

WORLD WAR II REVISITED: NEW APPROACHES  
AND INTERPRETATIONS IN THE NATIONAL HISTORIOGRAPHIES  
OF BULGARIA AND ROMANIA AFTER 1989

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Among all other things, the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe gave rise to significant changes in the historiography and the memory of the past in general. Topics that have long been carefully covered by ideological silence were brought up to public attention, historical events and whole historical periods became subject of revision and reassessment. The spirit of the “miraculous” 1989 unleashed passionate public interest in the national history of the recent past, as if vocalizing the “silenced” issues and correcting the distorted picture of the past would clear the path for a new future. In this new situation of openness and ideological freedom, the historians were also to face many challenges. Unveiling the dark past implied the difficult task of handling with nationally sensitive issues. The history of the Second World War, which is a turning point in the history of Europe, is full of such delicate and controversial issues. And if in Western Europe the process of talking about the difficult issues related to that period had started in the 1970s and especially in the 1980s, in Eastern Europe that would take place only after the fall of communism. This paper attempts to make a comparative study of the post-communist historiography on the Second World War in Bulgaria and Romania, two countries that shared the common fate of German satellites during the war and then of Soviet satellites in its aftermath, which determined the historical interpretation of the period.

**Keywords:** historiography, Second World War, Bulgaria, Romania, Holocaust.

Among all other things, the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe gave rise to significant changes in the historiography and the memory of the past in general. Topics that have long been carefully covered by ideological silence were brought up to public attention, historical events and whole historical periods became subject of revision and reassessment. The spirit of the “miraculous” 1989, which Sorin Antohi aptly characterizes as a “heavy mix of elation, surprise, determination and hope”<sup>1</sup> also unleashed a sudden passionate public interest in the national history, as if vocalizing the “silenced” issues and correcting the distorted picture of the past was of crucial importance for clearing the path for a new future, to put it in other words, one had to square the accounts with the past in order to

<sup>1</sup> S. Antohi, “Narratives Unbound: A Brief Introduction to Post-Communist Historical Studies”, in *Narratives Unbound. Historical Studies in Post-Communist Eastern Europe*, ed. by S. Antohi, B. Trencsenyi and P. Apor, Budapest, 2007, p. XI.

start anew. Public interest was directed mainly to the recent past, but it also spread out to the period preceding the advent of the communists to power. A great number of books that were hitherto forbidden were published, memoirs of people inconvenient to the former regime saw the light of day, as well as interviews and documentaries, the media being very active in the process of “revealing the whole truth” about the past.

For the historians, the opening of archives and the freedom of interpretation of the historical facts was a great opportunity, but also a great challenge. Would they be able to live up to the expectations and respond to the pressing public demand? Seldom does history seem so urgently relevant or important as in moments of sudden political transition from one state form to another. At the same time, it has been asserted that exactly during political transitions historians can never be sure that their voices will be heard, because what they say is not always what people want to hear<sup>2</sup>. After 1989 the community of historians in Eastern Europe had to undergo a swift transformation. Not only were historians to face institutional changes, but they had to adapt very quickly and catch up with developments in history writing that had taken place in western historiography, from which they were isolated for a long time. Besides, scholars from different academic fields, like sociologists, literary historians, specialists in cultural history, anthropologists, took an interest in history, and seemed more successive in that adaptation. Last but not least, unveiling the dark past implied the difficult task of handling with nationally sensitive issues.

The history of WWII is full of such delicate and controversial issues. Needless to say, it was a turning point in the history of Europe, where the seeds of the division of the continent that would last for almost half a century were sown. The end of the Cold War also brought to changes in the memory of WWII in a broader European perspective. After 1989 two parallel processes took place in Europe: the establishment of the Holocaust as a main event during the whole world war, going from West to East, and the enforcement of the view of the similarity between the two totalitarian regimes – the National-Socialist and the Bolshevik, going in the opposite direction<sup>3</sup>. At the same time, dealing with the history of WWII has turned to be a very tough matter, not only in Europe, but also in East Asia, as Daniel Chirot argues. In a recent article, where he tries to find out why the memories of the war remain so troubled in so many countries, he comes to the conclusion that the unwillingness to recognize the dark side of one's own history is, after all, the rule rather than the exception<sup>4</sup>. As Otto Luthar points out, “much like

<sup>2</sup> R. Evans, “Introduction. Redesigning the Past: History in Political Transitions”, *Journal of Contemporary History* 38 (1), 2003, p. 5–12.

<sup>3</sup> П. Димитрова, “Память о Второй мировой войне: между прошлым и настоящим”, *Bulgarian Historical Review* 1–2, 2015, p. 203–211.

<sup>4</sup> D. Chirot, “Why World War II memories remain so troubled in Europe and East Asia?”, in *Remembrance, History, and Justice. Coming to Terms with Traumatic Pasts in Democratic Societies*, ed. by V. Tismaneanu and B. Jacob, Budapest, 2015, p. 45–68.

the war, occupation, collaboration and resistance constituted a process that marked a vast part of Europe, the current (changes in) commemorative practices, too, are a all-European phenomenon". In his view, this also refers to the discussions on victims and perpetrators, which over the past decade "have not only been the common denominator of the political debates in Eastern, Central and Southeastern Europe, but have underlined the culture of remembering throughout the continent"<sup>5</sup>. Yet, if in Western Europe the process of talking about some of the most sensitive issues related to that period, such as the Holocaust, had started in the 1970s and especially in the 1980s, in Eastern Europe that would take place only after the fall of communism. This paper is an attempt for a comparative study of the post-communist historiography on WWII in two Eastern European countries, Bulgaria and Romania, which shared the common fate of being German satellites during the war. I will try to find out where the issues related to WWII stand in the revised picture of the national past of the two countries and to outline the new approaches in the interpretation of these issues.

#### ON A NEW TRACK: SOME GENERAL OBSERVATIONS ON THE HISTORIOGRAPHIES OF BULGARIA AND ROMANIA AFTER 1989

After 1989, historians in all countries of Eastern Europe were encouraged to liberate history from real or presumed communist distortions and fabrications and to make reevaluation of different moments and personalities of the past. Thus, historical revisionism came as a response to the growing public pressure to revise and rewrite the national history. Yet, for a number of reasons, the actual change in the national historiographies proved to be very difficult. We can agree with the observation valid for all the countries in the region undergoing post-communist transition that among the researchers of the past could be distinguished two major groups: "traditionalists" and "innovators", the differentiation being rather conventional, for not encompassing all the variety of particular cases and because of the inevitable overflow of researchers from one group into the other<sup>6</sup>. Under the new circumstances, each of these groups was fighting to prove its version of history was the right one. The established version of the national past was very persistent and the attempts at deconstructing the national myths were often met with hostility from fellow historians, as well as from the general public. Ulf Brunnbauer notes that the focusing of the historiography on the respective national history and the resistance to the deconstruction of national myths is found in one

<sup>5</sup> O. Luthar, "Introduction. "Red Devil and the Evil Spirit", in *Of Red Dragons and Evil Spirits. Post-Communist Historiography Between Democratization and New Politics of History*, ed. by O. Luthar, Budapest, 2017, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> Бл. Нягулов, "Националната история в съвременен европейски контекст", in *Историческата наука в България: състояние и перспективи*, съст. А. Запрянова, Бл. Нягулов, Ил. Марчева, София, 2006, p. 151–152.

form or another in all post-socialist countries, although, he adds, the national perspective did not remain completely unchallenged<sup>7</sup>.

The national historiographies of Bulgaria and Romania followed this general trend. In the initial period of post-communist transition, they vacillated between continuity and change, between myths and de-mystification. Methodological innovation in the field was also very difficult and slow. Like in the entire post-communist Eastern Europe, the mainstream of historians in them kept to a positivist, political history focused on events. In her paper on the development of Bulgarian historiography in the early 1990s, Maria Todorova writes that not much has been done in terms of the introduction of new themes and especially of new modes of writing. In her view, Bulgarian historiography has remained outside the main trends of the historical profession and did not even try to confront the great debates. At the same time, she points to the fact that after 1989 “a surprisingly sophisticated postmodernist discourse broke out in the press, represented chiefly by scholars of philosophy, literary criticism, linguistics”<sup>8</sup>. For the Romanian case, Bogdan Murgescu has made similar observation as regards the development of historiography in the 1990s: “methodological backwardness, combined with a heavy centered Romanian approach”<sup>9</sup>. In his book “To be a historian in 2000” (*A fi istoric in anul 2000*) Murgescu offers a good synthesis of the variety of challenges historians had to face in the first post-communist decade. He points to the fact that the intensification of the external contacts did not mean automatically a renewal of the field<sup>10</sup>.

Yet, he also notes some positive trends, the predominance of political history starting to give way to new topics, forbidden until then, primarily from contemporary history, such as communist repression and resistance, the participation in the anti-Soviet war, the legionary movement, etc., as well as the introduction of new fields of study as, for instance, the history of mentalities and the history of ideas and the imaginary<sup>11</sup>. In her study on the new tendencies in Romanian history writing after 1989, Smaranda Vultur points to the fact that the extension of historical research to previously ignored or avoided topics because of censorship had resulted in the “pendulum principle”, i.e. a clear predominance of certain topics that focus public attention. She also makes the observation that while in the immediate aftermath of 1989 positions were radical and the tendency towards polemics among the people in the field was strong, the farther we get from the year 1989, the lesser this

<sup>7</sup> See U. Brunnbauer, “Introduction. (Re) Writing History in Southeast Europe”, in *(Re) Writing History. Historiography in Southeast Europe After Socialism*, ed. by U. Brunnbauer, Münster, 2004, p. 12–15.

<sup>8</sup> M. Todorova, “Historiography of the Countries of Eastern Europe: Bulgaria”, *The American Historical Review*, volume 97, issue 4, October 1992, p. 1105–1117.

<sup>9</sup> B. Murgescu, “The Romanian Historiography in the 1990”, *Romanian Journal of Political Science* 3, no. 1, Spring 2003, p. 35–36.

<sup>10</sup> Idem, *A fi istoric in anul 2000*, București, 2000, p. 30.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42–45.

“appetite for polemics”, while, at the same time, with the appearance of new topics and a new generation of historians one could observe moving away from the neo-positivist empiricism at the methodological level, and from the national centralist model as far as the construction of historical explanation is concerned. Yet, regardless of the methodological and thematic innovation, she notes “a disproportion between certain encouraging trends and the overshadowing mainstream”<sup>12</sup>.

Similar general trends are observed also with regards to the Bulgarian case. In their attempt to identify the novelties in Bulgarian post-communist historiography, Daniela Koleva and Ivan Elenkov come to the conclusion that a reassessment of ideas, events and personalities, which has countered hitherto dominant ideologically biased evaluations has taken place. They note that although in terms of methodology the changes were rather slow, some new tendencies are already visible. New topics have emerged – on the one hand, topics that had previously been silenced, and on the other, new directions of interest often resulting from contact with Western research, such as women's history, history of the minorities, religion<sup>13</sup>.

#### WWII REVISITED: BULGARIAN AND ROMANIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

In the course of decades the history of WWII was viewed in the light of the ensuing ideological confrontation of the Great Powers in the newly established world order. The communist regimes in Eastern Europe used the war as a strong instrument of their own legitimization. For Romania and Bulgaria, who were Hitler's satellites, the period of WWII was a sore moment in their national history, filled with traumatic issues that were rather not touched upon. Indeed, every nation has difficulties in acknowledging the embarrassing and less glorious moments in its history, which Marc Ferro describes as the “silences of history”<sup>14</sup>. Yet, soon after 1989 in both Romania and Bulgaria exactly the WWII period would become the focus of public attention and the reason for heated debates with two intertwined issues related to it, namely, the personality of the wartime leaders, respectively Marshal Ion Antonescu and King Boris III, and the topic of the Holocaust.

Communist historiography attributed to Ion Antonescu the image of a fascist/military-fascist dictator who was responsible for all the evils experienced by Romania during the war. At the same time, it kept silence on the issue of the tragic fate of Romanian Jews during that period. Initially used as a propaganda tool against political enemies, the saga of the extermination of Romanian Jews

<sup>12</sup> S. Vultur, “New topics, new tendencies and new generations of historians in Romanian historiography”, in *(Re)writing History: Historiography in Southeast Europe After Socialism*, p. 261–276.

<sup>13</sup> D. Koleva, I. Elenkov, “Did “the Change” Happen? Post-socialist Historiography in Bulgaria,” in *(Re)writing History: Historiography in Southeast Europe After Socialism*, p. 99–113.

<sup>14</sup> M. Ferro, *L'histoire sous surveillance*, Paris, 1985, p. 52.

disappeared from the pages of the newspapers and the history textbooks shortly after the end of the war. Despite the anti-fascist rhetoric of the official propaganda, the tragic history of the Jewish population in the years of the war was distorted or simply ignored.

Similar was the case of Bulgarian communist historiography with regard to King Boris III and the wartime regime. After the end of the war, the thesis of “monarcho-fascist” dictatorship was imposed, and the monarchy was ascribed the historical responsibility for all the negatives in the political development of the country and for the yet another failure in the national politics. The established cult of the king was replaced by oblivion, and his political behavior was subjected to one-sided interpretation and distortion. Similar to the case of Romania, for a very short period of time the tragic fate of the Jews had been the focus of public attention with the aim to highlight the fascist nature of the regime and the responsibility of the Bulgarian monarch. Then, the topic remained in the background. This silence was briefly broken by the book of Benjamin Arditi, published in Tel Aviv in 1952 and dedicated to the role of King Boris III in the expulsion of the Jews from Bulgaria, in which the author tried to clear his image by presenting him as a “savior” of the Bulgarian Jews, while putting the blame for what happened in “new lands” on the “sadist Belev” and Germany.<sup>15</sup> In the 1960s, the issue of the fate of the Jews during WWII regained international relevance, and the topic of rescuing Bulgarian Jews became tempting for the authorities in Bulgaria, which included it in their propaganda arsenal. Since the second half of the 1960s, and especially in the 1970s and 1980s, was established the thesis of Bulgaria as the sole savior of its Jews, while emphasizing the paramount role of the Bulgarian Communist Party and of Todor Zhivkov himself in the rescue. The question of the fate of the Macedonian and Aegean Jews was conveniently detached from that of the Jews in Bulgaria proper, silenced or belittled. They were regarded as non-Bulgarian, i.e. like foreign Jews<sup>16</sup>.

In Romania, the nationalism of the early 1970s and Ceausescu's intention to distance his country from Soviet influence had given rise to a change in the interpretation of the past, which also opened up the possibility of a change in the attitude towards some historical figures. In this context, the mid-1970s marked the beginning of a partial rehabilitation of Marshal Antonescu, who gradually started to acquire the image of a patriot and a fighter for national unity. Antonescu's rehabilitation was also motivated by Romania's desire to clean up its wartime dossier and to present itself to the world with its humane treatment of Romania's Jewish population. Ion Antonescu was presented as a “savior” of the Romanian Jews, who opposed Hitler and refused to send them to Nazi detention camps. As a rule, atrocities committed on Romanian territory or in Romanian-administered

<sup>15</sup> Б. Ардити, *Ролята на цар Борис III при изселването на евреите от България*, Тел Авив, 1952.

<sup>16</sup> See *VII състав на Народния съд. Едно забравено документално свидетелство за антисемитизма в България през 1941–1944 г.*, съст. В. Тодоров, Н. Поппетров, София, 2013, с. 12–13.

lands were either ignored or minimized, while at the same time close attention was paid to the anti-Semitic policy of Horthy's Hungary as a counterpoint to Antonescu's alleged "humanitarianism"<sup>17</sup>. Over the next decade, a significant contribution to the cleansing of the image of Ion Antonescu was made by the Romanian emigrant in Italy and former member of the Iron Guard, Iosif Constantin Dragan, who published in 1986 an extensive collection of documents that completely exculpated and glorified the Romanian wartime leader<sup>18</sup>.

Meanwhile, the established image of the "monarch-führer" continued to exist in the Bulgarian historiography, although in the 1980s was noted increasing scholarly interest in the personality of King Boris III and two biographical books about him were published almost at the same time in the west. They were the work of Bulgarian emigrants in their attempt to give a complete picture of the life and politics of the Bulgarian ruler and to put an end to the one-sidedness in the assessment of his historical role<sup>19</sup>.

In both countries the end of communism marked the beginning of a new reading of the past and an increased public interest in topics and personalities, whose historical evaluation had been in the grip of the established ideological canon for decades. It was King Boris III and Marshal Ion Antonescu who enjoyed the greatest public interest and, at the same time, were subject of sharp dispute and controversial evaluation. Very often, the assessment of their personality and political role was highly politicized and based on conjunctural considerations. As Tony Judt had aptly pointed, "the mismemory of communism is also contributing, in its turn, to a mismemory of anticommunism"<sup>20</sup>.

The efforts to rehabilitate the Romanian wartime leader, which had started in the previous decades, continued further. In the early 1990s, a cult of Antonescu began to establish itself in Romania. Now, to his image of a patriot and fighter for the Romanian national ideal was added that of "the first martyr of communism". Antonescu's apologists drew attention to the 1946 trial in which he was convicted as a war criminal and shot on June 1, 1946. They presented it as a "political process", pointing out its alleged procedural shortcomings and calling into question its legal bases. Raising the discussion of the Antonescu trial aimed to divert attention from the real allegations leveled against him and to portray him as a great patriot and anti-communist victim of the communist rule who was unfairly sentenced to death<sup>21</sup>. As one Romanian memory researcher has pointed out, "since

<sup>17</sup> A. Cioflâncă, "A 'grammar of exculpation' in communist historiography: Distortion of the history of the Holocaust under Ceausescu", *Romanian Journal of Political Science*, 2004/2, p. 29–46.

<sup>18</sup> I. Drăgan, *Antonescu. Mareșalul României și războaiele de reîntregire*, Milan, 1986.

<sup>19</sup> P. Dimitroff, *Boris III of Bulgaria: Toiler, Citizen, King, 1894–1943*, Lewes, 1986; St. Groueff, *Crown of Thorns: The Reign of King Boris III of Bulgaria, 1918–1943*, Lanham, 1987.

<sup>20</sup> T. Judt, "The Past Is Another Country: Myth and Memory in Postwar Europe", in *The Politics of Retribution in Europe: World War II and Its Aftermath*, ed. by I. Deák, J. Gross, and T. Judt, Princeton, 2000, p. 309–310.

<sup>21</sup> M. Ciucă, *Procesul mareșalului Antonescu. Documente*, vol. 1, București, 1995.

1989 the memory of the tragic fate of Romanian Jews in the war years was completely marginalized, it turns out to be very easy to put aside such painful problems and instead focus public attention on Ion Antonescu as a victim of early communist terror and as a patriot placed in an impossible position to maneuver between Soviet and German ambitions in the war”<sup>22</sup>.

After 1989 in Bulgaria, too, the public interest in the personality of the country's wartime leader King Boris III was extremely strong. Immediately after the changes, the two biographical books about Boris III published abroad in the late 1980s, were translated into Bulgarian and particularly the mentioned book of Stefan Groueff “Crown of Thorns” that was written with great sympathy for the king, enjoyed great popularity. In the following years, more attempts were made to present a broader picture of the personality and politics of the Bulgarian monarch<sup>23</sup>. In many articles in the press and memoirs of people close to the monarch, the other extreme was reached, his personality being almost mythologized. Although not to the extent that it was done with regards to the Romanian leader Ion Antonescu, in Bulgaria attempts were also made to portray King Boris III as a martyr, who had laid down his life for the Bulgarian national cause and as a victim of the communist regime. In this connection, the vandal act of the communists with the tainted memory of the king was referred to – the exhumation of his mortal remains from the Rila Monastery in 1946 and five years later, the blasting of the chapel in the park of the Vrana Palace where they were laid. At the same time, in the continuing speculations about the causes of the untimely death of Boris III in August 1943, increasingly more voices were heard in support of the version that the king was poisoned by the Russians. For the sake of comparison, it is also interesting to note the fact that the image of both leaders was politically instrumentalized, but while in Bulgaria the personality of King Boris III was used by supporters of the return of the monarchy, in Romania Antonescu became a banner of the nationalists against the pro-monarchist tendencies in the society<sup>24</sup>.

Gradually, the question of their role in determining the fate of the Jewish population in the territories administered by them during the WWII became crucial in the historical assessment of both Ion Antonescu and King Boris III. It is worth noting that the debates among Romanian historians with regards to Antonescu were extremely polarized and the estimates ranged from that of a true patriot and fighter for the Romanian national ideal to a fascist dictator, who deliberately exterminated

<sup>22</sup> M. Bucur, “Edifices of the Past. War Memorials and Heroes in Twentieth Century Romania”, in *Balkan Identities. Nation and Memory*, edited by M. Todorova, New York, 2004, p. 178.

<sup>23</sup> А. Леверсон, *Щрихи към портрета на цар Борис III. Щаб в сянка*, Кн.1–2, Пловдив, 1992; Д. Даскалов, *Цар Борис – познатият и непознатият*, София, 2001; Н. Недев, *Цар Борис III. Биография*, София, 1997; *Ibid*, *Цар Борис III. Дворецът и тайният кабинет*, София, 2013.

<sup>24</sup> И. Димитров, “Царят умря – да живее царят!”, in И. Димитров, *Между Мюнхен и Потсдам. Българската политика през Втората световна война. Исторически очерци*, София, 1998, с. 151–155; N. Djuvara, “Dosarul apărării, dosrul acuzării”, *Dilema*, anul IV, nr 165, 8–14 martie 1996, p. 6.



a huge portion of the country's Jewish population<sup>25</sup>. In Bulgaria, the debates with regards to King Boris III were not that heated, but his historical assessment was also seen through the lens of his responsibility for the fate of the Bulgarian Jews during the war<sup>26</sup>.

The issue of the historical responsibility for the Jewish victims had become the subject of fierce public debate and different historical interpretations. The prevailing attitude in Romanian society was a blatant denial of any Romanian complicity in the destruction of the Jews or even claims that the Holocaust had not affected Romanian Jewry at all<sup>27</sup>. Bulgarian society was also captivated by negativism and preferred to believe that "Bulgaria is the only country in the world that has saved all of its Jews" and to deny the blame for the 11,363 Jews from Vardar Macedonia and Western Thrace who ended up in the fascist death camps in Poland. The major argument in support of that thesis was the assertion that Bulgaria had actually only "temporarily administered" those territories and it was the Germans who were to blame for the deportations<sup>28</sup>. Two parallel narratives developed in Bulgaria: one about the "saved" and the other, about the "unsaved"/"sacrificed" Jews, which cannot find their place in a common history.

In Romania the topic of the Holocaust turned into the most controversial of all the topics that resurfaced after 1989 due to the contributions of specialists in emigration<sup>29</sup>. One of the most immediate responses to the general disbelief in the Romanian Holocaust was the publication of extensive collections of primary sources, covering a wide range of issues<sup>30</sup>, as well as survivors' testimonies and

<sup>25</sup> Among the supporters of the first thesis were: Gh. Buzatu, *Mareşalul Antonescu în faţa istoriei*, 2 vol., Iaşi, 1990; L. Watts, *Romanian Cassandra: Ion Antonescu and the Struggle for Reform, 1916–1941*, Boulder, 1993, and of the opposite: R. Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania. The Destruction of Jews and Gypsies under the Antonescu Regime, 1940–44*, Chicago, 2000; D. Deletant, *Hitler's Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and His Regime, Romania 1940–1944*, New York, 2006.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example: Н. Барух, *Откултът. Цар Борис и съдбата на българските евреи*. София, 1991; С. Ардити, *Човекът, който изигра Хитлер. Цар Борис III – гонител или приятел на българските евреи*. Русе, 2008; М. Бар-Зоар, *Извън хватката на Хитлер: героичното спасяване на българските евреи*, София, 2011.

<sup>27</sup> See: M. Shafir, *Între negare şi trivialisare prin comparaţie. Negarea Holocaustului în ţările postcomuniste din Europa Centrala şi de Est*, Iaşi, 2002.

<sup>28</sup> See Л. Деянова, "Посткомунистическият негационизъм", in Л. Деянова, *Очертания на мълчанието: Историческа социология на колективната памет*, София, 2009, с. 161–165.

<sup>29</sup> C. Petrescu and D. Petrescu, "Mastering vs. Coming to Terms with the Past: A Critical Analysis of Post-Communist Romanian Historiography", in *Narratives Unbound. Historical Studies in Post-Communist Eastern Europe*, ed. by S. Antohi, B. Trencsényi and P. Apor, Budapest, 2007, p. 347–351. See also: V. Eskenasy, "The Holocaust and Romanian Historiography: Communist and Neo-Communist Revisionism," in *The Tragedy of Romanian Jewry*, ed. by R. Braham, New York, 1994, p. 173–236.

<sup>30</sup> To mention but a few: Arhivele Nationale ale României, *Stenogramele sedintelor Consiliului de Miniştri: Guvernarea Ion Antonescu*, 11 vols, Bucureşti, 1997–2008; *Antonescu-Hitler: Corespondenţa şi întâlirile inedite*, eds. V. Arimia, I. Ardeleanu, St. Lache, Bucharest, 1991; *Evreii din România între anii 1940–1944*, ed. L. Benjamin, vol. I: *Legislaţia antievreiască*, Bucureşti, 1993; vol. 2: *Problema evreiască în stenogramele Consiliului de Miniştri*, Bucureşti, 1996; *Holocaust în România. Soarta evreilor din Basarabia, Bucovina şi Transnistria 1941–1942. Documente*, ed. A. Şiperco,

memoirs, which give a more personal perspective to the events<sup>31</sup>. In spite of the relatively large number of collections of documents, though, the Holocaust and its perceptions continued to be subjects of controversy, contestation, and confrontation. Some authors have pointed to the fact that no much progress can be noticed in the historiography on that issue as compared to the immediate past and “the Romanian Holocaust has mostly been the object of neglect and distortion”, while the work of both Romanian and Western scholars, was “still limited in the range of their questions and the methodology of their answers”<sup>32</sup>. Constantin Iordachi, in his turn, made the observation that the complex and controversial problem of the deportation and extermination of Jews and Gypsies from Romania has generated heated debates among the historians from completely opposite standpoints, but the disputes on this issue have remained isolated from the processes taking place in Europe. In an attempt to find the place of the Romanian debate in the general debate on the Holocaust, he notes the evolution of the Romanian historiography on the Holocaust: from the functionalist paradigm that places accent on the external factor and the political situation in the explanation of the Jewish extermination to a combination between the intentionalist approach which puts an emphasis on the internal factor and the functionalist perspective<sup>33</sup>.

Gradually, things have started to change, following the changes in the entire region of Eastern Europe. Dan Stone has pointed to some significant changes in the historiographical explanations on a broader scale, due to the fact that “since the end of the Cold War, the “discovery” of Eastern Europe at the heart of the genocidal process is reshaping our understanding of the Holocaust”. In his view “the return of ideology” that had begun displacing the “functionalist” or “structuralist” dominance of the 1980s remains strong, but it is being supplemented by very detailed regional and local studies, by analyses of different experiences of ghettoization in different places, and by a focus on the widespread plunder and corruption that accompanied the killing process. He makes the observation that historians have broadened the discussion on the Holocaust, situating it into a

București, 2005; *La Shoah en Roumanie. Les Juifs sous le régime d'Antonescu 1940–1944. Documents diplomatique français inédits*, ed. C. Iancu, Montpellier, 2007; *Al III-lea Reich și Holocaustul din România, 1940–1944. Documente din arhivele germane*, eds. D. Deletant and O. Trașcă, Bucharest, 2007.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example: *Martiriul evreilor din România, 1940–1945: Documente și mărturii*, ed. J. Alexandru, București, 1991; *Tragedia romilor deportați în Transnistria, 1942–1945*, eds. R. Ioanid, M. Kelso, L. Cioabă, Iași, 2009; M. Sebastian, *Jurnal, 1935–1944*, București, 1996; E. Dorian, *Jurnal din vremuri de prigoană 1937–1944*, București, 1996.

<sup>32</sup> I. Livezeanu, “The Romanian Holocaust: Family Quarrels”, *East European Politics and Societies* 16, no. 3, 2004, p. 934 and 941. See also V. Eskenasy, “The Holocaust and Romanian Historiography: Communist and Neo-Communist Revisionism,” in *The Tragedy of Romanian Jewry*, ed. by R. Braham, New York, 1994, p. 173–236.

<sup>33</sup> C. Iordachi, “Problema Holocaustului în România și Transnistria – Dezbateri istoriografice”, in *Problema Holocaustului. Perspective istorice și comparative*, ed. by C. Iordachi and V. Achim, Bucharest, 2004, p. 23–77.

transnational or world-historical context of imperialism and colonialism<sup>34</sup>. Other scholars point to the fact that at the beginning of the third millennium, research on the history of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust in East-Central Europe has registered noticeable progress. The academic freedom and better access to archives has opened new perspectives on the Holocaust that have challenged historians to reconsider their research agenda and their understanding of the field, while the new approaches to East-Central Europe as *the site* of genocide have enabled historians to further overcome the classical cleavage between “intentionalist” versus “functionalist” historiographical interpretations and to come up with new, more sophisticated and nuanced interpretative frameworks<sup>35</sup>.

In Romania, the controversies surrounding the anti-Jewish policies of the Antonescu regime have led to a wave of critical research. The historians of the Romanian Holocaust have begun to engage seriously with some of the wider debates in the Holocaust studies and to offer sophisticated analyses of the way it happened in Romania. More recent histories have emphasized the extent to which Romanians were important and independent actors in the Holocaust and reveal the value of the multi-causal explanations of the phenomena.<sup>36</sup> A review of the recent Romanian research on the Holocaust makes the general observation that whereas in the first decade of the 21st century, research on the Holocaust in Romania was focused on conducting what in German is so appropriately called *Grundlagenforschung* (research on the basics) of *who did what when how*, in the following decade, “this research field is gaining nuance, depth, and its own distinctive character”<sup>37</sup>.

In Bulgaria the topic of the Holocaust has entered the public debate in the beginning of the 1990s in relation to the 50th anniversary of the events of March 1943, when the issue of the “unsaved” Jews from Macedonia and Thrace was brought to the fore. In the following decade there was much controversy related to the status of the “new territories” and the responsibility for the deportations. At the same time some serious historiographical work was done on the antisemitic policies and legislation, the role of different actors in the rescue, particularly the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and bourgeois politicians, such as Dimitar Peshev<sup>38</sup>.

<sup>34</sup> D. Stone, “Beyond the ‘Auschwitz syndrome’: Holocaust historiography after the Cold War”, *Patterns of Prejudice* 44, 5, 2010, p. 454–468.

<sup>35</sup> M. Cattaruzza, C. Iordachi, “Introduction. Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust in East-Central Europe: New Research Trends and Perspectives”, *East Central Europe*, 39 (2012) 1, p. 1–12.

<sup>36</sup> R. Clark, “New models, new questions: historiographical approaches to the Romanian Holocaust, *European Review of History*”, *Revue européenne d’histoire*, vol. 19, N 2, April, 2012, p. 303–320.

<sup>37</sup> G. Fisher, “New Research on the Holocaust in Romania (Rezension)”, *Sehepunkte* 18, 2018, no. 3 [15.03.2018], URL: <http://www.sehepunkte.de/2018/03/30622.html>. Accessed on: 30.03.2020.

<sup>38</sup> To mention but a few: Вл. Пауновски, Й. Илел, *Евреите в България между унищожението и спасението*, София, 2000; П. Неделева, *Антиеврейското законодателство в България през Втората световна война*, София, 2015; Р. Аврамов, “Спасение” и падение: микроикономика на държавния антисемитизъм в България 1940–1944 г., София, 2012; Е. Троева, “Принудителният труд през Втората световна война”, in А. Лулева, Е. Троева, П. Петров. *Принудителният труд в България (1941–1962)*.

Much attention was paid to the “new territories” and the elucidation of issues, on which silence was laid for a long time<sup>39</sup>. The research was facilitated by the publication of collections of documents related to these issues, of which particular mentioning deserves the major collection of archival documents on the deportation of the Jews from Western Macedonia and Thrace<sup>40</sup>. In her thorough review of the Bulgarian and foreign research in the foreword to this volume, Nadya Danova points out the tendency toward a more realistic and critical approach and the positive role of international exchange for its developing<sup>41</sup>. However, regardless of these positive tendencies, Stefan Troebst has noted that in Bulgaria “the topos for the “salvation” of Bulgarian Jews during WWII is still complex, confused, extreme and causing a lot of clashes” and he sees in that an example of how in Europe “communism”, “Holocaust” and “democracy” are topics that remain alive, interconnected and having influence on each other<sup>42</sup>.

The flourishing cult of Antonescu provoked the indignation mainly of Jews residing in the USA, who insisted that there was a clear evidence of Antonescu's direct role in the deportations and massacres of Jews in the new territories and pointed to the state organized participation of Romania in the anti-Jewish genocide and the legality of the systematic murder. From the US officially came signals that a veneration of a war criminal could not be tolerated and that could affect bilateral relations and the prospects of Romania's NATO membership. Thus, under external pressure and out of foreign policy considerations, in March 2002, the Romanian government adopted Emergency Ordinance No. 31, which banned the cult of

*Спомени на свидетели*. София, 2012; *Гласове в защита на гражданското общество. Протоколи на Светия Синод на Българската православна църква по еврейския въпрос (1940–1944)*, съст. А. Танева, В. Гезенко, София, 2002; Д. Пешев, *Спомени*, съст. Н. Поппетров, София, 2004.

<sup>39</sup> *Българското управление във Вардарска Македония (1941–1944)*, съст. А. Гребенаров, Н. Николова. Архивите говорят. Т. 63. София, 2012; *Националното обединение на България, 1940–44 г. Сборник доклади от Национална научна конференция, Благоевград, 14–15 април 2011*, съст. Т. Митев, А. Гребенаров, София, 2012; Д. Йончев, *България и Беломорието (октомври 1940 – 9 септември 1944 г.)*, София, 1993; Г. Даскалов, *Драмското въстание 1941*, София, 1992; *Ibid.*, *Участта на българите в Егейска Македония 1936–1946: Полит. и воен. история*, София, 1999; Ив. Хаджийски, *Съдбата на еврейското население от Беломорска Тракия, Вардарска Македония и Югозападна България през 1941–1944 година*, Дупница, 2004.

<sup>40</sup> *Обречени и спасени: България в антисемитската програма на Третия райх. Изследвания и документи*, съст. В. Тошкова и др., София, 2007; *VII състав на Народния съд: едно забравено документално свидетелство за антисемитизма в България през 1941–1944 г.*, съст. и предг. В. Тодоров, Н. Поппетров, София, 2013; *Българското управление във Вардарска Македония (1941–1944)*, съст.: А. Гребенаров, Н. Николова. Архивите говорят. Т. 63. София, 2012; *Депортирането на евреите от Вардарска Македония, Беломорска Тракия и Пирот (март 1943 г.)*. Документи от българските архиви, съст. Н. Данова и Р. Аврамов, София, 2013.

<sup>41</sup> Н. Данова, “Дългата сянка на миналото. Депортацията на евреите от Западна Тракия, Вардарска Македония и Пирот: състояние на проучването на проблема”, in *Депортирането на евреите от Вардарска Македония, Беломорска Тракия и Пирот*, p. 36–74.

<sup>42</sup> Щ. Трьобст, “Спасение, депортиране или Холокост? Полемиките преди и след 1989 г. относно съдбата на българските евреи по време на Втората световна война”, in *История, митология, политика*, съст. Д. Колева, К. Грозев, София, 2010, p. 511.

Antonescu and the denial of the Holocaust<sup>43</sup>. The following year, Romanian President Ion Iliescu set up an International Commission for the Holocaust in Romania, which in November 2004 issued a final report stating unequivocally that: “Of all the allies of Nazi Germany, Romania bears responsibility for the deaths of more Jews than any country other than Germany itself.”<sup>44</sup> The recognition by the Romanian president of the findings of the report was considered an official recognition of the guilt of the Romanian state for the deaths of between 280,000 and 380,000 Romanian and Ukrainian Jews and 11,000 Roma during WWII.

In her paper on the application of the new EU memory policies on WWII on the Bulgarian case, Daniela Koleva points to the fact that while in the other EU member states the principle of conditionality has been used for the establishment of a consensual narrative of the recent past, this has not been the case of Bulgaria. In her view, this situation might look advantageous, giving chance for free and open discussions of the recent past, but it actually prevents broad debate. The result of that is “an air of quasi-reconciliationism based on avoidance, without the confession, apology, and forgiveness needed for a real reconciliation” and what is lacking are “the moral and normative conditions necessary for a sustained public and professional debate”<sup>45</sup>.

Yet, an external factor also influenced the determination of the historical responsibility of the Bulgarian King Boris III, although in this case it does not refer to the official assumption of responsibility for participation in the Holocaust. That was the decision of the Arbitration Commission of the Israeli National Fund of July 16, 2000 to dismantle the plaque erected by the Bulgarian community in Israel in memory of King Boris III in the Forest of Bulgaria near Jerusalem, that was taken after a persistent protest by the few surviving Jews from Macedonia and Thrace and their heirs, who claimed that King Boris III was one of the main culprits for sending them to the death camps in Poland. The decision provoked violent reactions in the media and in the Bulgarian Parliament, many people perceiving it as a blow to national self-esteem, and those who supported it were accused of betraying the national interests<sup>46</sup>.

In conclusion, the ideological freedom and openness of archives in Eastern Europe after 1989 have opened the possibility for a new reading of the history of WWII in Romania and Bulgaria, which are at the focus of this study. The publication of a vast array of documents related to the period: documents on diplomatic history from national and foreign archives, on the activity of particular

<sup>43</sup> *Monitorul Oficial*, nr. 214, 28 martie 2002.

<sup>44</sup> E. Wiesel, T. Friling, R. Ioanid, M. Ionescu, and L. Benjamin, *Final Report of the International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania*, Iași, 2005.

<sup>45</sup> D. Koleva, “On the (In)convertibility of National Memory into European Legitimacy: The Bulgarian Case”, in *Of Red Dragons and Evil Spirits*, p. 21.

<sup>46</sup> J. Benatov, “Debating the fate of Bulgarian Jews during World War II”, in *Bringing the Dark Past to Light. The Reception of the Holocaust in Postcommunist Europe*, ed. by J.-P. Himka, J. Michlic, Lincoln, 2013, p. 120–125.

institutions, diaries and memoirs of politicians, diplomats, public figures, etc., throw light not only on the motives lying behind a certain political decision, but also on the political climate and the society in general and open new perspectives for the interpretation of certain events. The unproportionally high interest to the issue of the Holocaust in both countries is easy to explain and it is in line with a general European trend, the question of responsibility and victimization being major reference points in the remembrance of WWII. At the same time, what is noted in both countries, the focus on the major political actors leaves behind the marked research on the societies and the public attitudes towards the ideology of National-Socialism during the war. In Romania the research on WWII is considerably more numerous and variegated, as compared to Bulgaria. Another noticeable difference is that while in Romania there were attempts for an overall study of the history of the country during the period, the most representative being that of Dinu Giurescu<sup>47</sup>, in Bulgaria such an overall assessment is still lacking.

<sup>47</sup> D. Giurescu, *Romania in the Second World War (1939-1945)*, New York, 2000.