

Bulgaria

Country in Eastern Europe. On the eve of World War II some 50,000 Jews lived in Bulgaria; more than half lived in the country's capital, Sofia.

For hundreds of years there was almost no antisemitism in Bulgaria. This changed during the 1930s, when certain political groups began expressing anti-Jewish sentiments. In late 1940 a pro-German government passed Bulgaria's first anti-Jewish legislation. These laws were vigorously protested by many Bulgarians, but to no avail—they were still passed by the Bulgarian parliament. Jewish teachers were fired from their jobs, all Jews were forced to don the Jewish badge (see also badge, Jewish), and they were made to live in terribly overcrowded conditions. In addition, Jews were not allowed to frequent main streets or places of entertainment, their radios, cars, and other valuable possessions were confiscated, and most Jewish males were drafted into doing forced labor.

In March 1941 Bulgaria allied itself with Germany and Italy; its main hope in doing so was that the AXIS powers would help it regain territories lost during World War I. As part of the package Bulgaria declared war on the Western Allies, and was rewarded by the Germans with its former provinces of Macedonia and Thrace. German army units were stationed in Bulgaria, but the Bulgarian government was not completely taken over by the Nazis.

In September 1942 the Bulgarians established a Commissariat (office) for Jewish Affairs and appointed a well-known antisemite, Alexandr Belev, to run it. The Commissariat, which was funded by money taken from blocked Jewish bank accounts, soon became Bulgaria's main address for dealing with Jewish affairs.

During the winter of 1943 SS officer Theodor Dannecker came to Bulgaria to direct its anti-Jewish measures. At that point, the deportation of Jews to extermination camps became a distinct and frightening possibility. In February of that year the Bulgarian government agreed to deport 20,000 Jews from Macedonia and Thrace. However, there were nowhere near 20,000 Jews in the two regions combined, so the extra 6,000 were to be taken from Bulgaria itself. As a first step, more than 11,000 Jews were sent from Macedonia and

Thrace to holding camps, where they were kept for about a week before they were handed over to the Germans, who deported them to Treblinka.

The first group of Jews set aside for deportation from Bulgaria itself came from the town of Kyustendil. Dimiter Peshev, a deputy speaker of the parliament, quickly launched a campaign to stop the deportation. Peshev met with Minister of the Interior Peter Gabrovski, who agreed to cancel the deportation order for the Jews of Bulgaria itself, but not for those from Macedonia and Thrace. Peshev then turned to the prime minister, and demanded that all anti-Jewish persecution be halted. Prime Minister Bogdan Filov promptly fired Peshev, and the Germans stepped up their demand for the deportation of Bulgarian Jewry. In late May the Bulgarian government decided to expel the Jews of Sofia to the provinces, pending their deportation. However, this turned out to be the furthest the government would go, and the threat of deportation disintegrated (although all Jewish men between the ages of 20 and 46 were drafted into forced labor battalions and made to do backbreaking work).

As the Germans slowly began losing the war, conditions improved for the Jews of Bulgaria. While the Jews from Macedonia and Thrace had been murdered by the Germans with Bulgarian assistance, the Jews who had been expelled from Sofia were allowed to go home on short visits and were given certain other privileges. When the Soviet army reached Bulgaria in August 1944 all anti-Jewish decrees were cancelled. The Jews of pre-war Bulgaria had been persecuted, but they had been spared the fate of most other Jews in Europe—death. After the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, 90 percent of Bulgaria's Jews settled there.