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The Holocaust in Eastern Macedonia and Thrace:

From Prosperity to Erasure

Historical Context, Diplomatic Interventions, and the Imperative of Memory

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Balkan Particularities

HISTORICAL FRAME

- The transition from the sprawling Ottoman Empire to modernized nation-states created deep, complex multi-ethnic fault lines across Thrace.
- The severe delay in building modern constitutional states anchored in universal civil rights paved the path for targeting the "other".
- Through geopolitical shifts, Jewish communities in major hubs like Serres, Drama, Kavala, Xanthi, Komotini, Didymoteicho, and Alexandroupoli were exposed to administrative vulnerability.



Golden Era: Economic Prosperity

THE PRE-WAR YEARS

Thriving Mercantile Communities

- **The Tobacco Trade:** Jewish communities spearheaded the transition from regional subsistence to international trade networks in the legendary "tobacco cities" (Kavala, Xanthi, Komotini).
- **Diversified Commerce:** Families integrated into silk cocoon commerce (Soufli & Didymoteicho), textile fabrication, and grain distribution.
- These efforts formed a highly robust local economy before the catastrophe struck.



www.agreekoddity.com

Social Fabric & Integration

PRE-WAR COEXISTENCE



Commercial Coexistence

Christians, Jews, and Muslims shared a vibrant economic landscape. Joint business ventures, shared properties, and integrated credit systems were commonplace in city centers.



Everyday Trades

A flourishing working class formed the bedrock. Jewish tinsmiths (renowned in Orestiada and Didymoteicho), shoemakers, carpenters, and small traders actively shaped the urban interior.



Communal Vitality

Beautifully constructed synagogues, Alliance Israélite Universelle schools, and charitable agencies proved a deeply rooted, highly integrated, and permanent historical presence.

1941: Onset of Persecution

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

April 1941

German invasion of Greece.
Axis powers divide the
territory, assigning Thrace to
Bulgarian military control.

The Partition

Bulgarian occupation forces
assume administrative
authority over Eastern
Macedonia & Western Thrace.

Legal Fracture

Civil protections collapse.
Integrated local citizens are
suddenly redefined as
targeted, non-citizen "others".

A Grim Future

The systemic isolation of the
Thracian Jewish populace
begins, severing old socio-
economic ties overnight.

Zakon za zashtita na natsiyata

ANTI-SEMITIC BASELINE

Legal Erasure

Promulgated on January 23, 1941, the *"Law for the Protection of the Nation"* acted as the Bulgarian regime's anti-Semitic legislative baseline. It stripped Jewish residents of basic civil rights, revoked national citizenship, and rendered entire communities legally defenseless.

Economic Isolation

The decree instituted systematic asset confiscations, enforced heavy punitive taxation, and banned Jews from key professional occupations. This institutional framework served as the indispensable precursor preparing populations for physical removal.

The Dannecker-Belev Agreement

BUREAUCRATIC MANDATE

20,000

JEWS DESIGNATED FOR
DEPORTATION

The Tragic Treaty

Signed in Sofia on **February 22, 1943**, by SS Hauptsturmführer Theodor Dannecker and Bulgarian Commissioner for Jewish Affairs Alexander Belev.

The treaty explicitly targeted 20,000 Jewish souls from both the "newly annexed Bulgarian territories" (Thrace and Macedonia) and older regions, scheduling their delivery to German jurisdiction by mid-April.

The Night of the Roundups

MARCH 3-4, 1943



Midnight Sweeps

During the agonizing hours of March 3-4, 1943, Bulgarian military and police units simultaneously surrounded Jewish homes in Alexandroupoli, Komotini, Xanthi, Kavala, Drama, and Serres.



Immediate Arrest

Families were pulled from their beds, allowed only minimal belongings, and immediately processed. Entire Jewish communities that had existed for centuries were erased in a single night.



Perverted Spaces

Victims were forced into transit centers. In Xanthi, they were held in local tobacco warehouses (such as Salaminos 1 street), perversely converting former sites of prosperity into holding prisons.

Logistics of Erasure

THE ROUTE OF DEATH

1. Transit Camps

Detainees are transferred under severe guard to Dupnitsa and Gorna Djumaya, held until March 18-19.

2. River Port

Trains arrive at Lom on the Danube. German officials assume absolute jurisdiction over the deportees.

3. The Danube

Boarded onto river vessels (Karageorge, Saturnus). A brutal 5-8 day voyage upriver to Vienna.

4. Treblinka

Transferred directly to trains in Vienna. Departed on March 26 & 28 to the gas chambers of Treblinka.

The Two Zones of Occupation

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Metric / Phase	Bulgarian Occupation Zone	German Occupation Zone (Evros)
Territories	Eastern Macedonia & Western Thrace	Didymoteicho, Soufli, Nea Orestiada
Key Events	Simultaneous night sweeps (March 3-4, 1943)	Sudden military arrests (~1,100 Jews on May 4, 1943)
Transit Route	Via Dupnitsa camps, Lom river port, & Vienna	Sent to Thessaloniki transit camp (May 8, 1943)
Final Destination	Treblinka Extermination Camp (March 1943)	Auschwitz-Birkenau (Deported May 10, 1943)
Result	Near-total demographic annihilation with zero Jewish presence remaining in all of Thrace.	

The Swiss Intervention

Charles Redard (Swiss Ambassador to Sofia) alongside the industrialist philhellene Charles Spierer spearheaded intense, urgent diplomatic negotiations. They desperately attempted to intervene with the Bulgarian regime, proposing to divert the captured Thracian Jews from Poland and secure their passage to Palestine instead.

The Tragic Outcome

Despite displaying immense diplomatic prowess, humanitarian zeal, and leveraging deep economic connections, their efforts hit an unyielding wall. The Bulgarian government's deportation decisions, highly coordinated with the German SS, remained utterly inflexible and irreversible.

The Void Left Behind

TOTAL ANNIHILATION

"Total Demographic Erasure: The communities that once fueled the vibrant tobacco and silk trades, and shaped the cultural fabric of Thrace, were physically annihilated in a matter of months. The bustling tobacco warehouses fell silent."

— HISTORICAL CONSENSUS

Synthesis: Remember & Forget Not

A PEDOGOGICAL MANDATE

- **Modern Mandate:** Connecting the historical tragedy of 1943 to the pedagogical and scientific missions of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA).
- Sincere remembrance is an active catalyst and a modern guarantee to combat prejudice and eradicate discrimination.
- Through local research and preserving ruins (like the tobacco warehouses), the memory of Thracian Jews remains protected against revisionism.



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The Imperative of Memory

Thank you for your attention. | ¡Muchas Gracias!

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Image Sources



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