Notes on Anti-Semitism in Modern Greece

Alexander Kitroeff*

RÉSUMÉ

Ce court article offre une première interprétation quant à la nature des relarions entre chrétiens et juifs et s'interroge sur les causes de l'antisémistisme dans la Grèce moderne. S'attardant surtout à une période qui s'étend des années 20 à la fin des années 40, l'auteur affirme d'une part que tant les côtés positifs que les côtés négatifs de cette relation ont été déterminés par la politique. D'autre part, il avance que l'antisémistisme s'est relativement peu appuyé sur des théories religieuses ou philosophiques ayant trait à la race. L'article s'inspire fortement d'un exposé que l'auteur a fait à une conférence de la Société hellénique de littérature, au printemps de 1996 à New-York. Puisqu'il s'agit ici d'une synthèse de la recherche de l'auteur et des travaux d'auteurs cités dans cet article, il n'y a pas de notes de référence.

ABSTRACT

This short article offers a preliminary interpretation of the nature of Christian-Jewish relations and of the causes of anti-semitism in modern Greece. Focusing primarily in the period beginning in the 1920s and ending in the 1940s, it argues that both the positive and the negative sides to this relationship have been politically determined and that anti-semitism in Greece has relied relatively little on religious or philosophical/racial theories. The article is closely based on a presenration the author made to a conference held by the Hellenic Literature Society in New York City in the Fall of 1996. Since this is a synthesis of the author's own research and of the work of authors mentioned in the article, there are no footnotes.

Errikos Sevillas, a member of the Jewish community of Athens, writing about the pre-WWII era in his diary, that chronicles his survival at Auschwitz maintains that the Jews in Greece did not know what anti-semitism was, for they had never encountered it in this blessed land.

Applied to the Greek-Jewish experience as a whole, this is an exaggerated claim. It does, nevertheless, reflect the experiences of the Jews in Athens and one or two other Jewish communities in «Old Greece» —the original territory that was Greece after the 1821 revolution. Those communities were Romaniot Jews, who had settled in the Greek lands sometime after the Jewish dispersion of

*Haverford College

70AD, and who by the late 19th century appeared to be thoroughly assimilated into Greek society. With the exception of the revolutionary 1820s, when Romaniot communities suffered in the Peloponnese, the establishment of the Greek state in the 1830s and the introduction of a constitution in the following decade offered protection to the Jews of Greece and provided the framework for an untroubled presence within the confines of the Greek state.

By the time Errikos Sevillas was born in 1901 there were no serious anti-semitic incidents reported in the press. A recently produced list of the books published in Greek between 1864 and 1900, a list that included many translated books, shows little evidence of the kind of anti-semitic literature that was widespread in other parts of Europe at the time. The anti-semitic literature that did appeared was derivitive, comprising of translations of foreign language works.

Greece's gradual territorial enlargement meant the incorporation of additional Jewish communities that differed, historically, from the Romaniots of the southern mainland. First came the Jews of the Ionian islands, given to Greece in the 1860s. The Ionian islands had a long history of Venetian rule, during which the Jews formed ghettos in those cities and thus lived apart from the local Greek Orthodox population. This historical separation may lie at the root of an ugly incident in the town of Zakynthos that began with the standard anti-semitic practice of accusing the Jews of using the blood of Christian children in their religious ceremonies —the so-called blood-libel accusations. The Athens intelligentsia, that had welcomed the Jews of the Ionians into Greece a little ear-lier, was vociferous in condemning the incident in the press. The topic displaced all others from the front pages of the Athenian newspapers and editorials called upon the authorities to take immediate measures against the perpetrators of the anti-jewish riot that followed on that island. Tension between Jews and Christians on another Ionian island, Corfu, because of blood libel accusations in 1891 was greeted with similar concern in the pages of the Athenian press.

The second greatest addition to the Jewish presence in Greece came at the end of the Balkan Wars of 1912-13 when Thessaloniki and its large, 90 000 strong Jewish community was incorporated into Greece along with several other smaller communities based in other Macedonian towns. The Salonica Jews were Sephardic Jews, and being under the Ottomans had retained their cultural char-acteristics; they were the largest ethnic group in the city and aside from playing a crucial economic role they had fostered a broad range of religious, civic and cultural activities. The labor organizations the Salonica Jews created were the first in the Balkans, and they played a central role in the emergence of socialist ideology in Greece and the rest of the Balkans. In short, Salonica was the most important Jewish center in the Near East at the time.

Thessaloniki's economic transition from being the commercial capital of the Balkans to becoming an important but nevertheless provincial economic center of Greece was traumatic. So was the transition the Jews suffered from being the major ethnic group in a cosmopolitan city to becoming an ethnic minority in a city that now belonged to a particular nation state. Nevertheless, the Greek government under Venizelos protected the liberties and the interests of the Jewish community. The Greek authorities took steps against anti-semitic outbursts that occurred when the Ottoman troops left the city, and the community was allowed to preserve its cultural autonomy and its distinctiveness. Locally, however, feelings of animosity persisted and almost certainly are to blame for a fire that swept through one of the city's center, that was mainly Jewish, leaving almost 40 000 persons homeless. Officially sponsored reconstruction and the new city plan allowed the local authorities to prevent massive resettlement of the Jews in the central parts of the city.

After 1922 the climate worsened much more explicitly for the Jews. The influx of Asia Minor refugees created increasing tensions between them and the Jews as economic competition and the struggle for resources sharpened. The same applied to other areas of Greece where, in fact the animosity between local and Asia Minor Greeks was unrestrained. The ethnic stand off was reflected in the ballot box where the refugees voted for Venizelos and the indigenous Greeks for their opponents —the pro-Venizelist administrations soon reversed the earlier benevolent attitude toward the Jews: an obligatory Sunday holiday was imposed in 1924 and in a series of measures Jewish education was entirely hellenized. Finally, separate Jewish electoral colleges were introduced because of the critical role Jewish voters were playing in shaping Thessaloniki's electoral returns. The Greek government, eager to preserve the well-being of the refugees was taking measures that were detrimental to the interests of the city's Jewish element. Small, local, extremist anti-semitic organizations appeared in Thessaloniki in the late 1920s and one of them was responsible for a fire that destroyed the Jewish Campbell neighborhood of the city in 1931.

There were, nevertheless, certain spheres of life in Greece where Jews were prominent, the best example being the communist and labor movements which they had helped establish.

The interwar period ended with a dictatorship that was established by General Metaxas in 1936 and that was a period in which the increasingly difficult conditions of the Jews in northern Greece were not significantly alleviated.

Although the Metaxas dictatorship put an end to such activities and itself stayed away from the anti-semitic policies witnessed elsewhere in Europe, it did, nevertheless, exhibit a degree of hostility toward the Jews. Thus, by the eve of WWII the numbers of the community in Thessaloniki had dropped from 90,000 down to 50 000. Overall, conditions had worsened for the Jews in northern Greece, certainly since 1922.

How can we understand Greek-Jewish relations in the nineteenth century through to the eve of World War II? If we adopt a comparative approach the overall picture is a positive one, only because both regionally and in a broader European context a great deal worse was going on. The type of anti-semitism that spread through Europe from France to Russia at the turn of the century was not even faintly echoed in Greece. The gruesome anti-semitic measures adopted in places such as Germany and Romania make the destruction of the Campbell district seem as a relatively minor affair. Finally, the faster speed with which Jewish education was nationalized elsewhere in the Balkans, and in Turkey, make the pace of hellenization seem very slow and gradual. Why exactly the official «hellenization» campaign was slower is open to debate, its effects, nevertheless were to help preserve Jewish identity within Greece.

Yet, rather than comparing Greece with other nation states, I believe it is important to try and understand the roots or the nature of anti-semitism as it appeared in Greece. It seems to me that anti-semitism in Greece has two sources: the first is the judeo-phobia preached either by the Church or other spokesmen of Greek Orthodox Christianity. It echoes the ideas propagated very early on by Christian sources, the idea that the Jews killed Christ and so on and so forth. This judeo-phobia is rampant on the village-level and in provincial towns (where often no one has ever seen a Jew) but less evident in large urban centers. The second source of anti-semitism lies not in misguided religious beliefs but in political and economic interests. It is a very specific phenomenon that appears only in time of ethnic and economic friction as was the case with interwar Thessaloniki. It really represents the use of anti-semitism to further political and economic interests. It appears at a grass roots level but also at the level of political elites, as in the case of the venizelists after 1922.

There are no other significant sources of anti-semitism in Greece similar to the philosophical kind that emerged in other parts of Europe in the late nineteenth century. Biological racism simply did not take root in Greece. To be sure, other European ideas were absorbed and disseminated in Greece, including Darwinian theories of descent, but racism was not a concern to an intellectual world because it was seen as less relevant than other ideas to Greece's irredentist project. It may sound paradoxical, but the conceptual ingredients of Greek cultural, «ethnic» nationalism precluded the type of elements that bred anti-semitism elsewhere in Europe at the time. This may very well be the result of a historical coincidence, but nonetheless, Greek nationalism was becoming very inclusive in the late nineteenth century: the struggle over Ottoman-held Macedonia required the broadest and most flexible definition of nationhood by those nation states laying claim to its territories. The largest numbers of «co-nationals» one could claim in that region, the more chances they were that the Great Powers would look favorably on territorial claims. Accordingly, the Greeks arrived at an extraordinarily loose definition of Greekness, one that defined as «Greeks» persons who did not even speak Greek but who sent their children to Greek schools.

Of the two active sources of anti-semitism in Greece, it is the socio-economic one rather than the religious that has provided a basis of mobilization, as witnessed in interwar Thessaloniki. Greek Orthodoxy, though it is considered an integral part of Greek culture, has not functioned as the basis of any sustained political mobilization after the demise of the Russian party in the 1850s. This may also sound paradoxical, given the frequent uses of religious imagery that the Greek nation-state has employed throughout the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. Yet if one looks beyond the uses of myths and symbols, one would be hard-pressed to come up with many examples of religiously inspired political mobilization. Confessionally-based political parties and politics are not the norm in Greece, or in any other country where Orthodoxy in the major religion.

This is because the explicitly modernist orientation of Greek party politics, beginning in the nineteenth century, sat awkwardly with the traditionalist-oriented aura of Orthodoxy. Politics, promising progress, used clientelism and the promises of favors bestowed by the state to incorporate the Greek countryside into the modern polity. We can think of political clientelism as a mechanism linking the village to the modernity and modernization that Athens promoted. Religion, on the other hand, stands as a counter force, affirming the roots of the villagers to their locality and their traditions. From protests over the translation of religious texts in the spoken rather than the formal language all the way to protests against government sanctioned nudist beaches, the Church, and religion, have stood against the government's concept of innovation or progress in twentieth century Greece. Strikingly different gender roles accentuate that division. There is a dramatic contrast, in fact, between the wealthy male notables engaging in clientelism and the poorer, female peasants standing as the guardians of the faith, mixing that role with distinctly anti-modernist practices linked with myths and magic. No wonder modernist politics chose to stay away from employing Orthodoxy as a mobilizing factor.

The political nature of elite-sponsored anti-semitism is evident not only in the volte-face the Venizelists made in the way they treated the Jews in the inter-war period. The political roots of the treatment of the Jewish element by the major interwar parties has been perceptively analyzed in the standard book on that period of Greek politics, George Mavrogordatos' *Stillborn Republic; Social Coalitions and Party Strategies in Greece, 1922-1936* published in 1983.

The Thessaloniki Jews were a crucial element in deciding hard fought electoral campaigns in that city between the Venizelist Liberals and the Populists. Since the Liberals were closely associated with the refugees and had, for that reason, taken measures that were detrimental to the interests of the Jews (the economic competitors of the refugees), the Populists were able to successfully attract Jewish voters. It appears, therefore, that attitudes towards the largest Jewish community in the country were politically motivated.

Equally significantly, the fundamentally political determinants underlying the state of Greco-Jewish relations are verified, I believe, when we look at what happened during World War II when Greece was occupied by the Nazis. This may not be a useful exercise, given that almost 90% of the 65 000 Greek Jews were deported to the death camps beginning in 1943. Nevertheless, this horrifyingly high percentage was due mostly to Nazi effectiveness rather than due to inactivity of the rest of the Greek populations. Two points have been made and documented in the literature that has studied the holocaust in Greece. First, the Nazis got minimal support in executing the roundups —there was no segment of the political world prepared to create a Greek Vichy and all that it meant for the French Jews. To be sure, there were collaborators in occupied Greece, but collaboration was not institutionalized beyond a rubber stamp quisling government and even that brought itself to protest against measures directed against the Jews. Persons in official positions, and on the ideological right, the head of the Greek Church Archbishop Damaskinos, and Athens Police Chief Angelos Evert were opposed to the Nazis and protected the Jews in Athens as did a number of other individuals.

Secondly, the left-wing resistance groups that were, in political terms, diametrically opposed to the Nazis, did the most to protect the Jews and help escape to the mountainous liberated areas or to Palestine via Turkey. This was the case in Athens and elsewhere such as the town of Volos. It is important to stress that it was the left-wing resistance groups EAM/ELAS that aided the Jews —the rightist resistance group EDES cannot boast of any initiatives in that direction. Unfortunately, the resistance groups did not have easy access to Thessaloniki and that, coupled with the ease that the Germans could identify the less assimilated Jews made the protection of the Salonica Jews almost impossible. The degree to which the elder generation was unassimilated played an unfortunately cruel role when the Nazis moved against the Jews. Some Jews that were able to leave the city decided, fatefully, to return in order to help their families. We should also take into account the probability of a greater unwillingness by the local population to offer help, a legacy of the earlier political animosities.

The correlation between political activism against the Axis and the willingness to help the Jews underscores the connection between political interests and attitudes toward the Jews. Clearly this view is presented here in a roughly hewn form and it requires further elaboration. Nonetheless, the historical record indicates the pre-eminence of «politics» over either philosophical or religious concerns in the relationship between the modern Greeks and their Jewish compatriots. Those groups and individuals who were actively resisting against the Nazis took steps to protect the Jews when the gruesome mechanism for their destruction was put into motion in Greece. The statements issued by the left-wing EAM/ELAS leadership equated the struggle to liberate Greece with the struggle to save the Jews. The politics of the anti-Nazi struggle thus presupposed a sense of sameness

and brotherhood between Christians and Jews. Finally, the integrated role of many Greeks Jews in the resistance movements that they joined suggests that a common anti-fascist ideology brought Greek Christians and Jews together, the same way socialist ideology had done so earlier in the twentieth century.

One should not, however, exaggerate the significance of this support and solidarity and use it to white-wash the state of Christian and Jewish relations in the 1940s, let alone during the modern era more generally. To suggest that anti-semitism in Greece was primarily politically motivated is not to say that it was less pernicious, or indeed that other sources of anti-semitism did not mar relations between Christians and Jews. Nor was anti-semitism eradicated in the 1940s —proof of that was the less than welcoming official attitudes towards the survivors who returned from the camps. Yes, Greece was entering a highly polarized political moment that led to a civil war in 1947-49, but that is hardly an excuse. The post 1945 period is even less well known than the earlier ones and we will have to await the results of more research. Indeed, the Greek-jewish relationship is not all that well known for the previous eras although a series of valuable works are being produced that are providing a more comprehensive picture. Among the scholars who have published on this topic in English and are continuing their research are Steven Bowman, Yitchak Kerem, Mark Mazower and Rena Molho; also, the *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora,* a biannual Greek studies publication based at West Chester University PA, published articles on the Greek Jews regularly. Many works have also been published recently in Greece, with the help of a society for the study of Greek Jewry established in Thessaloniki. The naming of Thessaloniki as the «cultural capital» of Europe has prompted work directed towards discovering the city's cosmopolitan past including its rich Jewish heritage, and this is also something that will contribute to the better understanding of Greek-Jewish relations.

As research continues, we may be permitted some qualified conclusions about Greek-Jewish relations in the modern era through the 1940s. A case can be made that those relations have been underwritten by political factors, rather than religious or philosophical ones. The relationship between Greek Christians and Jews has experienced positive and negative moments, and in both cases political interests has determined the attitudes of the Christian Greeks. To the extent that we can shape our political identity and interests more rationally and consciously than we can more «viscerally» held religious and philosophical beliefs, we can say that anti-semitism in Greece can be preempted now and in the future. That will not bring back the thousands who perished at the hands of the Nazis, nor will it restore the richness that the Jews imparted to life in Greece. But the elimination of anti-semitism will enhance and widen civil liberties and democracy in Greece and that is the best memorial with which we can honor the memory of the Greeks, Christians and Jews, who perished at the hands of Nazism.

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