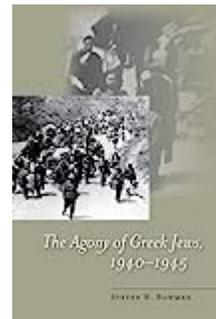




**Steven B. Bowman.** *The Agony of Greek Jews, 1940-1945.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009. xiv + 325 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-5584-9.



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## **Greek Jews and the Holocaust: Recovering the Multiple Stories of Death, Rescue, and Resistance**

Bearing in mind that the Jewish communities of Greece suffered one of the highest percentages of extermination in the Holocaust (85 percent or even higher, depending on varying estimates for both victims and the actual number of Jews in Greece pre-1941), it is rather surprising that a book dedicated to the *âagonyâ* of the Greek Jews during WW2 did not appear earlier. Centuries of thriving Jewish life in Salonica, Athens, cities of the mainland, and many islands were threatened with the most brutal and devastating obliteration during WW2. Some episodes of this story had of course been highlighted before in the historiography of the Holocaust: the violent round-up, deportation to Auschwitz, and almost complete extermination of one of the oldest and most vibrant Jewish communities in the world, which had made the northern port city of Salonica their home since the early Ottoman times;<sup>[1]</sup> the tragic story of the Jews of the island of Crete who were left to drown mid-sea in 1944;<sup>[2]</sup> the checkered deportation trajectory of the Jews of Rhodes, Cos, and Corfu, again in 1944;<sup>[3]</sup> the fate of the Jewish communities in western Thrace who were sac-

rificed by the occupying Bulgarian authorities (and deported to Poland) as an alternative to those Jews living in the pre-1941 territories of Bulgaria;<sup>[4]</sup> and numerous stories of survival, Jewish self-organization, and assistance by Christian Greeks and international agents. Steven Bowman's book, however, is above anything else a masterpiece of comprehensive historical *âarchiving.â*

*The Agony of Greek Jews* documents with meticulous attention to detail and a laudable ambition for breadth of coverage the stories of Jewish communities scattered across the territory of modern Greece at a time of rapid, often destabilizing, and eventually catastrophic change. Although the primary chronological focus of the book is precisely this final phase during war and occupation (1940-45), Bowman's first chapter captures the complexities of the preceding period that saw these communities transformed from vibrant pieces of the multiethnic/multireligious Ottoman mosaic to a visible (and increasingly vulnerable) minority within a rapidly and often aggressively *ânationalizingâ* Greek state. In many ways, *âagonyâ* had been consuming Jewish life in Greece

since the beginning of the rapid territorial expansion of the modern Greek state from the 1880s onwards. What followed was a systematic state campaign of ethnic homogenization—particularly in the northern provinces annexed by the Greek state through military campaigns and ambitious diplomacy during the 1910s. Yet, as threatening and unsettling as the new reality of living in an aspiring nation-state was for the Jewish communities in Greece, it was a kind of “agonny” wholly different from the cataclysmic experience of the WW2 years.

Bowman constructs a captivating narrative that places these communities at the heart of a complex interaction between four agents: the Greek authorities (national and regional/local) who pursued their “homogenization” projects with renewed vigor and often outright hostility against minorities in the years leading up to WW2 (chapter 2); the German, Italian, and Bulgarian occupying authorities during the war, who made decisions that impacted directly on the mere life of the Greek Jews (chapters 4-7); the leadership of each Jewish community, whose different reading of, and response to, the threat posed by Nazi occupation made the difference between (partial) rescue and near-complete extermination; and “ordinary” (Christian) Greeks, whose attitudes toward their Jewish neighbors covered the entire spectrum from passive hostility and sometimes active collaboration with the occupiers, to incidental assistance and compassion, to tangible, sometimes heroic, help. While it was inevitable that the plans and decisions of the different occupying authorities in different parts of Greece during WW2 largely determined the margins for maneuver for the rest of the above actors, Bowman also underlines how different levels of survival were also partly attributable to the attitudes of Jewish local leaderships and to the mobilization of rescue mechanisms (informal or institutional, individual or collective) by Christian Greeks.

What emerges from the pages of this fascinating book is a complex set of stories relating to individuals, families, and entire communities, some of them predictably chronicling the destruction of Jewish communities but others also registering examples of rescue, sheltering, and resistance. Bowman weaves into the narrative official documents and personal testimonies, skillfully disaggregating the syntagma “Greek Jews” into local communities (each with its special characteristics, trajectories, and responses); and those communities into families and individuals, whose different fates transform the harrowing chapter of the destruction of Jewish life in Greece into a supremely multilayered humanistic narrative. Apart from collating these stories and piecing together a rich

jigsaw of individual stories, Bowman sheds lights on lesser known episodes, such as the participation of Greek Jews in the resistance movement (chapter 8), the role of resistance organizations and international bodies (such as the International Red Cross and various international Jewish organizations [chapter 9]) in the efforts to rescue Greek Jews, and the often difficult return to “normal” life of Jewish survivors from the Polish camps and the resistance (chapter 10). In addition to the unique case of the trial involving the surviving members of the wartime Salonica Judenrat (pp. 228-229) who were accused by the community of “collaboration” with the Nazi occupiers, some Jews who had joined left-wing resistance organizations were soon to be caught in the net of the Greek civil war (pp. 217-220). For other survivors, traumatic memories from the deportations, material destitution caused by the long years of occupation, and bitter recriminations from the rapidly escalating civil strife made them particularly receptive to the Zionist call or to the promise of a more stable, safe, and prosperous life away elsewhere.

The picture that Bowman paints of the Greek state, the Orthodox Church, local society institutions, and “ordinary people” in relation to the Jews is a broadly sympathetic one—both before and during the occupation of the country by the Axis forces.[5] This is not to say that pogroms against the Jews did not take place in Greece—during the 1820s (p. 12); on the island of Corfu in 1891 (p. 15)[6] and across Thessalia in the wake of the 1897 military defeat; in the Jewish neighborhood of Kambel in Salonica in 1931 (pp. 30-31). However, Bowman suggests that these were the exception rather than the norm and that “there had been no tradition of [anti-Jewish] violence or hatred in Greece” (p. 230). This is a somewhat debatable claim: while actual violence was indeed limited by comparison to other European countries, anti-Jewish prejudice and hostility ran deep in Greece—amongst “ordinary people,” sectors of the political elite, and indeed the lower echelons of the church.[7] The situation was noticeably aggravated in the three decades before the Axis occupation (especially between 1922 and 1936) of Greece, albeit predominantly in the newly annexed territories of the north.

In the end, Bowman’s narrative underlines how difficult it is to generalize about the experience of very different Jewish communities across Greece during WW2. Salonica was in many ways a unique case—in terms of its sizeable and socio-culturally varied Jewish community, the complexities of its recent history since its incorporation into the Greek state (1912), and the experience of raw Nazi occupation there.[8] By contrast, in

Athens Jews (and many Christian Greeks, whether ordinary or in positions of authority) responded vigorously to the impending catastrophe and through a combination of hiding, escape, and effective non-cooperation with the occupiers many more were spared the terrible fate of deportation to Auschwitz and mass murder (pp. 155-161). The official church leadership in Athens, Salonica, Zante, and elsewhere took extraordinary risks in protesting the deportations and in actively helping Jews escape it. While some (and, according to some commentators, more than a few)[9] Greeks did collaborate with the occupiers (including some in official positions, such as the Corfu mayor Kollas), most were at least uncomfortable with the treatment of their Jewish neighbors—and many tried to do something to help. As for the local community Jewish leaderships, Bowman stresses that the Jews of Greece were totally unprepared for the savageries inflicted on them by the occupiers (p. 230) and thus failed on many occasions (the case of Ioannina is the most tragic in this respect, pp. 70-72) to read the unfolding situation effectively, even if the stark warning was on the proverbial wall. As in many other similar cases across Europe, their attempts to accommodate the demands of the Nazi authorities were mostly motivated by a desire to assist their members faced with extreme deprivation and then threats of deadly persecution (there were a few exceptions, such as Vittal Hasson in Salonica, p. 157). Their efforts to prepare for the onslaught were nevertheless severely circumscribed by the attitude of the Nazi occupiers, whose deadly fixation with the apocalyptic goal of annihilating the Jewish race from Europe meant that precious little could be done in the first place to counter the Nazi raw violence against the Jews in Greece and elsewhere (p. 232).

Jewish life and culture in Greece, Bowman reminds us in the final pages of his book, did survive the war; but life struggles on. Dramatic demographic depletion due to mass murder during the Holocaust and emigration means that the small remaining Jewish communities are faced with mounting challenges in their efforts to sustain their collective cultural existence. *The Agony of Greek Jews* is as much an impressive historical register of Jewish survival in Greece against the odds as it is a uniquely detailed archive of memory for all those who perished in the Nazi camps or lost their lives while fighting against the brutal occupying forces.

Notes:

[1]. Rena Molho, Germany's policy against the Jews of Greece: The annihilation of the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki, 1941-1944, in Rena Molho, ed. *Salonica and Istanbul: Social, Political and Cultural aspects of Jewish Life* (Istanbul: Isis Press, 2006) 49-70. More generally, Mark Mazower, *Inside Hitler's Greece: The Experience of Occupation, 1941-44* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

[2]. Judith Humphrey, The sinking of the "Danae" off Crete in June 1944, *Bulletin of Judaeo-Greek Studies*, 9 (1991): 19-34.

[3]. Hizkia Franco, *The Jewish Martyrs of Rhodes and Cos* (Harare: Harper Collins, 1994); cf. Goetz Aly, ed., *Beitraege zur nationalsozialistischen Gesundheits- und Sozialpolitik, Vol. 5: Sozialpolitik und judenvernichtung: Gibt es eine Okonomie der Enddsung?* (Berlin: Rotbuch Verlag, 1985).

[4]. Nissan Oren, The Bulgarian Exception: A Re-assessment of the Salvation of the Jewish Community, *Yad Vashem Studies*, 7 (1968): 83-106.

[5]. See also his earlier work, e.g., Steven Bowman, Jews, in Richard Clogg, ed., *Minorities in Greece: Aspects of a Plural Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 64-80, and Jews in Wartime Greece, *Jewish Social Studies* 48, no. 1 (1986): 45-62.

[6]. Athanasios Gekas, The Port Jews of Corfu and the Blood Libel of 1891: A Tale of Many Centuries and of One Event, *Jewish Culture and History* 7, nos. 1-2 (2004): 171-196.

[7]. Giorgos Margaritis, *Unwanted Compatriots: Elements on the Destruction of the Minorities of Greece* (Athens: Vivliorama, 2005), 91-132.

[8]. Mark Mazower, *Salonica, City of Ghosts: Christians, Muslims and Jews 1430-1950* (London: Harper-Collins, 2004).

[9]. For example, Andrew Apostolou, Strategies of Evasion: Avoiding the Issue of Collaboration and Indifference during the Holocaust in Greece, in Roni Stauber, ed., *Collaboration with the Nazis: Public Discourse after the Holocaust* (New York and London: Routledge, 2010), 138-65, and The Exception of Salonika: Bystanders and Collaborators in Northern Greece, *Holocaust Genocide Studies* 14, no. 2 (2000): 165-196.

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