

The Bulgarian Jews

AND THE FINAL^m SOLUTION, 1940-1944

Frederick B. Chary



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FREDERICK B. CHARY

Virtually all of Bulgaria's Jewish citizens escaped the horrors of the Polish death camps and survived either to migrate to Israel or to remain in their homeland. This book is a study of the Bulgarian government's policy toward the Jews during these fateful years, illustrating again that Nazi Germany was not omnipotent and that determination and moral courage in a small country could successfully thwart the Final Solution.

In order to portray fully Bulgaria's handling of the Jews, Dr. Chary describes the Bulgarian government's vacillation under pressure between the Allies and the Axis, and illustrates the political interaction between the various Bulgarian groups and individual leaders, particularly King Boris and Metropolitan Stefan. He deals powerfully with intensely dramatic and moving material —the still mysterious death of King Boris, the intrigues by which Bulgaria stalled depor-

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To Julie

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Introduction

The justification for studying the application of the Nazi Final Solution to the Bulgarian Jews lies in the rather startling observation that more Jews were living in Bulgaria after World War II than before. In the general tragedy of the war years it would seem improbable that the Jewish community of a small nation could escape annihilation—especially in a country which was part of the Axis alliance.

The Bulgarians themselves have turned the anomaly into a source of pride by claiming to be the only nation in occupied Europe where all the Jews survived. Great political controversy has grown up over the cause and manner of the survival of the Bulgarian Jewish community. This controversy manifests itself in the question: “Who saved the Bulgarian Jews?” The current major argument concerns the role of King Boris III in the events surrounding the Jewish question in his country. One group claims that the king was responsible for saving the Jews and that he did so by preconceived plan, deliberately misrepresenting his intentions to Berlin. Some claim that the king’s mysterious death in 1943 was in fact an assassination ordered by Hitler either in part or as a whole because Boris would not permit the Nazis to deport the Bulgarian Jews to the extermination camps in Poland.

On the other side, some historians and commentators believe that the Bulgarian Jews were saved despite the king. They say that Boris either wholeheartedly agreed with the Nazi anti-Semitic policies or was indifferent to them. Only pressure from groups within the country and outside it forced the king to cancel his plans for deporting the Jews to Poland.

The Bulgarian response to the Final Solution is complicated by the Bulgarian deportation of Greek and Yugoslav Jews from territories Bulgaria occupied in the Balkans. Why did Sofia deport these Jews

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while hesitating to do the same to Jews of Bulgarian citizenship? Did the Bulgarians have less control there? Were the non-Bulgarian Jews sacrificed to save those with Bulgarian citizenship?

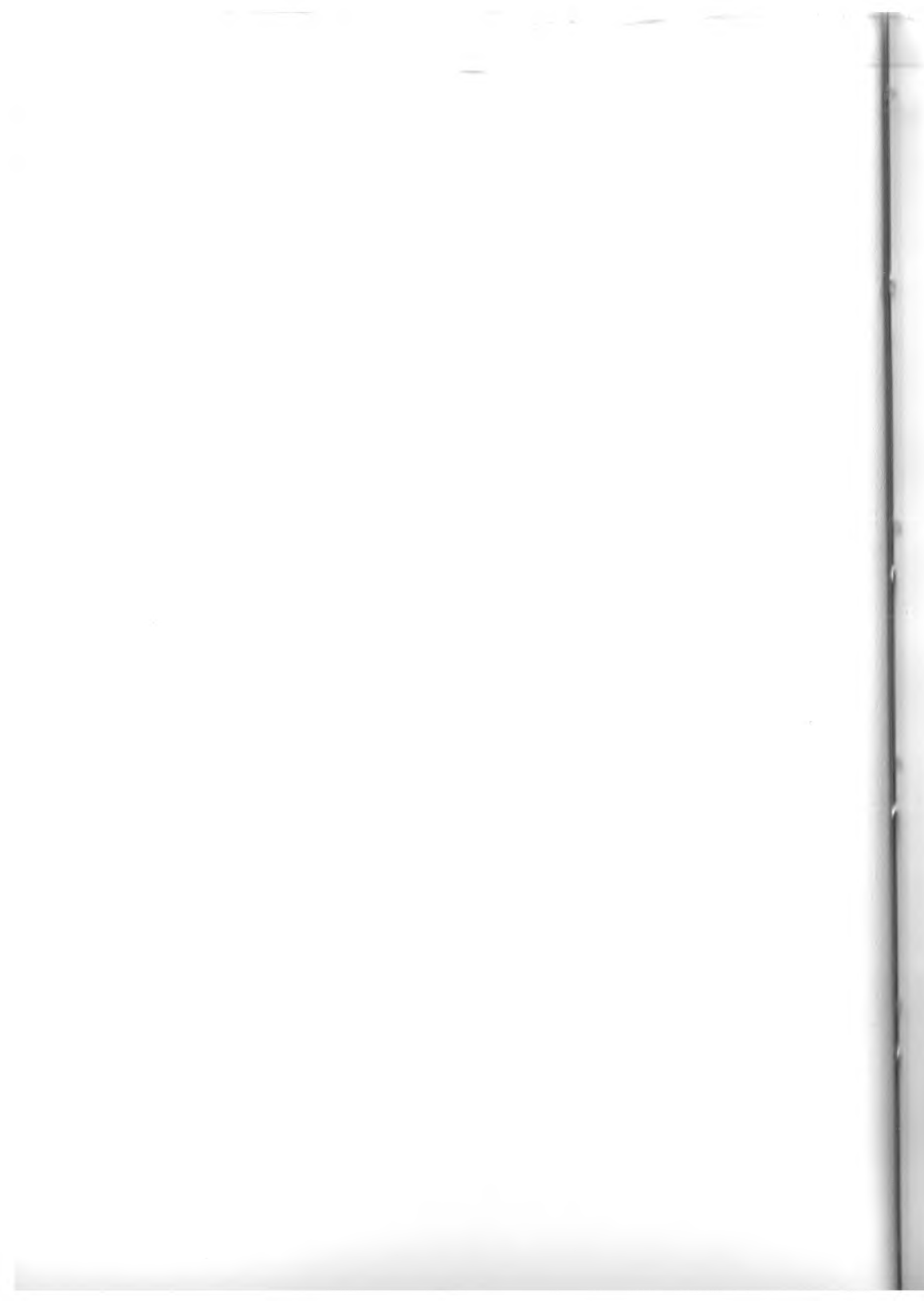
This book attempts to investigate the attitude and actions of the Bulgarian government with respect to the Jews in these critical years. By examining the political pressures on Sofia as well as the response to these pressures in the enactment of anti-Semitic legislation and deportation procedures both fulfilled and canceled, I hope to uncover the reason for the paradox of the Final Solution in Germany's Balkan partner. The differences in Sofia's attitudes and reactions with respect to Bulgarian and non-Bulgarian Jews are also examined. I have described the preparations and deportation procedures at some length to show the inhumane and at the same time bizarrely mechanical and bureaucratic nature of the Final Solution in Bulgaria (and presumably elsewhere). The details of the Bulgarian deportations are also a case study for other areas in Nazi Europe. Furthermore, the behavior of the Bulgarian government under political pressures can give insight not only into the nature of Bulgarian and Axis politics in the early forties, but also into the general nature of the Jewish question on the continent.

This book examines also the relationship of the various sections of Bulgarian ruling circles and society to the Jewish question and the Final Solution. These sections include the king and court, the church, the *Subranie* ("parliament"), the political opposition, and various other groups. I also investigate the important question of the relative strength of political forces inside the country and those outside, for example, the Allies, as to their effect on the events concerning the Jews in Bulgaria. Finally, I consider the Bulgarians' claim that theirs was the only nation in Nazi Europe to save the Jews and, indeed, whether it is useful to ask: "Who saved the Bulgarian Jews?"

Transliteration Note

I have used the Library of Congress Bulgarian transliteration system **except** that I use *H* instead of *Kh* for the Bulgarian X and I have not **used** diacritical marks. However, familiar names like *Sofia* and *Bulgaria* **are** not transliterated exactly.

The Bulgarian Jews and the Final Solution, 1940-1944



Bulgaria, Germany, and the Jews

Bulgaria After 1934

The story of Bulgaria's treatment of the Jewish community within its boundaries during World War II is not just another history of horror and degradation or, for that matter, glory and humanity. It is a story which reveals the interconnections among big nations and small in the modern world. It reveals the way in which the forces of society and the power of ideology shape the destiny of individual men and separate peoples no matter how disparate or distant from the originators of those forces and ideology they may seem to be. The history of the implementation of Nazi "Jewish policy*" in Bulgaria gives us an opportunity to see this interconnection between ideology and action, between great powers and small, as well as the interplay of societal confrontations.

From 1941 to 1944, Bulgaria was an ally of the Axis powers in Europe. Dragged into the war after vainly hoping to remain neutral, its government did what it could to keep the country's individuality while at the same time trying to uphold alliance requirements as Berlin relayed them to Sofia. Recognizing and dealing with a Jewish question was one of these requirements, just as was billeting of German troops outside of Sofia, allowing gestapo agents to help the king's police track down Bulgarian partisans, and permitting the German navy to take over the ports of Varna and Burgas to build the vessels that patrolled the Black Sea.

The Bulgarian Jews became a touchstone for the Berlin-Sofia alliance. Their fate rested more on the military fortunes of the Wehrmacht in Europe than on the political fortunes of the anti-Semites in Sofia. At the same time the eagerness or hesitancy with which the Bulgarian government implemented the Final Solution in the country gives us a picture of this alliance in progress. We can see here the interaction of three entities: the Third Reich, the Bulgarian government (and society), and

the Bulgarian Jewish community. We shall see how historical events during the war years embraced these entities.

Since 1935 Bulgaria had been controlled by King Boris III of the house of Saxe-Coburg. Extremely shrewd and cognizant of the games of power politics, the monarch governed his state through ministers selected from his coterie of advisors and chamberlains with a disregard for the constitutional limitations upon his rule. This sort of royal dictatorship was not unique to Bulgaria in the thirties. Boris's fellow Balkan monarchs Alexander of Yugoslavia and Carol of Rumania followed the same form, but the former was assassinated by Croatian and Macedonian terrorists and the latter fled his country, pursued by Rumanian fascists. Boris's version of the royal dictatorship was more successful.

It was not the king, however, who had dissolved constitutional government in Bulgaria but a clique of left-wing army colonels. In May 1934, when the ruling Democrat party was unable to deal successfully with the multiple problems of the kingdom, especially the perennial Macedonian question, a section of the powerful Military League, led by Cols. Damian Velchev and Kimon Georgiev, seized power in a *coup d'état*.

The colonels were connected to a small political group of intellectuals—the *Zveno* (Link).¹ Writing later at a time when Marxist terminology was becoming an unquestioned frame of reference for politics in his country, one of the *Zveno*'s prominent leaders called the group "left members of the right parties."² "Right" in this context meant *bourgeois*, not *fascist*, and the coup leaders were in many ways radical and progressive; some were even socialist. Some of them, including Velchev and Georgiev, appeared as ministers after the war in collaboration with the Bulgarian Communist party.

In their brief opportunity in government, the *Zveno* colonels attempted to solve the problems besetting the state. They halted the terrorism of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO), whose interparty shootings had disrupted life in the country and whose raids had caused Bulgaria international embarrassment, but with which no party had dealt in the past because of political entanglement. Reflecting the widespread hostility toward the rival groups of

1. For the history of Bulgaria in the middle and late thirties, see Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, *Istoriia na Bulgariia* [History of Bulgaria], ed. D. Kosev et al. (Sofia: "Nauka i izkustvo," 1962-64), III, 279-354 (hereafter cited as BAN, *Istoriia*). See also Dimo Kazasov, *Burnt godini 1918-1944* [Turbulent years 1918-1944] (Sofia: Knigaizdatelstvo "Naroden pečat," 1949), pp. 497-537, 552-649.

2. Kazasov, p. 435.

lawyers who had dominated Bulgarian political life for their own benefit since 1923, the colonels also outlawed all parties.

Georgiev's government lasted only eight months, but during that time the king feared for his throne. Boris had heard republican sentiments expressed in Bulgaria before, and now the Zveno group did not hesitate to speculate openly about the advantages of a republican government. However, the king was able to capitalize on divisions among the military clique, the confusion in the country, and the lack of mass support for the colonels to oust Georgiev in January 1935. After two short-lived governments and a series of back-room negotiations, Boris was able to install as his prime minister Georgi K'oseivanov, who had served the king as his personal court chancellor.

K'oseivanov remained as the prime minister for his monarch during the next five years through eight successive governments—the longest period for any Bulgarian prime minister in the twentieth century until the 1950s. Boris took the opportunity presented by the May 19 coup to continue the more effective measures of the colonels. Political parties remained illegal and the national parliament suspended by the colonels was not recalled until 1938. Furthermore the IMRO never regained the influence that it had had in the early thirties.

The king earned much popularity in Bulgaria. After the war disasters of 1913 and 1918 the prestige of the court had declined greatly; yet the country's sympathies were generally still monarchist rather than republican. Boris was able to endear himself to his subjects, for none of the responsibility for the tragic war years stigmatized him when he ascended the throne in 1918. He was a consummate politician with a charming personality. His marriage to the Italian princess Giovanna in 1930 increased his popularity in the country.

Bulgaria's constitution (written 1879) gave the king great potential for political action, but it also contained the possibility of restraint under a forceful and popular prime minister, which had been the experience of Boris's father, Ferdinand, with Stefan Stambulov in the nineteenth century, and of Boris himself with Aleksandur Stamboliiski in the 1920s. Boris felt threatened by political opposition, small as well as great. He could not work comfortably in conflict; and although indeed a skillful politician, he had a practice, whenever possible, of eliminating anyone who might be a source of conflict or potential competition. The king's main political goals were to preserve the royal line and follow the best possible policies for Bulgaria as he saw them.

Boris's apprehension of opposition and republicanism became ap-

parent in his anxious uneasiness over Velchev, the major author of the coup. He deemed it insufficient that he should be merely removed from power and certainly had a hand in the colonel's arrest and trial. At a secret court-martial in February 1936 a number of members of the Military League were tried for sedition. The league was dissolved and the court sentenced Velchev to death. Minister of War General Hristo Lukov, later a leader of the fascist Legionaires, hoped to carry out the sentence swiftly. However, public agitation at home and abroad, when the sentence was learned, called for leniency for Velchev. According to Bulgarian law the minister of justice had to approve the sentence before it was carried out. When the latter refused to do so, the king had no choice but to commute Velchev's sentence to life imprisonment. Boris's power was by no means absolute, and the most he could do to show his ire in this situation was to demand the dismissal of the errant minister of justice.

Opposition to the king and his government continued to exist in Bulgaria, although the means of expressing it constitutionally were for the time being prorogued. Even mayors and local officials were now appointed from Sofia. Nevertheless, the political parties, although in law disbanded, still remained a factor.

The most popular party in the country was the complex Bulgarian National Agrarian Union (BZNS), a coalition of various landed interests and poor peasants, which had crumbled under the weight of its irreconcilable factions and the blows of the court and bourgeoisie in the twenties. In the years of Boris's rule there were many parties calling themselves agrarian, but the organization's most radical leaders were forced to live abroad.

Furthermore, Bulgaria had a powerful Communist party (BKP), illegal since 1925. In fact, the country's most famous citizen may have been not its king, but the secretary-general of the Comintern, Georgi Dimitrov, the hero of the Reichstag fire trial in Leipzig in 1934. The BKP had demonstrated its popularity after World War I by gaining votes in the parliamentary elections second only to the BZNS. Even in 1932 under the name of Bulgarian Workers' party they were able to win municipal elections in Sofia. The Russian connection with bolshevism was an aid rather than a drawback to the party in Bulgaria, and, there being no really serious minority problem in the country, the party was distinguished in Eastern Europe because its membership included a high percentage of Bulgarian nationals rather than disgruntled members of minorities.

In general there were three major political groupings in the country during the royal dictatorship: a) the illegal opposition of Agrarian, Communist, and Zveno members in exile or under arrest; b) the court and its agents running the country but themselves divided into several quarreling factions; and c) the "legal" opposition of old bourgeois party men—distinguished lawyers, financiers, industrialists, merchants, and statesmen—whose political groups were outlawed, but who were still themselves in a position to influence affairs. Finally, in discussing the politics of any European country in the thirties, mention must be made of a fourth group—the fascists.

The extreme right wing of Bulgarian politics included for the most part a catchall of small fascist and Nazi-style parties and movements, but also several which attained a degree of prominence. There was never anything approaching a mass fascist movement in the kingdom, and these groups relied primarily upon their leaders' reputations, when this was possible, or on their connections with fascist movements abroad. The latter in the thirties were tenuous at best, and, with the exception of the Tsankovite movement, Bulgarian fascism before the last years of the decade was a collection of squabbling comic-opera groups led by would-be fiihrers.³

Even the Tsankovite movement, the most pretentious of the right-wing groups, gravely suffered from a lack of support. Aleksandur Tsankov, the eponymous leader of the movement, had been a professor of economics at the University of Sofia and became his country's prime minister after leading the coup which ousted Aleksandur Stamboliiski in 1923. That event earned him the everlasting mistrust of Bulgaria's peasantry and thus limited his political future.

In the thirties he formed the National Social Movement which became known by his name. It was characterized by nationalism and fascism, but was not quite the same as Hitler's nazism. The apogee of the Tsankovite movement occurred in 1935 when King Boris negotiated with his ex-premier to enter into a black-red government of sorts including both Tsankov's followers and members of one of the legal BZNS factions. Because the man associated with the death of Aleksandur Stamboliiski was so disliked by the peasantry, the Agrarians re-

3. There is no adequate study of Bulgarian fascism, but a good nonscholarly description can be found in Gospodin Gochev, *Biuro "D-r Delius"* [Bureau "Dr. Delius"], 2d ed. rev. (Sofia: Narodna kultura, 1969), pp. 161-70. See also Benjamin Arditi, *Yehudi Bulgariyah bishanah hamishpat hanatz: 1940-1944* [The Jews of Bulgaria during the years of Nazi occupation: 1940-1944] (Tel Aviv: Israel Press, 1962), pp. 24-35.

fused to agree and nothing came of it.⁴ Tsankov's fortunes declined after that, but he still remained a prominent personality on the Bulgarian political scene, especially as a member of the opposition in the wartime parliament, following his personal, indeed often erratic, ideological path.

In the late thirties and during the war years, two other important fascist organizations gained prominence in Bulgaria—*Suiuz na bulgarskite natsionalni legioni* (Union of Bulgarian National Legions), called simply Legionaires, and *Ratnitsi naprecluka na bulgarshinata* (Guardians of the Advancement of the Bulgarian National Spirit), called *Ratnitsi*. The Legionaires' importance, like that of the Tsankovite movement, came from the renown of their leaders, particularly the previously mentioned Hristo Lukov, minister of war from 1935 to 1938, and Nikola Zhekov, who had been commander in chief of Bulgarian forces in World War I. In this period, the leader of the *Ratnitsi* was the less illustrious Professor Asen Kantardzhiev, but Petur Gabrovski, one of the organization's founders, held cabinet posts from 1939 to 1943.

The *Ratnitsi* and the Legionaires like Tsankov maintained connections with various Germans and German organizations, including the SS (*Schutzstaffel*). Although the exact nature of these connections is obscure, there are sufficient allusions to them in captured German records to substantiate their existence.⁵ Thus what these fascist groups lacked in popular strength they managed to make up through the power of their German connections.

The inability of the Bulgarian right to create a genuine native fascist movement à la Italy or Germany gives some insight into the nature of Boris's rule in the late thirties. It was not a new government born of the twentieth century as much as another phase in the struggle between crown and Subranie that had marked Bulgaria's history since 1879. In fact the king did not align himself with either of the major members of the fascist group in Europe on coming to power, but decided on a foreign policy that kept the country close to the League of Nations.

4. For these political negotiations see Vladimir Mitev, "Utvurzhdavane na monarhofashiskata diktatura v Bulgariia prez 1935-1936 g i 'Tsankovoto dvizhenie' " [Confirmation of the monarcho-fascist dictatorship in Bulgaria during 1935-1936 and the "Tsankovite movement"], *Istorieski pregled* [Historical review], 23, no. 6 (1967), pp. 62-81.

5. Washington, D.C., The National Archives and Records Service, General Services Administration, German Records Microfilmed at Alexandria, Va., Microcopy no. T120 (hereafter cited as T120), serial 2320H (Foreign Office, Inland II geheim, packet 92, Counterespionage and Agents in Bulgaria, January 1941 to September 1943). Roll 1305 is particularly informative on this matter.

Although Bulgaria still maintained its revisionist intentions in the Balkans, Boris tried to attain these national aspirations through peaceful methods and *rapprochement*. He supported the League on Abyssinia and Spain and sought an alliance with Yugoslavia; nonetheless, he could not bring himself to join the Balkan Entente, a mutual defense pact among Rumania, Greece, Yugoslavia, and Turkey, designed to uphold the status quo, that is, the Treaty of Neuilly, and hence directed against Bulgaria. If Bulgaria had joined, it would have been tantamount to renouncing even by peaceful means a revision of the treaty.

In 1938 Boris and K'oseivanov felt satisfied enough with the progress of their regime to restore the Subranie. The new electoral law forbade candidates to run as members of a party slate. This had been tried with success for the government in 1937 in the first local elections since the coup, but it was somewhat unrealistic to believe that the measures would prevent the parties from exhibiting some of the influence they had had in the past.

At the polls the government employed tactics associated with previous Bulgarian elections—control of ballots, blocking known opponents from voting, use of police guards, etc. Government supporters could electioneer, but opponents were frequently enjoined from doing so because of the rules against political parties. Boris and K'oseivanov hoped that these measures and restrictive qualifications on candidates would insure them a substantial majority.

Considering these harsh measures, the results were a setback. It is true that about 100 of the 160 representatives supported the government.⁸ In an open election this would be a landslide, but in view of stringent control of the elections, the sizable opposition demonstrated widespread dissatisfaction with the regime. Furthermore, many of the government supporters were only mildly committed, and during the course of the Subranie meetings K'oseivanov was embarrassed several times.

The opposition in the Subranie, although it was unable to carry through many bills or stop many governmental proposals, was able to make its opinions felt. On one occasion it brought down the government. Boris was not happy with this unexpectedly vocal parliament, and in 1940 when K'oseivanov's cabinet went through a crisis, the king prorogued the body.

G. *La Parole Bulgare* (Sofia), March 13, 1938, p. 1; March 20, 1938, p. 1; und April 3, 1938, p. 1; Marin V. Pundeff, "Bulgaria's Place in Axis Policy" (Ph.D. diss., University of Southern California, 1958), pp. 79-81; BAN, *Istoriia*, III, 337.