The Greek Orthodox Church and the Holocaust

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In the 1940s, Greece was still a young nation. Of course its independence dated from 1830, but the state that emerged from the Greek Revolution of 1821 had few things in common with the one shaped by the turmoil of the Balkan Wars and World War I. As was the case with many other European countries, Greece was completely changed by the general European unrest of the second decade of the twentieth century. The major change was that up to 1912, those whom we would define as Greeks were not identified with the small Greek state. In fact most Greeks lived outside the country, around the coasts of the Aegean Sea, the Black Sea or the Eastern Mediterranean. Athens as a capital city was a truly modest national center in comparison with the cosmopolitan cities where the Greek Diaspora distinguished itself through its professional, financial, cultural and social activities. The Greeks of Constantinople, Smyrna, Salonika, Alexandria, southern Russia or the Danube were far closer to European social standards than their compatriots in Patras, Argos, Volos or Lamia. Under such circumstances it was difficult to actually define what the Greek nation was and where its frontiers lay. At the time, Greek emancipation was largely perceived as the first step toward a new multiethnic empire, an heir to the Ottoman world, where Greeks would be the leading component of a variety of peoples, languages, religions and ways of life.

The defeat suffered by the Greek Army in Asia Minor in 1922, and the massive exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey that followed, put an end to those speculations. Greece was going to be a nation-state, not an old-fashioned multicultural Empire. The Greek Diaspora—in its East Mediterranean version at least—ceased to exist, and most of its members found a place within Greece’s borders. It was a new beginning but also a hard one. Greece was ruined, and the “new lands” were far from suited to accept the burden of their new population. Greeks, now that they were gathered together, had to work hard to survive and
make their new country productive and healthy in the face of many adverse circumstances. The fight against high mortality due to malaria and tuberculosis, for example, proved to be an objective almost as difficult to achieve as the housing of one million refugees.

During this period, the cosmopolitan spirit that had animated a portion of the Greek nation vanished. It was replaced by nationalistic tendencies that focused on the conformity of all citizens. Pressures against minorities—of all kinds—were even stronger in the “new lands,” where the Greek presence had to be consolidated as soon as possible.

On the social level, during the interwar period Greece was a virtually egalitarian country. For example, Greece was one of the few European countries at the time to have achieved almost total agrarian reform, that is, the distribution of plots of productive land to farmers, making all of them small but independent landowners. Within a context of general poverty, few exceptions to the rules and regulations were tolerated.

The Axis occupation began in late April 1941, after a lengthy resistance to the Italian invasion. The new situation halted the unification process of the previous period. Considerations such as equality, which had been dictated by necessity, started to collapse. In fact, there were many fresh opportunities for personal enrichment in the new situation. Cooperation with the occupation authorities was not just a political choice but an economic one. Economic activity was strong in many fields, for example in the construction industry, where new airports, roads, ports, bridges, barracks and arsenals needed to be built for wartime needs. Many Greek businessmen—or, more correctly, entrepreneurs—took advantage of this lucrative opportunity. The distribution of huge sums of foreign aid, provided to Greek cities by the International Red Cross beginning in September 1942 after an agreement between the belligerents, became another source of enrichment. Meanwhile, the vast majority of Greeks lived in extreme poverty, having barely enough to survive. In fact, food shortages during the winter of 1941/1942 led to many deaths in Athens and in some of the smaller islands.

Thus the Axis occupation was marked by a brutal internal rift within Greek society. The economic demarcations promptly became social
and then political. Violence introduced by the Axis forces opened the way to armed resistance and, later of course, to internal conflict and civil war. It was a period of blood and death. Within this overall atmosphere of violence, the fate of the minorities was more than unstable; for most of them, it was lethal. In an exploding society, the fate of people who differ even somewhat from the official national standard, runs the risk of becoming a history apart. This meant that there was not a unified body of Greek citizenry standing between the Nazis and the Jews of Greece. Everything was crumbling, and amidst this chaos, the Jewish community of Greece could find little that was stable to rely on.

**The Greek Orthodox Church**

The Greek Orthodox Church is, as it was during the Axis occupation of 1941-1944, a major factor in Greek social and political life. The Church has a close relationship with the state, owing partly to the fact that there is no official separation between Church and state in Greece. Thus a strong ecclesiastical presence in public affairs is commonplace, with the Church playing an important role in the formation of what is generally referred to as “Greek identity.”

Nevertheless, it is quite difficult to assemble a social and political history of the Church. The Church archives, especially the local ones, are difficult to access. Ecclesiastical authorities are of the opinion that the history of the Church should be written “officially,” that is, within the Church. This is one reason that a cohesive approach to the subject is almost completely absent. In addition, the history of the occupation as a whole presents many difficulties. Although there is an enormous quantity of evidence, we are only at the earliest stages of a multidisciplinary approach regarding virtually every aspect of society under Axis domination. This is particularly true of certain questions such as the attitude of Greek society and the Greek Orthodox Church to the Holocaust. There are of course some publications on the subject, but these are not very convincing.\(^1\) Under the circumstances, therefore, we are limited to a

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\(^1\) Special mention must be made here of the Chronicles published by the Central Greek Jewish Council of Athens. One can discern in these articles an effort not to further disrupt
The Greek Orthodox Church inherited ancient anti-Jewish traditions. Their origins can be traced to the Ottoman period (14th-19th centuries) in Greece. Under the Ottoman Empire, the different populations were divided into religious communities, called from the 18th – 19th century onwards, millets. In addition to the millet of the Believers (Muslims), there were two non-Muslim millets: Orthodox Christians and Jews. In the semi-mediaval structure of the Ottoman Empire, these entities had well-defined functions, responsibilities and rights. Throughout the sophisticated Ottoman system, particularly in the cities, the friction between the two religious communities was not only inevitable but also fomented by the authorities. In addition, the Greek Orthodox millet had the benefit of a coherent organization emanating from the Patriarchate of Constantinople and the Church apparatus.

As one of many problems confronting the Christians of the Empire, relations with the Jews were a matter of concern to the Church. The Church felt an obligation to express and to channel the anti-Jewish feelings of its followers. As the timariot system faded away in the Ottoman world and the cities gained in importance, the friction between the Jewish and Christian populations became more and more significant. The Church, from the highest echelons down to the parishes, cultivated anti-Jewish practices on both a symbolic and a social level.

Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that the Orthodox catechism, as taught during this period, was violently anti-Jewish. The most remarkable example involves the “teachings” (didaches) of Cosmas Aitolos, a famous preacher of the 18th century and in fact a saint of the Greek Orthodox Church. The Jews were treated in his discourses as agents...
of the Devil and were accused of being devoted to a merciless fight against God, the Church and Christianity. We must recall the historical context in which such accusations were pronounced. The dispute over Saturday versus Sunday as the day of the “bazaar” (market), which necessitated the intervention of the Ottoman authorities, marked the growing antagonism between the two non-Muslim communities of the Empire on the economic level.

The dissemination of Enlightenment ideas among the Greeks of the Empire, in the late 18th-early 19th centuries, did little to moderate relations between the two communities. It is obvious that the Greek revival, as the neo-Hellenic Enlightenment perceived it, did not extend to the Jews. Eventually, the spirit of the French Revolution, with its notions of equality of all peoples and religions, caused the Jews to be included in some of the theoretical concepts of Greek independence. But the general perception was of an unbridgeable hostility between the two entities. When the Greek Revolution finally occurred in the spring of 1821, the Jews were considered enemies and were treated more harshly than the Muslims. The rupture between the two communities emerged symbolically at the highest level. When the Sultan put the Patriarch Gregorius V to death in Constantinople in April 1821, the Jews were accused of having desecrated the corpse of the high priest in a most irreverent manner. The myth created around this event sparked an anti-Jewish hysteria throughout the areas of the revolt and as far away as southern Russia (Odessa), where the Patriarch was eventually buried. The Jews were accused of having caused the Patriarch’s death through treason, as they had done with Jesus so many centuries ago. The revival of anti-Jewish feeling as a result of the death of Gregorius made such sentiments an inherent part of the revolutionary spirit.

Consequently, during the Greek War of Independence the question of the Jewish presence in the new state was resolved most

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4 The best example is the writings of Rhigas Velestinlis, in which he proposed that all religions would have the same rights in a future free state. In his view, the “citizen” was of prime importance; religious beliefs were merely a matter of personal choice. See, for example: Τα δίκαια του ἄνθρωπου (The rights of man) (1797), article 7.
dramatically: the Jews were slaughtered wherever an uprising took place.\textsuperscript{5} Thus, when the Greek state finally emerged, in 1830, there were very few Jewish communities left. Chalkis was one of them, but this was only because the city was delivered to Greece under treaties concluded at the end of the war. The absence of important Jewish communities in the Kingdom of Greece up to 1864 (the year of the incorporation of the Ionian islands into the kingdom) kept the development of anti-Semitic sentiment outside the borders of the new-born state. Greek anti-Semitism thus emerged in the Diaspora centers of the eastern Mediterranean where Greeks and Jews tried to establish competing commercial and economic networks.

The Greek Orthodox Church changed its character and function during this same period. In the Ottoman Empire, the Patriarchs progressively lost their importance as heads of the \textit{millet}. The Tanzimat and the birth of Slav nationalism rendered interethnic relations political rather than religious meaning. Meanwhile, in the autonomous and self-governing Kingdom of Greece (which was independent from Constantinople), the Church was duty-bound to support national policy. The latter was embodied in the \textit{megali idea} (Great Idea), namely, the creation of a large Hellenic kingdom that would incorporate all the historical sites of Hellenism. As a first stage, this meant expanding to the north, where Slavic nationalism was gradually emerging. The Church was obliged to play an important role in this national plan. It was, of course, important to transform religious communities into national ones; but, as far as the Jewish communities were concerned, it was also important to gain allies or at least to appease third parties, especially if they were numerous, active and – some of them - wealthy, as the Jews were. Thus the “official” Church abandoned its hostile attitude toward the Jews and established some contacts with Jewish communities.\textsuperscript{6} Meanwhile, however, Greek

\textsuperscript{5} The most notorious massacres of Jews during the Greek Revolution took place in Tripolitza, Vrachori (Agrinion) and Niokastro, among other locations.

\textsuperscript{6} The Kingdom of Greece incorporated several important Jewish communities in 1864 with the annexation of the Ionian Islands (Corfu, Lefkas, Zante) and in 1881 with the annexation of Thessaly (Larissa, Volos, Trikkala). To the north, in the disputed territories, which were claimed by the Ottomans, the Bulgars and the Slavs as well as the Greeks, there was a strong Jewish presence in Epirus (Jannina, Preveza) and of course in Macedonia (Salonica, Monastir, Verroia, etc.).
society was becoming increasingly open to anti-Semitic ideas, and the lowest echelons of the Church continued their anti-Semitic practices.

The contrast between the two ecclesiastical attitudes became obvious in the early 1890s with the occurrence of an outbreak of anti-Semitism in Greece, centered around the island of Corfu. The local Church officials on Corfu (as well as on the other Ionian islands) maintained a deliberate neutrality during the anti-Semitic events and did not support the government’s efforts to reestablish order. By contrast, the high echelons of the Church took a number of measures to limit the anti-Semitic mood, which was seen as posing harm to the national interest.

In 1922-1923, Irredentism and the policy of a Greater Greece collapsed with the military disaster in Asia Minor and the exchange of Christian and Muslim populations between Turkey and Greece. The issue that preoccupied Greece in the interwar period was the consolidation of the new state, that is, its ethnic and cultural unification. From 1912 onwards, the country had not only doubled its own population but also absorbed new territories containing a large proportion of the Greek community in the Diaspora. Effectively, both the role of the Church and

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7 We can suggest three main social sources of anti-Semitism: the immigration from areas of strong anti-Semitic feelings and the introduction into Greece of corresponding influences; the acceleration of urbanization and the conflict of the newcomers with long-established urban Jewish communities; the growth of the economic activities, commerce and craftsmanship of the petite bourgeoisie, which destroyed the old balances.

8 This rupture between the highest instances of the Church and the lowest ones is explained by the political-nationalistic preoccupation of many senior clergymen of the day. In fact, certain bishops were more closely allied with the Greek state than with the Church apparatus. Germanos Karavaggelis is the most prominent example.

9 The complete absence of local Church involvement in the pacification efforts can be deduced from the contemporary press. There is no intervention on the part of Church officials during the many weeks that the riots progressed (see Kairoi, Ephimeris and other newspapers, from April 6 to May 15, 1891). By contrast, the government and the local administration were very alarmed by the events as they could have had—and indeed did have—serious diplomatic repercussions: a number of foreign warships actually intervened on Corfu to stop the pogroms.

10 In 1890, the great reformer of the Greek Orthodox Church, Nektarios Kefalas (who later became a Saint of the Church), published the 18th-century work of Evgenios Voulgaris, *An outline of religious tolerance, concerning the tolerance of heterodoxies*. In 1891, the Holy Synod of the Greek Church published a circular against the anti-Jewish practices during Easter celebrations (i.e., the burning of Judas).
the attitude towards the Jewish communities changed under these new conditions.

At the end of World War I in 1918, as the peace conferences were considering the question of a Greater Greece, the Holy Synod had issued its final appeal against anti-Jewish practices and customs conducted in the name of Christianity. A few years later, the mood had completely changed. The signs of anti-Semitism that appeared in the latter half of the 1920s were not invented or orchestrated by the Church. But in the new Greece, especially in the “new territories” (the regions annexed after 1912), the Jewish communities were the smallest, albeit the most important, religious and cultural minority. In a country in pursuit of homogeneity and a new national identity, the Jewish position was a very delicate one. The Church did not oppose the general anti-Semitic mood that emerged, primarily in northern Greece, fed by publications and the press and expressed by refugees, veterans’ groups and nationalist associations. The Church did not even denounce the anti-Semitic initiatives of certain members of the clergy, and accepted the use made in many parishes of anti-Semitic literature, notably the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion.” The idea of a secret threat, a “conspiracy” against the nation, Christianity, and Greek moral and political values, was extremely widespread at the time; it was a part of both anti-Communist and anti-Semitic ideology. In the summer of 1931, when violent anti-Semitic riots led by nationalist groups, refugee associations and war veterans took place in Salonika, the Church was literally absent. Even when the heavily Jewish Campbell neighborhood was burned down by extremists, the Church did not see a need to intervene in order to quell the passions. This policy of “neutrality” with regard to Jewish affairs prevailed until the Holocaust.

The Axis Occupation

The occupation period saw an increase in the political and economic importance of the Greek Orthodox Church. At the same time, the regime in

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12 It was translated into Greek in 1928 and soon had to be reprinted.
13 Kakoulides, Anti-Semitism and Anti-Communism in Greece in the Interwar Years (post-graduate thesis, University of Crete, History Dept.).
Athens, as well as the government-in-exile, suffered a loss of authority and popularity during this period of hunger, privation, fear and despair. Likewise, the civil administration was looked upon as an instrument of the occupation rather than as a provider of public services. Church bodies were heavily involved in the distribution of foreign aid, thereby gaining major economic importance. The Church, from the local level to the highest echelons, became a privileged intermediary of the Axis authorities in Greece in spite of the objections raised by the Italians. This special position gave the Church an important platform from which to intervene in the Jewish question, especially when this issue entered its most critical phase early in 1943.

The Axis forces occupied Greece in April 1941, dividing the country into three zones: a Bulgarian zone, including western Thrace and eastern Macedonia; a German zone consisting of Salonika and the Vardar valley, Athens and its coastal suburbs, and most of Crete; and an Italian zone comprising all the rest. The country was highly dependent on imports to provide its population with the necessities, and the sea blockade had immediate repercussions. In the winter of 1941/1942, a terrible famine broke out in the major cities, claiming thousands of victims. The situation was alleviated later in 1942 through international agreements and the arrival of massive foreign assistance. During this first and unstable phase of the occupation period, the Jewish question was not raised as the Germans wished to avoid more problems and to prevent friction with Italy, considered the predominant Axis force in Greek affairs.

The persecution of the Jewish communities began in Salonika, which was under German administration. The city was home to the most important Jewish community in Greece, with a lengthy tradition and history. “Madre Israel,” as it was formerly known, was a small, Ladino-speaking community, which had not assimilated into the new Greek personality of the city. The local tradition of anti-Semitism was particularly strong in the suburbs of the city, populated largely by refugees. On July 11, 1942, all Jewish males were ordered to gather in Elephtheria Square to be registered for forced labor. It is noteworthy that the German authorities took this initiative following protests from the Greek authorities, trade union leaders and other city notables against the
privileges(!) enjoyed by the Jews under the occupation regime. From this moment onwards, the Jewish community was subjected to numerous hardships even as detailed preparations were being made for the more radical measures still to come.

The events in Salonika launched a new chapter in the reactions of Greek society, the authorities, and of course the Church, to this hideous treatment of Greek subjects. In Salonika the prevailing response was silence and “neutrality.” On July 11th, the Greek population gathered around Elephtheria Square to observe, with some satisfaction, the fate of the Jews. In the following days, the Greek newspapers of the city described the sufferings of the Jews in an ironic—even a sarcastic—tone. The Church, the trade unions, the intellectuals looked on from the sidelines, untroubled by the events. A few months later, in October 1942, the General Administration of Macedonia (the Greek governmental body for German-occupied Macedonia), demolished the historical Jewish cemeteries of the city at the instigation of the Germans. The corpses of the dead had to be “deported” immediately. It was an old demand (from 1925) of the refugees living in proximity to the cemeteries, now shifted onto the German military authorities. Predictably enough, the destruction of the cemeteries in November did not elicit any reaction from the Christians of the city or from the Church.

Only when the “Final Solution” appeared imminent did the Greek Orthodox Church decide to take action on the question of the Jews of Salonika. On February 25, 1943, new measures were instituted against the Jews. They were confined to ghettos and ordered to brand themselves

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15 Many hundreds of Jews were sent to southern Greece to work on maintenance of the railway lines. Several thousand others were hired out to public works projects or entrepreneurs to engage in arduous forced labor. The Jewish community was obliged to pay huge amounts of money to German officials to secure exemptions for the weakest. Rates of illness and mortality were very high. See Fleischer, pp. 304-305. A full description is provided in: Frangiski Abatzopoulou, ed., *Yomtov Yakoel: Memoirs, 1941-1943* (in Greek) (Thessaloniki, 1993), p. 58ff.

16 The passivity of the Christians is denounced in Abatzopoulou, pp. 59-60.
as well as their homes, stores, buildings, etc., with the yellow star. The Jewish Council appealed to the Church, hoping to arouse their Christian conscience. In many churches of the city, priests took the step of protesting directly or indirectly against what was happening to their neighbors. The Church’s initiative contributed to a certain change in the general mood of the city, with the Christian population showing increased sympathy toward the labeled and ghettoized Jews.

Meanwhile, in Athens, a certain flexibility on the Jewish question emerged among the entourage of Archbishop Damaskinos. The powerful Jewish community of Athens played a major role by alerting influential people in the capital. Many individuals and associations added their protests to the messages from almost all the Jewish communities of the Italian-occupied zones seeking the intervention of the Church. It was indeed as a result of such pressure that Archbishop Damaskinos decided, in March 1943, to intervene in this matter. As a first step, he went to see the German plenipotentiary for Greece, Günther Altenburg, to request the cancellation of the deportation orders. As was the usual practice of German officials, Altenburg answered that the plans had been determined at the highest levels of the National-Socialist Party and the Reich and he could therefore do nothing to stop the process.

17 Abatzopoulou, pp. 111, 115.
18 The official report of Archbishop’s Damaskinos’ activities during the Axis occupation was written well after the event by Elias Venezis, a prominent Greek literary figure. See: Elias Venezis, Archbishop Damaskinos: The Times of Slavery (Athens, 1952). It was a rather obvious effort to praise the image and actions of an Archbishop who was also an important political personality. Damaskinos’ actions on behalf of persecuted Jews are presented in only one chapter (34) out of a total of 44. In those scant seven pages, the entire matter is oversimplified. For example, the reader learns at the start that “during the first two years of the occupation, 1941-1942, no moves were taken by the Germans against the Jews” (page 259, 1981 edition) Of course, this statement implies that the events in Salonika prior to the deportations were normal procedure! The pressures imposed on the Archbishop to take some initiative in the matter are described on pages 260 and 261. At first, there were numerous appeals from the Jews of Salonika and other Jewish communities. But the Archbishop’s decision to act was taken only after Christian involvement in the affair: “Delegations and committees of Greeks visited the Archbishop, asking him to intervene (against the deportation of the Jews). Archbishop Damaskinos, who shared the feelings of his flock, then asked to see the German plenipotentiary...” (p. 261 of the 1981 edition).
The Archbishop then took the initiative of calling on a number of public figures—presidents of Greek universities and high schools, heads of professional associations and cultural institutions, etc.—to join him in issuing two declarations, one to the President of the Greek government in Athens, Logothetopoulos, and one to Altenburg. The declarations, issued on March 23 and March 24, 1943, condemned the deportation of Greek citizens of the Jewish faith to Poland and demanded an immediate halt to these actions. These declarations, while very convincing on the theoretical level with their references to the equality of all Greek citizens regardless of religious belief, were ineffectual in concrete terms since the Church and the notables were unwilling to take actual steps to oppose the deportations. The Prime Minister was warned that the nation would not forget the moral implications of this affair, but of course there was no such threat to the German plenipotentiary. The resignation of the Archbishop or any other Church or civil figure was not considered; neither was the severing of ties with the German authorities. It was obvious that the Jewish question was perceived as a moral issue without any crucial political implications for the Church or for the Greek state; the strengthening of the Resistance movement, and the threat posed by the Communists, were the most pressing national priorities.

If we consider the reactions of the ecclesiastical leaders inadequate and weak, it would be useful to compare them with the rest of Greek society. By 1943-1944 a strong, Leftist-dominated Resistance had developed in Greece. It is quite astonishing to examine the reaction of this movement to the deportation of the Jews. As Odet Varon pointed out in her dissertation on the Youth Resistance press, the deportations and extermination of the Jews of Greece are almost completely absent from the Resistance press of the period. Well after the occupation, the press of the Left—laying claim to the heritage of the Resistance—but also that of the Right, cited the mass executions and destruction wreaked by the Axis forces in Kalavryta, Distomo, Kommeno Artas, etc. when it spoke of German crimes in Greece. The extermination of Greek Jewry, however, is

20 The first transports of Salonika Jews had already begun (March 15, 1943), under such terrible conditions that little hope was left as to their fate.
virtually never mentioned in this context. Nevertheless, with 50,000 to 60,000 deaths, the extermination of the Jews was by far the most important crime committed by the Axis forces in Greece.

Neither the Resistance movement nor the state authorities, the underground press nor the official media, made any mention of what was happening to the Jews. Under the circumstances, it is obvious that the overall reaction of Greek society was more than passive on this question. The period between spring and early summer of 1943 was the most active of the entire occupation in terms of mass protests, street demonstrations, strikes, and other forms of civil disobedience. This unrest was based on a large number of demands—from economic ones to the most blatantly political. There were, for example, genuine revolts against civil conscription and the enlargement of the Bulgarian occupation zone, with the participation of tens of thousands of people and fierce street fighting against security forces. By contrast, there were no massive protests against the deportation of the Jews. In retrospect, it seems that the Jewish deportations were one of the few radical measures on the part of the occupation forces that took place amid such silence, such social passivity. Against such a backdrop, the Church could not have been expected to do anything different or anything more....

Archbishop Damaskinos confronted the Jewish question on one other occasion. In early spring of 1944, the Germans, who had meanwhile taken control of southern Greece, decided to proceed with the Final Solution in Athens. The Jews of Athens were fewer than those of Salonika and more assimilated into the Christian element. The solidarity they enjoyed was thus far broader than that in Salonika a year earlier. In many cases, organs of the Greek administration, such as the police, consented to provide false papers to Jews in hiding. The Archbishop took part in this process. The Church issued baptism certificates dated long before the war, based on which the administration could produce false papers.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{22} Venezis, 1981, p. 269. The Church issued about 560 such certificates. See: Fleischer, vol. II, p. 327. Most of those conversions were, of course, fictitious. There were many other instances in which the Archbishop acted on behalf of individuals, mainly in cases requiring some clarification, i.e., mixed marriages. Polychronis Enepekides, \textit{To olokaftoma twn Evraión tis Ellados} (The holocaust of the Greek Jews, 1941-1944) (Athens, 1996), pp. 55-56, 59ff.
This practice conforms with another characteristic of the Christian reaction to the persecution of the Jews. In general, the Resistance forces, private individuals, and a significant portion of the administration rarely refused to help Jews on a personal level. In Free Greece, that is, the areas under the control of the guerrilla forces, there was genuine support and acceptance of Jews suffering from persecution. The majority of Greek society—and this includes the Church—was reluctant to take the initiative against the deportation of the Jews but, at the same time, it did not refuse assistance to the persecuted. During this tense and dangerous period, such assistance was the rule, and the Resistance organizations even established special bodies to provide it. One can safely state that, in general terms, Greek society was clearly not anti-Semitic but considered the Jewish community’s problems with the Germans to be their own affair and not a national question.

The provincial cities

With the exception of Athens-Piraeus and Salonika, the cities of Greece were very modest in size; even the major ones ranged from only 10,000 to 30,000 inhabitants. Jewish communities of several hundred people were significant in these confined entities where public life was centered around the few marketplaces. Church magnates and local bishops carried special importance there, and a number of them took over key civilian powers during the occupation period. It is therefore interesting to trace the reactions at this local level.

Volos was an important city and port in Thessaly, with a flourishing Jewish community of more than a thousand members before the war. The persecutions started there only in the spring of 1944. A number of factors contributed to the rescue of more than two thirds of this community:23 the Resistance movement was already very strong in Volos and the nearby mountains of Pelion and Othrys, the Jews were not confined to ghettos, the fate of the deportees was well known by then, and the local society showed a spirit of solidarity. The evacuation of Jewish families to the villages, and the hiding of many of them in the city, were a

23 Less than 300 people were in fact deported.
major event for Volos. It is thus astonishing that Bishop Iôakeim, in his memoirs published in 1950, has not a word to say about this entire affair—and of course, nothing about the role of the Church in this operation.24

Corfu is another relevant example. It was home to a very important Jewish community of almost 2,000 people, who lived in their own section of the city and spoke a dialect containing many Italian words. We have quite a complete picture of what happened there: Mark Mazower has provided us with precious information regarding events on the German side as well as the personal testimony of a survivor.25 In addition we have the published diary, including ample archival evidence, of Methodios Kontopanos, the Bishop of Corfu during this crucial period.26

The Jewish community of Corfu was one of the oldest in modern Greece. The island was the scene of extremely violent anti-Semitic riots in the last decade of the 19th century. Despite a state of generally peaceful coexistence from that point onward, the old anti-Semitic traditions left some traces. At the start of the occupation and up to September 1943, Corfu, as part of the Ionian Islands, was annexed to Italy. The arrival of the Germans was a turbulent one, as they had to fight against their former allies to take over the island. The proximity of the Allied forces and their steady air attacks made for a fluid military situation, and this was perhaps the reason for the delay in the Final Solution on the island. Up until the late spring of 1944, there were no measures taken against the Jews of Corfu, and this delay created a false illusion of security. On the other hand,

24 Iôakeim Dimitriados, Metaxy kataktitôn kai andartón (Between occupants and guerrillas) (Athens, 1950). Compare with: Nitsa Koliou, Agnostes ptyches tis katochis kai tis Antistasis. O nomos Magnissias (Unknown aspects of the occupation and resistance: the prefecture of Magnisia) (Volos, 1985), vol. I, pp. 146-147. The silence of Iôakeim is perhaps explained by the fact that the EAM (National Liberation Front—the principal resistance movement in Greece, led by Communists) played an important role in the rescue of the Jews of Volos. And, of course, the Bishop found it inappropriate to praise “Communist” activities.
26 Methodios Kontostanos (Bishop of Corfu and Paxi islands), Archeion kai kathimerina peristatika gegonota epi italikis kai germanikis katochis (Archive and everyday events during the Italian and German occupation) (Corfou, 1949).
it allowed the local Jews to observe the fate of other Jewish communities on the mainland.

The deportation of the Jewish population of Corfu had its own unique characteristics. The decision to proceed with the operation was taken in April, after the deportations in Jannina had been completed. But, as Mazower noted, “a most unusual dispute” broke out. The German commander of the island, Oberst Emil Jaeger, began to raise a number of technical as well as political objections to the operation. There was a certain delay, and it was only in mid-June that the long journey to the extermination camps began under the supervision of SD officer Burger who came from Athens for this purpose.27 Meanwhile, the reactions of the Church and some of the local Christians offer some interesting insights.

The first time that the Bishop of Corfu intervened in favor of the Jewish community was on April 1, 1943. At the request of the local rabbi, Methodios composed a circular to be read in the churches, castigating those who were destroying the city’s Jewish cemetery in order to obtain bricks, stones and other construction materials. The document stated that the places of rest of all faiths must be respected.28 The desecration of the cemetery was the first sign of a hostile attitude toward the Jews on the part of the local society.

As soon as news of the Jewish deportations on the mainland (in Epirus) reached the island, a number of anti-Semitic initiatives took place on Corfu. As the discussion on the modalities of the deportation continued on the German side, the pressure on the Jewish population intensified. In addition to the generalized discrimination against the Jews, there was actual looting of Jewish property along with the extortion of considerable sums of money by German officials and Greek collaborators. Most significant is the fact that this discrimination was so pervasive. On June 1, 1944, seven Jewish stevedores sought the Bishop’s help in obtaining permission to work. Their trade union, on the initiative of its president, had excluded these seven out of a total of 52 members licensed to practice this trade. This was not, of course, a German discriminatory measure. The Bishop appealed mainly to the Greek authorities on the island, specifically

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27 Mazower, p. 253.
28 Kontostanos, pp. 152-153.
the Prefect, to cancel the ban.\textsuperscript{29} This action on the part of the Church ultimately had little importance as, despite fresh protests by the Bishop to the German commander, the Jewish families of Corfu were isolated in an old fort on June 8, 1944 and deported a few days later. Out of a total of 1,800-2,000 Jews, less that 120 survived.

Methodios protested once more, but managed only to obtain a general promise of humane treatment of the Jews during the deportation. Meanwhile, the German commander—perhaps in exchange for this vague promise, which of course was not kept—asked the Bishop to participate in the anti-Communist campaign launched by the Germans during this same period. Methodios agreed and, in fact, delivered several speeches shortly thereafter condemning “foreign theories and social unrest.” He also issued a pamphlet in the same spirit. These acts of good will did not help the Jews of the city. On the contrary, they marked the limits of what the Church magnate of Corfu was willing to do to express his opposition to the German measures.\textsuperscript{30}

Zakynthos, the southern island of the Ionian archipelago, was a different case. There, almost the entire Jewish population of 250 was saved. It is difficult to attribute this unexpected salvation to just one factor, person or organization. The Church, the Greek Prefect and a considerable portion of the Christian population of the island did their best to prevent the deportation, but they were not the sole reason for the positive outcome. The attitude of the German commander of this isolated garrison was also an important factor, along with the geographical location of the island, which rendered sea transport difficult.\textsuperscript{31}

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It would be pointless to offer further local examples in an attempt to clarify the general position of the Greek Orthodox Church in the face of the Holocaust. It is difficult to discern the differences, if any,

\textsuperscript{30} Kontostanos, pp. 432-433. The German Commander also asked him to take steps to stop the Allied bombing!
\textsuperscript{31} Fleischer, vol. II, p. 338.
between the smaller communities and the rest of Greek society, the state administration, or even the Resistance movement. The prevailing attitude was that what happened to the country’s Jews was, of course, a painful situation but not a crucial one. Greek society observed the affair from a certain distance, and no one thought that the extermination of the Jews was a national problem or a major moral, ideological, or political issue. No one in Greece—within the Church or elsewhere—considered the failure to save 50,000-60,000 Greek citizens from death to be an individual or collective failure. No one, let us recall, was dismissed as a result, and those in power offered nothing more than standard, ineffectual responses to the situation. It was the neighbor’s problem, not our own.

On the contrary, the Church as well as other Greek institutions continued to address the matter of the Jews as if it were a natural, commonplace situation—even after the destruction of the Jewish community. The Church, for example, was a key participant in the administration of Jewish properties left behind. In the city of Jannina, the local council of the ODAKPI32 (a body created by the Church to handle social welfare and foreign aid) kept a detailed accounting of the disposal of Jewish properties there. The meticulousness of their reports is quite remarkable: we learn, for example, that 160 matchboxes belonging to Jews were distributed, along with 6 okades and 350 dramia of butter.33 Yet despite the semblance of order, the terrible looting of Jewish property is well known; Germans, collaborators and ordinary citizens simply seized whatever they could.34

Why, then, the need for such an exhaustive inventory by the ODAKPI? It would be reasonable to suggest that this approach offered the Church the necessary alibi for the actions of a significant portion of the local populace. The presence of such a body gave the appearance of propriety, reducing the terrible fact of the extermination of 2,000 citizens of the city to an accounting problem and nothing more. In this way, society could return to a state of normalcy, erasing the gaping hole left behind by

32 Organismos Dimosias Antilipseos kai Koinonikhs Pronoias Ipirou (Organization for Public Relief and Social Welfare in Epirus).
33 Records of the ODAKPI Council, 12th session, August 19, 1944.
the Jews and, perhaps, its moral ramifications. The Church was the most appropriate institution to play this role—to open the way to a future without Jews and without remorse.