

Israeli Airliner shot down by Bulgarian Fighters. - Loss of 58 Lives. - Bulgarian Apology and Offer of Compensation.

A Constellation airliner of Israel Airlines (the *El Al* Company) was shot down by Bulgarian fighters on July 27 near the Greco-Bulgarian frontier. All 51 passengers on board were killed, among them three children, as well as the crew of seven.

The airliner was flying from London Airport to Lydda (Israel) *via* Paris, Vienna, and Istanbul. At the time of the disaster it was on the Vienna- Istanbul run, and near the point where the Greek, Bulgarian, and Yugoslav frontiers intersect. First reports of the disaster came from the Greek frontier authorities, who announced that the plane had been shot down by Bulgarian gunfire and had crashed a few miles inside Bulgarian territory. On July 28 the Bulgarian Government issued a communique saying that the airliner had “departed from its route and entered Bulgarian airspace without warning”; that the anti-aircraft defences had opened fire on the machine, which they had been unable to identify; and that it had crashed with the loss of all passengers and crew on board. After expressing “the deepest regret of the Bulgarian Government and the entire Bulgarian people at this disaster,” it was announced that a ministerial committee of investigation had been set up under the chairmanship of the Foreign Minister, Dr. Nelchev.

On the same day (July 28) the Israeli Government sent two strongly-worded Notes to Bulgaria. The first denounced the Bulgarian attack on the airliner as “shocking reckless” and “a wanton disregard for human life and for elementary obligations of humanity”, and demanded the punishment of those responsible, as well as full compensation for the loss of the aircraft and for the families of the 58 passengers and crew who had lost their lives. The second Note protested at the Bulgarian Government's refusal to permit an Israeli investigating team to enter Bulgaria to examine the wreckage of the machine. [Six Israeli civil aviation experts had arrived at the Bulgarian frontier for this purpose, but were refused permission to enter Bulgaria.] The *El Al* Company issued a statement denying the Bulgarian allegation that the plane was off its course, and pointing out that radio messages transmitted from the aircraft up to the time of the disaster showed that it had not entered Bulgarian airspace.

In a Note to the Israeli Government on July 29, the Bulgarian Government reiterated its regret at the shooting-down of the aircraft and declared its readiness to accept responsibility “for part of the material damage caused.”

Three of the Israeli civil aviation experts were eventually allowed to enter Bulgaria on July 30 and inspect the wreckage of the plane. Their report, published on Aug. 1 by the Israeli Foreign Office, stated that the plane was riddled by machine-gun bullets, which seemed to indicate that it had been shot down by fighters and not by anti-aircraft fire; that the Bulgarian authorities had tampered with the wreckage in an obvious attempt to remove incriminating evidence; that the investigators had been allowed to stay in Bulgaria for only six hours; that the Bulgarian officers

had been uncommunicative and unwilling to impart information; and that no interrogation of Bulgarian witnesses had been permitted.

The passengers in the aircraft included British, Canadian, South African, American, French, and Swedish nationals, as well as Israeli citizens, whilst the pilot, Capt. Stanley Hinks, was a British national.[Captain Hinks, a wing-commander in the R.A.F. during the war, was formerly personal pilot to Sir Winston Churchill and had also piloted King George VI.] In addition to the protest Notes from Israel, strong protests were made to Bulgaria by the British Government (acting also on behalf of Canada and South Africa) and by the U.S., French, and Swedish Governments. The British Note said that “H.M. Government cannot accept that any Government is in its right in shooting down a civil aircraft in time of peace”; the U.S. Note said that the “brutal attack” on the Israeli airliner was a “grave violation of all principles of international law”; whilst the French Government described the Bulgarian action as an “act of war.” All the Notes demanded the punishment of these responsible and the payment of full compensation to the families of those who had been killed.

The Bulgarian Government issued a statement on Aug. 3 admitting that the Israeli airliner had been shot down by two Bulgarian fighters and not, as originally stated, by anti-aircraft fire. It promised to “discover and punish those responsible for the catastrophe,” to take “all measures to prevent a repetition of such incidents,” and to pay compensation to the families of the 58 victims.

The statement (claimed to be based on the findings of the ministerial commission of inquiry) said that the “unidentified” aircraft had gone off its course without warning and had flown over Bulgarian territory for 125 miles at a depth of 25 miles. Fighters had been sent up to investigate “this deep penetration of Bulgarian airspace,” but the airliner had ignored their signals to land. Seeing that the plane was “trying to escape across the frontier,” they had opened fire on the machine, which had caught fire and crashed. The statement admitted that the air defences had “shown hastiness” and had failed to take all necessary measures to force the aircraft to change direction.

The remains of the 58 victims of the disaster were flown to Israel and were buried in a common grave near Tel-Aviv on Aug. 4 in the presence of the Prime Minister of Israel (Mr. Sharett), the British and U.S. Ambassadors, and many other diplomatic representatives. (Times - Daily Telegraph)