

## **Antifascist struggle and the Jews: The case of Yugoslavia and Greece.**

Abstract: Although we have a deep understanding on Nazi anti-Jewish policies, both at a central and local level, less is known about the Jewish reaction against these efforts to eradicate them. This paper will try to highlight the importance of Jewish participation in the antifascist struggle in Greece and Yugoslavia and the ways that this was manifested. It will also try to stress the importance of the political content of national liberation movements, as a vital factor for Jewish participation in fighting against the general occupation and its consequences.

Key words: National liberation movements, Jewish, Second World War, Resistance.

Recent research has shed light on many aspects of the Nazi occupation systems, on central and local mechanisms for the destruction of the Jewish population. We are now in a position to understand the ideological, economic and political factors that formed Nazi policies. Also, new findings help us understand the persecutors' and bystanders' attitude towards the victims, as well as the attitudes of those who risked their lives to save the Jews who were being hunted. In this paper, I will try to focus on the Jewish participation in the national liberation movements of Greece and Yugoslavia. In a speech delivered in 1993, Raul Hilberg mentioned a series of reasons which defined the isolation of the Jews, the level and complexity of this isolation that assisted the implementation of Nazi destruction policy. He posed the question: where could the Jews of Warsaw or Amsterdam go, even if they decided to break through the ghetto walls? Geography, according to Hilberg was important. In the case of Athens, things were better, since 'on the Greek mountains, there were guerrillas that could shelter those Jews.'

Of course, geography, the existence of mountains and forests was a crucial element. But here, we are interested in the existence of the guerrillas on those mountains. We are going to focus on those guerrillas and their relations to the Jews, in an effort to explore the question of gentile reaction to the destruction of the Jews. We would like to highlight the importance of previous closer ties between the Jews and the local population, the importance of ideological perceptions regarding World War 2, as factors that shaped the

reactions at national level and defined their attitude towards the Jewish genocide. I will try to explore, given the limited space here, the case of Greece and Yugoslavia, how the partisan movements in these countries reacted to the destruction of Jewish communities, the methods deployed in order to save Jews and the participation of Jews in the respective resistance movements. This comparison is possible because in these countries the largest antifascist movements, under communist leadership in Europe were formed and in both countries there were significantly large Jewish communities. As far as the available material is concerned, there is a gap in research on the topic in Greece. Besides testimonies, personal memoirs, there is only one study which tries to record names and events. The fierce repression against the national liberation movement and its members unleashed after the liberation, especially after the Civil War, prevented any research on the resistance, and systematic research began only decades after. The Jewish participation in the antifascist struggle was affected by the same silence<sup>1</sup>. In Yugoslavia research was in contrast extensive and as far as the Jewish participation in the national liberation war is concerned, we have more concrete studies, first of all thanks to Jaša Romano and other researchers.

82.000 Jews lived in Yugoslavia<sup>2</sup> and about 80.000-72.000 in Greece<sup>3</sup>, 50.000 of them living in Thessaloniki. We know that approximately 4500 Jews fought in the partisan ranks in Yugoslavia. This is considered one of the highest levels of Jewish participation in the European resistance. About 600 Jews fought in the ranks of ELAS, the National Liberation Army in Greece and in various other organisations of EAM, the National Liberation Front. The number may be higher, because many did not use their Jewish names, or the participation of others may have been forgotten in the turmoil after the Liberation of Greece. However, most scholars agree that they were about 600 fighters in the ranks of EAM- ELAS.<sup>4</sup>

The engagement of Jews in the antifascist struggle developed in two waves, which do not necessarily coincide in the two cases. In Yugoslavia we notice a large participation of

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<sup>1</sup> Bowman, Steven, *Η αντίσταση των Εβραίων στην κατοχική Ελλάδα*, (The Resistance of the Jews in occupied Greece), ΚΙΣ, Athens, 2012, p. 95

<sup>2</sup> Jaša Romano, *Jevreji Jugoslavije, 1941-1945, žrtva genocida i učensici narodnooslobodilačkog rata*, Beograd, p.14.

<sup>3</sup> Bowman, *Η αντίσταση των Εβραίων*, p. 23. Φλάισερ, Χάγκεν Στέμμα και Σβάστικα, *Η Ελλάδα της Κατοχής και της Αντίστασης, 1941-1942*, (Crown and Swastika, Greece of Occupation and Resistance) 2, Athens, 1995, p.302.

<sup>4</sup> According to Bowman the Jewish fighters were about 1000.

Jews in the first period of the uprising, that is in the summer uprising until the end of 1941. According to the available data, more than 1000 Jews participated from various positions in the newly born antifascist struggle. The second wave took place after the capitulation of Italy. In Greece, the development of the resistance movement followed a slightly different pattern, where we have firstly the building of a massive resistance organisation in urban centres, especially Athens, followed by an outburst of armed struggle in 1943. According to Bowman, there were three groups of Jews in the Resistance, those who escaped slave work in the summer of 1942 and afterwards those who were organised in the movement after the efforts of EAM and the Communist Party in spring and autumn of 1943 and finally those who were incorporated in the antifascist struggle ranks after the capitulation of Italy.

We can attribute the difference in Jewish participation, in Greek and Yugoslav case to the following factors. First, the different ways in which the national liberation movements developed and secondly to the level of interwar engagement of Jewish population with the working class and revolutionary movement. We should bear in mind that the organizers of both resistance movements were the Communists and they tried to mobilize primarily working class elements. The uprising against occupation manifested itself in Yugoslavia earlier than in Greece. During the summer of 1941 a wave of uprisings swept the Yugoslav territory, especially in the area of NDH, where the Serbian population reacted against the devastating policies of the Ustaša. In Montenegro the uprising was massive and in western Serbia it resulted in the liberation of a large territory, the famous Republic of Užice. The Communist party of Yugoslavia was the only political party in the country that called for armed resistance against occupation and for the creation of a mass national liberation front all over Yugoslavia. This call, made by a small and illegal party, coincided with developments on the ground. Antifascist feelings of people in Serbia, reinforced by their will to continue resisting after the shameful capitulation of the army, the unwillingness of people in Montenegro to accept Italian occupation, the reaction of the Slovenes and Serbs in NDH against their physical and cultural destruction, culminated in the summer of 1941 in an uprising.

The working class element of Jewish origin had a strong level of engagement in the interwar trade union and revolutionary movement. Many high ranking members of the Communist Party were of Jewish origin, as well as a significant number of Spanish Civil War veterans,

whose abilities in organising the first partisan detachments were of great importance. We must also note the activity of the communists in the various Jewish organisations, especially youth organisations, like in the case of Matatja in Sarajevo<sup>5</sup> or in Hasomer Hacaim in Bačka. In both cases, the participation of the Jews in the uprising of 1941 was very high. In Sarajevo alone, 263 Jews took part in the partisan detachments and the national liberation movement.<sup>6</sup> In Bačka we can count 271 Jews, mostly in the national liberation movement.<sup>7</sup> Apparently, their participation was ideologically motivated but we cannot exclude the possibility of participating in the resistance movement as a means of survival.

There were strong traditional relations between the trade union movement and the lower social strata of the Jewish population, especially in the city of Thessaloniki<sup>8</sup>. In Greece, the Jews were among the founding members of the Communist Party. According to one testimony, the Christian workers in the port of Thessaloniki learnt Judeo-Spanish in order to communicate with their Jewish colleagues. Many Jews were killed in the strikes of 1936. We find Jews amongst the political prisoners in Yedi Kule, the notorious prison of Thessaloniki. However, these bonds were somehow broken, due to the harsh restrictions imposed against the Communist Party in the 20's and especially the 30's. On the eve of the war, thousands of Communists were in exile or in prison, the Party's structure had literally been crushed. The community was forced to await the Second World War in a peculiar isolation, not only because of the language barrier. The old tradition of fighting side by side with the Christian population was lost as well. Again, those few who joined the ranks of the newly born national liberation movement were ideologically motivated.

There is another difference between Greece and Yugoslavia. Whereas in Greece anti-Jewish restrictions started to unfold in their full ferocity only in the summer of 1942, in Yugoslavia the first roundups and deportations began in April 1941. Due to the extent and early manifestation of the uprising in Yugoslavia, the German need for peace and order at their rear was threatened. For the Nazis, the connection of Jews to Bolshevism, the old notion of the Jews acting as a channel of communist activity, was again reinforced especially

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<sup>5</sup> Finci, M., 'O radu u "Matatji"' in *Sarajevo u Revoluciji*, tom.1, Sarajevo, 1976, pp. 565-662.

<sup>6</sup> Romano, *Jevreji Jugoslavije*, p. 221

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.* p. 255.

<sup>8</sup> See Maria Kavala, *Η Θεσσαλονίκη στην κατοχή (1941-1944): Κοινωνία, Οικονομία, Διωγμός Εβραίων*, Rethymno, 2009, PhD dissertation, p. 267 for the economic structure of the Thessaloniki Jewish Community.

after the invasion of Soviet Union<sup>9</sup>. For the Nazis, there was a strong connection between the Jews and the partisan activity, and thus communists and Jews were the first to be shot in acts of retaliation and intimidation against the local population. Serbia is a characteristic example of this. German reports of that period clearly depict the composition of those executed, Jews and communists, along with Gypsies. For example, *'on 8, VII 10 communists and 3 Jews were executed, related to the finding of explosives in Serbia'*<sup>10</sup>, *'Serbian gendarmerie executed 16 communists and Jews'* and so on. The execution of male Jewish hostages in retaliation was of such a scale that by October 1941 there weren't many male Jews left to meet the ratio set by the Germans.<sup>11</sup> In the territory of NDH we find the same picture. The Jewry of Yugoslavia certainly did not have much time to think or react against the German plans.

However, the policies imposed by German and collaborationist authorities against the Jews acted as a proof of the real nature of the occupation and the role of the collaboration forces. This was the case in Bosnia and Hercegovina, where the organization of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia in its appeal to the people referred to the destruction of Serbian and Jewish population, as a clear indicator of the anti-national and anti-popular character of the Ustaša regime: *'Today, the frankovist groups, protected by the German troops, kill and pillage and humiliate Serbian people, trying to uproot them from Bosnia and Hercegovina. They run wild by their dark motives, they pillage and hunt down the Jews aiming even at their physical destruction.'*<sup>12</sup> The Jews were considered to have their place in the battle, under the leadership of the Communist Party, for a better life along with the Serbs, Croats and Muslims, since *'they experienced the inhumane and criminal soul of the frankovist bosses.'* The proclamation of the Communist Party ends with a call to the Croats and Muslims not to become oppressors of their Serbian and Jewish brothers. Similar content can be found in appeals issued in other territories as well.

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<sup>9</sup> Browning, Christopher, *The Origins of Final Solution, The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939-March 1942*, Lincoln, 2004, p. 334.

<sup>10</sup> *Zbornik dokumenata i podataka NOR*, tom I, kn.1, br. 111, Izvještaj vojnog zapovednika na Balkanu, 8 VII 1941, br. 113, izvod iz izveštaja šefa nemačke policijske službe od 9 VII 1941 godine.

<sup>11</sup> Bowman, *Η αντίσταση των Εβραίων*, p. 343 and 345.

<sup>12</sup> *Zbornik dokumenata i podataka NOR-a*, tom IV, kn. 1, br. 1, Proglas pokrajinskog komiteta KPJ za Bosnu i Hercegovinu, maj 1941.

In Greece the reflexes of the national liberation movement against the destruction of the Jews were also demonstrated when the roundups started. In April 1943 a pamphlet of EAM in Athens called for the rescue of the Jews: *'Every Greek should protest against the martyrdom of the Jews, because this is a part of the martyrdom imposed to all the people living in the country of Greece.'* Or the dramatic appeal made through the newspaper of EAM in the city of Volos, in October 1943: *'No Jew should be caught. We must provide them all means to escape, all means to hide. EAM does not discriminate against people. They fight against Nazism, so therefore they are our brothers. The Jews must escape. Germans are hunting them. We must help them.'* We notice the same need for protecting the Jews in an appeal, made by the Central Committee of the Communist party of Macedonia in Yugoslavia in June 1943: *'Partisans! Protect your people from the terror and the pillage of the fascist armies, protect the Albanians, the Turks, the Vlachs and the Jews from the terror of the fascist armies'*.<sup>13</sup>

The strengthening of partisan activity led to the creation of free territories under partisan control that could provide shelter to those in need of it. It is very common in partisan reports and instructions to find references to the transfer of people from the cities to the partisan detachments, as a means of protection. The Jewish population was highly urbanised both in Greece and Yugoslavia and this was one factor amongst others that facilitated their quick entrapment. At the same time, the direction of partisan activity from urban centres to the country side could act as a channel for Jews to escape. EAM in Greece offered its various networks to help Jews leave the cities and in some cases even organised transfers outside the country. In both countries the national liberation movements tried to persuade Jews to leave or they offered to help them do so, but in many cases their efforts were in vain. Various factors prevented those Jews who expressed a will to join partisan ranks such as the strong family values and the refusal of most community leaderships to encourage any action that would provoke German outrage.<sup>14</sup> Such is the case of Iakov Stroumsa from Thessaloniki, who refused to leave the city and join EAM, because he didn't want to leave behind his pregnant wife or the story of a young Jew, who returned from the mountains just to be with his family during holidays, arrested in Trikala and sent to the

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<sup>13</sup> *Zbornik Dokumentata NOR*, tom. VII, kn. 1, br. 85, Proglas CK KP Makedonije od Juna 1943.

<sup>14</sup> Such is the case of Thessaloniki and Ioannina communities. See, Φλάισερ, *Στέμμα και Σβάστικα*, p. 310 and 335.

death camps.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, the communities of Thessaly in central Greece, Volos, Trikala, Larisa, Chalkida, after the coordinated activity of EAM and communities, suffered less losses<sup>16</sup>. The Rabbi of Athens refused to give the Germans the records of his community and he was 'abducted' by EAM, which was really a pretext to hasten the roundup and transportation of Athenian Jewry.<sup>17</sup>

Let us return to Raul Hilberg and his observation. Truly, the Jews of Greece and Yugoslavia did have somewhere to go. But what was the reason that turned those mountains into possible escape routes? Both Greek and Yugoslav antifascist, national liberation movements were under communist leadership. The policy of the antifascist front, elaborated by Communist International at its 7<sup>th</sup> congress in 1935, aimed at the creation of a political and social coalition that would gather all political parties and all social strata in the battle against fascism. The results regarding the creation of such a front were actually minimal during the interwar period. However, the antifascist platform and the policies of alliances, derived from it, acted as a compass for the Communists during the war years. In the Yugoslav case we can observe the national content of this alliance, since it was a multinational country: respecting the national identity and the right of each nation to self-determination, was essential in the party's policy and tactics. Then, in times where Axis occupation deprived nations the right of existence, equivalent to national slavery, respect to national identity and fighting for national survival, acted again as a meeting point for all those political and social forces that wanted to oppose occupation. For the communist movement religion or national background was never a matter that should divide people. On the contrary, religious or national alienations were always considered to be obstacles posed by the ruling classes in order to muddy the lower classes' social consciousness. Highlighting the importance of social background could gather together people of various religious and national backgrounds. Moreover, foreign occupation was not only limited to mass killings, deaths in the front lines or national slavery. Occupation by Axis forces also meant starvation, meant human beings becoming dispensable, zero cost work force, it meant burnt fields and stolen crops. That is why we can find in the Yugoslav case, people of all nations in the ranks of the national liberation movement and in Greece, people of different religions or language

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<sup>15</sup> Bowman, *Η αντίσταση των Εβραίων*, p. 36.

<sup>16</sup> Φλάισερ, *Στέμμα και Σβάστικα*, p.335.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid*, p. 323.

minorities, Jews and slavophones. Recognising the existence of nations in Yugoslavia helped the communist led national- liberation movement to gain popular support among all nations in Yugoslavia. It was the movement that guaranteed equality to the people and promised a future where this national equality could be institutionalised through a federal state structure.

The Jews could find their place in such movements: not only because of political affiliations. Not only because they agreed with the vision of social justice. But because those movements would tolerate their specific cultural characteristics as well. It is not a coincidence that we hardly find any Jews in the ranks of the Chetniks. They considered the partisan activity against the occupation as harmful to the Serbian people and in many cases reproduced the well-known notion of the Jewish- Bolshevik conspiracy.<sup>18</sup> We hardly find Jews in the ranks of EDES in Greece as well. We could further explore the idea that the destruction of the Jews in Ioannina was inevitable because in the area of Epirus it was EDES forces that prevailed.<sup>19</sup>

I tried to focus on this neglected aspect of Jewish resistance during Second World War. This topic needs to be further studied and research has more to offer. The experience of Jewish armed resistance and participation in resistance movements in other countries would help us shed light on the various aspects of this topic, for example the social background of the participants, how the networks between Jews and the resistance movements developed and functioned, etc. However, we can still draw some useful conclusions. We saw that pre-war relations were of great importance, and where communities were not isolated from their surroundings, it was easier for Jews to be given the option of participating in the actions of the local population. We cannot answer the hypothetical question of what would have happened if the leadership of Jewish communities was more supportive of this option<sup>20</sup>. The cases of communities that were saved in Greece allow us to claim that the will to react against German plans was equally

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<sup>18</sup> Hoare, Marko Attila, *Genocide and Resistance in Hitler's Bosnia: the Partisans and the Chetniks, 1941-1943*, Oxford, 2006, pp. 156-162.

<sup>19</sup> Φλάισερ, *Στέμμα και Σβάστικα*, p. 335.

<sup>20</sup> Σπέγκλερ-Αξιοπούλου, Μπάρμπαρα, 'Μεθοδολογικές σκέψεις για μια ιστορική προσέγγιση του ολοκαυτώματος: η περίπτωση της Θεσσαλονίκης', (Methodological thoughts for a historical approach of the Holocaust, the case of Thessaloniki), *Σύγχρονα θέματα: τριμηνιαία έκδοση επιστημονικού προβληματισμού και παιδείας* (52-53), pp. 85-88, p. 88. (1994).



essential. The cases of Greece and Yugoslavia can be used as a good example of how ordinary people, organised to fight in a common cause, can help and protect their fellow citizens, regardless of religion or ethnic background.

#### Summary:

Large Jewish communities existed in pre-war Greece and Yugoslavia. Nazi genocide policies led to their destruction. However, we can find a respectable Jewish presence in the ranks of the national liberation movements of both countries. Jewish participation in resistance was expressed by joining the fighting partisan formations or other various organizations of national liberation front. About 4500 Yugoslav Jews and about 600 Greek Jews can be found among partisan forces. The antifascist movements in both countries helped the Jews to escape and hide, providing them their networks and a safe place in liberated territories.