

The Holocaust of the Thessaloniki Jews and the role of the bystanders (1942-1943)

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Introduction

Within a few months of 1943, the overwhelming majority of the members of the historic Jewish community of Thessaloniki were transported from their homes, in cattle cars, to be exterminated at the Nazi death camp of Auschwitz. Thessaloniki, a major port city in the Balkans and Greece's second largest city has the sad privilege of having lost one of the largest percentages of Jewish population during the Second World War compared to other cities in Europe. Almost 95% of the city's 50,000 Jews did not survive the war, most of them deported and exterminated in Poland. This was not a fringe event in the history of Greece's second biggest city during World War II. Rather, the Jews constituted a large percentage of Thessaloniki's population, with a long presence in the city, who contributed to the social, economic, political and cultural life. Their suffering was felt by all the citizens in the city and beyond.

The post-doctoral study seeks to reexamine aspects of the Holocaust in Thessaloniki and the different events on the local level, in order to further enrich our knowledge of this period. It looks into the interaction of local Thessaloniki actors with the German occupation authorities.

Using methods of microhistory to study the issue of decision-making at the local level can help us answer many of the questions that are lost in a broader approach, including any moral or other reservations that could have emerged. In particular, the research focuses on the Greek Christian elites of the city who occupied important positions in the city's administration. It investigates their interactions with the German occupiers, their contacts with the Greek government authorities in Athens as well as business activities they undertook during this period.

To do so, the research looks into a variety of research material, some utilized for the first time. For example, these include the special annex for Sociétés anonymes of the Greek Government Gazette for 1941-1944, the archives of Michael Molho in Madrid, author of *In Memoriam*, the first account of the Holocaust in Greece, the archive of the International Red Cross in Geneva, the archives of post-war trials of collaborators, the archives of the Agency for the Custody of Jewish Property, the local press as well as several published works and articles. In addition, a number of local sources were consulted, contained in the archives of the Church of Thessaloniki, the City Council, the University, the Chamber of Commerce, the Bar Association, the Journalists Union and the Electricity Company.

Background

The great majority of the Jews of Greece who perished during the Holocaust were residents of Thessaloniki. Thessaloniki, Greece's second biggest city, had been for centuries a major Jewish center, often dubbed the "mother of Israel." The city's Jewish community has a history of more than 2,000 years, already settled when Apostle Paul came to preach there the new religion. The Jewish population received a significant boost when, in 1492, thousands of Sephardic Jews fleeing the Spanish Inquisition found shelter in Thessaloniki, at the time under Ottoman control. The newly arrived transformed the city and dominated its economic, cultural and political life, making it a "Sephardic metropolis."

At the turn of 20th century, Thessaloniki counted 70-80,000 Jews out of a total population of 150,000. Some fifty percent of the total inhabitants were Jews, with many other ethnic groups being part of this cosmopolitan matrix. Due to the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Greek state—the city became Greek in 1912—there was a considerable change of the ethnic-religious composition of the population. In the interwar period the Jewish inhabitants dropped

considerably, due mainly to migration abroad for political or economic reasons, while the Greek Christian population got a significant boost by refugees who came from Asia Minor as a result of the Greek-Turkish War of 1922-23.

When the German army entered the city in April 1941 as Greece lost the war, Thessaloniki counted about 50,000 Jews, approximately 20 percent of the population, still marking the city's character. This illustrious history came to an abrupt end with the Nazi deportations and the Holocaust when more than 90 percent of Thessaloniki's Jews found a tragic death in the Nazi death camp of Auschwitz. These Jews were well integrated in city life, so their plight affected all sectors of the Greek public administration and civil society. Although many Jews worked as independent professionals, a number of them were employed as civil servants in the local government. With the majority living in the center of Thessaloniki, their plight was known and could be felt by all citizens and institutions.

The Paradigm of Bystanders

Historians have made different distinctions of individuals depending on their behavior during World War II, such as victims, perpetrators, bystanders and rescuers. Drawing the line between these categories is hard, especially over a long period of time and in rapidly changing environments, and may also appear simplistic. For example, an Italian soldier perpetrator may become a rescuer. A rescuer may eventually betray the victim, and so on. The role of the bystanders has become key in Holocaust research during the last decades, as it allows us to go beyond the perpetrator/victim paradigm and explore the reactions of society as a whole. In defining this category of behavior, Hilberg made the following remark:

Most contemporaries of the Jewish catastrophe were neither perpetrators nor victims. Many people, however, saw or heard something of the event. Those of them who lived in Adolf Hitler's Europe would have described themselves, with few exceptions, as bystanders. There were not "involved," not willing to hurt the victims and not wishing to be hurt by the perpetrators. Yet, the reality was not so uncomplicated.

The Nazi measures against the Jews of Thessaloniki took place in the center of the urban life from the summer of 1942 to the summer of 1943, and affected Jews who lived in central areas, side-by-side with Greek Christian neighbors. Many of Thessaloniki's Jews were

employed in businesses located at the city center, working as tradesmen, lawyers, clerks and employees. These measures were widely announced in the local collaborationist press and the local Greek population could easily witness this process.

In this study, the main victim group are the Jews of Thessaloniki, who were the targets of the Nazi antisemitic measures and were undergoing a process that led to their deaths. The perpetrators are the Nazis, the SS facilitated by the German military authorities, the German foreign service, as well as Greek collaborators. The Greek population of Thessaloniki could fall in the bystander category, according to his scheme. Nevertheless, this categorization is not fully helpful, as we will explain below.

During the Nazi Occupation of Thessaloniki, the local population had to face unprecedented challenges. During that harsh winter of 1941 food was scarce and almost two thousand people died from starvation, close to one percent of the total population. In addition, the average citizen had to live in a climate of fear, terror and reprisals. Life and death started losing distinction. Notwithstanding the harsh conditions of the occupation, there were some groups of people who not only were able to preserve their standard of living but also enrich themselves, during these difficult and turbulent times. First, it was the Greek collaborators, people who were close to the German authorities, working as interpreters, assistants, journalists, spies, providing them with much needed services, whose economic situation significantly improved compared to that before the war.

Another group—which is the focus of this study—is that of the local political, business and intellectual elites. When the Germans entered Thessaloniki, they found a functioning network of different institutions that were in place in the city. On most occasions, they chose to keep these officials in their positions. This group comprised of the General Governor with his senior staff, the Mayor with the members of the City Council, the Metropolitan, the Presidents of the business associations, the Dean of the University, former parliamentarians and other senior government officials, bankers and other people with clout and connections. They enjoyed respect from the general public, and had connections with people of influence in the public administration, including the German authorities. This group emerged as leaders during this period and worked to address the problems faced by the local population. In addition, they also saw the larger picture, in terms of what they perceived to be the “national interest” and took several initiatives to that extent.

For the Germans, keeping the order was of primary importance and they wanted to leave as many of the daily administrative tasks as they could to the local Greek officials. Many of these officials were first appointed during the dictatorship of Ioannis Metaxas. The same can be said for the leadership of the city's professional associations, grouping businessmen, industrialists, lawyers, most of whom remained in place guaranteeing a continuity in the institutions. These individuals were also close to the numerous Jewish community of the city, regularly interacting as business partners, clients, colleagues and friends.

As the country was divided in three occupation zones—German, Italian and Bulgarian, with Thessaloniki falling under German control—the ability of the Athens collaborationist government to effectively administer the whole of the country diminished significantly. Thus, all these prominent individuals, comprising the ecclesiastic, governmental, business and media elite of Thessaloniki of the time, gathered additional duties and responsibilities. They were empowered because of the war situation and were trusted with crucial tasks by both the Germans and the Greek collaborationist regime.

One needs to differentiate and speak of several groupings of Greek elites. Several members of the pro-Allied Greek political or intellectual elite had fled Greece hours before the capitulation and constituted the exiled Greek government in Cairo, functioning in close collaboration with the British. Others had joined the growing partisan movement and were located at the mountains, forming a parallel Greek government. Yet, the majority of the Greek people were under the influence of the ones selected or tolerated by the Germans and their allies.

This group of people, the Greek Christian elites of Thessaloniki, falls in between the German occupiers and the ordinary Greek civilians. They could easily fall in the bystander category, as individuals who lived through the Holocaust but did not intervene one way or another. Yet, according to this research, this group fluctuated between perpetrator and victim. At times, it seemed they were the initiators of antisemitic actions, without however having a clear genocidal intent, like that of the Nazis. In other occasions, they perceived themselves to be victims, or representatives of the victims, trying to alleviate the hunger, terror and fear of the ordinary Greek population of the city.

The reasons for focusing on elites are multiple. First, they tend to emerge as natural leaders of collectives, especially in times of crisis. Second, they enjoy privileged access to the main

decision-makers and other important stakeholders. Third, they represent not just themselves, but the public at large, which gives them a larger mandate as well as more legitimacy and protection for their actions. Fourth, elites are considered as having more duties in a society than the common people. And last but not least, we have more sources to examine the actions of this group of senior individuals than those of ordinary citizens, who often leave little paper trail behind them and their actions carry less impact.

This small group of individuals, in charge of the city institutions, was aware of the antisemitic measures and served as eye-witnesses to these developments. Yet, many—with few exceptions—displayed an “indifferent stance” towards persecution of city’s Jews. Some of them even took an active part in the implementation of the antisemitic measures, for example as members of the city council who decided to demolish the Jewish cemetery or board members of professional associations who quickly implemented the order to delete all Jews from their membership. How did this group of people, with influence and access, react when the antisemitic measures started to get implemented? How did they deal as the situation was escalating and the Jews were forced to get concentrated in a ghetto and then be deported to Nazi-occupied Poland? Did they reach out to their Jewish compatriots or preferred to adopt a more neutral stance? What was their stance in relation to the vacated Jewish properties? What were the main preoccupations they had? These are some of the main research questions of this study.

Current Research

A central element in the Holocaust and the period of the occupation in Thessaloniki is that of the fate of the Jewish properties. When the Jews were being forced into ghettos, a government body, the Agency for the Custody of Jewish Properties (YDIP), was established by the Nazis on March 7, 1943 in order to administer the properties, businesses, homes, merchandise, assets, furniture, etc. that the Jews were leaving behind. This issue has remained a big taboo in Thessaloniki to this day, as almost all of the city’s institutions or citizens were implicated in varying degrees. This agency acted under German supervision and in order to operate with a sense of legality branded Jewish properties as “enemy assets.” One of its main purposes was to identify and appoint eligible “custodians,” on various grounds, to manage these assets.

This was not an easy task. There were over 2,300 stores and 12,000 apartments that fell under this category. Several prominent individuals of the Thessaloniki society were involved in the allocation of the properties in different capacities. Many institutions petitioned YDIP with suggestions of people for the allocation, such as the General Governor, professional associations, the Church, etc. Many properties were also given to institutions such as the Municipality of Thessaloniki, the International Red Cross, and professional associations. Mark Mazower observed that “German policy implicated much of the city’s business elite in the disposal of Jewish property and created a powerful incentive for them to work with Berlin.” Later on, these custodians were allowed to sell the movable and immovable properties under their purview, bringing them a significant financial profit.

The Germans tightly controlled the agency and often offered the lion’s share of the Jewish assets to people close to them, such as informants or agents, making it “an extraordinary story of greed, coercion and fraud.” According to Stratos Dordanas, “a large number of Christian caretakers [were] appointed by the Germans to manage the Jewish owned commercial properties, which touched the very core of the Greek collaboration phenomenon.”

The research is looking into Thessaloniki’s Greek officials and their involvement in the issue of the Jewish properties. Did the fact that the deportation of the Jews gives them material benefits make them less vocal in their opposition to the antisemitic measures? Did their participation in bureaucratic structures to redistribute Jewish properties turn them into collaborators or are they just simple bystanders? By shedding light into these individuals and their attitudes, one is able to investigate the financial aspects of their stance and their economic motives, adding an extra layer to our knowledge on the Holocaust in Thessaloniki.

When tens of thousands of Jewish businesses and homes were given to custodians, the elite circles had a say in the way they were managed. They were involved in a process of enormous wealth redistribution and they used their clout and political connections to push for candidates that were close to them. Some sat on consultative bodies. Others compiled lists of potential custodians, or lawyers, businessmen and public servants who could serve as expert evaluators. Although very involved and active in this process, these individuals were careful not to be seen to directly profit from this reallocation of wealth and their names do not seem to appear in the lists of custodians that have survived in the archives. It is very probable that they did not remain indifferent and also profited themselves, something which remains to this day elusive.

A number of these transactions may have been left purposefully unrecorded or “under the table”: a commission or kickback for the handing of a business, a certain percentage of merchandise, an off-the-books delivery. Nevertheless, by understanding the specificities of the economy of the time of the occupation, one is able to identify possible ways of enrichment and a series of economic initiatives during this period that point to that direction. As the economic realities today are different from that period, it is also difficult to realize the different ways to generate profit, either legal, or illegal, or anything in between. A careful research of the sources, combined with post-war trials and a good understanding of the economic realities allows the researcher to generate a more complete picture of the business undertakings of these individuals and explore their involvement in the issue of the Jewish properties.

In order to be able to distribute goods and to get import or export licenses, one had to own or be part of a company. The foundation of the company, its statutes, its board members and shareholders as well as its annual balance sheet and any other changes were recorded in the special annex for Sociétés anonyme of the Greek Government Gazette. Studying this voluminous publication, shows many well-known names of this period, who established companies during the German occupation, were active in diverse business affairs and generated big turnovers. Among them, one can find prominent business people of Thessaloniki, with key positions in the distribution of Jewish companies, some even partnering with German officials.

Another field of economic activity that seems to be on rise during those difficult times for most of the population was that of insurance. A high number of insurance companies was established in Greece during this period, compared to other types of industries. Some of the Greek Christian leaders of Thessaloniki are among the stakeholders in newly-founded insurance companies.

While the examples above do not constitute any kind of substantial proof, they could, nevertheless, serve as a “smoking gun,” especially if one takes into consideration that great financial redistribution that was going on in parallel. Depending on the available archival sources and the contextual analysis, one may be able to pinpoint to particular economic interests that skewed the priorities of the Greek Christian elites, when the Jews of Thessaloniki were in great need of assistance and solidarity.