



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Bulgarians defend Jews from deportation during World War II, 1941-1945

1941

to:

1945

Country: Bulgaria

Location Description: *Near MPs offices and train stations in all parts of Bulgaria*

Goals:

To prevent Bulgarian Jews from being deported and sent to death camps in Nazi Germany.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 015. Group lobbying
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 015. Group lobbying
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 135. Popular nonobedience
- 144. Stalling and obstruction
- 145. General administrative noncooperation
- 147. Deliberate inefficiency and selective noncooperation by enforcement agents
- 152. Delay and cancellation of diplomatic events
- 190. Alternative markets

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 015. Group lobbying
- 020. Prayer and worship

- 038. Marches
- 039. Parades
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 134. Nonobedience in absence of direct supervision
- 135. Popular nonobedience
- 144. Stalling and obstruction
- 145. General administrative noncooperation
- 147. Deliberate inefficiency and selective noncooperation by enforcement agents
- 152. Delay and cancellation of diplomatic events
- 171. Nonviolent interjection

Methods in 4th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 015. Group lobbying
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 135. Popular nonobedience
- 140. Hiding, escape, and false identities
- 144. Stalling and obstruction
- 145. General administrative noncooperation
- 147. Deliberate inefficiency and selective noncooperation by enforcement agents
- 152. Delay and cancellation of diplomatic events

Methods in 5th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 015. Group lobbying
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 135. Popular nonobedience
- 140. Hiding, escape, and false identities
- 144. Stalling and obstruction
- 145. General administrative noncooperation
- 147. Deliberate inefficiency and selective noncooperation by enforcement agents
- 152. Delay and cancellation of diplomatic events

Methods in 6th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 015. Group lobbying
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 135. Popular nonobedience
- 140. Hiding, escape, and false identities
- 144. Stalling and obstruction
- 145. General administrative noncooperation
- 147. Deliberate inefficiency and selective noncooperation by enforcement agents

- 152. Delay and cancellation of diplomatic events

Classifications

Classification:

Defense

Cluster:

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- Bulgarians

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Dimitar Peshev (a parliamentary leader), Bulgarian Orthodox Church, Bulgarian Intellectuals

Partners:

Bulgarian Workers Party (Communist), Bulgarian professional organizations

External allies:

Tzar Boris III

Involvement of social elites:

Dimitar Peshev was the strongest advocate for the anti-deportation movement - he sacrificed his job as Deputy Leader of Parliament for the cause. Tzar Boris III was sympathetic, but was not strong enough to act without the support of demonstrators.

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Bulgarian Intellectuals
- Bulgarian Orthodox Church

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Bulgarian Workers Party
- Bulgarian professional organizations

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Bulgarian Citizens

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: *Approximately 8 months*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Nazi Germany

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not Known

Campaigner violence:

Not Known

Repressive Violence:

Not Known - Bulgaria was an ally, so it was harder for the Nazis to be openly repressive to a nation they still officially viewed as sovereign.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

5 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

The Bulgarians saved all Bulgarian Jews except those in the colonies of Thrace and Macedonia. However, until the end of the war, the Bulgarian Jews were absent from society and their families split up. Nonetheless, when they returned most of their houses were exactly as they had left them.

The campaign survived through the end of the war.

The campaign grew to widespread Bulgarian participation

Early on in the Second World War, Bulgaria was a member of the Axis powers, having signed the Tripartite Pact on March 1, 1941. However, Bulgaria was not emotionally attached to the ideals of the major Axis powers. They simply signed on because they desired - and were guaranteed by Germany - the nearby territories of Thrace and Macedonia, which they had lost after their defeat in World War One. As a result, though Hitler was certainly a persuasive influence on Bulgaria's foreign and domestic policy, he was not quite dictating every action taken by Bulgaria's ruler, Tzar Boris III.

Early on in Bulgaria's official alliance with Germany, Boris III refused to deport Jews from his country to concentration camps. Unlike most European countries at the time, Bulgarian Jews were fully integrated into Bulgarian society, though they numbered only about 1% of the total population of the country. There was a much lower rate of anti-Semitism in the country and Bulgarian intellectuals purposefully promoted tolerance of the Jewish population as something of which to be proud. Even the Orthodox Church and the Jewish Synagogues tended to get along quite well.

Though Tzar Boris was able to deflect Nazi pressure for Jewish deportation, he was forced to make some concessions to the anti-Semitic Germans in order to maintain his alliance. In January 1941, the Bulgarian parliament passed, thanks to considerable Nazi political pressure, the

Law for the Defense of the Nation

, an order inspired by the Nuremberg Laws in Germany. Among other things, this order prohibited significant Jewish economic

and professional activity, restricted where they could live, and enforced strict confiscatory measures on their possessions. Jewish marriages were prohibited, and Jews were not allowed to gather in public spaces.

Public reaction to this legislation was fierce and one-sided. Citizens, and particularly the many intellectuals that took pride in Bulgaria's tolerance of the Jewish population, were vehemently opposed to the new law. Joining the intellectuals in letter-writing and petition campaigns were the Bulgarian Workers Party (the Communist party), several professional organizations, and the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. One letter read: "This is not a law for the nation's defense but rather a proposal for its infamy."

Thanks in large part to the widespread and diverse reaction to the

Defense

legislation, the anti-Semitic rules were, at first, only minimally enforced. Many Bulgarians brought food to their Jewish friends who, thanks to the oppressive Nazi regime, were no longer able to provide for themselves.

In the fall of 1942, the Nazis decided to push harder and forced the establishment of a Commissariat for Jewish Relations. The Commissar's primary function was to oversee the deportation of Bulgarian Jews to Nazi death camps. In early 1943, Commissar Belev, a fiercely anti-Semitic Bulgarian, signed a secret agreement with Germany arranging sudden deportation action. Belev's quota was more than 20,000 Jews. About 11,000 Jews were swiftly transferred from the colonies in Thrace and Macedonia to death camps. Very few survived. However, this left Belev more than 9,000 short of his quota - he would have to deport Jews from Bulgaria itself.

Despite Belev's best attempts at secrecy so as to not alarm Bulgarians, word of the deportations began to spread. Three days before the deportation was scheduled and as arrests of Jews were taking place across Bulgaria, a large delegation of non-Jewish Bulgarians set out to protest against the deportations to the Deputy Speaker of Parliament, Dimitar Peshev. Peshev had been known to be sympathetic to human rights and minority issues in the past and though he was just as vulnerable to Nazi pressure as the rest of the Bulgarian government, he was probably the most likely to be in a position to help the Bulgarian Jews. At first, Peshev did not believe the claims of the protesters - he had not heard anything about a deportation and was sure that any such order would have required his approval. However, after asking a few of his powerful friends, he was convinced. Peshev made the deportation plans public as soon as he realized what was going on.

Though there were protests before the order was made public, they were not of the same magnitude of the protests after Bulgarians found out that they were being forced to send their Jewish citizens to death camps. Bulgarians began sending huge numbers of protesters into the offices of members of Parliament from all facets of Bulgarian society. Citizens held marches and street demonstrations in nearly every Bulgarian city, generally organized by the Orthodox Church, and supported by Jewish leaders throughout the country however they could help (though most Jewish Bulgarians had gone into hiding and were unable to actively participate). Many people threatened to lay across the railroad tracks to stop the trains from leaving with Bulgarian Jews. Peshev, along with forty-two other members of Parliament, composed a sharply-worded letter of protest and sent it to the Assembly chairman. Peshev, thanks to his position as the political mouthpiece of the protection movement, was soon removed from his position as deputy chairman.

However, the damage to the deportation plan had been done. Though 9,000 Jews were gathered by train stations on the day of the scheduled deportation, the trains never arrived. Tzar Boris, despite immense pressure from Hitler, was unable to deny the will of his people. He claimed that the Jews were needed for work projects in Bulgaria and that he simply could not part with them at this time. Male Jews were sent to work camps, where they were treated fairly, and Jewish women and children left for rural Bulgaria where they spent the remainder of the war tending crops - but they were able to remain in the country. Unfortunately, these measures necessarily meant that Bulgarian Jews were absent from Bulgarian society for years and families were split apart. Though Hitler would continue to press for deportation, the will of the Bulgarian people never allowed Boris to comply.

When the war was finally over, the Jews were able to leave the work camps and the countryside and be reunited. When they came back to their towns, nearly every Jewish family found their house exactly as they had left it - the Orthodox Church organized its members to tend the houses of Jews while they were away. Bulgaria was the only country whose Jewish population actually rose during the war.

Research Notes

Sources:

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Haskell, Guy. *From Sofia to Jaffa: The Jews of Bulgaria and Israel*. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1994.

Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Fragility of Goodness: Why Bulgaria's Jews Survived the Holocaust*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001.

Additional Notes:

See other examples of resistance against the Nazis (particularly in Denmark).

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