

The Interrupted Modernity: Sephardic Communities in Eastern Macedonia and Thrace

1. Introduction & Historical Context

The Chronological Shift: Contrary to previous assumptions anchoring this history strictly in the 20th century, the socio-economic and institutional transformation of the regional Sephardic communities began during the Ottoman Tanzimat reform era (1839–1876).

Turbulent Geopolitical Transitions: These peripheral communities navigated a complex, violent transition from the multi-ethnic Ottoman imperial framework to the Greek nation-state during the Balkan Wars (1912–1913) and World War I, enduring multiple severe Bulgarian military occupations.

The Historiographical Gap: While the major Sephardic metropolis of Thessaloniki has been exhaustively examined, the distinct historical trajectories of smaller regional urban centers in Northern Greece have remained largely marginalized.

Geographic Scope: This study analyzes the networks spanning Eastern Macedonia (Serres, Drama, Kavala) and Thrace (Xanthi, Komotini, Alexandroupoli, Didymoteicho, Soufli, Feres, Orestiada).

2. Communes, Reforms, & The Secular Elite

Administrative Secularization: The decline of traditional rabbinical hegemony was not an arbitrary process of secularization but the result of protracted intra-communal conflicts dating back to the late 19th century.

The Democratization of Governance: During the Interwar period, Greek Law 2456/1920 ("On Israelite Communities") institutionalized universal male suffrage within the communes, dismantling the historical oligarchic voting exclusions based on the *pecha* tax.

THE RISE OF THE BOURGEOIS OLIGARCHY

Executive power was centralized into seven-member lay councils, frequently monopolized by prominent local mercantile dynasties:

Kavala: The Benveniste family (tobacco merchants).

Didymoteicho: The Givré family (silk & cocoon industrialists).

Alexandroupoli: The Baloul family (bankers & merchants).

Serres: The Bourla family (money-changers & merchants).

Komotini: The Carasso (Thessalonikan origin) & later the Romano, Kazes, and Benouzilio families.

3. Educational Modernization & AIU

The Institutional Shift: Traditional, hyper-localized religious schools (*Meldarim* and *Talmudei Torah*) were progressively replaced or structurally absorbed by the modern primary school network of the **Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU)**.

- 1897 / 1904 — Didymoteicho:** Boys' school integrated in 1897; converted to co-educational mixed in 1904.
- 1904 — Serres:** Established as a modern co-educational mixed school.
- 1905 — Kavala:** Separate boys' and girls' schools established in a unified building to appease traditionalist parental anxieties.
- 1910 — Komotini:** Officially integrated into the AIU central framework.

Curriculum & Gender Ideology: The AIU introduced a Western European, French-language curriculum coupled with state-mandated languages (Ottoman Turkish or Greek). Female education was heavily subsidized by the AIU, viewing mothers as primary vectors of modernization despite conservative friction.

4. Economic Networks & Stratification

Deep Class Polarization: The economic structure displayed a stark duality. A wealthy mercantile elite collaborated closely with international tobacco monopolies (e.g., the *Commercial Company of Salonica, Hermann Spierer*).

Conversely, the vast majority of the communal population constituted a highly vulnerable proletarian class of tobacco laborers, clerks, and artisans.

Labor Mobilization: In Kavala, class consciousness overrode ethnic divides, culminating in mass Jewish participation in the multi-ethnic tobacco-worker union **"Eudaimonia" (1908)**, directly challenging the political hegemony of the communal elite.

Interwar Strangling: The global economic depression of 1929, exacerbated by the German barter-based "Clearing" system in the 1930s, choked local Jewish tobacco houses. This structural shift caused widespread unemployment and destitution.

5. Socio-Spatial Transitions

The Organic Ottoman Spatial Fabric: In the Ottoman era, no compulsory or state-enforced ghettos existed. Jewish quarters (such as the historic *Kales* in Komotini) developed organically around synagogues, housing a highly integrated mixture of socio-economic classes.

Post-Liberation Hellenization & Urban Planning:

Serres: Following total destruction of the Jewish quarter by the Bulgarian army in 1913, the Interwar urban reconstruction law (Law 2517/1920) enforced land consolidation, dispersing Jewish properties. The community re-clustered in the mixed Arabadji quarter, erecting a new school (1929) and synagogue (1933).

Kavala: Laborers expanded into formerly Muslim quarters (Tshomlek Dere, Yeni Mahalle), centering on Amynta Street, while the wealthy bourgeoisie settled along the prestigious Ellinikis and Gallikis Dimokratias avenues.

The 1922 Demographic Shock: The massive influx of Greek Orthodox refugees from Asia Minor completely restructured the demographic landscape, relegating Jewish populations from a substantial, politically influential urban minority into a minuscule fraction of the population.

6. A Hybrid Integration & The Shoah

The Hybrid Identity Paradigm: The Sephardic communities of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace successfully navigated a hybrid path. They balanced the Western model of civic integration and linguistic acculturation (championed by the AIU and the Greek state) with the preservation of their distinct ethno-religious identity, which was further revitalized by Interwar Zionist currents.

The Abrupt Cataclysm (1943): This highly dynamic, multi-layered socio-economic and cultural evolution was brutally eradicated. In the spring of 1943, under the dual Bulgarian administrative and German military occupation, the occupation forces executed systematic, mass roundups, deporting the regional Jewish population to Treblinka, resulting in the absolute and irreversible annihilation of these historic communities.

Selected References

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