

OPINION

From: Prof. DSc. Pavel Pavlovich, Department of Arabic and Semitic Studies, Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology, Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski

For: Dissertation for obtaining the educational and scientific degree “Doctor” in the professional field 2.2. History and Archaeology, doctoral program “History of Bulgaria” – Contemporary Bulgarian History.

Dissertation Title: Relations between Bulgaria and Israel 1948–1990

Author: Petar Georgiev Stoilov, Department of History of Bulgaria, Faculty of History, Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski.

Procedure Details

By Order No. RD-38-44/24.01.2025 of the Rector of Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski, I have been appointed as a member of the academic jury for the defense of the above-mentioned dissertation. Additionally, by Protocol No. 1/20.01.2025 from the meeting of the academic jury, I have been assigned to present an opinion.

The materials submitted by the candidate comply with the regulatory requirements of the **Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (ZRASRB)**, its implementing regulations (PPZRASRB), and the internal rules of Sofia University for acquiring the educational and scientific degree “Doctor.” The abstract accurately and comprehensively reflects the content of the dissertation.

The presented publications in English, Bulgarian, Hebrew, and German meet the minimum national requirements for scientific activity: two have been published in scientific journals, while the remaining six are included in edited volumes. Three of the publications are co-authored with other scholars: two with Efrat Aviv and one with Rumyana Marinova-Hristidi, who is also the Mr. Stoilov’s doctoral supervisor.

The dissertation text is an original work by Mr. Stoilov and does not contain elements of plagiarism.

Assessment of the Dissertation

The dissertation focuses on the relations between the People's Republic of Bulgaria and the State of Israel from the establishment of Israel in 1948 to the dissolution of the communist bloc in 1990. Within the selected period, the author examines the relations between Bulgaria and Israel in the fields of diplomacy, culture, economy, science, trade, and tourism, as well as the activities of the respective intelligence services, placing them in the context of the bloc confrontation during the Cold War era and the intertwining of often contradictory interests of international actors influencing the policies of both states.

The main objective of the dissertation is to fill the gap in the academic study of Bulgarian-Israeli relations during this period, which have been the subject of only a limited number of studies, among which comprehensive monographic works are lacking. The author's central thesis is that Bulgaria's bloc alignment left the potential of its relations with Israel largely unutilized.

The exposition follows a well-structured format and is divided into an introduction, two chapters, a conclusion, eight appendices, and a bibliography, with a total length of 193 standard pages.

The **Introduction** clearly outlines the objectives of the research, reviews the literature on the dissertation's topic, and outlines its structure. While Mr. Stoilov does not explicitly define his research methodology, a reading of the work reveals that he combines a thematic-chronological presentation of historical events with elements of political and sociological analysis.

In **Chapter One**, the author focuses on Bulgarian-Israeli relations during the period 1948–1967. He examines the processes that determined Israel's alignment within the Western bloc—following its establishment in 1948 and its subsequent association with Western policies—as well as Bulgaria's integration into the Soviet sphere of influence after World War II. The chapter begins with an analysis of the causes and course of Jewish migration (*Aliyah*) from Bulgaria to Israel and traces the complex and often problematic relations between the two states in politics, economy, culture, sports, and tourism.

Considerable attention is given to the activities of Bulgarian and Israeli intelligence and counterintelligence services in each country, detailing the motives that shaped the goals and methods of their respective agencies.

Chapter Two follows the logic of Chapter One, placing it within a new chronological and historical context. The author outlines the causes and consequences of the diplomatic rift between the People's Republic of Bulgaria and Israel in June 1967. On a broader level, Bulgaria's growing alignment with Arab countries sympathetic to the Eastern Bloc contributed to the break in diplomatic relations, while the immediate catalyst was the Six-Day War in June 1967 and its impact on Soviet policy toward Israel.

The rupture led to indirect diplomatic representation of Bulgaria in Israel through the Austrian embassy and had repercussions on trade, economic relations, culture, science, sports, and tourism between the two countries.

A particularly interesting aspect of **Chapter Two** is the examination of the activities of various "anti-Zionist" organizations and forums. As Mr. Stoilov notes, Bulgaria did not follow the "Soviet line of sharp anti-Semitism" (p. 86). However, by joining the Soviet "anti-Zionist campaign," the propaganda apparatus in communist Bulgaria effectively echoed its slogans and reinforced the narratives of institutionalized anti-Semitism in the USSR.

Mr. Stoilov's work leaves the impression of a carefully conducted study on Bulgarian-Israeli relations during the Cold War. The author has utilized an impressive amount of literature and worked with archival materials in both Bulgaria and Israel. This approach has allowed him to shed light on the topic with the factual depth necessary for a dissertation-level study. Mr. Stoilov's presentation of facts is clear, and their organization into main chapters and sub-sections is well-structured according to their significance within the overall argument.

In his work, Mr. Stoilov prioritizes description over analysis, likely due to the lack of a clearly defined research methodology. He meticulously presents the facts he has gathered, leaving it to the reader to draw conclusions. While this approach allows for interpretative freedom, it also leaves the reader uncertain about the author's own

assessment of the examined evidence. Although some analytical perspective emerges from the structure and progression of the narrative, it remains absent in the form of explicitly articulated conclusions at the end of each chapter and subsection.

One example of this analytical deficiency is the case of a documentary film about the fate of Bulgarian Jews, discussed on p. 134. The author notes that “the Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not approve the film production,” yet he does not address the obvious question: why was it rejected, given that members of the Bulgarian Communist Party’s Central Committee had expressed a positive opinion about it? Could such a decision have been made solely by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs? Does it bear on the party line, which asserted that Bulgarian Jews were saved thanks to the intervention of Bulgarian communists—a fictitious narrative that contradicts historical facts?

The author provides factually comprehensive and scientifically convincing descriptions of the role of both individual contributions and institutional factors in Bulgarian-Israeli relations. However, at times, he neglects the broader historical context of the events. For instance, on p. 102, he discusses the warming of relations between Bulgaria and Israel as a result of personal contacts between Petar Mladenov, Yitzhak Shamir, Shulamit Shamir, Nikolay Haytov, and other figures from the communist intellectual elite. However, he does not acknowledge that these interactions took place within the broader context of Mikhail Gorbachev’s reforms, which, as early as 1985–86, led to the liberalization of communist regimes. This liberalization is likely reflected in Shulamit Shamir’s statement that, “it felt as if she was not speaking with people from a communist regime.”

Mr. Stoilov’s work is generally well-structured, with each chapter covering a specific period in the history of Bulgarian-Israeli relations and subdivided into thematic sections. However, there are occasional structural ambiguities. For example, in Chapter I.2, “Official Contacts Between Bulgaria and Israel and Political Issues,” the only sub-section is dedicated to the shooting down of an Israeli passenger plane on July 27, 1955. While this is a key topic, the author could have included additional sub-sections addressing issues such as Bulgarian Jews’ emigration to Israel, property rights of citizens in both countries, Bulgaria’s relations with Arab states and their impact on ties with Israel, etc. Additionally,

marking transitions between thematic sub-sections with “****” is inappropriate for an academic work, which requires conceptual and structural clarity.

The dissertation is characterized by clear expression and a convincing academic style. However, in some cases, there is a lack of clarification regarding the political roles of key participants in bilateral relations. For example, on p. 104, the author refers to negotiations held in 1988 between “the Israeli citizen Joseph Assa” and Andrey Lukanov, but he does not specify whether Lukanov was negotiating in a private capacity, as Minister of Foreign Economic Relations, or as a member of the Politburo of the Bulgarian Communist Party. Similarly, on p. 110, the text mentions “the American advisor Thomas Kahn,” but the reader is left to guess the significance of the vague title “advisor.”

On p. 141, the author lists several “Israeli citizens” admitted to Bulgarian universities between 1973 and 1975. Based on their names, it is evident that they were Arabs. The author should have explicitly noted this fact and explained their admission in the context of Bulgaria’s political alignment with Arab countries. Additionally, it would be worth exploring whether these students were members of the Israeli Communist Party or were sent to Bulgaria on its recommendation.

The author demonstrates a strong familiarity with the scholarly literature on the topic and skillfully integrates insights from these sources into the dissertation.

The summary of contributions accurately reflects Mr. Stoilov’s achievements in this work.

Conclusion

The dissertation presented by Mr. Petar Stoilov provides a comprehensive review of the development of Bulgarian-Israeli relations during the period 1948–1990. The author examines various aspects of bilateral relations—including political, diplomatic, economic, cultural, and tourism-related ties—in a chronological sequence, placing them within the broader context of global politics and the East-West confrontation during the Cold War.

Drawing on a rich array of sources, the author successfully achieves the research objectives, offering a thorough investigation of the emergence and evolution of relations between the two countries during this period.

Considering the high quality of the dissertation, I give it a positive evaluation and recommend that the academic committee award Mr. Petar Stoilov the educational and scientific degree of “Doctor” in Professional Field 2.2. History and Archaeology, Doctoral Program “History of Bulgaria” – Contemporary Bulgarian History.

Sofia

13.03.2025

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