have initially deported some 8,000 Jews from Bulgaria to Auschwitz, was temporarily suspended because of the intervention of Bulgarian parliamentarians and members of the Orthodox hierarchy. Comforty notes that Bulgarians were not as anti-Semitic as their government, and in 1943, the king’s death and the war’s turning tide in favor of the Allies saved the Jews of Bulgaria from being sent to their deaths. The book includes valuable pictures, a time line of events, and an extensive bibliography. **Summing Up:** ★★ Recommended. General readers through faculty.—*J. Fischel, independent scholar*

59-2382 BX1567 MARC
Huener, Jonathan. **The Polish Catholic Church under German occupation: the Reichsgau Wartheland, 1939–1945.** Indiana, 2021. 374p bibl index ISBN 9780253054029 cloth, \$90.00; ISBN 9780253054043 pbk, \$42.00; ISBN 9780253054067 ebook, \$41.99

Bulgaria's tsar a Nazi-collaborator, not hero, new book reveals

Bulgaria's narrative is that Boris III was a savior to the Jews. But in reality, he allied with Hitler to regain territory in Thrace and Macedonia, lost during the Second Balkan War of 1913.

By COLIN SHINDLER **Published:** JUNE 4, 2022 15:21



BULGARIAN TSAR Boris III, who ruled during the Holocaust, 1995. The book deconstructs what it says was his negative impact on the Jews as opposed to more positive narratives Bulgaria tried to present. (photo credit: REUTERS)



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Many believe that Bulgaria, like Denmark, saved its Jews from the Nazi death camps. The book *The Stolen Narrative of the Bulgarian Jews and the Holocaust* (Rowman and Littlefield) by Jacky Comforty, together with Martha Aladjem Bloomfield, tells a different story.



It is a narrative that recalls Bulgaria's alliance with Hitler to regain territory in Thrace and Macedonia, lost during the Second Balkan War of 1913.

In March 1941, Bulgaria joined the Axis powers and allowed the German army to cross its frontiers to attack Greece and Yugoslavia. A few weeks later, Bulgaria occupied Western Thrace and Eastern Macedonia – and its armed forces oversaw the delivery of 11,343 Jews to the Gestapo in Vienna, who then transported them to death camps in Treblinka. The Bulgarian king, Boris III, had refused to listen to the pleas of Charles Redhart, a diplomat of neutral Switzerland, to stop the deportations. The Bulgarians also assisted in the German occupation of Serbia, in which nearly 20,000 Jews ^Xlost their lives.

Martha Bloomfield is an oral historian who writes about minorities, immigrants and the homeless. Jacky Comforty, a documentary filmmaker, however, is the son of Bulgarian Jews who bore witness to those terrible years, survived and reached the United States. For both the authors, this story is personal.



Flag of Bulgaria. (credit: Wikimedia Commons)



Deconstructing the myth

They deconstruct the myth that depicts Boris as "a savior of the Jews" – a myth later erected by both monarchists and Communists to advance political agendas. As Boris commented on June 22, 1943: "The great damage to humanity throughout the generations is caused by the Jewish spirit of profiteering" and related it to "the present global cataclysm."

In a telegram to German foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop, Boris also consented to the [deportation of thousands of Jews from Bulgaria](#) itself in addition to those in the conquered territories. The other 25,000, wearing yellow stars, would be sent to camps to be conscripted into labor battalions, overseen and directed by the Bulgarian Army. Many subsequently testified to the brutality of their military overseers and the harshness of conditions.

Boris told Hitler that he would not send Bulgarians to fight alongside the Nazis in the assault on the Soviet Union, but, on the other hand, clearly thought that bartering Jews and other ethnic groups for territory was a worthwhile deal. An ethnically cleansed Greater Bulgaria would arise to take its place among the nations.

Some Jews in Eastern Europe had already seen the writing on the wall and attempted to escape to the Yishuv in often unseaworthy vessels. In the Bulgarian port of Varna, 350 Jews boarded a rotting hulk of a ship, the *Salvador*, which sailed in December 1940. A few days later, it sank in a storm in the Sea of Marmara with the loss of 238 passengers. The remains of those who perished were buried on Mount Herzl in 1964.

Comforty and Bloomfield relate how in January 1941, Boris gladly signed legislation that legitimized state antisemitism and essentially embraced Nazi Germany. Boris himself belonged to the House of Saxe-Coburg, as did the British royal family. Bulgaria however aligned itself with Germany in both world wars. Indeed, almost a thousand Jews died fighting for Boris's father during World War I.

Only a couple of decades later, Jews were barred from the army and from public office. Jewish organizations were closed down and a quota system for Jewish students who wished to enter university was put in place. Jews were compelled to drop their Bulgarian surnames, reverting to their original Jewish ones.

Bulgarian Jews reacted by joining the resistance. The authors estimate that up to 10% of partisans were Jewish.

Thousands of Bulgarian Jews did survive, but it was not due to Boris. Instead it was due to the pressure placed upon him by Orthodox Christian clergy, the intelligentsia and generally people of goodwill.

[Metropolitan bishops Stefan of Sofia and Kirill of Plovdiv](#) regularly intervened with the king. They remarkably rushed to round-ups of Jews, awaiting deportation and zealously guarded by Bulgarian police – and secured their release. In May 1943, a march, attended by both Jews and non-Jews, protesting about the planned deportations and led by rabbis Daniel Zion and Asher Hananel, started out from a Sofia synagogue. The astonished police soon pounced on the demonstrators, but arrested only Jews.

In 1996, the JNF in its wisdom dedicated a forest to Boris. Many Bulgarian Jews worldwide were astounded by this move and extremely angry. It essentially honored a revisionist view of history and added to the anguish of survivors. A memorial to the deported Jews of Thrace and Macedonia was eventually erected in its place.

Jacky Comforty and Martha Bloomfield have done a service for the rest of us in shining a light on the dark and complex history of the Balkans. In an era of disinformation and fake news, their painstaking research has reclaimed this terrible episode in Jewish history for a wider audience and pushed aside those adept at manipulating it. It is an accessible and interesting read.

The Stolen Narrative of the Bulgarian Jews and the Holocaust
By Jacky Comforty
Lexington Books ,456 pages; \$125



Comforty, Jack, and Martha Aladjem Bloomfield. *The Stolen Narrative of the Bulgarian Jews and the Holocaust*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books (imprint of Rowman & Littlefield), 2021. Lexington Studies in Jewish Literature. 370 pp. \$125 (9781793632913) HC.

This book, a compilation of eyewitness testimonies, archival documents, photographs, and researchers' investigations, debunks a Holocaust myth that not only were the Jews of Bulgaria spared but it was thanks to a sympathetic government. By giving voice to the formerly unheard and marginalized, the author,

whose Bulgarian-Jewish parents followed the mass post-1948 immigration to Israel, paints a different picture.

This book might have benefited by better editing as it contains excessive repetition, awkward prose, and poorly integrated quotes. Nevertheless, the author provides ample background of a minority that was largely middle class and assimilated, and of a region long embroiled in ethnic dispute. Of nearly 50,000 Jews,

over 11,000 "non-citizens" ended up bargaining chips in exchange for the adjacent territories, Thrace and Macedonia, and offered to Bulgaria, which was part of the Axis powers. For this King Boris III eagerly implemented anti-Semitic policies; only his sudden death in August 1943 stopped them.

Survivors and historians describe the trauma of deportations, propaganda, labor and transit camps, and brutality at the hands of police, guards, or neighbors. Family members were murdered at Treblinka or turned away and left to drown while attempting to sail to Palestine. The author has actively campaigned to discredit the glorification, and exoneration, of that era's leaders as well as the "humanitarian" history rewritten by the postwar Communist regime. Although many citizens were indeed kind and helpful, in the author's view, Italy or even Hungary, did a far better job in protecting their Jews. Despite its flaws, this book provides a fresh perspective on that time and place. This title is recommended for all Holocaust collections.

Hallie Cantor,

Acquisitions Associate, Yeshiva University, New York, NY

THE STOLEN
NARRATIVE OF
THE BULGARIAN
JEWS AND THE
HOLOCAUST



JACK COMFORTY
WITH MARTHA ALADJEM BLOOMFIELD
—EDITED BY KIMBERLY COO—

The Jewish cultural heritage in Bulgaria among the titles of the Bulgarian Diplomatic Institute's Library

Nina Kisselkova

COMFORTY, Jacky with Martha Aladjem Bloomfield. Foreword by Omer Bartov. *The Stolen Narrative of the Bulgarian Jews and the Holocaust*. US: Lexington Books, 2021; 370 pages.

Jacky Comforty is an American film director, a descendant of a family of Bulgarian Jewish immigrants in Israel, the author of documentaries and educational media programs. He is known in the country for his documentary film entitled "Optimists" (2000) about the rescue of the Bulgarian Jews from the Holocaust – a winner of a number of international prizes.

The book itself consists of eight individual parts. The first two entitled: "Identity – who are we?" and "The Collective Memory of the Balkan Jews" trace back the key events in the history of these particular Jews, with an emphasis on the presence and the lifestyle of the Jewish population in the Balkans, as well as in Bulgaria before the Holocaust.

The presentation itself, which spans the next four parts, has been built upon some excerpts from the interviews recorded by the author over more than three decades. All these include fragments of some personal memories of the victims and of their contemporaries about the drastic changes that the anti-Jewish legislation in Bulgaria had brought about to the lives of the Jewish population in the country in the period 1941-1944 – a topic which, for political and ideological reasons, has remained out of the view of the researchers for many years. Included there are the interviews conducted with 134 people from Israel, Bulgaria, Greece, the Republic of North Macedonia, Spain and the USA – all of them members of the former Jewish communities in Bulgaria and the territories annexed to it during World War II, as well as with their Bulgarian friends and contemporaries and with historians. The interviews are arranged chronologically and placed in a socio-historical context.

Two storylines in the published memories are intertwined, each one of them with its own heroes and anti-heroes – the well-known story of the rescue of the Bulgarian Jews and the silent story of these individuals' traumatic encounter with the institutional antisemitism, in which the survivors bear witness to the human dimensions of the disenfranchisement, of the deprivation of property and livelihood, of forced labor and displacement; and of the life in constant fear of deportation, which had turned out to be a fact with respect to 11 343 Jews from Macedonia and East Thrace (the book concentrates on the story of one of the six survivors).

The last two parts of this book are of a somewhat journalistic nature, posing the question of the moral responsibility of the politicians and the scientists to the history.

The text is supplemented with 101 photographs and illustrations from the personal collection of the Comforty family.



Паметта ни задължава

Традицията повелява на 2 юни, точно в 12 часа в цялата страна да прозвучат сирените, които спират забързания ритъм, за да сведем глава в почит на героизма и саможертвата на всички знайни и незнайни български герои, сред които и български евреи, отдали живота си за свободата на България.

Българската еврейска общност традиционно почита паметта на героите, паднали в боевете за свободата на България, с едноминутно мълчание и поднасяне на цветя пред Мемориалната плоча в памет на евреите,

храбро сражавали се и геройски загинали за свободата на България през войните 1912 – 1918 година, която е поставена на стената на Еврейската болница в София.

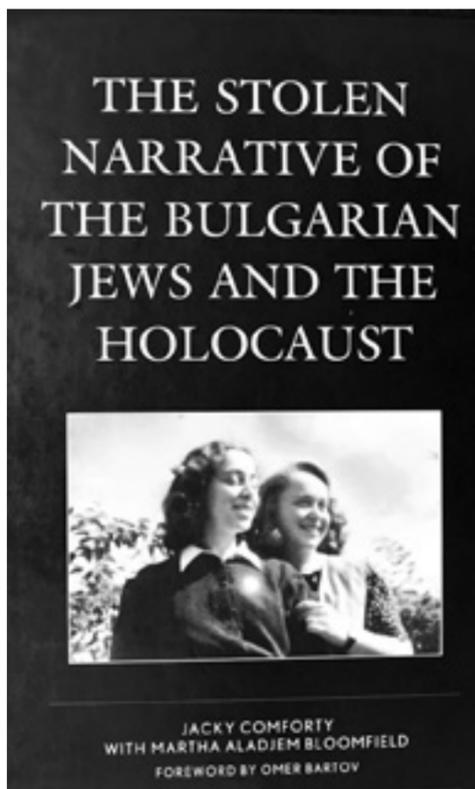
Цветя поднесоха председателят на РОЕ „Шалом“ София г-н Ели Анави и председателят на Народно читалище „Емил Шекерджийски г-н Мориц Машиах, а председателят на Централен израилтянски духовен съвет г-н Максим Делчев прочете молитва в памет на всички загинали за свободата на България български евреи. В словото си пред събралото се множество г-н Ели Анави каза: „На този ден почитаме паметта на един млад ре-

волюционер, отдал делото и живота си за България - Христо Ботев, скланяме глави пред героизма на войниците и офицерите-евреи, сражавали се за родината си във войните 1912 - 1918 година. Именно в тяхна памет българската еврейска общност построява тази болница. Почитаме паметта на нашите братя и сестри, загинали през Втората световна война. Днес повече от всякога трябва да не забравяме, че всяко вероломно нападение над суверенна държава е недопустим акт на агресия. Паметта ни задължава да продължим да водим битката срещу омразата, фашизма и антисемитизма, защото в училището, на-

речено живот, няма почивни дни, няма ваканции. Паметта ни задължава да сме тук на този ден.“

Г-н Аврам Папаро призова, на ден като днешния, да изричаме на глас имената на загиналите български евреи, за да се помни делото им. Той даде старт на тази инициатива, като прочете имената на евреите от Трети пехотен Бдински полк, сражавали се и загинали за България. Спонтанно, Лика Ешкенази изпя „Ели, ели“, за да изпълни мига на преклонение със сила.

ОЕБ „Шалом“, ЕВ



той премисля през следващите 30 години. Това не е научно съчинение, това е поглед на документалист. Самата книга позволява да се кръстосват по много начини, в много точки историографията, т.е. научното отношение към събитията, и личната памет. Книгата стъпва върху събраните повече от 300 разказа, събрани не само в България, а и в много места в Европа и по света от 1989 година до 2019 година, и те представляват един забележителен архив на устната история за събитията от началото на 40-те години. В книгата има една кола с множество снимки, като някои от

без уточняващи намеси в разказа и, разбира се, всички тези свидетелства носят неизбежните ограничения, условности и недостатъци на устната история, които са свързани с несъвършенството на самата човешка памет, с приблизителна хронология на фактите, с неизбежно и несъзнателно много често наслагване на митове или клишета (...) Книгата добавя и отразява сърцевината на днешния публичен дебат и историография по този въпрос, а тя е как да бъде съчетано оцеляването на българските евреи с мрачната страна на депортациите на тези от така наречените

ша последователността на разказа, за да отворя врата към работните откъси на новия документален филм на Джеки Комфорти „Нашата история. Българските евреи по време на Холокоста“, който присъстващите в залата имаха удоволствието да видят. И като журналист, и като участник в българския проект на Стивън Спилбърг „Шоа“ изключително ценя личния разказ, личната история, колкото и тя, по някакъв начин, да е егоистична спрямо историографията. В един от откъсите, които гледахме в зала „Иерусалим“, очарователен герой е майката на Джеки Комфорти. Нейният разказ е



Румен Аврамов, Джеки Комфорти и Емил Бехар по време на срещата

„Откраднатите разкази“ на Джеки Комфорти*

Михайлина Павлова
Снимки Зафер Галибов

Организацията на евреите в България „Шалом“, Народното читалище „Емил Шекерджийски-1919“ със съдействието на Американския научен център в София и на Центъра за академични изследвания - София бяха домакини на една изключително интересна среща – разговор с Джеки Комфорти, потомък на български евреи и изследовател, сценарист и режисьор, състояла се на 30 май 2022 г. в зала „Иерусалим“ на Еврейския културен дом.

Поводът за тази среща бе представянето на книгата „Откраднати разкази за българските евреи и Холокоста“, която Джеки Комфорти, в съавторство с Марта Блумфийлд издава през 2021 година в САЩ. (Бел. авт. - Очаква

се книгата да излезе на български език през 2023 година, когато ще бъде отбелязана 80-годишнината от спасяването на българските евреи.)

На събралото се множество бяха показани и работни откъси от новия документален филм на режисьора „Нашата история. Българските евреи по време на Холокоста“.

Организаторите на събитието отбелязват в поканата за тази среща, че книгата и филмът са резултат на повече от тридесет и пет години изследователска и творческа работа на Джеки Комфорти по проблемите на произхода, идентичността и културата на българските евреи, техния живот и оцеляване в годините на Холокоста. В основата им е събраният от него изключително богат архивен фонд, който съдържа хиляди фотографии, документи и стотици часове автентични аудио- и видеозаписи на раз-

кази на български евреи.

Събитието беше посетено от преживели Холокоста български евреи, ръководители и активисти на ОЕБ „Шалом“, изследователи, учени и преподаватели, публицисти и журналисти, филмови продуценти, сценаристи и режисьори, издатели и други специалисти, работещи по проблемите на историята на българските евреи и тяхното оцеляване в годините на Холокоста.

Книгата на Джеки Комфорти бе представена от Румен Аврамов: „Това е една много лична, искрена и честна книга. Преди всичко наблягам на „лична“, защото тя говори колкото за респондентите, толкова и за самия автор. Той е преживял прозрение, което между другото е точно датирано на 14 септември 1984 година и последвалата еволюция в разбирането на събитията в самата перспектива, която

тях са познати на публиката, други - които са личен архив и са чудесно допълнение към разказа (...)

В тези свидетелства се наслагват погледите на няколко поколения, които ги правят още по-интересни, т.к. става дума за едни и същи събития, прочетени, видени, разбрани или неразбрани от вече няколко поколения български евреи, а също и хора извън България. Хората са били оставени да говорят напълно свободно, няма никакво специално насочване от интервюиращия. Той ги е оставил да говорят

новоосвободени земи. Това е екзистенциалният въпрос и става все по-ясно, особено на следващите поколения, че едното е неотделимо от другото събитие (...)

Цитирам само част от дълбочения анализ на Румен Аврамов върху книгата, която той добре познава в нейния оригинал, написан на английски език. Надяваме се българското издание наистина да предизвика нови срещи и разговори върху значимостта на труда на Джеки Комфорти и неговата съавторка Марта Блумфийлд.

Тук за малко ще нару-

сладкодумен, спокоен, интелигентен, аналитичен, обран от емоции и излишна патетика и произнесен на богат български език. Ролята на сценариста-документалист и режисьор е да го допълни с факти и да подреди тяхната хронология, което Джеки Комфорти прави, без да наруши или разкъса финала дантела на спомена.

Тепърва ни предстои да видим този филм, който, надявам се, ще бъде подкрепен от още истории и факти, намерени в България.

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