

ABRAHAM BENAROYA, THE MACEDONIAN QUESTION AND THE SOLUNA SOCIALIST WORKERS' FEDERATION

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Abstract. Avraam Benaroya was born in 1887 in the Bulgarian town of Vidin to a family of small-scale merchants; his father was of Sephardic origin. He soon became a committed social democrat and emerged as both an ideologue and an organizer of the Macedonian social democratic movement during the period between 1909 and 1912. As the leader of the Thessaloniki Socialist Workers' Federation (*Federación Socialista Obrera*), Benaroya articulated the idea of the particular character of Marxist ideology. He maintained that Marxist tactics ought to be both flexible and adaptable to the specific political conditions of each country. Accordingly, his views could be classified as distinctly centrist, aligning closely with the political logic of the left wing of Bulgarian social democracy, namely the BRSDP (Narrow Socialists). This characterization is further supported by the chronology of Benaroya's political activity. For instance, during 1910–1911 he edited the newspaper *Solidaridad Obradera / Workers' Solidarity*, the successor to the multilingual *Workers' Herald*. The publication timeline of Benaroya's periodical closely corresponds with that of *Napred*, a left-centrist organ issued under the leadership of the prominent Bulgarian left-centrist figure, Christian Rakovsky.

Moreover, Benaroya – like Rakovsky – initially endorsed the ideals of the Young Turk Revolution. Furthermore, in line with Rakovsky and the leadership of the centrist left within the BRSDP (Narrow Socialists), Benaroya aligned his political activities with the stance of the Second International. This occurred precisely at the time when Rakovsky was acting as a representative of the Bureau for the Unification of the Bulgarian Social Democratic Movement. Additional evidence of Benaroya's ideological proximity to the

left-centrist platform lies in the fact that, in May 1910 and again in November 1911, at his personal invitation and with the official endorsement of the *Federación* leadership, Rakovsky traveled to Thessaloniki “as a representative of the International Socialist Bureau.” There, he participated in the May Day rally (1910), spoke at a *Federación* rally (4 November 1911), and even delivered several lectures “on issues concerning the Balkan and international socialist movement.”

In conclusion, the Macedonian phase of Avraam Benaroya’s political career must be recognized as distinctly left-centrist in orientation. It was during this period that Benaroya – both as a humanist and a democratically inclined political figure, and as a prominent Macedonian socialist – maintained closest alignment with the centrist platform of the BRSDP (Narrow Socialists). It was also during this period that he most directly linked the Jewish Question to the Macedonian Question, envisioning their resolution through the implementation of a Macedonian federation (confederation or union).

Keywords: Avraam Benaroya, Socialist Workers’ Federation (SWF), Jews, Thessaloniki, Sh. Ya. Natadze (Gortsev), socialism, Macedonia, Balkan Confederation, Young Turks

АВРААМ БЕНАРОЯ, МАКЕДОНСЬКЕ ПИТАННЯ І СОЛУНСЬКА СОЦІАЛІСТИЧНА РОБІТНИЧА ФЕДЕРАЦІЯ

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Резюме. Авраам Бенароя народився 1887 року у болгарському місті Відін в сім’ї дрібних торговців, батько його був сефардського походження. Досить скоро він став переконаним соціал-демократом і проявив свої здібності як ідеолог й організатор македонського соціал-демократичного руху в період між 1909 і 1912 рр.

Будучи лідером Солунської соціал-демократичної робітничої федерації, він висунув тезу про особливий характер марксистської ідеології. Він вважав, що марксистська тактика має бути і гнучкою, і здатною трансформуватися залежно від політичних умов конкретної країни. Таким чином, його погляди можна позначити як цілком центристські, тобто сумісні з політичною логікою лівого крила болгарської соціал-демократії – БРСДП (о). Останнє побічно підтверджує і хронологія політичної діяльності Бенароя. Зокрема, у 1910–1911 рр. він видає газету «Солідарідад Оврадера / Робітнича солідарність», яка стала спадкоємицю чотирьохмовного «Робітничого вісника». Дати видання газети А. Бенароя практично повністю збігаються з датами існування в Болгарії лівоцентристського органу «Наперед», що виходив під керівництвом визнаного лідера болгарського лівого центрризму К. Раковського.

Далі, А. Бенароя, подібно до К. Раковського, на початковому етапі підтримує ідеї младотурецької революції. Крім того, подібно до того самого К. Раковського і керівництва центристської «лівиці» БРСДП(о), А. Бенароя узгоджує свою діяльність із позицією керівництва Другого Інтернаціоналу. Причому, відбувається це саме в той період, коли К. Раковський виступає від імені Бюро за об'єднання болгарського соціал-демократичного руху. І завершує цей перелік аргументації на користь лівоцентристської платформи А. Бенароя той факт, що в травні 1910 і в листопаді 1911 р. за його особистим запрошенням, а також на основі офіційного запрошення керівництва «Federación», К. Раковський приїздить до Солуні «...як представник МСБ». Там він бере участь у першотравневому мітингу (1910 р.), виступає на мітингу Federación (4 листопада 1911 р.) і навіть погоджується прочитати кілька лекцій «...з проблем балканського і міжнародного соціалістичного руху».

Отже, оцінюючи македонський період у політичній кар'єрі Авраама Бенароя, слід визнати, що він мав яскраво виражений лівоцентристський характер. Саме в цей період А. Бенароя був максимально близький, як гуманіст та демократично

навлаштована людина і як популярний македонський політик, до центристської платформи «лівиці» БРСДП (о). І саме в цей період він максимально пов'язував єврейське питання з македонським питанням, шлях до вирішення якого бачив у реалізації концепції македонської федерації (конфедерації, союзу).

Ключові слова: А. Бенароя, Соціалістична робітничка федерація (СРФ), євреї, Солунь, Ш. Я. Натадзе (Горцев), соціалізм, Македонія, Балканська конфедерація, младотурки.

Introduction

Abraham Benaroya was born in 1887 into a family of small-scale traders. His father was of Sephardic origin – a fact that later led American historian Donald Quataert to identify him, along with Bulgarian/Macedonian social democrats Angel Tomov and Dimitar Vlahov, as the Sephardic Jews. However, this classification appears somewhat debatable in the case of the latter figures and warrants further scholarly investigation.

Benaroya was born in the Bulgarian town of Vidin, near the Bulgarian-Romanian border. From an early age, it became apparent that his interests lay in the humanities – he reportedly spoke six languages. Eventually, he enrolled in the Faculty of Law at the University of Belgrade. Interestingly, even this seemingly straightforward biographical detail remains contested. For instance, one of Benaroya's close associates and fellow members of the Thessaloniki Federation, Angel Tomov, claimed that Benaroya had no more than a secondary education.

Tomov wrote:

“I have had close friendly relations with Avram Benaroya since that time. He, too, was a stranger from Bulgaria, a native of Vidin – a ‘liberal’ socialist, a man as small in stature as he was great in spirit and devotion to the socialist cause. His life was one of tireless effort in the name of the great proletarian ideal. ... Benaroya had a high school education. He was naturally gifted, with pronounced organizational and journalistic

abilities. He also possessed a fairly solid understanding of socialism and the workers' movement. Moreover, he had the rare and valuable ability to inspire sympathy, to infect others with his idealism and personal example, and to ignite those around him to dedicated work in the service of the proletarian cause" (Tomov 1947, 192).

Some modern researchers also assert that Benaroya did indeed enroll at the University of Belgrade, but was ultimately unable to complete his studies. Regardless of the academic outcome, by 1907 Benaroya had relocated to Plovdiv, where he worked as a Bulgarian language teacher in a local Jewish school.

Following the 1903 split within the Bulgarian Social Democratic Party, much of the Plovdiv socialist community came under the influence of the right-leaning wing of Bulgarian Marxism – particularly the anarcho-liberal orientation represented by the leadership of the Social Democratic Union "Proletarian," a left-centrist faction. It was within this ideological context that Benaroya, as a young, democratically-minded educator, found a natural affinity with the federalist and conciliatory tendencies of left centrism. Before long, he became not only a devoted adherent, but also one of the leading figures within the Plovdiv group of the "Proletarian" Union (Studies on the History of Socialism in Bulgaria 1891–1944 (2008)).

Main Part

It is important to note that even at the earliest stage of his political career, Abraham Benaroya displayed a marked interest in the Jewish question – both in general and specifically in the context of the Balkans. He actively wrote on Jewish issues and, in 1908, published a substantial work entitled *The Jewish Question and Social Democracy* in Plovdiv.

By the end of that same year, Benaroya left Bulgaria — either, according to some sources, due to pressure from the Bulgarian authorities, or, according to others, in accordance with a specific party assignment. He relocated to the Macedonian city of

Salonica (also known as Solun or Thessaloniki), which at the time was part of the European territories of the Ottoman Empire.

At this juncture, Benaroya began to conceptualize the structure of what would become the Socialist Workers' Federation (SWF) of Salonica. His approach framed the Macedonian question – as part of the broader "Eastern Question" – within a social-democratic and simultaneously Jewish context. Initially, he organized a Jewish political workers' club, which eventually evolved into the Jewish national section of the Salonica *Socialist Workers' Federation* (SWF; in Ladino, *Federación Socialista Laboradera* – FSL; also known as Φεντερασión or *Federacion*).

As Angel Tomov noted, in addition to the significant influence of Bulgarian Marxism on the ideological outlook of Salonica's intelligentsia during the first decade of the twentieth century, leftist sentiments had also begun to emerge among the city's artisan and working-class populations. These sentiments created fertile ground for the reception of external ideological and political impulses – particularly those associated with Bulgarian Marxism, and more specifically its center-left interpretations. By 1911, Marxist influences from Serbia and Romania also began to shape the development of the Macedonian workers' movement.

This environment provided a strategic launching point for the formation of the Salonica Socialist Group and its eventual evolution into a broader and more influential political entity. Tomov wrote:

“The initial impulse for the establishment of the Socialist Federation in Salonica was given by workers from Bulgaria, mainly printers, but the healthy organizational force came from the local workers, and primarily from the Jewish workers” (Tomov 1947, 192).

Tomov's statement confirms that Benaroya's efforts in organizing the SWF heavily relied on the Jewish segment of Salonica's society. Nevertheless, the Jewish community in the city was ideologically diverse, united mainly by shared concerns over the growing Greek influence in this historically Balkan-Jewish-Ottoman region. This concern played a pivotal role in shaping the foundations of the Socialist Workers' Federation.

The character of the SWF, formed in the context of the Young Turk Revolution, was strongly influenced by Austro-Marxist ideology. Drawing on the organizational principles of the Brunn Program, the SWF was envisioned as a federation comprising national sections – Jewish, Bulgarian, Greek, and Turkish – each maintaining its cultural and political autonomy. Benaroya and his Bulgarian-Macedonian associates saw the SWF as the first step toward the creation of a broader Turkish Social Democratic Party, organized along similar federalist lines. Much like the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs* (SDPA), this envisioned party was to be unified by a common statute and governed through congresses serving as corrective assemblies (Zürcher 2010).

However, in the Ottoman context, the political and ideological energies of the liberal-democratic left were largely absorbed by the Young Turk movement. Mass mobilization was directed toward national liberation, leaving little space for the development of a Turkish social-democratic party until the 1920s. Within this constrained environment, the SWF stood out as one of the few Ottoman socialist organizations aligned ideologically and organizationally with the strategies of the Second International. In fact, during its initial period of cooperation with the Young Turk leadership, the SWF came to be viewed as a potential platform for uniting democratic forces across the Balkans and Turkey – possibly within the framework of an Eastern Democratic Federation (Deliradev 1909).

While actively involved in the broader political work of the SWF, Benaroya increasingly focused on its Jewish component. In *The Jewish Question and Social Democracy* (1908), he underscored the parallels between the Jewish and Macedonian national struggles. Like many Bulgarian left-centrists of the time, he believed that these issues could be addressed through the implementation of Austro-Marxist strategies adapted to the Balkan context. It was from this ideological position that Benaroya gave an interview to the well-known Russian revolutionary and publicist Shalva Yasonovich Natadze (writing under the pseudonym Gortsev), a member of the Socialist-Revolutionary Party.

Documents from the Foreign Bureau of the Russian Imperial Police confirm the connections between the Socialist-Revolutionaries and ideologically aligned social-democratic groups in Constantinople, as well as their links to similar Marxist organizations in Russia and Bulgaria. In this transnational context, both the Jewish and Macedonian questions emerged as central topics in social-democratic discourse across Macedonia. Indeed, by the early 1910s, socialists in Austria, Russia, and Turkey were placing national issues at the core of international social-democratic strategy – an emphasis made all the more urgent by the rising tensions that would culminate in the Balkan Wars and, eventually, the First World War.

Until the outbreak of World War I, Salonica remained, in many ways, a quintessentially Jewish city within the Ottoman Empire. It earned the nickname “Balkan Jerusalem,” a term widely adopted by contemporary observers. For example, Russian writer and publicist Andrei Nikolaevich Sirotinin, traveling through Macedonia in 1906, remarked on the rich linguistic diversity of Salonica. While many tongues and dialects filled the air, two languages predominated: Turkish and Spanish. The latter referred to Ladino – the Judeo-Spanish language spoken by Sephardic Jews who had settled in the Ottoman Empire following their expulsion from Spain in the 15th century (Sirotinin).

According to statistical data, by the time of the Greek conquest of the city in 1912, the Jewish population of Salonica constituted more than one-third of the total urban population. As early as 1906, a Russian publicist A. N. Sirotinin noted that the Jews made up roughly half of the 125,000 residents of the city. By 1912, the figures were more precise: approximately 62,000 Jews, 46,000 Muslims, 40,000 Greek Orthodox Christians, 6,000 Bulgarians, 2,700 Roma, and 1,600 individuals of other ethnic backgrounds¹.

Within this sizeable Jewish community – still operating in a predominantly Ottoman city – Zionist sentiments held a strong position. As evidence of this, it is sufficient to recall that David Ben-Gurion resided and studied in Salonica for some time. However, as the

¹ In 1913, the population of Salonica reached approximately 160,000, of whom more than 61,000 identified as the Jews (Kazakov 1998–1999, 110).

publicist Avraam Benaroya argued, he maintained a principled opposition to Zionism, grounding his position in comparative reflections on the experiences of Austria, Russia, and notably the case of Budapest (Benaroya 1908, 28).

At the same time, a significant portion of Salonica's Jewish community remained committed to integration into the political and economic structures of the Ottoman Empire. The threat of the disintegration of the Empire's multicultural European provinces encouraged such integrationist attitudes, as many Macedonian Jews increasingly viewed the Ottoman political framework as a preferable alternative to expanding Greek influence in the region (Kazakov 1998–1999, 103–114; 1998–1999, 115–132). Benaroya was critical of both nationalist alternatives – Zionist and Greek – and advocated instead for a center-left approach to resolving both the Macedonian and Jewish questions. The mechanism for realizing this vision was the federalist platform that also informed the organizational structure of the Socialist Workers' Federation (SWF).

In a relatively short period, the SWF – within which the Jewish section was particularly prominent – emerged as a significant political actor among the Jewish population of Macedonia. Jewish socialist activists, many of whom had connections with the left wing of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO) and, for a time, the Young Turks (Benaroya himself was a member of the “Army of Action”; Tomov 1947, 189–195), gravitated toward the idea of a Balkan confederation (federation or union). This framework, they believed, could preserve national identity – cultural, economic, and political – especially as a counterbalance to potential Greek hegemony in the region.

The primary publication of the SWF was the *Rabochaya Gazeta* [Workers' Newspaper] (in Bulgarian, *Rabotnicheski Vestnik*, 1909)², printed in four languages:

² The original publication of the Socialist Workers' Federation (SWF) was titled *Rabonicki Vestnik* [Workers' Bulletin]. It was later transformed into *Solidaridad Ovradera*, then into *Mujadele*, and finally, in 1912, into *Avanti*, which was published in Ladino.

Bulgarian, Turkish, Greek, and Hebrew (specifically Ladino, or Judeo-Spanish)³. Articles in its supplement *Rabotnicheska Borba* [Workers' Struggle] emphasized that, unlike in Bulgaria – where divisions in the labor movement stemmed from domestic political conflicts – Macedonia's diversity offered a platform for unity. It is worth noting that A. Tomov observed with a degree of irony that the “intensity, passion, confusion, and pettiness” of Bulgarian social-democratic factionalism, “thank God,” had not affected the Salonican socialists (Tomov 1947, 189–195). Contrary to the dynamics of intra-party struggle in Bulgaria, Benaroya's principal objective for the socialist movement in Macedonia was to unify the proletariat in order to form a single socialist party with collective representation within the International Socialist Bureau of the Second International (*Workers' Struggle*, 15 November 1908).

Returning to the interview Benaroya gave to Shalva Natadze (writing under the pseudonym “Gortsev”) and later published in the journal *Sovremennik*, it is evident that Benaroya articulated a broad vision for the activities and ideological platform of the Socialist Federation. Based on that conversation, Natadze attempted to convey to readers his understanding of the aims and character of the Federation in Macedonia.

Natadze identified the summer of 1909 as the founding moment of the Socialist Workers' Federation in Salonica. He noted that the initial unity of this Jewish-Bulgarian organization was short-lived. Within five months, a faction with more radical leanings, ideologically aligned with the Orthodox Marxism of Bulgaria's Narrow Socialists, split from Benaroya's organization. Nonetheless, the remaining group continued its work and eventually expanded to include at least 120 members, among whom the Jews and Bulgarians remained active. Thus, Natadze appears to interpret the summer of 1909 not

³ It is noteworthy that documents from the Special Division of the Police Department, detailing the connections of the prominent revolutionary Kamo (Ter-Petrosyan) in Constantinople, identified his links with the Socialist Workers' Federation (SWF) and emphasized the multinational composition of the organization. According to these documents, the socialist group with which he interacted included the 'Greeks, Turks, Bulgarians, and Jews' (GARF, 13).

as the moment of the Federation's original founding, but rather as the beginning of its organizational transformation.

In his interviews, Benaroya consistently articulated his political philosophy. In a conversation with the newspaper *Rech* [Speech] – which positioned itself as an independent outlet but was closely associated with the Constitutional Democratic Party – Benaroya stated: “I am a follower of scientific socialism founded by Marx, but I cannot call myself an orthodox Marxist.” He added that he accepted the principles of Marxism, but emphasized, as Natadze reported, “...that their application must be adapted to the conditions of each specific country” (Gortsev 1912, 260).

A Bulgarian historian Georgi Parvanov also linked Benaroya's name with the Proletarian Union (Parvanov 1997). It is difficult to dispute that Benaroya's understanding of Marxism – as a flexible ideology responsive to national political contexts – aligns him with the centrist tendencies of the Bulgarian Workers' Social Democratic Party (united) [BWSDP(u)]. This connection is further confirmed by the chronology of his political work. In 1910–1911, Benaroya began publishing the newspaper *Solidaridad Ovradera* [Worker's Solidarity], the successor to the four-language *Rabochaya Gazeta* (Tomov 1947, 192). These publication dates nearly coincide with the appearance of the Bulgarian center-left journal *Napred*, edited by the recognized leader of Bulgarian left centrism, Christian Rakovsky (Chernyavsky, Stanchev, Tortika (Lobanova) 2014).

Moreover, like Rakovsky, Benaroya initially supported the ideals of the Young Turk revolution. Also in parallel with Rakovsky and the leadership of the BWSDP(u), Benaroya coordinated his political activities with the leadership of the Second International. Notably, this occurred at the very time when Rakovsky served as head of the bureau overseeing the unification of the Bulgarian social-democratic movement. Adding further weight to Benaroya's centrist credentials is the fact that in May 1910 and again in November 1911, he hosted Rakovsky in Salonica at the official invitation of the Federation. Rakovsky participated in a May Day rally (1910), addressed a Federation

gathering (4 November 1911), and gave several lectures “on issues of the Balkan and international socialist movement” (Hristakudis 1998–1999, 244).

As might be expected, the Bulgarian orthodox Marxists – namely the Bulgarian Workers' Social Democratic Party (Narrow Socialists) [BWSDP(u)] – were quick to criticize the ideological and political platform of the SWF. They characterized the Federation as a petty-bourgeois formation, akin in their view to the Bulgarian centrists and Broad Socialists, and thus insufficiently socialist in character.

Conclusion

In assessing the Macedonian period of Abraham Benaroya’s political career, it is evident that his activities bore a distinctly center-left orientation. During this time, Benaroya – both as a public figure, journalist, and influential Macedonian politician – was closely aligned with the centrist platform of the "leftist" Bulgarian Workers' Social Democratic Party (united) [BWSDP (u)]. It was also in this period that he most clearly articulated the link between the Jewish question and the Macedonian question, envisioning their resolution through the realization of a Macedonian federation (confederation or union).

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