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THE BALKAN WARS AS A REASON FOR MIGRATION OF JEWS FROM MACEDONIA¹

Alliances and agreements between the Balkan countries to resolve the political, military, economic and other issues began in the second half of XIX century. The purpose and meaning of their formation were diverse and varying, the parties involved were different and depended primarily on the interest of the parties who participated in the signing of such agreements. In the period from 1866 to 1868 the first alliance was concluded between Serbia, Greece and Montenegro. The initiator of the idea was the Kingdom of Serbia with the pretext to release Balkan peoples from the Ottoman authorities. The Balkan Alliance of 1912 was formed as a result of bilateral agreements between Bulgaria, Greece, Serbia and Montenegro.² Subsequently, the founding members of the Association started to get ready for war against the Ottoman Empire. They initiated pressure on the Ottoman government for reforms and autonomy for Albania and Macedonia. The Albanian uprising, a rebellion of the garrison in Edirne and Bitola/Monastir, and the fall of the Young Turk government enhanced the anarchy in Turkey. For its part, the Great Powers sought to maintain the existing situation, but with the introduction of some limited reforms which had no greater meaning. In such situation, the Balkan allies had decided to settle the issue with weapons. An ultimatum was sent to the Ottoman Empire by the Allies in relation to the introduction of the reforms: to carry out administrative autonomy, to introduce local assemblies, to allow free classes, to establish a local militia etc. The ultimatum was dropped and the Ottoman Empire ordered a partial mobilization in the European

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¹ The authors in the article refer to the part of Macedonia which became part of the Kingdom of Serbia after the Treaty of Bucharest in 1913.

² Ванче Стојчев, *Воена историја на Македонија*, (Скопје: Сојуз на друштвата на историчарите на Република Македонија, Воена академија „Генерал Михаило Апостолски, 2000“, 515. (Vance, Stojchev, *Military History of Macedonia*, Union of the Historians of the Republic of Macedonia, Military Academy „General Mihailo Apostolski“, 2000, p. 515.

territories on September 23rd. In meantime the Allies responded with a general mobilization on September 30th, 1912, and the next day the same was made by the Ottoman Empire. On October 8th, 1912 Montenegro proclaimed war on the Ottoman Empire, until October 19th, 1912 and the other members of the Allies declared war to the Ottoman Empire as well. Thus, the First Balkan War starts.³

In the first phase of the war the Allies managed to defeat the Ottoman army. The Bulgarian army was close to Istanbul/Constantinople and Salonika, the Greek army entered Thessaloniki and established control over Epirus and part of Macedonia. Serbian and Montenegrin army occupied Kosovo, Novi Pazar, Northern Albania and part of Macedonia. The Greek navy paralyzed the Ottoman communications in the Aegean Sea, and the Bulgarian navy did the same in the Black Sea. In late November the truce was signed. Greece did not sign it and continued the war until it took over the east Aegean islands of Lemnos, Lesbos, Chios and Samos, and advanced in South Albania. The armistice between the Allies and the Ottoman Empire was signed on December 4th, 1912, under the pressure of the Great Powers. Peace talks began in early December 1912 in London, where the ambassadors of the Great Powers, working out the conditions for peace. The Balkan allies were trying to get all European Ottoman territories west of the Midia-Rodost line and the Aegean islands, including Crete. In such situation, the Ottoman Port offered to give autonomy to Macedonia and Albania, without losing those territories. The agreement, proposed by the Great Powers, was similar to the proposal of the Allies. It generated a coup d'état in Istanbul and the new government has terminated negotiations, renewed hostilities in mid-January 1913. The second phase of the war lasted almost three months.

The Ottoman counterattacks in Eastern Thrace were rejected by the Bulgarian army, Montenegrin army took the fortress of Shkodra/Skadar, the Greeks occupied the fortress of Ioannina and the Bulgarian army took Adrianople/Edirne. Peace talks continued in London and on May 17th, 1913 the peace was signed. The Allies took over all Ottoman territories in Europe, west of the Midia-Enos line and also Crete. The moment had come to divide the "prey". That would lead to friction among allies and the end of the Balkan Allies. All the Balkan statesmen, armed with all possible kinds of arguments, sought more territories. The "apple of discord" was Macedonia where the drawing of the borders was shown to be almost an insoluble problem.

³ Стојчев, *Воена историја на Македонија*, 518.

While the split between Serbia and Greece passed at ease, Bulgaria's aspirations could not be met. In order to meet their aspirations on June 16th, 1913, King Ferdinand ordered General Savov to attack the Serbian and Greek lines in Macedonia. Greece, Serbia and Montenegro, supported by Romania, declared war on Bulgaria. The Second Balkan War started. The Ottoman Empire also sends his armies against Bulgaria. After more than a month of cruel war, the Great Powers intervened again and stopped the military actions. The Treaties of Bucharest and Istanbul set the new territorial order in South-Eastern Europe. Romania took South Dobrudza, Serbia got Kosovo, Novi Pazar and Vardar Macedonia. Greece received Epirus and Aegean Macedonia. Montenegro annexed a number of neighbouring territories. Bulgaria took Pirin Macedonia and Western Thrace. The Ottoman Empire returned Eastern Thrace. Albania was proclaimed an independent state.

The result of the Balkan wars was terrible: a large number of victims among all participants in the war, burned villages, economic destructions, and a wave of large migrations and suffering of the civilian population. Moreover, the Balkan wars created hatred, suspicion and fear among the Balkan nations.

Undoubtedly, the ethnic cleansing of the territories which were taken by the Ottoman state were the largest and continued after the war as well. According to Turkish historiography, 200,000 Turkish refugees came to the Ottoman state from Thrace, Macedonia and Epirus, territories within Greece after the war, was to come. 240,000 Turks were expelled from Macedonia alone.⁴

Our article focuses on the situation of the Jews from the part of Macedonia which became part of the Kingdom of Serbia after the Bucharest peace agreement.

In the territories which became parts of the Kingdom of Bulgaria, the Kingdom of Greece and the Kingdom of Serbia began immediately a process of introduction of special regulations and a harsh regime against the local population. Much of the companies become bankrupt, trades failed, many workers lost their jobs, employment became very uncertain and the wages were very small. The Serbian government introduces their own teachers, police, clergy, etc. This situation resulted in the eviction of Turkish, Macedonian and especially the Jewish community because of changed economic opportunities. According to a census in 1912, in Bitola lived

⁴ Исмет Кочан, *Битка за Македонија (Турската историографија за Балканските војни 1912-1913, со посебен осврт за Македонија)*, (Скопје: Бата прес 2010), 176-177.

48,000 inhabitants out of which approximately 10 to 15,000 people were Jews. As a result of the war many Jews, because of the decline of the economy, were forced to migrate. As a result of the migration of the Turkish and Jewish families the population in Bitola declined notably.⁵

Undoubtedly, the Jews as well as the other citizens who lived in Macedonia within the Ottoman Empire could move freely and conduct trade. They were aware that in a divided Macedonia, trade would become very difficult. However, it should be borne in mind that despite their notion for Macedonia to be in the frame of the Ottoman Empire, the Jewish community in the Balkans had no political influence and hardly was possible to change something for them. Therefore, the Balkan wars and the First World War had a major impact on the migration of the Jewish community from the Balkans.

While the London conference (December 17th, 1912 - May 30th, 1913) was in process, in January 1913, the Union of Israelite companies based in Berlin send a delegation on the spot with the aim to introduce the state of Jews and Jewish communities in the Balkans after the First Balkan war. The delegation was made up of well-known Jewish leaders of the time, Elkann Adler from London and Dr. Paul Nathan and Dr. Bernhard Kahn from Berlin. After the visit they submitted a detailed report on the situation of the Jews. According to what they saw in Macedonia, which was exposed in the report, they could conclude that in January 1913 the situation of the population in certain cities in Macedonia was the following:

TOWN	Total population	Jewish population
Bitola / Monastir	60 000	6000
Skopje	60 000	2000
Stip	25,000	750
Strumica	15,000	650
Kumanovo	10 000	50
Dojran	3000	100
	173,000	9,550 ⁶

⁵ Ѓорѓи Димовски-Цолев, *Битолските Евреи*, (Битола: Друштво за наука и уметност, 1993, p. 107-108. (Gorgi, Dimovski-Colev, **Bitola Jews**, Society for Science and Art, Bitola, 1993), 107-108.

⁶ Жени Лебл, *Плима и слом, од историјата на Евреите во Вардарска Македонија*, (Скопје: Фонд на холокаустот на Евреите од Македонија, 2013, 200).

Representatives of the Union of Israelite Associations on January 21st, 1913 visited Skopje. In the report they emphasized that even in Kumanovo they saw terrible scenes as a result of the fighting. On the road they could only see ruined villages without residents. When they came to Skopje they saw that the city was already reeling from the aftermath of the war as they named them "the atrocities of war." They concluded that the city had approximately 60,000 inhabitants from which 2,000 were Jews. According to information received prior the First World War they noted that Jews suffered severe damage from what they named "The Albanian revolution"⁷ when almost 50 Jews from Kosovo, were in the middle of the battles between Turks and Albanians, in search for shelter in Skopje. They were without any means of livelihood, so they became a burden to the Jewish community.⁸

Subsequently a Skopje delegation went to Bitola. The number of residents of Bitola was the same as in Skopje approximately 60 000 inhabitants of which the number of Jews was through 6.000, so the Jewish population was the fourth largest in the area of military operations (in Thessaloniki, Istanbul and Edirne). They concluded that Bitola was one of the hardest hit cities in the First Balkan War. Bitola and its surroundings suffered from the heavy battles that have been directed towards Lerin (Florina) against the Greeks, and towards Prilep against Serbs. On the way to the road to Bitola the delegates went through the destroyed and devastated villages and towns that once were Jewish homes and shops.⁹

⁷ The activities of the Albanians in the period after the proclamation of Hurriyet in 1908 were aimed at getting the promises given by the Young Turks: declaring Albanian as the official language in schools, children to learn Albanian, hiring Albanian teachers, military service in vilayets inhabited by Albanians etc. However, in the following years none of the promises were fully met. As a result of this on May 20th, 1912, a meeting was held in the village of Junik. The meeting was attended by Hasan Prishtina and Nexhipi Draga. Here they gave oath (besa) that the Young Turk government had to be crashed. Immediately afterwards they gathered a group of about 3,000 armed men which were divided into two parts: one group went to Pech and the other to Gjakova. In such a situation began talks between the Turkish officers and Albanian rebels whose officers crystallized concessions to the rebels. The only unacceptable request to the Ottoman officers was the request for autonomy of Albania. Recognizing the complexity of the situation in the Balkan domains, the current government of Ghazi Muhtar Pasha established contact with the rebels immediately after taking office. A delegation was formed at the end of July 1912, and arrived in Pristina in order to negotiate with the rebels. Among the insurgents occurred a dispute. One group advocated for full autonomy of Albania and the other was only interested in improving the situation and giving greater rights to the Albanian in the vilayets. Such an act of leniency was an incentive for the rebels gathered in Pristina to highlight their demands still known as "14 points of Hasan Prishtina". The government was given 48 hours to respond. Otherwise, they threatened to occupy the center of the Kosovo Vilayet, Skopje. Because there was no response, the rebels rushed to Skopje. The very act of coming to Skopje was taken in order to push the Ottoman authorities to accept Albanian demands, but not as a "liberating action" of Skopje from the Ottomans. Peter Bart, *Albanians from Middle ages until today*, (Belgrade: Danas, Trans. By Ljubinka Milenković, 2001), p. 136.

⁸ Лебл, *Плима и слом, од историјата на Евреите во Вардарска Македонија*, 201.

⁹ Лебл, *Плима и слом, од историјата на Евреите во Вардарска Македонија*, 201.

They could conclude that in Bitola was formed a Committee in which leadership entered a Jew who was governor of the schools of the Alliance. The Committee, during the First Balkan War, distinguished itself by its sacrificial work for the common good of the community. They concluded that the school was damaged "by the former, and the new masters." Also they noted that the "Turks committed, prior to withdrawal, requisition of many goods from Jewish shops without any compensation". They emphasized that after Serbs entered Bitola they also committed robbery. They highlighted that many Jews who had their commercial activities in the surrounding villages during the war remained unable to sell their goods on the market, much longer failed to settle their debts "of its major customers, villagers - Turks who usually used 'credit' and in the war they disappeared, killed or expelled."¹⁰

The next city the delegation visited was Stip. Before the Balkan wars nearly 160 Jewish families with 560 inhabitants lived in Stip. Their main occupation was trade and crafts. Some have dealt with petty services.¹¹ During the Balkan wars the old synagogue was alight and burnt to ashes with most Jewish houses around it. Because of the war many Jews fled to Thessaloniki. After the Balkan wars most of them were back in town.¹² Most of the propertied families were leaving Macedonia for France, Greece and Italy, the poorer migrated to the United States of America.¹³

Leon Trotsky, as a war correspondent for the "Kyiv thought" wrote about the Bulgarian entry in Stip. Among other things, he pointed out in his article that Bulgarian troops did not do mischief only on Muslim population but also on Jews, as he highlighted, they were tortured by hunger. He quoted a statement by a Bulgarian clerk who was sent to Stip to set up a branch of the National Bank of the newly conquered territories. Among other things, the clerk said that "half of the kasaba constituting Turkish and Jewish houses was completely empty. Up to 25 chetnik-komitadzi attacked in broad daylight a Jew and beat his head with a stone. Because I intervened they attacked me. A terrible condition: Turkish civilian villagers were killed for no reason and

¹⁰ Лебл, *Плима и слом, од историјата на Евреите во Вардарска Македонија*, 201.

¹¹ Исак Сион, „Евреите во Штип во војна и мир“, во: *Штипските Евреи, Зборник на трудови и сеќавања, ученички творби од фондацијата „11 март 1943“ – Штип*, (Скопје: Еврејска заедница на Македонија, 1999), 171.

¹² Сион, „Евреите во Штип во војна и мир“, “104.

¹³ Благоја Цветковски, „Составот и структурата на Штипските Евреи“ во: *Штипските Евреи, Зборник на трудови и сеќавања, ученички творби од фондацијата 11 март 1943 – Штип*, (Еврејска заедница на Македонија, Скопје, 1999, 82.

they looted their property ... Between Radovishte (Radovis) and Stip 2,000 Turkish refugees, most of whom were women and children, died of hunger. Indeed only hunger".¹⁴

According to the statistics the delegates of the Union of Israelite companies held in 1913 in Stip lived around 25 000 inhabitants, of which approximately 750 Jews. The city was in Serbian hands, but the Serbian troops were stationed in the barracks outside the city, while Bulgarians were in the city. According to information they received in Stip there were "Bulgarian gangs" from which the Jews suffered a lot. Bulgarians in the city were from October 11th, 1912 and during their administration they forced the Jews to leave the town.¹⁵

In the city remained only six old men, among them a sick rabbi who died two days after the entry of Bulgaria, and two boys. Indeed, as the delegates cited in the report, the expulsion of the Jews preserved their lives because Bulgarians rage slaughtered and killed about 750 Muslims from the town and the surrounding area. Of the remaining seven Jews, two were killed. All Jewish homes and stores were looted and demolished.¹⁶

During the Bulgarian administration, Bulgarians set two fires up, which completely burned the synagogue, 24 Jewish houses and six of their stores. From the synagogue were looted all valuables and the Torah scrolls and prayer books were torn and destroyed. Many escaped Jews fled to Thessalonica, where beds were made in the building of the Talmud Torah School in the "Baron Hirsch" in the city.¹⁷

Jews were in a very poor condition. A German Jewish organization for assistance granted 20,000 francs to the refugees from Stip and promised further support to enable a return to their hometown. The work was very urgent because most of those people in Stip were engaged in opium production obtained by drying the liquid milk from poppies. The work was seasonal and had to be done a month after the visit of the delegates, because they would become penniless if they arrived after the season. Meanwhile, 15 Stip Jews decided to settle in Thessaloniki.¹⁸

During a visit to Strumica, delegates of the Union of Israelite companies concluded that in Strumica in 1913 lived approximately 15 000 inhabitants, from which 115 Jewish families with around 650 people. Most of them were engaged in petty trade: thirty were greengrocers, seven had manufacture workshops, six were selling dried fruit, and six had wine workshops. A

¹⁴ Кочан, *Битка за Македонија*, 170-171.

¹⁵ Лебл, *Плима и слом, од историјата на Евреите во Вардарска Македонија*, 202.

¹⁶ Лебл, *Плима и слом, од историјата на Евреите во Вардарска Македонија*, 202.

¹⁷ Лебл, *Плима и слом, од историјата на Евреите во Вардарска Македонија*, 202.

¹⁸ Лебл, *Плима и слом, од историјата на Евреите во Вардарска Македонија*, 202.

Jew was a banker and had three money changers, two clerks of the insurance companies, two were tinsmiths and all other were unskilled workers. Josef Chaim (born in 1880) was rabbi in Strumica over 35 years, later he moved to Skopje.¹⁹

When in 1913 Strumica was won by Bulgarians they started to demolish houses to rob and kill. They killed two Jews. Pillaged goods from Jewish shops were estimated at 50,000 francs. A Jew, Baruch A. Shaltiel had to collect the sum of 5000 francs and handed over to the Bulgarians not to be killed. All property people were ruined. Market day, which during the Turks for centuries was Monday, was moved to Saturday. That fact hit badly the Jews, whose faith and tradition forbade to work on Saturdays and Sundays, so they had to keep their shops closed.²⁰

With the arrival of refugees from Dojran, a destroyed town in the war, the Jewish in Strumica population grew in 1916, but shortly afterwards the natives had to leave Strumica as well. Twenty-five families moved to Skopje.

Interestingly, of the 15,000 residents, as counted Strumica in January 1913, 650 were Jews” the people of this city in 1921 counted altogether about 45% of the pre-war number, or 6733 people, and only one Jew!²¹

In the census of 1931, the number of Jews increased to five. In 1932, when Skopje felt the consequences of the global crisis, the Jewish-comer from Strumica wanted to help the community which accepted them. They turned to their Strumica municipality and asked to pay the Skopje Family Jewish community - if they could no longer value their personal possessions that were left in the city - at least by the property that belonged to the Jewish community ("Jewish Harvey") and as such had been registered in the municipal books. In this sense it was sent a letter from Skopje to the Federation of Jewish Confessional municipalities in Belgrade, II in 1932. The letter reads:

"In Strumica, in the regional unit, until the wars of the 1912-1918 there was a strong and rich Jewish community. During the war, the enemies of Yugoslavia caused many crimes and expelled the Jews from Strumica, so they had to displace and most of them arrived in Skopje and became members of our community. Now in Strumica there were altogether two Jewish houses and the real estate remained:

1. Synagogue burned; There is a ground 16X16 m²;

¹⁹ Лебл, *Плима и слом, од историјата на Евреите во Вардарска Македонија*, 202.

²⁰ Лебл, *Плима и слом, од историјата на Евреите во Вардарска Македонија*, 202.

²¹ Лебл, *Плима и слом, од историјата на Евреите во Вардарска Македонија*, 203.

2. Old school burned; There is a ground 12X12 m²;
3. The new school, damaged building with ground 15X290 m²;
4. Jewish cemeteries, now level with a size of 5500 m².

"This Jewish property today is enrolled in the local municipal books as 'Jewish Harvey', which in November last year convinced our MPs (that went) to review this property. Now in Skopje live 25 Jewish families who moved from Strumica and they want to turn this property into money and transfer the value in favour of this community. So we ask the Association for report and for guidance: what to do to keep the property and continue as a Jewish property and whether our community can take possession because after the wars that property no one exploits ..."²² It is known that the equivalent of such property was never paid.

The delegation of the Union of Israelite companies visited Negotino as well. In 1913 8000 people lived there nearly from which five Jewish families, mostly traders. With the arrival of the Bulgarians, Jews were completely looted and forced to leave Negotino. And in neighbouring Udovo, the only two Jewish families had to leave because they had been previously robbed.

In Dojran in 1890 lived 5900 people from which 225 Jews. But just before the Balkan wars their number decreased to about 5,000, and the number of Jews dropped to 20. Before the First World War in Dojran there were only roughly 100 Jews. During the First World War, Dojran was evacuated. Dojran Jews found refuge first in Strumica, then in Skopje. The Jewish community in Dojran is no longer updated.²³

In Gevgelija in 1913 there were about 15 Jewish families. Among them were tinsmiths and glaziers, tanners and traders. They had a place for praying on the floor of the building, as in the same time served as an office of the small community. The community was headed by the merchant Avraham Buton. When in World War I began the breakthrough of the Thessaloniki Front, Bulgarians depopulated Gevgelija. The Jewish community is not renewed.²⁴

From Kumanovo, around whom fought fierce battles, in Skopje rumbled 15 Jewish refugee families. In Skopje found refuge 20 Jewish families from Bujanovec as well, and many came from Kosovska Mitrovica, Pristina and Novi Pazar. In Skopje itself the situation was very difficult. Around 50 families of Skopje Jewish merchants who traded in Turkish villages were on

²² Лебл, *Плима и слом, од историјата на Евреите во Вардарска Македонија*, 203.

²³ Лебл, *Плима и слом, од историјата на Евреите во Вардарска Македонија*, 204.

²⁴ Лебл, *Плима и слом, од историјата на Евреите во Вардарска Македонија*, 204.

the brink of collapse because there was no one to pay the goods they gave "the veresija." Fortunately, not all settlers were poor, though most came with nothing.²⁵

On the twenty-sixth of October 1912, after centuries of slavery to the Turks, the Greek army liberated Thessaloniki. Intoxicated with victory, the Greeks began revenge not only to the Turks but also to the Jews, to which they had special "accounts", not only as to the "friends of the Turks", but also as against competitors in crafts and trade. The Jewish population was threatened, insecure, without hope for a better future, so individuals decided to leave. Some of them had relatives in Skopje and Bitola, so they decided to join them.²⁶

At the end of the Balkan Wars and the First World War the Jewish population in Macedonia was reduced. Some of them returned, but most left Macedonia permanently. Jews continued to exist only in three towns in Macedonia: Bitola, Skopje and Stip until March 11th, 1943 when Bulgarian occupation forces sent them to the German concentration camp Treblinka where in one day 98% of the Macedonian Jews were exterminated.

²⁵ Лебл, *Плима и слом, од историјата на Евреите во Вардарска Македонија*, 204.

²⁶ Лебл, *Плима и слом, од историјата на Евреите во Вардарска Македонија*, 205.