



**SOFIA UNIVERSITY “ST. KLIMENT OHRIDSKI”**

**FACULTY OF HISTORY**

**DEPARTMENT OF “HISTORY OF BULGARIA”**

**AUTHOR’S ABSTRACT**

of a dissertation for the award of the educational and scientific degree “Doctor”  
in professional field 2.2 History and Archaeology, doctoral program “History  
of Bulgaria” – Contemporary Bulgarian History

**“Relations between Bulgaria and Israel 1948 – 1990”**

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Sofia

2025

The dissertation was discussed and proposed for defense at a meeting of the Department of “History of Bulgaria” at the Faculty of History of Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, held on January 21, 2025, at 13:00.

The text consists of an introduction, exposition in two chapters, conclusion, bibliography, and appendices, with a total volume of 193 pages.

# **I. General Characteristics of the Dissertation**

## **1. Significance of the Topic**

The relations between Bulgaria and Israel have a special character. There is a friendship between the Bulgarian and Jewish peoples, based on deep historical and cultural ties and strengthened by the unprecedented act of rescuing the Bulgarian Jews from the old borders of the Kingdom of Bulgaria during World War II. Brave Bulgarians from all walks of life opposed the deportation of their fellow Jewish citizens to concentration camps, making Bulgaria the only country in Europe to successfully save its entire Jewish community, numbering nearly 50,000 people.

The majority of Bulgarian Jews chose to make aliyah after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, becoming a living bridge of friendship between the two countries. Contemporary Bulgarian-Israeli relations are excellent and have developed based on a well-established legal framework from the 1990s, which has been continuously expanded with new agreements and memoranda. The two countries cooperate in key areas such as politics, economy, and security, as well as in investments, high technology, healthcare, science, energy, water resource management, environmental protection, culture, and tourism. Bulgaria is a preferred destination for Israeli tourists due to its natural diversity, rich cultural and historical heritage, and the traditionally low levels of antisemitism in the country.

The active exchange of high-level visits between the two countries is crucial for expanding Bulgarian-Israeli cooperation, and the prospects for further development are very positive. Israel's expertise in various sectors makes it an important strategic partner for Bulgaria, while Bulgaria is a valuable ally in the Balkans. The complex political relations between Israel and the European Union, as well as the problematic Israel-Turkey dialogue, have directed Israeli diplomacy toward the Balkan region as a sphere of influence. In recent decades, Israel has increased its presence in the politics, economy, and culture of the Balkan states, and its special historical ties with Bulgaria give the country an exceptional position in Israel's foreign policy, making it one of the Jewish state's most loyal allies in Europe and beyond. All these factors make the study of the history of Bulgarian-Israeli relations valuable not only for scholars, researchers, and specialists but also for those involved in formulating Bulgaria's contemporary foreign policy.

## **2. Objectives and Tasks**

This dissertation aims to build a comprehensive and detailed picture of Bulgarian-Israeli relations from 1948 to 1990. It traces the development of bilateral relations from their inception in 1948 (coinciding with the establishment of the modern State of Israel) to 1990, a period that largely overlaps with the chronological boundaries of the Cold War. As part of the Eastern Bloc, Bulgaria did not conduct an independent foreign policy, and Bulgarian-Israeli relations are examined within the context of the geopolitical confrontation between East and West while highlighting their unique aspects. By 1990, the Soviet Union was undergoing disintegration, and the Cold War was nearing its end, marking the conclusion of a decades-long era in global politics and the beginning of a new one. This point serves as the upper chronological limit of the study, after which Bulgarian-Israeli diplomatic relations were restored and began to develop within a new paradigm.

The dissertation examines the genesis of relations between the People's Republic of Bulgaria and the State of Israel. It analyzes how official and unofficial contacts developed within the broader East-West bloc confrontation and identifies the motivations behind the policies of both countries toward each other. It highlights key areas of cooperation and pivotal moments in their history while investigating the unique and unprecedented nature of Bulgarian-Israeli relations. A key research focus is the development of bilateral contacts during the diplomatic rupture and Israel's efforts to strengthen ties through various channels. It is also significant that during the socialist era, Bulgaria permanently severed diplomatic relations only with Israel, Chile, and the USA, adding extra value to the study of unofficial Bulgarian-Israeli interactions after 1967.

The topic of the rescue of Bulgarian Jews is outside the chronological scope of the dissertation but is included as a historical fact and an important factor in bilateral relations. Similarly, the lives of Jews in Bulgaria from 1948 to 1990 and the government's attitude toward them are not the main subjects of research but are touched upon in the broader context of unofficial Bulgarian-Israeli interactions.

### 3. Historiography and Sources

The historiography of relations between Israel and Eastern European countries is limited. The topic is usually covered within broader studies on Israeli-Soviet relations but is rarely examined separately. An exception is the book by former Israeli diplomat Yosef Govrin, who, based on his notes and contacts within the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, traces the restoration of diplomatic relations between Israel and the Eastern Bloc in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The Bulgarian historiographical tradition on Middle Eastern studies dates back to the 1960s, with key figures such as Prof. Yordan Peev and Prof. Hristina Mircheva. Until the late 1980s, Bulgarian research focused primarily on the history and politics of Arab nations. Today, Hebrew Studies (Hebraistics) has become a significant part of Middle Eastern studies, centered on the history of the Jewish people and the State of Israel in the context of their interactions with various cultures from antiquity to the present day. The topic of Bulgarian-Israeli relations has been explored in a series of articles by Assoc. Prof. Rumenya Marinova-Christidi and has been mentioned in studies on Bulgaria's policy toward the Middle East conflict.

Until now, there has been no comprehensive study of Bulgarian-Israeli relations during the Cold War. This dissertation is the first step toward filling this gap. The research is based on a rich and diverse source base from three Bulgarian and three Israeli archives.

From the **Central State Archives of Bulgaria (CSA)**, materials from 14 different archival collections were used, including the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party, the Bulgarian-Israeli Committee, the Council of Ministers, the Committee on Religious Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Foreign Trade, the Committee for Friendship and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Education and Culture, the Central Consistory of the Jews in Bulgaria, the Central Committee of the Union of People's Youth, and the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs related to consular relations, international organizations, and diplomatic correspondence. The emphasis is on official documents from ministries, state, and party bodies that provide evidence of Bulgaria's state policy on issues directly or indirectly related to Israel.

**The Archives of the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs** provided access to documents covering the period from 1976 to 1990. These documents include political correspondence, reports, memoranda, and briefing notes, primarily concerning visits by Bulgarian cultural figures, athletes, and scientists to Israel, which required authorization from

the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The most significant political documents pertain to the second half of the 1980s, when preparations for restoring diplomatic relations were underway.

Materials from **the Archives of the Commission for Disclosing Documents of the Former State Security** (COMDOS) shed light on the intelligence and counterintelligence activities conducted by both Bulgaria and Israel against each other, as well as on unofficial contacts between the two countries.

Through specialization at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the research was enriched with primary source materials from three Israeli archives: **the Israel State Archives, the Central Zionist Archives, and the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People**. Additionally, materials from the **National Library of Israel** were used. These include original institutional documents in Hebrew and publications from the Israeli press that present Israel's perspective on key moments in bilateral relations. For the completion of this dissertation, a wide range of secondary sources—Bulgarian and international—were utilized, including documentary collections, periodicals, monographs, articles, studies, and memoirs.

## II. Structure and Main Content of the Dissertation

The dissertation consists of an introduction, an exposition divided into two chapters, a conclusion, a bibliography, and appendices. The text follows a chronological-thematic structure, with each chapter containing four subsections divided into distinct paragraphs.

The **introduction** justifies the choice of the topic and its chronological boundaries, presents the objectives and tasks of the dissertation, provides a historiographical review of the literature on the subject, and introduces the source material on which the research is based.

The **first chapter**, *“The People’s Republic of Bulgaria and the State of Israel on Opposite Sides of the Iron Curtain (1948-1967),”* covers the period from 1948 to 1967, when the Six-Day War prompted the severance of diplomatic relations between the Eastern Bloc countries and Israel.

The **first subsection** serves as a historical introduction to the dissertation’s topic. It outlines the positions of the United States and the Soviet Union on the creation of the State of Israel and how Israel positioned itself on the international political stage. The text introduces the Soviet influence on Bulgaria’s foreign policy, which shaped the framework of Bulgarian-Israeli relations. Special attention is given to the “Great Aliyah” of Bulgarian Jews, who became the first almost entirely relocated diaspora community in Israel, establishing a strong connection between the two states.

The **second subsection** examines official contacts between Bulgaria and Israel until 1967, provides information about the activities of the Israeli legation in Sofia and the Bulgarian legation in Tel Aviv, and highlights key political issues that emerged in bilateral relations. The case of the Israeli passenger plane shot down near the town of Petrich in 1955 is analyzed as a serious diplomatic crisis with international repercussions.

The **third subsection** explores various areas of interaction between Israel and Bulgaria, including trade, economic relations, cultural exchanges, tourism, and sports, identifying key trends in these fields.

The **fourth subsection** focuses on an additional important aspect of bilateral relations—the intelligence and counterintelligence activities conducted by Bulgarian and Israeli security services against each other.

The **second chapter**, *“From Severance to the Restoration of Diplomatic Relations (1967-1990),”* traces the unofficial contacts between Bulgaria and Israel from 1967 to 1990.

The **first subsection** introduces the reader to the dynamics of international relations following the Six-Day War in 1967 and how they influenced Bulgaria's policies in the Middle East and Israel's approach to Eastern Europe. A separate paragraph is dedicated to Bulgaria's interests in the Arab world, providing essential context for understanding the decisions made by Bulgarian institutions regarding Israel. The section also examines the mechanism by which Austria represented Bulgarian interests in Israel following the severance of diplomatic relations. The main focus is on the path to restoring diplomatic relations, including key visits by high-ranking Israeli officials to Bulgaria. Trade and economic relations between the two countries, which persisted throughout the 1970s and 1980s, albeit on a limited scale, are also analyzed.

The **second subsection** is dedicated to cultural, scientific, sports, and tourism exchanges between Bulgaria and Israel during the period of diplomatic severance. A clear distinction is made between permitted and prohibited participation of Bulgarian representatives in events held in Israel or of Israeli representatives in events in Bulgaria. The specific characteristics of Bulgaria's foreign policy regarding these matters, compared to other Eastern European countries, are highlighted.

The **third and fourth subsections** add further depth to the analysis. “*State Security and the Struggle Against Zionism*” continues the discussion on unofficial contacts between Bulgaria and Israel through the activities of intelligence services, without delving into the specifics of individual operations. In “*Prospects for Bilateral Relations After 1990*,” the first direct results of the intensive political cooperation between Bulgaria and Israel in the late 1980s are presented. The dissertation argues that the potential for bilateral relations was largely unutilized during the Cold War. The vacuum between Bulgaria and Israel was artificially created, and the rapid development of relations in the early 1990s, following the geopolitical shifts of the period, serves as the clearest evidence of this.

The conclusion summarizes the main findings of the study, following the historical chronology. The text ends with a comprehensive analysis of each country's policies toward the other between 1948 and 1990.

### **III. Key Findings of the Study**

In the late 1940s, the Soviet Union provided political, military, and demographic support for the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine, hoping it would serve as a conduit for Soviet influence in the region. Bulgaria's position on Israel mirrored that of Moscow, and the favorable attitude of the Fatherland Front government toward Bulgarian Jews after 1944 contributed to a positive start in Bulgarian-Israeli relations.

The People's Republic of Bulgaria officially recognized the new Jewish state on November 26, 1948. At that time, Israel was in a state of war and faced severe economic difficulties. To strengthen its demographic and military potential, the Israeli government prioritized immigration from Jewish communities worldwide. The Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP) fully supported the establishment of Israel and permitted the free emigration of Jews, including party members of Jewish origin. This resulted in the mass emigration of Bulgarian Jews, with over 32,000 people moving to Israel by May 1949, and a total of nearly 50,000 leaving Bulgaria in the following years. The Bulgarian Jewish community was one of the first to be almost entirely relocated to Israel, in stark contrast to the difficulties Israel faced in negotiating Jewish emigration from other Eastern European countries.

In the decades that followed, Bulgarian Jews became ambassadors of their homeland in Israel, while Jewish institutions in Bulgaria, such as the Organization of the Jews in Bulgaria "Shalom" and the Central Israeli Spiritual Council, strengthened their ties with the Bulgarian Communist Party leadership.

Israel pursued good relations with the Soviet Union's satellite states in the Balkans—Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Albania—to maintain access to Jewish minorities and facilitate continued emigration. Historically, the Balkans had always been viewed by Israeli leadership as the closest friendly region.

In 1952, Bulgaria and Israel opened legations in Tel Aviv and Sofia, respectively, expressing their intention to develop bilateral relations. However, in reality, diplomatic interactions remained limited. The missions primarily handled administrative and legal matters, such as issuing visas and passports, executing judicial requests, processing inheritance cases, and managing property claims of Bulgarian citizens in Israel. No high-level official visits were exchanged, except through the framework of Communist Party relations.

One exception was in the field of trade. Bulgaria and Israel developed direct commercial contacts, facilitated by trade agreements signed in 1954, 1957, 1959, and 1964. The volume of trade gradually increased from \$1.5 million in the early 1950s to \$6 million by the mid-1960s. Bulgaria became a key supplier of food products, construction materials, and consumer goods to the Israeli market, while Israel exported mainly agricultural and light industrial products to Bulgaria. However, competition from Western countries limited Bulgaria's access to the Israeli market, and by 1965, the Bulgarian government decided to prioritize trade with Arab countries over Israel.

Beyond trade, there were sporadic cultural and sports exchanges. Bulgarian tourists and sports teams visited Israel, and Israeli citizens of Bulgarian descent frequently traveled to Bulgaria. However, no formal cultural cooperation agreement was signed between the two countries. The Bulgarian-Israeli Friendship League, established by Bulgarian Jewish emigrants, played a crucial role in preserving cultural ties between the Bulgarian Jewish community in Israel and their homeland.

By the mid-1960s, global geopolitical shifts further constrained Bulgarian-Israeli relations. Following the Six-Day War in June 1967, Bulgaria, along with other Eastern Bloc countries, severed diplomatic relations with Israel. From that point on, Austria represented Bulgarian interests in Israel, while Sweden assumed responsibility for Israeli interests in Bulgaria.

Despite the diplomatic rupture, Bulgaria remained an exception among the Eastern Bloc states due to its continued, albeit limited, economic and cultural interactions with Israel. Unlike the Soviet Union, Poland, and Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria continued issuing entry visas to Israeli citizens and permitted Israeli delegations to participate in international conferences held in Bulgaria. However, Bulgarian authorities carefully controlled cultural and sports exchanges to avoid antagonizing Arab states.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Israel intensified efforts to reestablish official and unofficial contacts with Bulgaria. This was part of a broader Israeli strategy to reduce its diplomatic isolation and improve relations with Eastern European countries. Israel sought contact with Bulgaria through diplomatic channels at the United Nations and UNESCO, as well as through business, cultural, and academic initiatives. Nevertheless, Bulgaria maintained its official stance that diplomatic normalization could only occur if Israel withdrew from the territories occupied in 1967 and resolved the Palestinian issue.

Throughout the Cold War, Bulgaria's policy toward Israel was shaped by its commitment to the Eastern Bloc and its economic and political interests in the Arab world. The ideological divide between communism and Zionism also played a role, as Zionism was perceived as a form of anti-communism. However, by the late 1980s, both Bulgaria and Israel recognized the potential benefits of restoring diplomatic relations. The groundwork for normalization had been laid even before the end of the Cold War, with informal negotiations beginning in 1987.

Key figures in this process included Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban, Minister of Industry and Trade Ariel Sharon, and the wife of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, Shulamit Shamir, who was of Bulgarian Jewish origin and played a crucial role in strengthening bilateral ties.

By 1990, the political will to restore Bulgarian-Israeli relations was clearly expressed by both Sofia and Tel Aviv. In May 1990, diplomatic relations were officially reestablished, leading to a rapid expansion of cooperation in trade, economy, science, and culture. Within the first years of normalization, agreements were signed in key areas, including trade, investment, air transport, healthcare, education, and tourism. These agreements provided a solid legal foundation for the dynamic development of Bulgarian-Israeli relations in the decades that followed.

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After the establishment of the State of Israel, all the necessary prerequisites—political, economic, cultural, strategic, and human—were in place for excellent relations with Bulgaria. However, geopolitical realities did not allow for an official partnership between the two countries, which negatively impacted all possible areas of cooperation.

Bulgaria's policy toward Israel was aligned with the general stance of the socialist countries and was dictated more by pragmatism than by ideology. Since political, economic, and cultural rapprochement with Israel was objectively impossible, Bulgaria prioritized its contacts with Arab states, which were key trade and economic partners. Bulgaria's economic interests in the Arab world, along with the related political commitments, were the main drivers behind the strict policy imposed by the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to limit cultural, scientific, and sports contacts with Israel.

From 1948 to 1990, Israel consistently pursued an active policy of rapprochement with Bulgaria, motivated by various factors. In the early years of statehood, Israel prioritized attracting Jewish emigrants from Eastern Europe. After 1967, the main motivation was to break international isolation. Regardless of the different Israeli governments in power, the country's policy toward Bulgaria remained unchanged, largely due to the significant Bulgarian Jewish community in Israel. Many Bulgarian Jews were well integrated into various levels of Israeli society, including government institutions. They maintained warm feelings toward their homeland and contributed to shaping a positive public and institutional perception of Bulgaria in Israel. The historical fact that Bulgaria rescued its Jewish population and that the Bulgarian Communist Party allowed free Jewish emigration to Israel without any administrative obstacles was highly appreciated by the Israeli state.

## **IV. Scientific Contributions of the Dissertation**

1. The dissertation constructs a comprehensive picture of Bulgarian-Israeli relations between 1948 and 1990, focusing on political, economic, and cultural interactions rather than the domestic history of Jews in Bulgaria.
2. It introduces a wealth of previously unused archival documents from Bulgarian and Israeli sources, shedding light on the unique and unprecedented nature of unofficial contacts between the two countries during the Cold War.
3. It presents to the Bulgarian academic community the issue of Israel's policy toward Bulgaria in the broader context of Eastern Europe.
4. It is the first in-depth research study to systematically analyze the informal Bulgarian-Israeli relations between 1967 and 1990, a phenomenon unparalleled in Bulgarian foreign policy history.

## V. Publications on the Dissertation Topic

**Stoilov, P.** *Highlights of Israel's Geopolitical Interests in the Balkans.* – In: *Balkan Issues of Regional and National Security (Historical Aspects and Contemporary Dimensions)*, Vol. 1, Sofia, 2021.

**Stoilov, P.** *The Balkans in Israel's Security Policy.* – *History Journal*, Vol. 32, Issue 2/2024, pp. 131–139.

**Stoilov, P.** *A Fatal Detour to the East: The Tragic Incident of the Downing of an Israeli Passenger Plane near Petrich on July 27, 1955.* – In: *Kyustendil Readings 27 (2023). Disasters and Catastrophes in History*. Sofia, St. Kliment Ohridski University Press, 2024, pp. 185–193.

**Stoilov, P., Efrat Aviv.** *Old Allies, Close Friends: The Strategic Importance of Bulgaria for Israel.* – *BESA Perspective Papers No. 2,300*, The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Bar-Ilan University, 2024.

–. **החשיבות האסטרטגית של בולגריה לישראל: בניית ברית ותיקות וידיעות טובות Mabat BESA**, No. 2,300, The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Bar-Ilan University, 2024.

## VI. Other Publications

**Stoilov, P.** *Felix Kanitz and the Balkans.* – In: *March Student Readings. Proceedings of the Ninth Student Scientific Conference at St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Tarnovo*, Vol. 8. Veliko Tarnovo, St. Cyril and St. Methodius University Press, 2022, pp. 205–215.

**Marinova-Christidi, R., Stoilov, P.** *Zur Forschung über die Todesfälle an den Grenzen der Volksrepublik Bulgarien.* – In: *Zeitschrift des Forschungsverbundes SED-Staat (Schwerpunkt: Fluchtwege)*, Berlin, Forschungsverbund SED-Staat der Freien Universität Berlin, 2024, pp. 26–29.

**Stoilov, P.** *Israeli-Turkish Relations in Light of Isaac Herzog's Visit to Turkey in March 2022.* – In: *Balkan Issues of Regional and National Security (Historical Aspects and Contemporary Dimensions)*, Vol. 2, Sofia, 2025, pp. 60 – 70.