

THE 1942/43 BRITISH INITIATIVE: EMIGRATION AND TRANSIT OF JEWS FROM AND VIA BULGARIA¹

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The present study's goal is, on the one hand, to trace how the specific negotiations on the British initiative from the period 1942–1943 aimed at the reception of 4,500 children and the accompanying 500 adults from and through Bulgaria fit into the Bulgarian Government's general policy on the Jewish Question, at a time when the country was an ally to the Third Reich. On the other hand, another goal of this study is to outline the role of the initiative in the general British policy focused on the settling of Jews in Palestine throughout the years of the Second World War. In addition, it will examine the impact of some other external factors that would affect the implementation of the British proposal concerning the emigration and transit of Jews through Bulgaria.

Keywords: Bulgaria, British War Cabinet, Holocaust, 4 500 Bulgarian children, Jewish refugees, Final Solution.

The Final Solution of the Jewish Question in Europe in the years of the Second World War is undoubtedly one of the most terrible tragedies that has ever taken place in world's history in the 20th-century. And while the Holocaust is regarded as such an ominous page of the world's horror-filled armed conflict, due to various reasons during the course of the war itself, this theme neither receives sufficient public prominence nor becomes a significant issue in international relations. The emphasis in the negotiations between the then governments was placed on far more politically critical issues for the warring countries, such as: initially, the building up and strengthening of allied relations, and subsequently, the determination of the post-war *status quo* and the delineation of spheres of political influence. For these reasons, the fate of Europe's millions of Jews remained far away from mainstream diplomatic discussions.

However, the scale of the extermination of the Jews prepared and carried out by way of the Final Solution gave rise to some, albeit limited, diplomatic activity related to the Allies' attempts to ensure that at least a small part of the Jewish

¹ The research of this article was supported by a grant of the Bulgarian National Science Fund (BNSF), project "The Other Face of the War", n° KII-06-H60/11, 22.11.2021r.

community would avoid the terrible fate assigned to them. Such an international initiative advocated the idea of the British government from the end of 1942 and the beginning of 1943 to bring about 4,500 Jewish children, together with about 500 adult companions, from and through Bulgaria to British Mandatory Palestine. This number would include not only Bulgarian, but also Romanian and Hungarian children who had to pass through Bulgaria's lands. The topic still remains poorly researched both in Bulgarian and world historiography, especially in the part of it that refers to the negotiations between the British and Bulgarian governments with the mediation of the Swiss diplomatic representatives in Bulgaria². However, along with the rescue of Bulgarian Jews from the lands of Bulgaria's pre-WWI borders, the negotiations with the British authorities were among the most familiar in Western historiography when considering Bulgaria's Holocaust policy³. The study of this policy of Bulgaria's would illuminate some important aspects of both the foreign policies of Great Britain and our country in the years of World War Two, especially since that was one of the rare cases of indirect contacts between two warring countries.

THE POLICY OF THE BULGARIAN STATE TOWARDS THE JEWS IN THE YEARS OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

In general, what can be said about this policy is that it was determined by two main factors. The first factor is the traditionally tolerant attitude of the Bulgarian State and Bulgaria's society towards the Jewish population from the times after the restoration of our country's political independence in 1878 and until the beginning of the Second World War. By 1939, the Jewish community in Bulgaria numbered about 48,000 people, which made slightly less than 1% of Bulgaria's entire population. Almost half of the Bulgarian Jews used to live in the capital Sofia. According to the Bulgarian Constitution adopted in 1879, also known as the *Tarnovo Constitution*, Jews would enjoy all civil and political rights and freedoms. As noted by the researchers of

² This initiative and the subsequent negotiations were touched upon in the study of Dr Shlomo Shealtiel entitled: *От родина към Отечество. Емиграция и нелегална имиграция от и през България в периода 1939–1949*, Унив, изд. „Св. Климент Охридски“, Sofia, 2008, as well as in two recently published documentary editions: *Мостът на спасението. Транзитът на евреи през България в годините на Втората световна война. Документален сборник*, Научен редактор Д. Вачков, съст. Р. Чукова, С. Авдала, С. Никифорова, Д. Григоров, Българска академия на науките. Институт за исторически изследвания, Sofia, 2022; Г. Боздуганов, *Почти невъзможно. Царство България и еврейската емиграция през Втората световна война. Независимо историческо дружество*, Sofia, 2020.

³ F. Chary, *The Bulgarian Jews and the Final Solution, 1940–1944*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1972; M. Gilbert, *Auschwitz and the Allies: A Devastating Account of How Allies Responded to the News of Hitler's Mass Murder*, Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, New York, 1981; D. Packer, *Britain and the Rescue: Government Policy and the Jewish Refugees 1942–1943*, PhD thesis, Northumbria University, Newcastle, 2017; R. Zweig, *Britain and Palestine During the Second World War*, Boydell Press for the Royal Historical Society, London, 1986; R. Breitman, “The Allied War Effort and the Jews, 1942–1943”, *Journal of Contemporary History* (SAGE, London, Beverly Hills and New Delhi), 20, 1985, p. 135–156.

the Jewish community in Bulgaria during this period, Bulgaria was developing successfully in both economic and cultural terms⁴. Although the majority of the Jews were people of modest means, i.e., small craftsmen, merchants and city workers, among them there were quite a few people who rose in financial and intellectual terms and who were great merchants and large manufacturers and some of them were also prominent representatives of the liberal professions and scientists. There was also a feature that would be hardly found in the countries of South-Eastern Europe: the presence of a relatively large number of Jewish officers in the Bulgarian Army. For its part, the Jewish community in Bulgaria would show sympathy for Bulgarian nation's great national goals related to the Bulgaria's unification. An eloquent example is that during the Balkan Wars and World War One that took place from 1912 through 1918, the Jews gave the same number of fatal casualties in proportion to their percentage in the country's total population that was similar to the percentage of the fatal casualties suffered by the Bulgarian community. All these features shaped the basis of the tolerant attitude of the Bulgarian society and State towards the Jewish community. The fact that, compared to other ethnic minorities, the number of Jews grew at the highest rate during the period 1887–1939 (from 24,000 to 48,000) is indicative, and the growth thereof is only comparable to that of the Bulgarian community⁵.

The other factor that would determine the position of the Bulgarian State towards the Jews during World War Two was the efforts to implement the national foreign policy goals in the context of the dynamically changing international situation during the world conflict. The main foreign policy goals set by the rulers in Sofia, i.e., Tsar Boris the Third of Bulgaria and the governments of Georgi Kyoseivanov and Professor Bogdan Filov, were to prevent the country from involvement in active hostilities and at the same time to achieve a revision of the territorial clauses of the Neuilly Peace Treaty signed in 1919. As early as at the very beginning of the war, Bulgaria announced that it would follow a policy of strict neutrality, but at the same time declared that it would try to peacefully regain the territories lost as a result of the First World War: i.e., Southern Dobruja, the so-called Western Outskirts and the outlet to the Aegean Sea. Such difficult-to-fulfil goals would require the Bulgarian governments to constantly manoeuvre between the conflicting interests of the warring Great Powers towards the Balkan countries. The first year of the war gave rise to certain hopes that Sofia's foreign policy related actions might be crowned with success. Remaining neutral in the summer of 1940, Bulgaria managed to carry out an important revision of the Treaty of Neuilly. On September 7, 1940, the new government of Professor B. Filov signed the Treaty of Craiova under which Romanians, under diplomatic pressure from Germany, returned South Dobruja to Bulgaria.⁶

⁴ Д. Коен, *Евреите в България 1878–1949. Студии*, Българо-израелска търговско промишлена палата, Sofia, 2008, p. 77–85.

⁵ *История на българите в документи 1878–1944*. Т. I, 1878–1912, Част първа, Просвета, Sofia, 1994, p. 135.

⁶ *История на България*, Т. 9, *История на България 1919–1944 г.*, Sofia, Тнагра-Танакра, 2012, с. 337–346.

However, the circumstances surrounding Bulgaria's neutrality did not appear to be that favourable. After the establishment of the Germany–Italy–Japan Tripartite Pact at the end of September 1940, Berlin increasingly insisted that Bulgaria, as well as other countries in the region, join the Pact. Sofia rejected the request, referring to its military unpreparedness, which was due to the restrictive clauses of the Neuilly Treaty, in force until the summer of 1938. The German pressure on Bulgaria intensified *inter alia* as a result of the Italo-Greek war that broke out in October. The failed actions of the Italian troops necessitated urgent German military aid, which implied the passage of the Wehrmacht through the Balkan countries. Berlin wanted Bulgaria to determine whose side it would take in the conflict as soon as possible. The rulers in Sofia tried to maintain neutrality, declaring that they would pursue a policy completely favourable to the Reich. In this regard, they were taking steps to pass laws that would match policies of the regime in Germany. At the end of December 1940, the Law for Protection of the Nation was passed, which imposed numerous severe restrictions on Jews in Bulgaria. They were deprived of most civil and political rights and freedoms, they were prohibited from holding managerial positions in the State sector and public posts, and along with those, restrictions were imposed on their marriages with Bulgarians. Restrictions would be also provided for some of Jews' economic activities. They were obliged to put yellow Stars of David on their clothes and homes. It would be noteworthy that this anti-Semitic law had nothing to do with the legislative traditions of the Bulgarian state.

However, those efforts would not ensure the preservation of neutrality. In January, Germany, whose troops had already been deployed in Romania, sent an ultimatum-like request demanding that Bulgaria should join the Tripartite Pact. On March 1 1941, in Vienna, Professor Bogdan Filov signed Bulgaria's accession to the Pact. The very same day marked the entrance of the German troops in Bulgaria⁷. After Yugoslavia withdrew from the Pact in April, what followed was a blitz-style German occupation campaign in that country, eventually producing the capitulation of Belgrade. As a result of the German military successes in Yugoslavia and Greece, Berlin handed over to Bulgaria some territories from Vardar Macedonia, Pomoravlje and the Aegean Sea coastal lands (*Belomorie*) with the right to administer them, and the expectations in Sofia were that after the end of the war those territories would be definitively handed over to Bulgaria.

Over the first year after the adoption of the Law for Protection of the Nation, the Bulgarian authorities would appear as if they had no intention of enforcing the Law with all of its rigour. Indeed, Jews were no longer entitled to serve in the Bulgarian Army, and for this reason the male population was mobilised in separate groups to the Labour Forces at the Army. The situation of the Jews in Bulgaria visibly worsened in 1942, when the so-called "Final Solution" was adopted at the Wannsee Conference held in January, providing for the complete annihilation of the Jewish people in Europe. On the insistence of the German representatives in

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 383–384.

Sofia, by the end of August 1942, a Commissariat for Jewish Affairs was established and various regulations were adopted by the Council of Ministers, further restricting the rights of Jews⁸. The head of the Commissariat was the avowed anti-Semite, Alexandar Belev.

The critical moment for the Jewish community came at the beginning of 1943, when the Reich's special envoy Theodor Dannecker arrived in February with a mission to make arrangements for the deportation of Jews from within the new and old borders of Bulgaria to the eastern provinces of the Reich (i.e., Poland). Already at his first meetings with representatives of the Bulgarian Government, it became clear that they were reluctant to deport the Jews from the old territories. After lengthy negotiations, an agreement was signed for the resettling of up to 20,000 Jews from Vardar Macedonia and the area of the Aegean Sea region. But since the total number of Jews from these areas amounted to about 12,000, the Commissariat drew up a plan to deport about 8,000 Jews from the old Bulgarian territories. At the beginning of March, even with the first reports that preparations were being made for the relocations of Jews from Kyustendil, Plovdiv and other places, what followed was a sharp reaction from the Members of Parliament, including the Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly, Mr. Dimitar Peshev, representatives of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and from public organisations and individual prominent personalities, which gave the rulers a reason to immediately stop the deportation of Jews from the old lands. At the end of March, at a meeting with Hitler and Ribbentrop, Tsar Boris III categorically stated that the Bulgarian Jews would be used for infrastructure construction in Bulgaria and would not be deported to Poland⁹. This was the position that was also confirmed after the death of the monarch by the Bulgarian regents in September. Realising the failure of his mission, T. Dannecker was recalled from Sofia the same month. A little later, the commissioner A. Belev also resigned.

In 1944, a gradual softening of the policy towards the Jews began, and in August, under the new government of Ivan Bagryanov, the Commissariat for Jewish Affairs ceased its activities. After a military coup on September 9, a Communist-dominated Fatherland Front government was formed, which later repealed the Law for Protection of the Nation.

Another very telling fact about the attitude of the Bulgarian State and society towards the tragedy of the European Jews in the years of the Second World War is the intense and almost unhindered transit of Jewish refugees through Bulgaria to Palestine. Bulgaria was established as one of the main corridors through which the so-called *Aliyah Bet* (illegal immigration by Jews fleeing from Nazi Germany) would take place. That process began in the days immediately before the outbreak

⁸ П. Добчев (съст.), *Антиеврейското законодателство и неговото преодоляване (1942–1945)*. Сборник с нормативни актове, София, изд. Феня, 2010, р. 25–33.

⁹ *Обречени и спасени. България в антисемитската програма на Третия райх. Изследвания и документи*. БАН, изд. Синева, София, 2007, р. 394; *България – своенравният съюзник на Третия райх. Сборник документи*, В. Тошкова (съст.) и др., Военноиздателски комплекс „Св. Георги Победоносец“, София, 1992, р. 134–135.

of the war, as streams of Jews fleeing from Central Europe headed for the Bulgarian ports of Ruse, Varna and Burgas, from where they embarked on risky journeys to the shores of Palestine using Bulgarian ships, some sailing under a foreign flag. In the beginning, the nation that strongly opposed to these actions was Great Britain, which sought to stop illegal immigration and accept legal immigrants within the too restrictive quotas as stipulated by the White Paper of the spring of 1939 – 75,000 Jewish settlers moved within a period of ten years. Despite diplomatic objections from the British Embassy in Sofia and threats that Bulgarian ships carrying illegal Jewish immigrants would be stopped and confiscated by the Royal Navy, the Bulgarian authorities took no substantial action to restrict the transit of Jewish refugees¹⁰. In the period from the beginning of the war to Bulgaria's entry into the Tripartite Pact, more than 7,500 Jews passed through the country's waters by sea route. Nearly 4,000 was the number of those who would use the railways on their way to Turkey, and from there to Palestine. After Bulgaria's accession to the Pact, the conditions for the transit of Jews became more complicated. The presence of a large number of German officers, as well as the establishment of double border control (that would also include German checkpoints) on the Bulgarian-Turkish border, would create many obstacles and risks for the Jewish migrants. However, despite the strict requirements imposed over the issuance of Bulgarian transit visas, which would include seeking the consent of the German representatives in Bulgaria, the Bulgarian consular offices in Bucharest, Budapest and other places, with the consent of the leadership of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Confessions, would issue thousands of transit visas that would become a ticket to salvation. For the period from 1941 to the autumn of 1944, nearly 4,000 transit or exit Bulgarian visas were issued¹¹. The fact that already at the beginning of the war Bulgaria became the main route to *Eretz Yisrael* for Jews fleeing from the Holocaust zone, would have its significance for the British initiative, which will be discussed in detail hereinafter.

GREAT BRITAIN'S POLICIES ON THE JEWISH QUESTION UPON THE ADOPTION OF THE FINAL SOLUTION

Undoubtedly, one of the factors that would catalyse a change in the British policies described in the White Paper was the maritime tragedy that occurred in February 1942 – the sinking of SS *Struma*, a steamer, which left Constanța with 769 passengers on board. It was hired by the illegal *Aliyah Bet*, but sailed under the Panamanian flag and crewed by Bulgarians.¹² The tragic incident occurred after

¹⁰ *Мостът на спасението...* p. 52–53.

¹¹ Г. Боздуганов, *Цит. съч.*, p. 71.

¹² The ill-fated voyage of SS *Struma* lasted from December 12, 1941 to February 23, 1942 when it was sunk by a Russian submarine. More info: J.J. Zasloff, *Great Britain and Palestine. A Study of the Problem before the United Nations*, München, 1952, p. 22; F.C. Collins, *Death on the Black Sea. The Untold Story of the "Struma" and World War II's Holocaust at Sea*, New York, 2003; M. Gilbert, *Auschwitz and the Allies*, etc.

Turkish port authorities barred passengers from the ship from coming ashore. The ship, whose engine broke down on a number of occasions, was towed by a Turkish tug to Istanbul, but was then forced back out to sea, where it was torpedoed by a Soviet submarine on 24 February 1942. Almost everyone on the ship overloaded with Romanian Jews perished, most of them refugees from the Chernivtsi ghetto, as well as rabbis, doctors, engineers and wealthy Jews with accounts in Palestinian and US banks, plus over 100 children.¹³ The purpose of the Jews was to reach Istanbul, where they expected to obtain legal entry visas for admission to Palestine from the British Consulate.

By that point, Turkey was in a delicate situation: formally neutral, it was trying to maintain a balance between the Allies and the Axis powers. This complicated situation stemmed from the Defence Treaty signed with Great Britain in October 1939, and on the other hand because of the Friendship and Non-Aggression Pact concluded with Nazi Germany in June 1941. The negotiations about the fate of the Jewish refugees between the Turkish border authorities, the British consulate and The Jewish Agency was dragging its feet. However, London's position remained adamant, and it stated that immigrants coming from a country controlled by the Third Reich and who had passed through enemy territory were not entitled to Palestinian visas. As of December 7 1941, Romania and Great Britain were at war.¹⁴ That was a circumstance that contributed to the SS *Struma* disaster.

Despite the tragedy, Britain did not immediately soften its policy. This is clearly evident from the telegram that the British High Commissioner for Palestine, Sir Harold MacMichael, sent on March 1, 1942, to the Colonial Office in London. He emphasised that his administration was not to blame for what had happened, because it followed the principle that illegal immigrants who were citizens of a country, with which Great Britain was at war and coming directly from enemy territory, could not be assisted. McMichael persisted to maintain the position that citizens from enemy or enemy-controlled territory should not be allowed in subsequent attempts by illegal Jewish groups to enter Mandatory Palestine.

In an attempt to protect British interests during this critical phase of the war, a meeting of the War Cabinet on March 5 1942 laid down a basic principle of British emigration policy: taking of any practical steps which might discourage the illegal immigration into Palestine by Jewish refugees from enemy controlled territories. Cabinet fears were that any compromise would lead to a massive influx of Jews and upset the Jew–Arab ethnic balance. This decision was taken despite the opinion of the then Secretary of State for the Colonies, Lord Moyne¹⁵, who

¹³ 769 Jews from Romania Reach Turkey o Sinking Freighter After Eventual Voyage, Jewish Telegraphic Agency, Vol. IX, N 36, Thursday, February 12, 1942, p. 3; D. Frantz, C. Collins, *Death on the Black Sea. The Untold Story of the "Struma" and World War II's Holocaust at Sea*, New York 2003; S. Gheorghiu, *Tragedia navelor "Struma" și "Meškure"*, Constanța 1998; E. Ofir, *With No Way Out. The Story of the Struma. Documents and Testimonies*, Tel Aviv, 1999.

¹⁴ A. Patek, *Jews on Route to Palestine 1934–1944. Sketches from the History of Aliyah Bet – Clandestine Jewish Immigration*, Jagiellonian University Press, Krakow, 2012, p. 142–143.

¹⁵ Walter Edward Guinness, Lord Moyne, served as Secretary of State for the Colonies from 8 February 1941 to 22 February 1942.

advocated the thesis that not only the six thousand visas scheduled for the year, but also the remaining 36,000 immigration certificates that were still available, were to be urgently granted to the Jews of Central Europe. The same line was continued by his successor, Lord Cranbourne. However, a number of circumstances such as the German military victories in North Africa, the reactions of the local Arab population in Palestine to the Jewish immigration, the behaviour of the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem al-Husseini, and also the need to preserve the stability of British power and control over the Suez Canal motivated the maintenance of the adopted conservative style on the Jewish refugee issue. In this context, Britain was putting diplomatic pressure on Turkey to prevent the Turkish route of passage of Jewish refugees to Palestine¹⁶ Unfortunately, the decisions of official London came at a time when the most active period of the implementation of the Final Solution was under way, yet the Allies still did not have accurate information about the scale of the genocide against the Jews throughout Europe.

Another motive for the Cabinet's conservative line was related to security: if the Germans learned that Palestine was accepting Jewish immigrants *en masse*, they would take advantage, trying to flood the mandated territory with an almost continuous flow of refugees from Southeast Europe. Spies and persons trusted by the Reich could be easily infiltrated into any such immigrant flows. In the spring of 1942, the above line was shared not only by High Commissioner MacMichael, but also by Alexander Randall, Head of the Foreign Office Refugee Department, and also by the then Secretary of State for the Colonies, Lord Robert Cranbourne.¹⁷ McMichael agreed to make an exception that would cover the Jewish children only. Thereupon, in the spring of 1942, the admission of 100 Romanian children and possibly a second wave from Hungary was allowed.¹⁸

In early May 1942, Lord Cranbourne proposed that all Jews who managed to reach Palestine should be admitted and their number deducted from the general immigration quota (42,000 immigration certificates were then available). On May 13, the Colonial Office issued a call for information about this compromise to be classified in order to avoid publicity of the new arrangements.¹⁹ However, the news did not remain a secret for the World Zionist Organisation, and while the new immigration measures were being debated in the British Parliament, the chairman of the organisation, Dr Chaim Weizmann, convened an Emergency Conference at the Baltimore Hotel, New York (May 6–11, 1942). At that Conference, the Executive Director of the Jewish Agency, David Ben-Gurion, stated that, as a result of the strict implementation of the 1939 White Paper, Jews could no longer rely on Britain to establish a Jewish national home in Palestine. It was therefore necessary

¹⁶ M. Gilbert, *Auschwitz and the Allies* ..., p. 38–39.

¹⁷ Telegram from High Commissioner (Sir H. MacMichael) to Secretary of State for the Colonies. No. 190. 17 II 1942, TNA. FO 371/32661/W 2483, p. 56; FO 371/32661/W 2093. FO minute (Alec Randall), 12 II 1942. In: R.W. Zweig, *Britain and Palestine During the Second World War*, Woodbridge, 1986, p. 117–119.

¹⁸ M. Gilbert, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

for the Jewish Agency itself to replace the British Mandate as the Government of Palestine. The participants set a course for building a “Jewish Community” in Palestine and toward terminating all immigration restrictions.²⁰ On May 22, Lord Cranbourne sent an official letter to the Jewish Agency informing them of the amendments to Great Britain’s immigration policies. The Cabinet did not promise a change in its current course of preventing uncontrolled entry, but indicated that illegal immigrants from overloaded ships who managed to reach Palestinian shores would be allowed to set ashore. Then those immigrants were supposed to be detained in temporary camps, and those who were supposed to pass the double security test successfully and had the qualities to adapt to economic life would gradually be released as legal immigrants within the semi-annual immigration quotas.²¹ However, there was a condition to that and it was that upon the supposed end of the war all those would be returned back to the European countries, which they had fled from. A compromise was reached that came as a result of the pressure exerted by the Zionist organisations based in both Great Britain and the US and that compromise did not go beyond the frameworks of the White Paper; nevertheless, it opened some favourable opportunities to intensify the *Aliyah Bet* by taking advantage of the Balkan route. Besides, the SS *Struma* disaster that had risen some moral reasoning concerning the passive nature in the Allies’ policies, would add an extra impetus to the Jewish Agency to further to the British Authorities in both London and Palestine the Agency’s request to soften those Authorities’ stern stance that refugees coming from “enemy territory” should never be let ashore over some security concerns. The Jewish Agency rightfully pointed out that the war map of Europe as of the summer of 1942 would never allow Jewish refugees from Central and Eastern Europe a free passage but to use the route through Reich’s Balkan satellites, i.e., Bulgaria and Romania.

There was also another reason for the cautious Cabinet’s behaviour that could not be neglected: the pending threat of boosting anti-Semite moods among the British society, which undoubtedly existed by the late 1930s and had even penetrated into the community of British public servants Jews’ religious and cultural impenetrability and their residential locations in ring-fenced neighbourhoods was definitely a thorn in side among some of the British subjects. There was also a negative stance evolving in the stereotypes inherited from the period after World War one suggesting the idea that rich Jews would never fall into any patriotic ardour and rush to join the battle units, however were quite active in providing supplies for the British Army, Navy and Air Force.²² Cabinet policies in London

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ CO 733/445 (76021/41), 18 May 1942, Cabinet Conclusions, cited in Wasserstein, p.161; The National Archives, The Cabinet Papers, CAB 65/35 Original Reference (42) 91–(42) 132, 1943 1 Jul. – 28 Sep., p. 123.

²² For more details, see T. Kushner, *The Persistence of Prejudice: Anti-semitism in British Society During the Second World War*, Manchester Univ. Press, 1989, p. 257; D. Cesarani, An Alien Concept? The Continuity of Anti-Alienism in British Society before 1940, In: D. Cesarani, T. Kushner (Eds.) *The Internment of Aliens in Twentieth Century Britain*, London, Frank Cass, 1993, p. 24–52.

expanding over the period of 1930s and the beginning of the war can be described as the “mask of Janus”.²³ On the one hand, the British Government did not encourage Jewish immigration, especially after the occupation of France in 1940. On the other hand, the British ruling elite sought to adhere to universal human values and maintain their authority in world’s public opinion.

The beginning of the Final Solution coincided with the period when the Allies were experiencing the greatest difficulty from a military point of view as they had not yet coordinated each other’s efforts to oppose the German plans. The strategy to carry out the genocide of the Jewish population relied on complete secrecy and according to the list presented by Eichmann at the Wannsee Conference, 11 million Jews fell within its scope, which extended not only to the occupied and allied territories, but even to neutral countries such as Switzerland, Sweden, Turkey, Spain, Portugal or Eire. In the context of war and information isolation, it was not until the summer of 1942 that fragmentary rumours about mass acts of genocide against the Jewish population reached Great Britain and the United States, however no such rumours were officially confirmed yet. Despite the suspicions, the decisions of the Wannsee Conference, held on January 20, 1942, remained a closely guarded secret. During the summer, when the most active campaign to deport and exterminate European Jews in the concentration camps at Belzec, Chełmno, Sobibor and Treblinka, rumours of German terror reached the Allies, but none of them suspected that it was an official, thoroughly planned and systematically implemented programme of the Reich aimed at the genocide of the Jewish population.²⁴

The head of the Geneva Office of the World Jewish Congress, Dr Gerhard Rigner, learned about the Final Solution from a German in Geneva in August 1942. He contacted the authoritative American Rabbi Stephen Wise and the British MP Sidney Silverman. Wise, for his part, engaged the attention of Under-Secretary of State Sumner Welles, before whom he presented in detail the credible evidence received from Europe of the planned genocide covering the entire Jewish population.²⁵

It was not until the summer of 1942, when, with the consent of the Ministry of Information, did the British press begin to publish reports of *pogroms* against Jews in various countries. They proceeded through illegal channels, and one of the first signals was provided by Shmuel Zigelboim, a member of the Polish government in exile, who undertook to make public the facts of the genocide of Polish Jews. The report was based on a report by the “Bund” – a left-wing Jewish

²³ D. Packer, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

²⁴ One of the important omissions of the American code breakers was the message intercepted on January 11, 1943, that 1,274,166 Jews were killed in 1942 during the operation “*Reinhardt*” in the four camps. The message itself only contained the identifying letters for the extermination camps followed by the total numbers, which made it difficult for decipherers. See: J. Wilson, *Wartime codebreakers missed clues to Holocaust*, *The Guardian*, Aug. 1 2005. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/aug/01/secondworldwar.jamiewilson> (access 17.8.2023)

²⁵ F. Chary, *The Bulgarian Jews and the Final Solution, 1940–1944*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1972, p. 130; R. Bolchover, *British Jewry and the Holocaust*, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994, p. 9–10.

illegal Socialist Party operating on Polish territory. Zigelboim disseminated the information to the British media and succeeded in persuading the Polish Prime Minister in exile, Władysław Sikorski, to officially announce the facts in a direct radio address to the Polish people, broadcast by the Polish section of the BBC. Sikorski would paint a detailed picture of the mass murders of Jews in Poland over the past year.²⁶

Taking into account the capabilities of the famous British intelligence, the question arises why so late, i.e., only at the end of 1942, the War Cabinet of Winston Churchill came out with a definite opinion on taking measures to protect European Jewry. There is evidence that as early as in 1941, the Allies were aware of the anti-Semitic genocide being prepared by the Germans. Based on intercepted encrypted messages, reports were sent to Prime Minister Churchill and senior intelligence officers.²⁷ This was months before Hitler announced the Final Solution. Possible answers could be sought somewhere around an in-depth study of the credibility of the information incoming from different sources of varying reliability; the cumbersomeness of bureaucratic rules; the desire not to instil further negativity among the British during wartime. There is another theory pointing to the desire to keep the German code-breaking secret longer by the Enigma machine at Bletchley Park, which would have inevitably happened if the information had leaked to the press. The reasons might be both the inexperience to decipher the coded fragmentary Nazi messages, the shortage of translators and the lack of information sharing between the British and Americans.²⁸

In historiography, the question of the passivity of the Allies throughout 1942 is highly debatable. Both exculpatory and accusatory comments may be found. The dilemma was “democratic censorship”²⁹ or a cautious propaganda approach; this concerned the hiding of incoming alarming information from the public and accordingly – what the arguments for such a political line were. As early as at the beginning of the war, various departments under the umbrella of the Ministry of

²⁶ Sikorski Assails Nazi Atrocities Against Jews in Broadcast to Poland, *JTA Jewish News Archive*, June 10 1942, p.3, http://pdfs.jta.org/1942/1942-06-10_131.pdf?_ga=2.35550881.1270411854.1688393393-1806305857.1688393393 (access 03.07.2023.)

²⁷ Churchill told systematic murder of Jews started as early as 1941 British code breakers were providing Churchill’s wartime government with daily accounts of the systematic killing of Jews, See also: R. Hanyok, *Eavesdropping the Hell: Historical Guide to Western Communications Intelligence and the Holocaust, 1939–1945*, Center for Cryptologic History, National Security Agency, 2005, p. 16; R. Benson, “SIGINT and the Holocaust”, *Cryptologic Quarterly* 14, n° 1, Spring, 1995, p. 71–76.

²⁸ T. Taylor, “Anglo-American Signals Intelligence Co-operation”, in F. Hinsley and A. Stripp (eds.), *Codebreakers: The Inside Story of Bletchley Park*, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 71–74; See also J. Wilson, “Wartime codebreakers missed clues to Holocaust, Code Breakers reported slaughter of Jews in 1941”, *The Guardian*, May 20, 1997, p. 5 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/aug/01/secondworldwar.jamiewilson> (access 09.08.2023)

²⁹ According to Philip Taylor’s words, censorship was a fact and contributed to the extremely effective propaganda that the War Cabinet conducted. See: Philip M. Taylor, *British Propaganda In The Twentieth Century: Selling Democracy*, Edinburgh University Press, 1999, p. 151.

Information controlled the censorship of press, radio and cinema.³⁰ Under special surveillance by the Ministry of Information were Air Force radio broadcasts that would express official Cabinet policy. In the first half of 1942, the media was criticised by influential people, because of the information blackout on the Jewish genocide. For example, in April 1942, the MP, Commander Oliver Locker-Lampson, asked the Minister of Information how many times since the start of the war the Air Force had included the Jewish issue in its reports and whether that issue had a direct bearing on the aggravation of anti-Semitism and anti-Jewish propaganda. What he found out was that there were no measures taken for the termination thereof.³¹ The Director General of the Royal Air Force, Mr. Frederick Ogilvy, emphasised on the fact that, despite the information flows from various sources concerning the genocide of European Jewry, only the facts whose authenticity had been confirmed by the Foreign Office could be broadcast. It is noteworthy that in the two Services of the RAF – the Domestic Service and the so-called “European” Service, intended for the distribution of news in the countries occupied by Germany, the content of the material on the Holocaust was different. It was much better exhibited in the overseas sections. In the British press in the summer of 1942, there were only some scarce short reports about the genocide of the Jews in Poland. The *Times*, the *Daily Mail*, and the *Daily Telegraph* would just mention the facts, yet they would typically avoid any further comments. That was the way how the alarming news referring the Holocaust would remain at the outskirts of public attention and provoked no serious reaction³²

It was not until July 9, 1942, that the Royal Air Force officially announced the mass killing of Jews in Poland for the first time. A few days earlier, on June 28, Rabbi Hertz spoke to the European Section of the Royal Air Force, stressing that Germany’s policy of mass executions would not stop with the extermination of the Jews, as the Reich’s anti-human crimes would also threaten some further ethnic communities.³³ Given the influential position of the said media as the official voice of the British Government and mediator in forming public opinion, this was virtually a signal of the change that had occurred in the Cabinet’s vision on the Jewish question. However, for months to come, it remained reserved in broadcasting information on the Jewish question.

The conceptual evolution of official British policy on the Jewish question was unwinding at a relatively slow pace. While the public learned the truth about

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

³¹ Jeremy D. Harris, *Broadcasting the Massacres. An analysis of the BBC’S contemporary coverage of the Holocaust*, Yad Vashem Studies, p. 73. Broadcasting the massacres : an analysis of the BBC’s contemporary coverage of the Holocaust | Article RAMBI990001799590705171 | The National Library of Israel (nli.org.il) (access 01.09.2023).

³² Daily Telegraph’s holocaust article in 1942 that went unheralded, *The Guardian*, 27 Jan. 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/greenslade/2015/jan/27/daily-telegraphs-holocaust-article-in-1942-that-went-unheralded> (access 23.08.2023).

³³ D. Packer, *op. cit.*, p. 69–72.

the Reich's anti-Jewish policy through the media, the official statements of Cabinet members would mostly remain cautious. For example, in his landmark speech of August 1942, Prime Minister Churchill condemned the "cold-blooded executions" of people in the occupied territories of the Soviet Union, without, however, mentioning the Jews. A likely motive, according to researcher Richard Brightman, could have been the Government's decision to minimise Jewish-related information and eliminate the promotion of anti-Semitism, which, according to the Home Office, was on the rise at the time. The Government was particularly wary because part of British society was convinced that Jews had played an important role in Germany's declaration of war.³⁴ The change in the position of British Prime Minister Winston Churchill was visible from the letter he sent to the Archbishop of Canterbury at the end of October 1942. In it he categorically emphasised that the systematic crimes to which the Nazi regime subjected the Jewish people were among the "most the terrible events in history" and this racial persecution must be put an end to.³⁵

As early as at the beginning of autumn, the Christian and Jewish clergy launched a campaign in defence of the murdered Jews. The Bishop of Canterbury himself, William Temple, organised a large demonstration against Nazi atrocities at the Royal Albert Hall in October. Chief Rabbi Dr Hertz and Rabbi Schonfeld³⁶ entered into active correspondence with Foreign Secretary Eden and Secretary of State for the Colonies, Lord Cranbourne. At a meeting in September 1942, Dr Hertz raised with Lord Cranbourne the question of providing British consuls in Turkey with blank visas to be available for transporting Polish children to Turkey, from where they could be sent to safety in various British colonies until the end of the war.³⁷ In view of some logistical difficulties, the rescued children and their accompanying adults were allowed to be sent to Mauritius or other British or Allied administered territories. The dispute that arose between the Jewish representatives and the Government was about the privileged position of the Jews, who were part of all the suffering and oppressed citizens of the occupied countries. The question was whether by launching such actions the British authorities would give or not an occasion for the Jews to be recognised as a nationality that would be supposed to receive some sort of special treatment.

At the end of 1942, behind the rescue initiatives was the newly formed Council of Christians and Jews, whose active members were MP Eleanor Rathbone

³⁴ R. Breitman, *Official Secrets. What The Nazis Planned, What the British and the Americans Knew*, New York, 1998, p. 109–111; I. Rennap, *Anti-Semitism and the Jewish Question*, London, 1942, in D. Packer, *op. cit.*, p. 87–88.

³⁵ Churchill archive, CHAR 20/54B/179, 29 Oct. 1942, <https://www.churchillarchiveforschools.com/themes/the-themes/key-events-and-developments-in-world-history/could-britain-have-done-more-to-help-the-jews-in-the-second-world-war/the-sources/source-3> (access 14.09.2023).

³⁶ Executive Director of the Spiritual Emergency Council to the Chief Rabbi.

³⁷ FO371/32680/W12396 Lord Cranbourne /Dr Hertz meeting, 29/9/42, p. 113, in Packer, Diana, *op. cit.*, p. 99–100.

and the Bishop of Canterbury. While those initiatives were aimed at opening the borders and facilitating transit to safe neutral countries, their goal was to get as many Jews out as possible, and children in particular. The incoming signals were becoming increasingly alarming about the fact that, along with adults, Jewish children were falling victim to mass extermination. That was a circumstance that would also contribute to the evolution in British politics. An example of British Government agreeing to accept a significant number of refugees was the plan suggested by Mr Oliver Stanley, Secretary of the Colonies and presented to the House of Commons on February 3, 1943. That plan concerned the acceptance of children from Bulgaria. The purpose of the scheme to save the Bulgarian Jewish children, proposed by Oliver Stanley, was double-bottomed: on the one hand, it was to demonstrate the humanity and willingness of the British authorities to save Jews, but on the other hand, it was to ensure that there would be no grounds for the growth of anti-Semitism either in Palestine or among British society itself.

A turning point in the Allies' fight against anti-Semitism was the United Nations Declaration of 17 December. It was released simultaneously in Washington, Moscow and London, where Foreign Minister Eden presented the document to the British Parliament.³⁸ It was joined by the governments in exile of all European countries occupied by Germany: France, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Belgium, etc. The declaration expressed the determination to protect European Jewry at all costs and, after the defeat of Germany, to demand responsibility for the racist policies implemented by the Reich.

The debates in the House of Lords put on the agenda the proposal already launched by the Jewish Agency and supported by some influential figures such as Baron Rothschild and the MP Samuel Silverman, to ensure that, regardless of military circumstances and humanitarian difficulties, any person who would manage to escape from any of the occupied territories, would be admitted and would be granted all assistance in the territories of the United Nations. The parliamentary debates in London also produced a proposal that the United Nations should address the citizens of Germany and its satellite countries for support, ensuring that their courage and willingness to sacrifice to help the Jews would not be forgotten and that after the war their merit would be recognised.

After Eden's speech in Parliament, delivered in December 1942, voices in support of the persecuted Jews became more and more insistent. In addition to famous Members of Parliament and religious figures, some prominent intellectuals were also involved in the campaign. The famous book publisher Victor Gollancz published the pamphlet "Let My People Go"³⁹, which sold an impressive 250,000

³⁸ United Nations Declaration, HC Deb 17 December 1942, See *Holocaust Sources in Context*, Declaration of December 17, 1942 | Experiencing History: Holocaust Sources in Context (ushmm.org) (access 14.09.2023).

³⁹ Appel On Behalf Of The Jews, in V. Gollancz, *Let My People Go*, London, 1942, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/48912740> (access 15.09.2023)

copies in three months. This book actually collected various ideas on how to organise the scheme for the removal of European Jews. There were some ideas that excelled among the rest: e.g., a coordinated plan under the auspices of the United Nations, negotiations with Germany through neutral countries that were supposed to be mediators, their aim being the Jews under their control to emigrate or be issued exit visas and provided transport to the border posts, where they would be transported to wartime asylum zones from.⁴⁰

Public reaction was mixed. The two ministers responsible for solving the problem: Anthony Eden and Oliver Stanley, as well as Prime Minister Winston Churchill, were inundated with letters from some highly respected organisations, prominent intellectuals and citizens demanding that the government take urgent measures to alleviate the plight of Jewish refugees. British public opinion was won over to the cause and fears of anti-Semitic sentiment receded into the background. By the end of 1942, the public was already aware that fascism was an anti-human ideology that would not stop with the extermination of the Jews, but threatened to spread to other ethnicities and religions.

NEGOTIATIONS WITH THE BULGARIAN GOVERNMENT

In the autumn of 1942, Jewish émigrés from Bulgaria living in New York and in Palestine founded a committee whose objective was saving the Bulgarian Jews who still lived within the Tsardom. The influential tobacco merchant Jacques Aseov, an emigrant from Dupnica, was elected president, and Sigmund Ritell was elected vice president thereof. The committee worked closely with international Zionist organisations. Their initial goal was to make relevant arrangements for the reception of 500 Bulgarian children and accompanying adults in Mandatory Palestine.⁴¹ That was an endeavour where the Jewish Agency provided particularly valuable help, which since the spring of 1942 had been conducting a contentious debate with the British Government for the admission of Jews coming from the so-called “enemy territory” to enter Palestine within the annual quota stipulated in the White Paper. High Commissioner Harold McMichael rejected the agency’s proposal to allow Jews from Bulgaria to gain legal entry. On November 9 1942 he sent his opinion and notes to the Colonial Office in London, recommending that the plan be rejected with the following argument:

“I fear that if the Bulgarian Government finds out that the British authorities are ready to receive Jews en masse, they will send as many as the trains can

⁴⁰ Victor Gollancz, *“Let My People Go”*: Some Practical Proposals for Dealing with Hitler’s Massacre of the Jews and an Appeal to the British Public, London 1943; Victor Gollancz’s attempt to stop the Holocaust, The Jerusalem Post, Jan 15 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/Diaspora/Victor-Gollanczs-attempt-to-stop-the-Holocaust-614283> (access 15.09.2023).

⁴¹ F. Chary, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

hold, regardless of the quantity and quality of the emigrants. Then the British Administration in Palestine can neither control the process of selecting the immigrants nor expel back the undesirables from among them".⁴² Another argument of his was that once the door to Palestine was thrown wide open, the colonial administration would be forced to let in illegal immigrants from any Axis country which, with or without German instigation, would decide to get rid of its Jewish population. It is even less likely that Britain will continue to refuse assistance to the illegal immigrants who are flocking to Turkey.

On November 17, 1942, an interdepartmental meeting of the British Cabinet was held to discuss the arguments in McMichael's opinion. After long debates, it was decided to support the recommendation of the High Commissioner for Palestine McMichael for the legal admission of the Bulgarian Jewish refugees. The main argument was not to set a precedent. Even the official record stated that supporting the Jewish Agency's request would mean "*lifting the bans and opening the floodgates*".⁴³

An important role in the evolution of the British policy on the Jewish question was played by the cooperation between the Government and the emissaries of various Jewish organisations. On December 4, the Minister of Colonies, Mr Oliver Stanley, received some representatives of the Jewish Agency, with whom he discussed the possibilities of activating the rescue operations of Jewish children through the Balkans and Turkey to Palestine. The reason for the conversation were the indications that there had been a strengthening of the anti-Semitic regime in Bulgaria and the planned expulsion of the Jews from the eastern regions of the Reich. They strongly insisted that an attempt must be made to save the remnants of the Jewish community in Bulgaria from destruction. The delegation included some authoritative figures such as the prominent British historian of Polish-Jewish descent, Professor Louis Namier, the head of the political bureau of the Jewish Agency in London, Berle Locker, the prominent Zionist activist Blanche Dugdale, niece of Lord Balfour. They were accompanied by the secretary of the Agency's London office, Joseph Linton. The main issue discussed was finding refuge for persecuted Jews from the Nazi-occupied territories. The preference was accommodation in Palestine, but emissaries were willing to accept some other territories in the British Empire as suitable should the logistical possibilities in Palestine be exhausted. The delegation appealed, acting through Minister Stanley, to the British Government to reconsider Government's position of not admitting Jews from enemy countries to the colonial territories "*in order to save the remnant of the Jewish people in Europe*".⁴⁴ They came to a compromise solution that was supposed to satisfy both sides and it was to give priority to rescue operations to get the Jewish children out. The three emissaries

⁴² FO371/32.698, W 15197; M. Gilbert, *Auschwitz and the Allies...*, p. 80.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ M. Gilbert, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

saw transit through Bulgaria, where the Jewish organisation was still functioning, combined with the suggestion that the Bulgarian Government “*would allow them to go*”, as the most favourable recipe for the time being. Another advantage was a safer route through a land border, which would avoid the risk of maritime tragedies. Oliver Stanley welcomed the delegation’s idea and even suggested that the Colonial Office consider the possibility of helping with a “*considerable immigration*” of Bulgarian Jewish children. His personal opinion was that this initiative would take time, and probably, in the present state of affairs, their adoption in Palestine would be difficult to accomplish.⁴⁵

At the very beginning of 1943, the British Wartime Cabinet and the Government in Sofia entered into negotiations with the aim of arranging for the transit of Jewish children. The negotiations were conducted through the active mediation of the Minister Plenipotentiary in Bern, Georgi Kyoseivanov, a trusted contact person between the Allies and Tsar Boris, and the head of the Swiss legation in Sofia, Charles Redard,⁴⁶ who represented both British interests and those of the International Red Cross. On January 5, 1943, the Chief Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dimitar Shishmanov, sent an official letter to the Minister of the Interior, Petar Gabrovski, in which he informed the latter that the British Legation in Bern, with a note dated November, 21, 1942, sent via the Swiss Foreign Ministry and accordingly via its legation in Sofia informed the Bulgarian Government that the British cabinet had decided to grant entry visas for Palestine to about 5,000 Bulgarian Jews, of whom 4,500 were supposed to be children plus 500 adults. Their number and exact proportion were supposed to depend on the local possibilities of acceptance and on the consent by the Bulgarian Government.⁴⁷ The letter made it clear that the Romanian and Hungarian governments have already given permission to hundreds of young Jews to emigrate to Palestine via Turkey. The request to Bulgaria was to join the scheme by providing transit visas and logistical support. In view of the spreading rumours of the imminent deportation of Jews from Bulgaria, the British Government was demanding an urgent response from Sofia and an assurance that the Bulgarian asylum seekers to Palestine would not be deported before the question was resolved. By order of Bulgarian Prime Minister Bogdan Filov, the British proposal was reported to Interior Minister Gabrovski. On the same day, the Ministry of the Interior returned to the Foreign Office a reply that it agreed to accept the proposal of the English Legation in Bern to deport 5,000 Jews to Palestine. Moreover, it “*considered it necessary even to insist that the number of deported Jews, especially the elderly, be increased.*”⁴⁸

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 94–95.

⁴⁶ Charles Arthur Redard, head of the Swiss Legation (12.05.1941–19.07.1945) and Ambassador (20.07.1945–20.03.1946) in Sofia.

⁴⁷ Central State Archive Funds (here-after CSA), Funds, Fund 264K, Bulgarian Jewish Community, Inventory 7, archive unit 251, foils 2–3.

⁴⁸ CSA, Fund 264K, Inventory 7, archive unit 251, foil 1.

The swift reaction of the Bulgarian Government was not a surprise. Between the office in Sofia and the Headquarters of the International Red Cross Organisation, there was already a good synchronisation and active correspondence in place, which was going via the Bulgarian Legation in Bern. For example, just one day later, on January 6, 1943, the Cabinet granted “*immediate consent*” to the transit of 200 Jewish children and emphasised that “no obstacles to this exist.” The only condition that Sofia imposed was that 20 days in advance the date of arrival and the border crossing point, the exact number of children and whether they were travelling with individual or collective passports had to be communicated, so that the relevant data could be promptly provided to the Bulgarian Legations in Budapest and Bucharest to issue the relevant visas.⁴⁹ Correspondence on this case was under way since June 13, 1942 with the mediation of the Bulgarian Red Cross. Even then, the Cabinet responded positively to the transit of the convoy of Jewish children from Hungary and Romania, arranged for by Haim Barlas, the representative of the Jewish Agency in Istanbul, under the conditions stated above.⁵⁰ The six-month delay is proof that it was not the political will of the Cabinet in Sofia, but the solving of logistical problems that had failed a number of rescue missions. The cited case was one of a series of campaigns in which Bulgarian institutions, through their consular services, did promptly provide individual and group transit visas to Jews emigrating to Palestine.

The issue of saving the Bulgarian Jewish diaspora was on the agenda of the British War Cabinet. Due to the specifics of the British policy on the refugee issue in Palestine, what was put in the foreground was the possibility of providing legal immigration quotas mainly for Jewish children from Bulgaria. The relevant discussions found a place on the agenda of the Cabinet meeting held on 14 December 1942. The Secretary of State for the Colonies, Oliver Stanley, reported on his talks with the emissaries of the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem and on their application submitted a month earlier to the High Commissioner for Palestine, Sir Harold MacMichael, with a request to allow the immigration of Jews from Bulgaria within the immigration quota. After deliberations, the Cabinet rejected the proposal, citing security concerns. The refusal was argued in accordance with British immigration policy, set out in the 1939 White Paper, according to which no immigration assistance could be allowed for citizens coming from countries with which Britain was at war. The compromise with which McMichael agreed in principle was to provide immigration certificates for 5,000 people from Bulgaria within the first immigration quota for 1943, of which 4,500 were intended for children and 500 for adults to accompany them and take care of them. Harold McMichael, however, wanted to maintain the condition that the decisive word on the exact number of accepted Jews would be with the Administration of Mandatory Palestine, depending on the specific logistical possibilities and preservation of order and security. The War

⁴⁹ CSA, Fund 176K, Inventory 8, archive unit 1176, foil 43.

⁵⁰ CSA, Fund 176K, Inventory 8, archive unit 1176, foil 10.

Cabinet approved the proposed course of action and authorised the Secretary of State for the Colonies to take the necessary steps for its execution.⁵¹

On January 4, 1943, the British War Cabinet again considered the issue of the reception and accommodation in Palestine of asylum-seeking children from Bulgaria. The Secretary of State for the Colonies, Oliver Stanley, reported on the progress of the negotiations and announced that the Bulgarian and Turkish governments had already succeeded in agreeing on the transfer of 4,000 Jewish children from Bulgaria to Palestine. He proposes to insist on the appropriate order for the immediate implementation of the agreements reached. At the same time, Stanley suggested that High Commissioner MacMichael give his opinion on a new scheme for the distribution of immigration quotas, necessitated by the then difficult situation. He proposed that the available 30,000 free certificates be distributed on the following principle: 80% were supposed to be granted to refugee children from enemy-occupied countries, and the remaining 20% to be reserved for accompanying adults and also for doctors, rabbis and others of special value persons who ought to be saved at all costs.⁵² In accordance with Oliver Stanley's new proposal, the War Cabinet agreed to postpone a decision on the case for a few days until the High Commissioner for Palestine MacMichael's notes were received.⁵³ Consent from the Government of Palestine for the admission of 4,500 Bulgarian children and 500 accompanying adults, including some doctors, rabbis and "veteran" Zionists (5% of the total) was given in February 1943.⁵⁴ Meanwhile, the Cabinet in London ordered the Passport Control Office at the British Embassy in Istanbul to get in touch with Haim Barlas of the Jewish Agency for Palestine and charge him with the selection and transportation of the immigrants who would be guaranteed entry visas to Palestine after their arrival in Istanbul.⁵⁵

The Jewish Telegraphic Agency, based in New York, reported on February 3 that the Secretary of the House of Commons for Colonial Policy, Colonel Oliver Stanley, made a statement to the press that "the English Government, represented by an independent state, had successfully negotiated with the Bulgarian Government which has given permission for 4,000 Jewish children accompanied by 500 adults to emigrate to Palestine."⁵⁶ In addition, the Cabinet in London

⁵¹ The National Archives, The Cabinet Papers, CAB 65/28 Original Reference (42) 131–(42) 174, 1942 Oct 5 – Dec 30, p. 224.

⁵² The author of this scheme was the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Oliver Stanley, who announced the programme on 02/03/1943.

⁵³ The National Archives, The Cabinet Papers. CAB 65/33 Original Reference (43) 1–(43) 46, 1943 4 Jan – 29 Mar, p. 58.

⁵⁴ CO 323/1846/2, 19 Sept. 1942, Cranborne, Minutes; 29 Sept. 1942, conversation, Cranborne and Hertz.

⁵⁵ Ira Hirshman Papers, Box 3, Letter re Admission of 5,000 Jews to Palestine from Bulgaria, British Passport Control Officer, Istanbul to Chaim Barlas. – in "Selected Digitized Documents Related to the Holocaust and Refugees, 1933–1945", in "Franklin Delano Roosevelt Presidential Library & Museum", published in *The Bridge to Salvation [Mostat na spasenieto]*, p. 117–118.

⁵⁶ Jewish Telegraphic Agency. Archive. Vol. X, n° 29, Febr. 4 1943. http://pdfs.jta.org/1943/1943-02-04_029.pdf?_ga=2.245054341.1297709016.1625728958-781052549.1624540046 (access 11.06.2023)

decided to admit an additional 500 children from Romania and Hungary instead of the planned 270, and also expressed readiness to provide additional quotas for children and adults from *Aliyah* within the framework of the certificates granted under the White Paper. For Berlin, the plans to transport this group of Jewish children came as quite an unpleasant surprise. An order was sent to the German embassies in Budapest and Bucharest to pressure the governments of the satellite countries to end the emigration of Jews. In addition, entering into contacts with the governments of enemy countries, which could lead to internal contradictions, feeding enemy propaganda and leakage of information to the enemy, was strictly forbidden. Another argument stated that the agreement contradicted Axis policy toward the Arab nations.⁵⁷

On February 22, 1943, the first group of Jewish children from Bulgaria arrived in Palestine.⁵⁸ Ten days later, on March 2, Swiss radio and the following day the Bulgarian newspaper *Zora* quoted a statement by the British Ambassador in Washington, Lord Halifax, addressed to the World Jewish Congress, that the talks between Great Britain and Bulgaria on the emigration of 4,000 children and 500 adults in Palestine had been successful. In response, the German Embassy in Sofia exerted pressure on the Bulgarian Government to stop their participation in the scheme agreed with the British. The very next day – March 4, reports appeared in the Bulgarian press that the Royal Government was encountering “technical difficulties” in implementing the transit agreed with the British.⁵⁹ With this background, in early March, reports in the world media of this landmark deal for the Allies, which would outline a political breakthrough in the field of an enemy satellite country, remained controversial. This becomes clear from a publication of the Jewish Telegraphic Agency of March 7. The publication cited a March 4 announcement by the German Transoceanic News Agency, which claimed, based on an official communiqué of the Bulgarian Cabinet in Sofia, the negotiations with the British Government had failed. The resulting “*technical details*” precluded the implementation of the plan for the emigration of 4,500 Jewish children and adults to Palestine. Literally on the same day, the Office of the British Government in Washington released a message to the contrary in content, which read: “*Information has just arrived those 4,000 Jewish children, accompanied by 500 adults, will leave Bulgaria to settle in Palestine.*”⁶⁰ Another publication in the same issue elaborated on the reasons. The practical difficulties that arose prevented the negotiations from reaching a successful conclusion, because the ships on which the

⁵⁷ Instruction from Berlin to the Legations in Budapest and Bucharest to collect information and prevent the exodus of Jews, March 1943, *Yad Vashem Archives, 0.13, Bulgarian Collection*, 64, p. 43–44, published in *The Bridge to Salvation [Mostat na spasenieto]*, p. 129.

⁵⁸ Jewish Telegraphic Agency. Archive. Vol. X, n° 44, 22. 02. 1943. http://pdfs.jta.org/1943/1943-02-23_044.pdf?_ga=2.180555943.1297709016.1625728958-781052549.1624540046

⁵⁹ Secret telegram from Sofia to Berlin, 5. 03. 1943, *Yad Vashem Archives, 0.13, Bulgarian Collection*, p. 64, 32, published in *The Bridge to Salvation [Mostat na spasenieto]*, p. 130.

⁶⁰ Jewish Telegraphic Agency, Vol. X, n° 55, 8. 03. 1943. Archive. http://pdfs.jta.org/1943/1943-03-08_055.pdf?_ga=2.147397559.1297709016.1625728958-781052549.1624540046 (access 12.06.2023)

Jewish children were to travel to Palestine were not approved by the Red Cross as reliable enough to carry children.⁶¹

The conflicting information about the fate of the British initiative combined with the participation of the Bulgarian Cabinet continued throughout the month of March 1943. From a secret telegram of the German ambassador Adolf Beckerle in Sofia sent to the Foreign Ministry in Berlin, we understand that the pressure on the Cabinet of Bogdan Filov to give up the agreement reached was quite significant. Between February 27 and March 13, the ambassador sent a series of letters in which he reported what measures the embassy had taken to end negotiations with the Swiss mediator aiming not to allow a contract to be signed. Beckerle claimed that Prime Minister Filov had assured him that the question of further transit would no longer be raised, and also that the number of so-called children, i.e., mainly young males between the ages of 16 and 18 who could join an enemy army would be reduced. The Gestapo agents in Romania and Bulgaria were actively involved in the action to prevent Jewish transit, who at that time were trying to pressure the authorities of both countries to prevent the passage of another group of 150 Jews from Central Europe to Palestine.⁶²

Young people between the ages of 16 and 18 were in the most disadvantaged position. The Jewish organisations that carried out the transportation were doing their best to include them in the category of “children” and appear in the collective visa documents in that capacity. At the same time, both the German and British sides saw them as suitable for military service and espionage. It is not uncommon for those young people, even holding the proper documents, to be detained and removed from the passing groups. That was the case with Romanian children returned from the Bulgarian-Turkish border to Svilengrad, who had been travelling holding Chilean passports and were sent back.⁶³ According to the rules adopted by the Bulgarian Legation in Bucharest, transit visas were allowed to be issued to Jews aged under 16 and over 55 provided that any such Jews had individual passports and Turkish entry visas each.⁶⁴

Despite the German efforts, Winston Churchill’s War Cabinet continued their attempts to accept Bulgarian children and women in Palestine. On March 19, the Secretary of State for Colonies, Captain Oliver Stanley, declared from the rostrum of the House of Commons that the Government were doing their best to overcome the practical difficulties which had arisen at the last moment. The Jewish Telegraphic Agency, citing a reliable source, stated that the Bulgarian government had issued instructions to the official institutions for the maximum facilitation of all Jews who want to emigrate outside the country. The information about the

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Secret telegram from Sofia to Berlin, March 13 1943, Beckerle, *Yad Vashem Archives, 0.13, Bulgarian Collection*, p. 64, *The Bridge to Salvation [Mostat na spasenieto]*, p. 139–140.

⁶³ CSA, Fund 176K, Inventory 8, archive unit 1176, foil 61, 63.

⁶⁴ CSA, Fund 176K, Inventory 8, archive unit 1176, foil 77.

unreliability of the sea vessels proposed by the Bulgarian authorities was also confirmed. Because of the pending hazards accompanying any sailing through the Black Sea, the Red Cross, which was overseeing transport, steadfastly refused to accept responsibility for the children's journey.⁶⁵

The issue of rescuing the Bulgarian Jews was the subject of a conversation during the meeting in Washington on March 27, 1943 between British Foreign Minister Eden and American President Roosevelt. American Secretary of State Cordell Hull raised the question of rescuing 60 or 70 thousand Jews⁶⁶, who were located in Bulgaria and were threatened with extermination unless the Allies organised a rescue plan. For this purpose, the Americans wanted to urgently "pressure" Eden for an answer to the problem. Foreign Secretary Eden's response was delivered entirely in the tone of characteristically British pragmatic caution. There, he pointed out that the whole question of the Jews in Europe was very difficult, and that the Allies had to consider the circumstances very carefully when they propose to remove all the Jews from a country like Bulgaria. Such an action would set a precedent, and all the Jews of the world could request a similar gesture for those of Poland and Germany. For Hitler, any such offer would be welcome, but there were simply not enough ships and means of transport in the world to make this viable. Anthony Eden emphasised that the British were ready to accept about 60 thousand more Jews in Palestine, but the problem of transportation, even from a nearby country like Bulgaria to Palestine, was extremely difficult. Moreover, any such mass movement would pose some security risks, as the Germans would surely try to implant their own agents into the group.⁶⁷ The meeting proved to be important for the convergence of positions and agreement on the common policy of the Allies on the Jewish question. Actually, it prepared the ground for the upcoming Bermuda conference, which was supposed to outline practical steps for the implementation of Jewish emigration under the auspices of the UN. The goal of the British was to attract the financial and transport resources of the USA to solve the Jewish question. On the other hand, the campaign that Jewish organisations were conducting in defence of Bulgarian Jews threatened with deportation motivated the United States to engage more closely with the problem. The British ambassador to Washington, Lord Halifax, informed the Foreign Office by an encrypted telegram of March 25 that the president of the World Zionist Organisation, Dr Weizmann, had written to him with a request that the Bulgarian youth be included in the total number for evacuation from Bulgaria, provided that a sufficient number of children were not collected in time, or if such children were

⁶⁵ Jewish Telegraphic Agency. Archive, Vol. X, n° 66, 21. 03. 1943. http://pdfs.jta.org/1943/1943-03-21_066.pdf?_ga=2.172768163.1297709016.1625728958-781052549.1624540046 (access 12.06.2023)

⁶⁶ The figure is greatly exaggerated, probably due to a lack of accurate information.

⁶⁷ Memorandum of conversation by Harry Hopkins, Special Assistant to President Roosevelt, FRUS. Diplomatic Papers, 1943, Vol. III. Doc. 23. p. 38-39. United States Government Printing Office, Washington 1963. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1943v03/d23> (access 10.07.2023)

threatened with deportation to Poland, which he believed meant mass slaughter. The same problem was raised by Moshe Shertok, one of the leaders of the Zionist movement and the Jewish Agency, to the Assistant Secretary of State for the Foreign Office, William Strang.⁶⁸

At the end of March and the beginning of April, the Allies initiated negotiations with the Turkish government to convince it to temporarily accept the 30,000 Bulgarian Jews on its territory in refugee camps. The American side guaranteed that it would financially secure their evacuation and subsistence by providing additional food supplies, and after the end of the war, the refugees would be repatriated back to Bulgaria.⁶⁹ From the encrypted telegram that the Foreign Office sent to the British ambassador to Ankara, Sir Knatchbull-Hugessen, and to his American counterpart there, Laurence Steinhardt, it becomes clear that the diplomats did not have high hopes for the successful implementation of the initiative. It was unlikely, they said, to expect a quick positive response from the Turkish Government, but their hope was that Anglo-American guarantees would manage to overcome his concerns.⁷⁰ The Minister of Colonies, Oliver Stanley, also took a position on the project proposed by the USA on the Bulgarian Jews refugee issue. What he stated was that, with the consent of the Turkish Government, he would ask the Foreign Minister to oppose the strong pressure he expected from Zionist community referring to the acceptance of those 30,000 Bulgarian Jews in Palestine. The War Cabinet was supposed to take into account the fact that such a mass reception might be able to cause some Arab unrest. Another concern of his was that if the American plan to concentrate Jews in temporary camps in Turkey worked, then the British plan for the simple immigration of Jewish children from the Balkan countries would fail.⁷¹ The Turkish government never accepted the allied offer. The arguments put forward by the Turkish foreign minister were of a purely financial nature and had nothing to do with the fact that the refugees were Jews: “*There is no such city in which to accommodate such a large number of refugees, as well as to build buildings for them, due to critical shortage of building stock and labour force. Health insurance, water supply, as well as constant guarding of the refugees would create significant difficulties, what remains for the problems concerning their nutrition*”.⁷² Moreover, the mere fact that the refugees were Jews from Bulgaria portended the emergence of particular issues related to concerns about infiltrating agents and other undesirables.

⁶⁸ Public Records Office, Kew. The National Archives. Transfer of Jews in Bulgaria to Turkey. CO323/1846/10, 6; CO323/1846/10, 7, in *The Bridge to Salvation [Mostat na spasenieto]*, p. 147–148.

⁶⁹ Public Records Office, Kew. The National Archives. Transfer of Jews in Bulgaria to Turkey. CO323/1846/10, 5, in *The Bridge to Salvation [Mostat na spasenieto]*, p. 155–156.

⁷⁰ Public Records Office, Kew. The National Archives. Transfer of Jews in Bulgaria to Turkey. CO323/1846/10, 11, in *The Bridge to Salvation [Mostat na spasenieto]*, p. 153–154.

⁷¹ Public Records Office, Kew. The National Archives. Transfer of Jews in Bulgaria to Turkey. CO323/1846/10, 5, in *The Bridge to Salvation [Mostat na spasenieto]*, p. 155–156.

⁷² Public Records Office, Kew. The National Archives. Transfer of Jews in Bulgaria to Turkey. CO323/1846/10, 13, in *The Bridge to Salvation [Mostat na spasenieto]*, p. 168–170.

The rescue of the Bulgarian Jewish children was also discussed at the Bermuda Conference of April 19, 1943. At the suggestion of the participants, the United States agreed to transfer 4,500 children and 500 adults by ship or land through Turkey to Palestine. It was agreed with the British that the Americans would pay half the cost of \$300,000, and Britain agreed to grant entry visas to Palestine. However, the problem came from the Turkish Government, which refused to allow transit through Turkey by land by rail. The argument that the Turks viewed the Jews as Bulgarians, regardless of their religion, and therefore would not give such permission.⁷³ Obviously, the historical sentiments of dislike between the two countries would also have an impact. Then, with the assistance of the American ambassador to Ankara, efforts were directed to the chartering of two ships. The British government, in turn, undertook to arrange the transit with the Romanian ships, using Turkey as an intermediary. After pressure from the Allies, Turkey ultimately agreed to allow the refugees to cross its territory to Istanbul, where they would be put on ships. However, the Romanian Government detained the ships, and the Bulgarian Government subsequently closed its borders and sent the Jews into the interior of the country.⁷⁴

In the end, neither of the two Allied schemes to save Bulgarian Jews worked. At the meeting of the War Cabinet, held on April 1, 1943, Foreign Minister Eden considered it a mistake to hold public discussions on the proposal to facilitate the transfer of Jewish refugees to Palestine through Bulgaria. Apparently, as a result of this openness, the Germans took special measures to prevent Allied initiatives. At his suggestion, it was decided that the further discussion of the Jewish question by the Cabinet would be carried out in strict secrecy and that public statements would be avoided.⁷⁵ On June 9, 1943, Colonial Secretary Oliver Stanley announced to the House of Commons that Bulgaria was withdrawing from the agreement with the Swiss authorities to release 4,000 children and 500 adults for emigration to Palestine. Responding to critical comments by Eleanor Rathbone and Labour's David Adams that Jewish emigration to Palestine was impeded by the White Paper's restrictions, he deflected blame for the failure on the War Cabinet. Rather, according to him, the reasons were rooted in transport problems and the subsequent refusal of the Bulgarian Government to fulfil the contract with the Swiss.⁷⁶

⁷³ Memorandum by Assistant Secretary of State (Long) to the Secretary of State, Washington D.C., June 29, 1943, FRUS Diplomatic Papers, 1943. General. Vol. I. Doc. 315, Washington 1963. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1943v01/d315> (access 15.09.2023).

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ The National Archives, Cabinet Minutes and Papers, p. 35. <http://filestore.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pdfs/large/cab-65-34.pdf> (access 15.09.2023).

⁷⁶ Jewish Telegraphic Agency. Archive, Vol. X, n° 6134(b), 10. 06. 1943. http://pdfs.jta.org/1943/1943-06-10_134B.pdf?_ga=2.214004887.1297709016.1625728958-781052549.1624540046 (access 15.09.2023).

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The failure of the British initiative to remove 4,500 Jewish children and 500 accompanying adults from and through Bulgaria was due to various reasons. On the one hand, the indiscretion of the British Government in conducting the negotiations with the Bulgarian authorities, which allowed the German services to be aware of the diplomatic actions and to exert strong pressure on Bulgaria to abandon the agreement. On the other hand, the delay in giving consent to the Turkish Government for the passage of such a large group of refugees through its territory would also contribute to the eventual failure of the British proposal. Nevertheless, the initiative has an important meaning and a place in the policy of the warring countries regarding the ongoing genocide of the Jewish community. It is rightly assumed that it was this idea that marked the essential change in British policy in terms of the Jewish refugees. And although it did not go beyond the narrow limits defined in the White Paper, the British Government gradually became more and more actively involved in the idea of rescuing Jews from the Holocaust zone. The initiative was important to the Allies not only for humanitarian reasons, but also because in this way an attempt was made to break through the monolithic Axis through a satellite state.

Although giving up the idea, after exercises of strong diplomatic pressure from Germany, the Bulgarian Government from the very beginning of the negotiations with the mediation of the Swiss representatives showed that it saw in the transit of Jewish refugees through the country, which actually took place since the beginning of the war, an opportunity to prevent the extermination of the Jews that had begun, especially actively arranged for after the adoption of the Final Solution. The willingness of the Bulgarian institutions to immediately provide the necessary logistical support to the initiative is another proof that the extremes of the anti-Semitic policy of the Third Reich were not adopted by Sofia at all.

CONCLUSION

Great Britain's policies in 1942–1943 were both conservative and stop-go on the Jewish Question, whose postulates were stipulated in the White Paper. Its policies would pursue two goals: first of all, security and avoiding any Jew-Arab ethnic conflicts in Palestine with the aim to ensure Great Britain's interests in the area of military strategies and economics; secondly: preserving its reputation of a Great Power defending universal human democratic values and rights.

The balance between these fundamental principles coupled with the traditional British cautiousness lay behind Britain's less-than-prompt and largely delayed response to the anti-Semite policies as an answer to the Final Solution. Another additional hindering Churchill's Cabinet efforts was the occurrence of

“home” anti-Semitism, which was particularly prominent over the 1930s that could well provoke some foreign political tensions.

By the end of 1942 and in early 1943, London’s policies in terms of the immigration question inevitably evaluated under the pressure of the Jewish organisations and the intervention of some outstanding public personalities: MPs and intellectuals, who were active in shaping public opinion.

The Bulgarian Jewish children salvation turned into a paradigmatic case, which was the expression of that very evolution in Britain’s colonial policies in terms of the Jewish Question. It was important to the Allies not only for humanitarian reasons, but also because in this way they made an attempt to break through the monolithic Axis through negotiations with a satellite state.

The Bulgarian Government entered some negotiations with Churchill’s War Cabinet making use of Switzerland’s mediation risking at the same time to suffer some negative consequences from its ally Germany. This was another case when the Bulgarian Government applied its unofficially announced policy to facilitate the Jew transit on their way to Palestine by ensuring transit and exit visas.

The failure of the initiative on the acceptance of 4500 children and 500 adults accompanying them in 1942 was owed to a sequence of circumstances, some of which stand out among the others: transportation and logistics issues, refusal expressed by the Turkish Government to cooperate, the German pressure exerted over the Governments of Bulgaria and Romania as Reich’s satellite states demanding the two to put an end to such transit and seal their borders.