

# REMEMBRANCE AS PUBLIC POLICY

## THE ROLE OF INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY FOR THE HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE: THE BULGARIAN CASE

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### Abstract

*The article examines the concept of memory policies in different perspectives. A central category of analysis is Holocaust remembrance policies and the role of the institutional approach for achieving sustainable results and developing values in the social environment. The reasons for the deficits in the memory of the Holocaust, the periodization in the stories about the Holocaust in Bulgaria and the importance of the factors of the political environment for the dynamics in the interpretations of the past are analyzed. The importance of reflection on the historical past, and in particular that of the Holocaust is considered in regard to the social and generational transfer of memory and attitudes.*

**Key words:** Holocaust remembrance; memory policy; Bulgarian Jews; IHRA.

Let us start with an explanation of the concept of *remembrance policies*. According to the dictionary definition, remembrance is “the act of remembering and showing respect for someone who has died, or a past event”<sup>2</sup>. However, *Holocaust remembrance* cannot fit into this definition. The memory of the Holocaust has some peculiarities. At first glance, the scale of the tragedy clearly determines the way it can be remembered. As is well known, the reality is different. Anti-Semitic ideology produces false interpretations that are actively communicated in the form of articles, books, films and publications in the media. The existence of these publications lines them among the literature on the subject. The development of technology (all social media, Internet itself, etc.) has exacerbated this situation by ranking fake news on a par with valid knowledge. Thus, erosion of knowledge and the relativization of the standards knowledge for orientation in the truth-false and good-evil coordinate system became part of the social environment. It became more difficult to orient in the coordinate system of the categories good-evil and true-false. The tendentious replacement of truth with untruth brings confusion, deception and, as a result, deterioration of the

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<sup>2</sup> <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/remembrance>

very ability to understand and think. The relativization of the categories of good and evil also erodes the social environment. Lack of sympathy for victims, rationalization of hatred, disguise of responsibility for political decisions that lead to repression and destruction have severe and dangerous consequences for the value system of society, gradually leading it to a state in which the political system itself can find new tyrants and be brought to a totalitarian regime.

This, of course, applies to every topic in public discourse.

Fake news has intervened as a fact in the social environment and as a constant theme in public discourse for many years. The concept of post-truth has become the subject of definitions in dictionaries of social science concepts. If the delusion of believers in the flat shape of the Earth is a kind of indicator of ignorance and challenges the question of knowledge and the ability to think critically, the Holocaust denial and deliberate delusion of the truth about it is much more important in view of the challenges of reproducing political freedom and morality of a society.

Holocaust denial and belittling the truth about the Holocaust have revolved around the memory of this catastrophe of civilization for many years. The subjects of the repressive policy of anti-Semitism hardly ceased to exist and be active with the end of the Second World War. The very fact that it was possible in the civilized twentieth century in developed European countries to have a tragedy on the scale of the Holocaust is a phenomenon that by definition involves the study and preservation of memory. The study is fundamentally important for understanding the processes and interactions in a society and its political system, which were possible to degrade to a state that made possible the persecution and systematic destruction of an entire group of this society. Preserving the memory of the Holocaust tragedy is fundamental to society's value system. The ability to feel sympathy for the victims and their heirs for this past, to preserve the understanding of these processes helps to orient in the coordinate system of good and evil. The latter is directly related to the reproduction of the moral values of society.

The thesis of this article is about the importance of Holocaust remembrance policies not only as a moral act that has validity in itself, but also about their special significance and role in the sustainability of the moral value base of society and preservation of political freedom as a prerequisite for development of this society. That is why at the beginning of this text the focus is on an organization such as the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, which is committed to consolidating the efforts of countries with democratic political systems to preserve not only information about this past, but its meaning and emotional empathy.

According to the definition of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance<sup>3</sup>, it can refer to the very definition of what IHRA is. The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance unites governments and experts to strengthen, advance and promote Holocaust education, research and remembrance and to uphold the commitments to the 2000 Stockholm Declaration<sup>4</sup>. It can be argued

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/world-remembers-holocaust>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/about-us>

that the specific policies for the Holocaust remembrance are most clearly formulated in the IHRA program document, namely the Stockholm Declaration<sup>5</sup>.

The concept of remembrance policies can be reduced to several specific elements. On the one hand, this is the organization of collective memory by political agents. On the other hand, it also connotes the political means by which events are remembered and recorded, or discarded. I find it significant that the concept of politics of memory is a subject of a separate article in the online dictionary Wikipedia, which cites different definitions and outlines that there is no common definition: Politics of memory is the organization of collective memory by political agents; the political means by which events are remembered and recorded, or discarded. Eventually, the politics of memory may determine the way history is written and passed on, hence the terms history politics or politics of history. The politics of history is the effects of political influence on the representation or study of historical topics, commonly associated with the totalitarian state which use propaganda and other means to impose a specific version of history with the goal of eliminating competing perspectives about the past. Nevertheless, the term is contested and there is no common agreement on its meaning which is often a matter of contextual use<sup>6</sup>.

In fact, the collision within remembrance policies is influenced by many factors. I would reduce them to four: the selection of content (“what”); the purpose that makes one look at a given episode of the past (“why”); the way it is done (“how”), and the agent of that interest (“who”).

(1) Let us first turn to the question of the subject of interest (*who*) – whether, for example, these are politicians or experts who turn their interest to a given past episode, or journalists, or scientists, contemporaries or next generations. In principle, it is not the job of politicians to retell the past, but rather to make decisions for the current public agenda and for the future. According to Swedish Prime Minister Göran Persson, who is the initiator of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (which currently has 35 member states and 9 more are accepted as observer countries), “the future we are shaping now, is the past that we will share tomorrow<sup>7</sup>.” In this statement, Persson as politician does not give an interpretation of the process and all its complexities. He speaks and acts precisely as a politician whose responsibility is to make decisions, create opportunities and rules that lead to responsible behavior on an issue and improve the condition of a problem diagnosed.

It is worth looking at this short statement again. It alerts about of an existing problem. This is the problem of forgetting and deteriorating values of modern societies. The lack of empathy, the distance from moral responsibility to the past, disinterest and forgetfulness actually challenge the maxim that *history is life's teacher*. It is well known that those who do not know history are doomed to relive it. In this sense, it is the responsibility of politicians to make decisions and act to help solve the problem identified. The problem in this case is forgetting or manipulating the memory of the Holocaust. Göran Persson as politician did not enter into a discussion on the essence

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/about-us/stockholm-declaration>

<sup>6</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics\\_of\\_memory](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics_of_memory)

<sup>7</sup> Former Swedish Prime Minister Göran Persson: <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/about-us>

of the various causes and variants of the problem given. He has spearheaded an initiative for the support of national and supranational memory preservation policies.

As we know, the parties concerned and authors of a given policy are numerous. They always involve various experts in the discourse and create opportunity for discussion as well as clear mechanisms for outlining alternatives and ways of making decisions. Founded in 2000, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance based on the Stockholm Declaration initiated a supranational partnership to uphold the responsibility of governments in their mission to create conditions for the maintenance of high moral values in their societies. It should be self-evident, but for the sake of detailed reasoning in terms of basic social principles, let us clarify why Holocaust remembrance is such an important issue today and why it affects everyone. In other words, the central questions in this analysis are:

- to highlight *why the memory of the Holocaust* as a politics of National Socialist Germany for the extermination of Jews affects not only Jews but everyone;
- to highlight *why the Holocaust is a common problem* for all societies, regardless of the specific way in which events unfolded in one country or another during the Second World War.

It would be strange to expect that the responsibility for preserving the memory lies with the heirs of the persecuted and the victims. Left alone and unsupported when the repressive machine of National Socialism pursued its policy of genocide against Jews in the years of World War II, they should never be alone in their efforts to preserve this memory for future generations. Understanding these issues should not be needed explained. It had to be understood by itself in nowadays. However, the rise of anti-Semitic attitudes in our time and the ideology of Holocaust deniers presuppose consistent institutional efforts in remembrance policies. It can be said that this is measured as the moral side, understood as solidarity with the suffering of the victims.

This repression is a result of violation of constitutional and moral norms. Any action in violation of the basic principles and norms should trigger institutional and all other possible mechanisms to protect the basic social principles. When that happens, the entire society becomes a victim, not just the persecuted. As Jews were left to be helpless victims of party and state-organized repression back in the WWII by the Nazis and their allies, is this same principle applicable today by considering them the only group in modern societies that should be interested in its suffering and survival? History is as it is and cannot be changed.

The persecution of the Jews was initiated and carried out on the extreme level of the so-called politics of the final solution with almost no sign of protection in societies that could prevent this genocide. Since the Jews remained helpless and defenseless at that time of trial, does this mean that, from the distance of time, the memory of this catastrophe is their concern? Because they have already suffered. As if the preservation of memory is the duty only of those who have suffered.

(2) Remembrance policies presuppose the creation of relevant infrastructure and the provision of appropriate regulations and resources to ensure the transfer of this memory to each succeeding generation (*refers to the question how*). The meaning of such public policy is not an end in itself, but a deeply conscious *process* of respect for history, which affirms the values of society on the

basis of sincere attitude to the past. This result is achieved precisely based on *institutionalized memory policies, which ensure that this memory is not the sole responsibility of the victims' heirs.*

(3) The *time* factor in relation to the memory of the past must also stand out as an essential element. For history, there is no hierarchy in the importance of periods according to the degree of their remoteness. The fact that the events that are here subject of discussion happened in the more distant past - almost eighty years since then - does not mean that their significance for society is diminishing. (This refers to the factor of *what* is remembered). In a sense, history is handing the torch from generation to the next. It is the duty of each succeeding generation to preserve the memory of the past, to preserve it and to pass it on to the next generations, preserved in its authenticity and valid meanings. The abandonment of certain historical episodes is a kind of interpretation of memory. Clearly, history does not start with us. It is exactly as long as our memory is. If we think that it starts with us, we will probably reproduce the specific errors in all specific circumstances. This may sound trivial, however practice suggests that there are events and facts in the present that raise difficult questions.

(4) Numerous studies and analyzes have been published on the complexity of historical memory issues. A specific perspective on them is in the article by Jean-Pierre Rioux, entitled “About the duty of remembrance”<sup>8</sup>, which problematizes the attitude to memory as a duty that instills guilt in future generations, reducing memory to a formal naming of things, and fails to form a true attitude towards them. The author does not call his conclusions exactly this way, but presents them in the final sentence: “But after all, the nobler witnesses themselves have agreed that any useful and genuine transmission would first and foremost require intelligence and knowledge, then recognition.” Primo Levi said on numerous occasions<sup>9</sup>, “I believe that for a layman like me, the main thing is to understand and to be understood.” However, the real message of quoted article fails to emphasize what is missing, namely empathy for the victims and understanding of the meaning of what is being studied. What the author has chosen is, to emphasize the formalism of memory as a problem, presenting his thesis in the title as “duty of remembrance”. In fact, memory policies are very different from the official obligation. (This refers to the factor of *why*). Knowledge of the past is not a tool for blaming the dark pages, nor for decorating with a medal when it comes to its bright pages. It is after all for understanding and becoming a better people.

The formal attitude towards the heritage of any historical period, and especially of one such as the Holocaust, can easily be profaned and manipulated. However, the reason for studying history and especially that of the Holocaust is dictated by two main benchmarks: to find the reason and to sympathize. Not just information, not just emotion, but meaningful messages that have the function of affirming values and principles for the good development of society. Thus, we can derive one of the indicators that set the framework of memory policies as meaningful knowledge. This means that looking at the past is not an end in itself and should not be seen as a duty. They are a kind of

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<sup>8</sup> Jean-Pierre Rioux, About the “duty of remembrance”, In: *Inflexions* 2010/1 (N° 13), p. 125 à 135, in: <https://www.cairn.info/revue-inflexions-2010-1-page-125.htm#no3>

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*

institutionalized responsibility to the past, which supports the quality of the present and the future. Understood in this way, it can be said that they contribute to the preservation of integrity and solidarity in relations as a public good.

### **REMEMBRANCE POLICIES AS ARGUMENTATION AND INITIATION**

The way in which memory policies are formulated involves the organization and commitment of relevant institutions and stakeholders clearly identified. At first glance, memory is a spontaneous way of dealing with the past. Of course, while there are many true witnesses to certain events, they, as contemporaries, are natural bearers of memory. Arbitrary interpretations are more difficult for them, but even then, they are possible and happen. Let us look at the incredible phenomenon of Holocaust deniers. The arrogance of such a thesis in the face of countless evidence, memories and especially the fact that millions of people have never returned to their homes speaks for itself how many challenges to memory. Moreover, the outright lie, cleverly disguised as doubts about the manner of persecution, the scale of the victims, the technology of the killings, practically launched the ideology of Holocaust deniers. This falsification has been raised in the face of millions of contemporaries of these events around the world. And, yet such manipulations of memory find ways to replicate and mislead the ideas of people of future generations. If for a phenomenon of the scale of the Holocaust it is possible to encounter a variety of ways of belittling, denial and all sorts of manipulations, then what is left for all other topics on which “alternative memory” is created. In other words, memory policies are an issue of growing importance.

According to a statement by Derrida, there is no political power without the control of the archive, if not of memory<sup>10</sup>. This short phrase highlights the main problem in the use of memory for political purposes, i.e. this leads to the “who speaks” factor in remembrance policies. This says that history has a way of serving current or conjunctural political goals. In other words, this phrase of Derrida addresses the problem of how the authorities could build imaginary and fake realities about the past that would serve some political goals of the authorities. This problem is related to the big topic of the misuse and replacement of history with some conjunctural political goals. However, remembrance policies mean something very different, even the opposite of the problem outlined here. Their purpose is to protect against memory abuse, deliberate deformation and forgetfulness. In other words, the question is about the difference in the concept of memory politics and policies for remembrance.

Let us repeat that the issues related to memory policies can be reduced to several things - to *what* is remembered (what the narrative itself contains); *how* memory is formed; *why* actions are taken regarding memory (goals); and *who* speaks. One of the systematic ways to preserve memory is education. Curriculum design is always based on the coordinated efforts of different categories of experts and parties concerned. The likelihood of spreading fake knowledge in a democratic world is

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<sup>10</sup> See Introduction to the special issue – disputed Holocaust memory in Poland, Larry Ray and Sławomir Kaprański in: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17504902.2019.1567657>, A Journal of Culture and History, Volume 25, 2019 - Issue 3: Special Issue: Disputed Holocaust Memory in Poland

small, and the opportunities for content enrichment and interaction are many and varied. Educational institutions are one of the most powerful socializing agents and therefore quality content and a well-chosen approach to teaching are key to a responsible and honest attitude towards memory.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF MEMORY POLICIES

The topic of memory and remembrance policies is increasingly relevant. In his analysis, the expert from the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and head of the research “Science, Data and Policy” says that “ultimately the objective of European remembrance policies is to create an informed and resilient historical memory which is also self-critical, turning away from a rigidly defined “remembrance culture” towards a common “culture of remembering.”<sup>11</sup>

The special status of Holocaust remembrance policies is a topic that is constantly discussed. Starting with the sporadic opinion that the topic is overexposed, but on the other hand there are so many deficiencies in knowledge and understanding of the topic and ending with the debate over whether the Holocaust is a unique or characteristic type of genocide. Perhaps the most synthesized and conceptual view on this issue is in Prof. Yehuda Bauer's speech to the UN Assembly in 2006. He says:

„Of course there are parallels between the Holocaust and other genocides. The main one is that the suffering of the victims is the same... There are no gradations, and no genocide is better or worse than another one, no one is more victim than anyone else. The other parallel is that every genocide is perpetrated with the best technical and bureaucratic means at the disposal of the perpetrators...”<sup>12</sup> And still, he continues, “Why is the Holocaust the most extreme case? I think the reason is that while all the elements of each genocide are repeated in some other genocides, there are elements in the Holocaust that were without precedent; they cannot be found in genocides that preceded it. There are five such elements, in addition to the fact that it happened at the center of human civilization.”<sup>13</sup>

Yehuda Bauer summarizes these five elements to meanings that are directly related to the foundations of Holocaust remembrance policies. Here it is enough to single out even just two of them to draw attention to the unprecedented nature of this genocide. This is the linking of Jewish origins back several generations as a motive for persecution and destruction. Secondly, this is the internationalization of persecution. Jews became the object of repression and massacre not only on the territory of National Socialist Germany, but all over the world. In the words of professor Bauer, “this was to be done, ultimately, everywhere in the world, so that for the first time in history there was an attempt to universalize a genocide.” In this sense, “the Holocaust was unprecedented, and we had hoped that it would become a warning, not a precedent.”

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<sup>11</sup> Markus J. Prutsch, Fellow of the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and Humanities and the University of Heidelberg, leader of the international research project Science, Numbers and Politics in: European Remembrance Policies, <https://europeanmemories.net/magazine/european-remembrance-policies/>

<sup>12</sup> Yehuda Bauer, In: <https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/pdf-drupal/en/remembrance/remembrance-and-beyond.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem

*This historical legacy challenges not just to be remembered, but to be made meaningful.* However, as Markus Prutsch says, „One of the most powerful tools in welding political identity is to create a collective historical memory, whereby we generally understand this to mean a form of collectively remembering or commemorating the past, whatever concrete form that might have.”<sup>14</sup>

## DISCUSSION

Remembrance policies in a democratic world are multifaceted. Governmental institutions have a key role in shaping their content (mainly as a standard in educational programs) and public communication in this content. However, these are network policies. They reflect the views and ideas of many other stakeholders. The result is a function of this interaction. The responsibility of the key actors is towards the values, cognitive and affective attitudes of the citizens, which are formed based on social capital and the sense of national identity. This is not the place to delve into the depth of the scientific debate on identity and memory policies, but it should be noted that this is again a very topical issue in the social sciences<sup>15</sup>. As far as the political (*mis*)use of memory for propaganda and ideological purposes is a trademark of totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, it can be hypothesized that the attempt of politicians to intervene in the expert debate on remembrance through ideological substitution is an indicator of the level of democracy of the political regime.

Knowledge of the past rests on objective truth proven by scientific methods. It is a subject of education, which must be provided by the institutions that set the standards for educational programs. The role of government institutions is to ensure that this scientific truth is available to the education of each new generation. Responsibility for Holocaust remembrance lies precisely in this area of remembrance policies. The educational content is produced by experts and is legitimized by its acceptance by legitimate scientific and educational commissions. The role of state institutions is in creating standards for objectivity and prevention against indiscriminate and manipulative reading of the past.

Holocaust remembrance policies are particularly sensitive to narrative, because the historical legacy itself is fraught with the ever-valid question of responsibility for this catastrophe. This question allows us to add another touch to the current analysis. It refers to *the originators of these remembrance policies*. The individual national narratives by definition represent segments of the whole picture of the Holocaust in Europe. The waves of interest in this past and the ways of telling

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<sup>14</sup> Markus J. Prutsch, Fellow of the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and Humanities and the University of Heidelberg, leader of the international research project Science, Numbers and Politics in: European Remembrance Policies, <https://europeanmemories.net/magazine/european-remembrance-policies/>

<sup>15</sup> See on these issues Patryk Wawrzyński in Polish Political Science Yearbook vol. 46 (1) (2017), pp. 294–312, <https://marszalek.com.pl/yearbook/docs/46-1/ppsy2017119.pdf> He, for example, says in the abstract of his article that “Remembrance is a powerful instrument of social mobilization, identity construction and political competition. Its impact on individual and shared beliefs or attitudes makes it an object of government’s interest, because remembrance can be used to legitimize ideologies or policies ”and that according to its concept “The government’s remembrance policy is myth-motoric, non-scientific, emotional, based on commitment and that it is a type of social influence” p. 294 This interesting concept raises issues that are debatable. It seems to me that the author has constructed his concept in the context of the current situation in his country with regard to memory issues, but that this concept does not have a universal explanation for the role of governments in memory policies. However, it does offer an interesting basis for further scientific debate.



it have specific periods in each country. In this periodization, there are many similarities, as well as different national features. What is most important, however, is the fact that a supranational agreement has been reached on the shared responsibility for the *memory* of this common horrific past in Europe. These consolidated efforts of many countries and organizations are increasingly visible in the results of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA). As Marcus Pruch's analysis already cited reads, "Only by tackling the past in a self-assured manner, equally able to acknowledge historical accomplishments *and* admit mistakes of the past without bias and by accepting accountability, will European societies be able to move into the future more confidently." This is how the status of European remembrance policies was achieved: from "remembrance culture" to a "culture of remembering."

As already said, the periodization of interest in the legacy of the Holocaust in Europe has both similarities and differences. In the words of Anne Wæhrens, "During the Cold War the memory of the Holocaust did not occupy a central role in Europe. Instead of remembering, Europe wanted to forget the victims of the war and move on. Moreover, the political climate and the ideological contrast between Communism and Liberal democracies dominated."<sup>16</sup> In the period after the end of the Cold War, there is a common policy embodied in the decisions of the European Parliament in addition to the actions of various countries. For example, the same analysis states that "in the period from 1989 to 2009 the European Parliament has adopted eight resolutions and two declarations concerning the memory of the Holocaust. The resolutions and declarations can be classified in three groups according to their theme: remembrance days, concrete physical places of memory and restitution."<sup>17</sup> What does this actually tell us?

Based on the approach in this analysis, namely, considering Holocaust remembrance policies from the perspective of the initiator (actor) and his manner of conducting them, the quoted passage draws attention to the subject of these policies. The extent to which memory policies are usually thought of is within national borders. However, this is a supranational policy, and more specifically a pan-European policy as an EU community. The even higher level to which the whole process has reached is what this text started with, namely the role of a supranational, international organization involving countries from all over the world, called the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance. The second part of this text focuses on the contribution to the memory policies of this institution and in particular on the role it has in relation to the legacy of the Holocaust in Bulgaria.

## **PERIODS IN HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE POLICIES. SPECIFICITIES IN THE BULGARIAN CASE**

The specific chronicle of the events of the Holocaust is well known even to people who are not particularly interested in history: the rise to power of the National Socialists, the practical suspension of the rule of law in Germany, the political and social marginalization of Jews in

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<sup>16</sup> Anne Wæhrens, *Shared Memories? Politics of Memory and Holocaust Remembrance in the European Parliament 1989-2009* DIIS Working Paper 2011:06, Copenhagen 2011, p. 6, in: <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/122232/1/664119069.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 13

Germany, economic plunder, humiliation, ill-treatment and murder. This is the model that has been exported and that National Socialist Germany has imposed as an occupying power since the start of WW2 or expected to be followed by countries allied to the Axis. But, as we know from history, although elements of the repressive regime are seen in many places in one way or another, the degree and cooperation are at a different pace, with different diligence or obstruction.

The purpose of this text is not to enter into the discussion on the essence of the events in the fate of the Jews of Bulgaria. This is a topic on which I have had the opportunity to express my concept and arguments in other publications. The focus of the analysis here is many decades later, after November 10, 1989, when former communist leader Todor Zhivkov fell from power and the process of transition to a democratic political system began. In fact, only then was the beginning of a consistent study, reflection and debate on the events in the fate of the Jews in Bulgaria during the Second World War.

The dynamics of attention to this issue has not been balanced in the last 30 years. One can clearly periodize the way in which social processes have taken place and influenced the attention of society, experts, historians, especially the attention of institutions to the heritage of the Holocaust. In particular, in the years after 1989, the whole focus of public attention was focused on changing the political system for obvious and understandable reasons. The main topic in the public discourse was communism - anti-communism, the legacy of the communist past and the desire of society to change the political system from totalitarian to democratic. Every single topic in these first years was refracted in the context of this common problem without exception. It was also an emotional period that did not always rationally interpret the past. In these years, at the beginning of the transition, the question of the fate of Bulgarian Jews in the years of World War II for the first time finds its place in public discussions about the past.

Throughout the period of Socialism - from September 9, 1944 to November 10, 1989 the topic of the fate of Jews in Bulgaria and the Holocaust in general have never been part of the educational content of school education. As far as the fate of Jews was concerned, this was in the general context of “fascist Germany” – using the phraseology of Socialism to characterize the German regime during the war. At best, the topic was mentioned in the teaching content as part of the common tragic legacy of Nazi Germany's policy toward the “progressive forces”. However, this has never been singled out as a separate subject of study. Of course, people were more or less aware of the events and the legacy of the Holocaust. Sources such as cinema, fiction, journalism and all other were used but information stemmed never from school education. It has not been the subject of serious scientific attention either. Publications of individual historians appeared in specialized literature<sup>18</sup>, but since the ideology of that era suggested, they were all obliged to mask their analyzes by promoting the leadership of the Communist Party for good and condemning the role of absolutely every other factor in public life. Thus, even in scientific publications, although the

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<sup>18</sup> Publications on this topic until 1999 are duly described in the extremely useful work of Jacques Eshkenazi and Alfred Crispin and an introduction by Emy Baruch, “Jews in the Bulgarian Lands. Annotated Bibliography”, Judaica Studios, Sofia 1999. also foreword by Emy Baruch in [https://newspaper.kultura.bg/media/my\\_html/2164/evrei.htm](https://newspaper.kultura.bg/media/my_html/2164/evrei.htm)

participation of the relevant institutions in the persecution and defense was described, the story was told via the topic of saving Bulgarian Jews because of the leadership of the Bulgarian Communist Party. The role of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church was mentioned, but the ideology that this happened at the lead of the Bulgarian Communist Party was also applied to it. The nature of these publications and the fact that they were the subject of attention only in the narrowly specialized scientific press, they never become subject of wide public attention. To the extent that media policy of that period would reflect only the one-sided ideological reading of anything, this explains the total oblivion and the desire to replace the historical picture - as it was with as it is told for future generations.

It is interesting to note that there is a public rumor that in the 80's there was an attempt to draw attention to this issue, using it to further embellish the image of Todor Zhivkov as a "savior" of Bulgarian Jews, claiming that it was he who organized the demonstration of the left forces against the then planned expulsion of Jews from the capital to provincial towns, scheduled for May 1943. According to rumors, this particular act of resistance was intended to be presented as an event organized by Todor Zhivkov as argument for his international recognition for efforts to the protection of Jews. However, let us note that the falsification of Todor Zhivkov's role as a participant in the protest action of the left forces on May 24, 1943 against the organized expulsion by the government of Bogdan Filov of the Jews from Sofia to the province, we documented in an interview with him. In this interview he points out his participation as an organizer, in fact the organizers are Valka Goranova and Betty Danone, while Todor Zhivkov at that time was not even in Sofia.<sup>19</sup>

In summary, *the first period* is from the end of the Second World War to the end of the socialist regime, when the memory of the Holocaust was not part of the public discourse in Bulgaria. The reasons for this are probably complex. They are the subject of a separate analysis. I will point out very briefly that, on the one hand, this is the momentum of pushing out the memory of war, suffering and destruction. Witnesses of certain events do not always realize how important it is to share their experience with next generations. However, in the conditions of the Communist regime is the creation of an idea that corresponds to the ideology of this regime. The peculiarities of the events in Bulgaria make them inconvenient for the regime. Let us briefly sketch these events by *key features* that shape them as such:

- According to Communist ideology, every religion is “opium for the peoples” and is therefore reactionary. Only the ideology of Marxism-Leninism is correct. The positive account of the moral role of the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church goes beyond ideology. For this reason, it is easier not to mention it, or if it is mentioned, to be with the official thesis that it was under the leadership of the Bulgarian Communist Party.
- A serious problem during the regime is even mentioning about *civil society*. This is also a negative perception by Communist ideology. It conflicts the basic claim that the latter ideology is

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<sup>19</sup> See more in Bar-Zohar, M., 1998

the most moral and the only correct one. For this reason, no alternative of it is allowed on any issue. The very idea of an alternative is a kind of political heresy from the point of view of the Communist regime. In fact, the opposition of the civil society to the repressive policy of the Bulgarian government towards the Jews is a manifestation of the search for an alternative to this official political course. Various institutions and individuals are in opposition to it. They disagree with the government's policy and insist on abandoning repressive legislation and require not persecuting anyone on a group basis. I believe that the most important meaning of knowledge about the Bulgarian case is precisely this - in the persistence of various structures to oppose the official repressive policy and in the insistence to change and stop it. The protest letters and petitions on behalf of various organizations and individuals, including the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, express mainly two arguments as the basis for their demands for an end to the persecution of Jews. These are generally the arguments that the Law on the Protection of the Nation violates constitutional norms and that such a policy violates the basic moral principles of society. Thus, all these actions of opposition to the policy of persecution managed to protect Bulgarian Jews and prevent the final act of deportation of Jews from the so-called Old Borders and the repeal of repressive legislation in August 1944. However, the narrative of events in this way would contradict the ideology of the socialist regime as according to it there couldn't be no positive social action with a participant other than the Communist Party.

- Another fact that made inconvenient for the regime to allow public debates on the fate of Bulgaria's Jewish population during WWII was that the party system at the time did not consist only of the BCP but also of the rest of so-called bourgeois parties. The factual picture shows that against government policy are individuals, political and civic institutions that are extremely different in their political and ideological views. It would also mean presenting a positive image of liberal opposition politicians in the 25th National Assembly during the debates on the draft Law on the Protection of the Nation in the autumn of 1940. This means recognizing the positive role of bourgeois politicians in general. Moreover, the actual participants in these events were politically persecuted and repressed during socialism. This applies to some of the brightest figures such as Dimitar Peshev, Petar Mihalev, Nikola Mushanov and many others.

- Next comes the fact that the majority of Bulgarian Jews have a strong Zionist attitude. Therefore, and due to the new circumstances of the repressive nature of the socialist regime (nationalization of property of the entire population in Bulgaria, as well as the suspension of all civil and political rights) leads to mass alia of Bulgarian Jews. About 45,000 of the 49,000 Jews in Bulgaria are leaving for the newly created state of Israel. However, Israel is considered by Soviet Union to be an enemy country, and therefore, under Soviet pressure this was the policy of almost the entire socialist bloc. This of course is still another argument for forgetting the fate of the Jews in the years of World War II.

Regardless of the validity of the arguments presented in this way, the reality in the years before 1989 in Bulgaria is that knowledge of the Holocaust was not part of the content of school curricula.

This is a period of 45 years in which several generations, most of whom were born after these events, have virtually no (or no systematic) knowledge of the subject. However, these are the generations that reconstruct the story of the Holocaust.

Thus, the *second period* in the memory of the fate of the Jews in Bulgaria coincides with the fall of Todor Zhivkov from power and thus the end of the Communist regime. This is actually the beginning of real interest in the topic at last. In the early 1990s, however, the question was not “what exactly happened to the Jews in Bulgaria” but “who is the savior - the Communists or the King” (Boris III who passed away in 1943) as a reaction to refute the overexposed thesis of the Communist Party's total presence in all positive social processes. At that time, the rescue of the Jews in Bulgaria was taken for granted that they remained alive on the territory of the Kingdom of Bulgaria and the whole question came down to clarifying who had the credit for this rescue.

To the extent that the demagoguery of socialism and the totalitarian dictatorship of the communist regime has long claimed to be the only possible player in the political field on the part of the right cause, the passion for overcoming this problem is leading in all processes and topics. *It can be said that although the public interest in the fate of the Jews has found a place in the eyes of society, it is rather an element in the Communism – anti-Communism discourse. It did not immediately become the subject of analysis per se, but rather an instrument in the wider debate on the direction of political change and social transition.*

One of the first manifestations of a large public discussion on this issue was the special meeting held in 1995 in the Auditorium of Sofia University, moderated by Mikhail Tachev<sup>20</sup> and with the participation of two Israeli guest speakers<sup>21</sup>. They articulated the thesis of the role of Tsar Boris III, which was in contradiction with the ideologized history of the Communist Party-rescuer of the Bulgarian Jews. The discussion on this occasion is reflected in a publication containing the full text of the event. Still, the first two significant documentary collections on the subject also appeared during this period. Special recognition should be given to the emblematic collection of the Organization of the Jews in Bulgaria "Shalom", "Survival"<sup>22</sup>, published in 1995. This is a documentary collection of major documents from this period, which has become a very important source for the interested in this issue. A similar role for the expert circles is played by the earlier collection of documents compiled by Vitka Toshkova, called "Bulgaria - the disobedient ally of the Third Reich".<sup>23</sup> Gradually, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, more systematic research on the subject began to emerge. Here we offer a brief overview of this subsequent development.

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<sup>20</sup> Mihail Tachev is President of the International Foundation "St. Cyril and Methodius"

<sup>21</sup> These are the historians Avram Ben-Jacob and Michael Bar-Zohar. The discussion was published in a brochure based on a recording.

<sup>22</sup> Оцеляването, съставител Давид Коен, ИК „Шалом“, 1995 [Survival, compiled by David Cohen, Shalom Publishing House, 1995]

<sup>23</sup> България – своенравният съюзник на Третия райх“, съставител Витка Тошкова и др., ИК „св. Георги Победоносец, С. 1992 г. [Bulgaria - the wayward ally of the Third Reich, compiled by Vitka Toshkova and others, Publishing House "st.Georgi Pobedonosetc", S. 1992]

## CHRONICLE OF THE NARRATIVE ON THE QUESTION OF THE FATE OF THE JEWS IN BULGARIA IN THE FIRST TWO DECADES AFTER 2000

The specificity of the interest in that topic is of an increasingly in-depth study and understanding of the historical heritage. The attention is focused more and more on the overall picture - to the events in the old borders of Bulgaria as well as to those in the so-called New territory. Research on specific problems is emerging. A debate on the responsibility for the persecution and the nature of the rescue started. The challenge of the labels is becoming more and more clear - whether the respective episode and the participant are named with the appropriate label.

The book *Beyond Hitler's Grasp* was published in the United States in 1998.<sup>24</sup> This book is the first comprehensive study published in English since the iconic work of Frederick Chary in 1972 on the same topic.<sup>25</sup> In 2003, Tsvetan Todorov's famous work, *The Fragility of Goodness*, was published.<sup>26</sup> During this period, documentaries on the subject started appearing. For example, M. Bar-Zohar made a documentary of the same name by the Israeli company Per Capita Production, directed by Nisan Aviram, based on the book.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, a documentary was being prepared by American law professor Ed Gaffney, *Empty Boxcars*, which was completed about ten years later. Another documentary was being prepared at the same time, *The Optimists*.<sup>28</sup> The film has been repeatedly shown in Bulgaria, the United States and many other places. The growing interest in the legacy of the 1940s continued to be the subject of documentaries for the past 20 years. They are dedicated to the interpretation of events as a whole or to individual aspects of them. Memory digitization projects also date from this same period. The partnership between Edward Serota and the Bulgarian Photographic Association led to the digitization of numerous family albums and interviews with contemporaries at these events.<sup>29</sup>

During this period, more and more academic and journalistic titles on the legacy of the Holocaust appeared. What is specific of them is the deepening of the documentary heritage and the analysis of specific aspects of the overall picture. Such are the documentary collection *Voices in defense of civil society. Minutes of the Holy Synod on the Jewish Question* (2002), translated into English in 2005<sup>30</sup> with the support of B'nai B'rith International; the collection of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences *Doomed and saved*<sup>31</sup>; the documentary collection *You Believe* by Lea Cohen and a number of

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<sup>24</sup> Bar-Zohar, M. "Beyond Hitler's Grasp". Adams Media, 1998. Bar-Zohar, M. "Beyond Hitler's Grasp". Adams Media, 1998. The book has been translated into Bulgarian and published as a joint publication of the publishing houses of OJB "Shalom", Sofia University and AUBG..

<sup>25</sup> Chary, Frederick B. *The Bulgarian Jews and the final solution, 1940-1944*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1972

<sup>26</sup> Todorov, Tsvetan, *The Fragility of Goodness: Why Bulgaria's Jews Survived the Holocaust*, Princeton University Press, 2003, first published in French 1999

<sup>27</sup> The film premiered at the United Nations, New York in 2000. It was in Bulgaria and Israel in early 2001. After that it was repeatedly presented in many places in Bulgaria and around the world.

<sup>28</sup> This film was created by Jackie Comforty: <https://www.newday.com/film/optimists>

<sup>29</sup> The results of this consistent research and creative activity can be seen at [www.centropa.org](http://www.centropa.org)

<sup>30</sup> *The Power of Civil Society in a time of Genocide*:

[http://jews.archives.bg/jews/uploaded\\_files/The\\_Power\\_Of\\_Civil\\_Society\\_In\\_A\\_Time\\_Of\\_Genocide.pdf](http://jews.archives.bg/jews/uploaded_files/The_Power_Of_Civil_Society_In_A_Time_Of_Genocide.pdf)

<sup>31</sup> *Doomed and saved: Bulgaria in the anti-Semitic program of the Third Reich: research and documents*, compiled by Vitka Toshkova, Sineva Publishing House, Sofia 2007/*Doomed and saved : Bulgaria in the anti-Semitic program of the Third Reich : articles and documents*

others.<sup>32</sup> An independent new focus in academic research is presented in the works of Rumen Avramov and Nadia Danova, whose subject of analysis is economic robbery and repressive measures and actions against Jews in Bulgaria.<sup>33</sup> A contribution to this development is the collection of analyzes of this legacy from a legal point of view<sup>34</sup>, as well as the study of Nikolai Poppetrov and Varban Todorov on political sanctions against anti-Semitic policies.<sup>35</sup>

Part of the development of interest in this heritage and, as a result, of maintaining the memory of the Holocaust, is the holding of numerous academic forums at the initiative of various organizations. During this period, although not very active, there is still interaction between academic and other experts and various government institutions. The State Archives Agency is among those constantly present in this context. Prominent expert Ivanka Gezenko and her colleagues have prepared numerous exhibitions on the subject, as well as various documentary publications such as the catalog of Jewish working groups in conscription.<sup>36</sup> It is worth noting that throughout the period after the fall of the socialist regime, the files in the State Archives are with completely free access for researchers and all readers interested. The development throughout the period is in the direction of providing wider access to the documentary heritage. There is currently a public web platform with a number of digitized key documents available in free access for all.<sup>37</sup>

The growing interest in the subject is also present in the fact of increase of titles of translated literature on topics dedicated to the Holocaust, as well as the appearance of photo type editions of emblematic titles. Such are the first documentary collection by Nathan Greenberg in 1947, as well as that of Buko Piti in 1937, which is based on interviews with prominent public figures of that period about their critical views and non-acceptance of anti-Semitism and racism.<sup>38</sup>

These examples represent the positive result that all these activities have towards a better understanding of the legacy of the Holocaust. They contribute to the preservation of memory as an element of interinstitutional cooperation in this field. A very good example of such interaction is the creation of the conceptual exhibition *The Power of Civil Society* as a collaboration between the Center for Jewish Studies at Sofia University and the State Cultural Institute at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The organization of this exhibition on the spot in over 80 countries so far around

<sup>32</sup> Cohen, Lea, *You Believe*, Enthusiast Publishers, Sofia. 2012

<sup>33</sup> See *The Deportation of the Jews from Vardar Macedonia, Thrace by the White Sea, and Pirot, March 1943*. Nadia Danova and Rumen Avramov, compiler and general editor, BHC,2013, [https://www.marginalia.bg/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/T.1\\_palen.pdf](https://www.marginalia.bg/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/T.1_palen.pdf) and "Salvation" and the Fall - Rumen Avramov

<sup>34</sup> See *Legal Aspects of the State Anti-Jewish Policy in the Kingdom of Bulgaria (1940-1944)* - Zdravka Krasteva, ed. Ecstasy, Berlin 2018

<sup>35</sup> Poppetrov N. and V. Todorov, VII Chamber of the People's Court. *A Forgotten Documentary Evidence of Anti-Semitism in Bulgaria in 1941-1944*, East-West Publishing House, 2013

<sup>36</sup> See for example, *Jewish working groups in conscription*. Thematic catalog, published by the State Archives Agency, 2008

<sup>37</sup> See <http://jews.archives.bg/> and <http://isda.archives.government.bg:84/FundSearch.aspx>

<sup>38</sup> <http://jews.archives.bg/17->

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the world is usually done by the Bulgarian diplomatic missions in partnership with the diplomatic missions of the State of Israel and various Jewish organizations in the host countries.<sup>39</sup>

However, the most significant in terms of achievement are the type of interactions that have contributed to the institutional nature of memory policies, their increasingly systematic nature and capacity building to maintain and develop quality and systematic knowledge in the educational programs themselves. In this regard, the formalization of a national date of remembrance<sup>40</sup> can be highlighted (March 10 was first officially commemorated in Bulgaria in 2003), as well as actions of the Bulgarian authorities to join International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (the application happened in 2012).<sup>41</sup>

One important feature in the analysis of these actions that should be emphasized is the fact of the *supra-party nature* and continuity between different political forces in Bulgaria. Presidents and governments of even opposing ideologies in the political spectrum have been in power. However, this did not prevent progressive efforts to better shape educational programs, provide resources for many different initiatives and support thematic inter-institutional working groups. The renewal of the curriculum that contributes to the systematic study of this heritage is a visible result. The result of the curricula, of course, depends on the specialized training of the teachers themselves. The cooperation of the Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science with a leading institution on these issues, such as Yad Vashem, has provided annual training for school teachers of history and civic education. The shared experience of interesting pedagogical practices and the adaptation of the subject to the age specificity of the students as well as the peculiarities of modernity are elements that contribute to the improvement of the general picture in the policies of memory. The

<sup>39</sup>[https://www.culture-](https://www.culture-mfa.bg/content/%D0%A1%D0%98%D0%9B%D0%90%D0%A2%D0%90%20%D0%9D%D0%90%20%D0%93%D0%A0%D0%90%D0%96%D0%94%D0%90%D0%9D%D0%A1%D0%9A%D0%9E%D0%A2%D0%9E%20%D0%9E%D0%91%D0%A9%D0%95%D0%A1%D0%A2%D0%92%D0%9E%20%D0%A1%D0%AA%D0%94%D0%91%D0%90%D0%A2%D0%90%20%D0%9D%D0%90%20%D0%95%D0%92%D0%A0%D0%95%D0%98%D0%A2%D0%95%20%D0%92%20%D0%91%D0%AA%D0%9B%D0%93%D0%90%D0%A0%D0%98%D0%AF_1825.html)

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<sup>40</sup> By Government Decision 105 of 19 February 2003, the date of 10 March was chosen because of the so-called "Kyustendil Action" of 1943. At that date, the government was asked to stop the planned deportation of Bulgarian Jews to the Nazi concentration camps with the help of politicians and public figures from Kyustendil and Bulgarian metropolitans.

<sup>41</sup> The process of Bulgaria's accession to IHRA formally begun with a decision under item 6 of Protocol № 37 of the meeting of the Council of Ministers on March 10, 2012. During the plenary session of the IHRA in Liege on December 10-13, 2012, Bulgaria was unanimously granted observer status. The first participation with an official delegation was ordered by the Minister of Education at the session in Manchester in December 2014 during the second presidency of the United Kingdom. Bulgaria became a Liaison country under the Swiss Presidency of IHRA in 2017. Bulgaria's full membership was voted in 2018 in Ferrara under the Italian Presidency after presenting a detailed report on its coherence in its policies on Holocaust remembrance and demonstrating institutional capacity and sequence of educational programs in the study of this historical heritage and preservation of memory.

The very process of developing such a capacity is supported by all member states of this international organization and its permanent office in Berlin. The partnership in this process with the mentor country, in the Bulgarian case it was Israel, is important for the quality preparation of programs and partnership meetings in the implementation of the standards and the capacity for effective participation of the country as a full member of the Alliance. The complex issues of this historical heritage have been fully discussed in the positive environment of this organization with the delegations of Greece and the Republic of Northern Macedonia, as well as many other initiatives such as joint seminars initiated by the Memorial de la Shoa in Paris.



establishment of an annual national competition on Holocaust heritage by the Ministry of Education and Science is another example of socializing new generations through knowledge and creative reflection on the past. These examples are among the indicators of the joint efforts of many institutions, which, despite all the other complexities of society's social and political agenda, are trying to meet the current challenges of memory abuse and attitude manipulation. The process of Bulgaria's accession to the IHRA became possible thanks to long-term cooperation between various stakeholders – politicians, academics, other experts, experts in the field of education and, of course, representatives of the Organization of Jews in Bulgaria “Shalom”. None of these institutions could independently achieve quality and sustainability of the results in overcoming oblivion, layers of misunderstanding of the peculiarities of the Bulgarian case and highlighting the deep foundations for systematic study and respect of symbolic dates of remembrance.

The presented direction of development does not mean that the debate on issues of the past has become unambiguous and calm. One of the challenges to the remembrance policies in the Bulgarian case is the complex nature of the content of this historical heritage. The experts are aware of the true picture of the Bulgarian case in which there are events and actions that represent persecution and repression, as well as other events and actions defending people from persecution. The difficulty of finding a concept that characterizes the whole process is part of the problem. The natural reflex of identifying with the good seems to push out or ignore the fact of persecution and can be bypassed or alienated from the general picture of memory. On the other hand, the sensitivity to this topic and the honesty to the historical truth provokes a sharpened attention to the repressive actions and sometimes to the meaning of the whole process in the categories of persecution. One can say that there is some chronicity of these collisions in memory management. Something more. The intensification of the attitude towards this past brings not only experts to the debate. The potential of social networks for the circulation of not only valid knowledge is a problem for every sphere of public life. Against these questions, the most effective answer is in the systemic nature of knowledge in educational programs and an approach that addresses learners not as an object of information, but as a partner in this discussion and an interested participant.

Obviously, it is not the responsibility of state institutions to intervene in the scholarly dispute. However, the improved capacity of remembrance policies stems from creating the conditions to teach credible, holistic and valid knowledge that is respectable to the past and contributing to building values in the present. The key issue for public environment policies that is always relevant is to be able to create a sustainable environment in which all stakeholders can partner on each issue and contribute to the quality of the conversation and hence to the integrity of the social environment.

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