The crimes of the Nazis in Greece: Part two

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This is the second in a three-part series; Parts one *and* three.

Destructive terror against the population

The Nazis' response to the resistance of the Greek people was horrific. They imposed a bloody regime of terror, which, in its brutality, resembled the ruthless National Socialist (NS) wave of extermination in the Soviet Union. National Socialist jargon declared it necessary to establish "order" in Greece and decisively "crack down" on "the formation of gangs," i.e., partisans. Hitler stated in September 1944, "There are areas, like Greece, that are absolutely incapable of maintaining order by themselves." (12)

And this was what "order" looked like: In Greece at least 100 villages were destroyed and 30,000 fell victim to acts of revenge by the Wehrmacht. Thousands of partisans died in at least 26 hostage and prison camps located on Greek territory.

The method of collective punishment for the population for actions by the partisans was first tried out in May 1941 in Crete, where residents fought with particular bravery against the occupation of the island.

In the autumn of 1941, the occupiers introduced a quota, announced officially by local military commander Speidel, "In the future, for every murdered German soldier, 50 Greeks will be shot, for every man wounded 10 Greeks." This order was not always followed in practice; the quota was often 1-10, but sometimes much higher. For example, when 335 Greeks were shot in May 1944, it was 1-84. (13)

These orders from the highest levels of the military prove that the Wehrmacht's crimes were not "emergency" measures taken under conditions of the fight against the partisans, as was claimed for a long time after the war. On December 16, 1942, Hitler and the supreme commander of the Wehrmacht, Wilhelm Keitel, issued the "order on gangs," which contained provisions for mass murder: "If this struggle against the gangs in the east and in the Balkans is not conducted with the most brutal methods, the available means to overcome this pestilence will not exist for the foreseeable future. Troops are therefore justified and obligated to use all methods in this struggle, also against women and children, if it leads to success."

It went on to state: "No German deployed to combat the gangs can be disciplined or held legally responsible under the laws of war due to his behaviour in the struggle against the gangs and their collaborators." German governments defended this stance long after the war's end.

Already prior to the order, commanders in the field had ordered troops to proceed with "the utmost ruthlessness" by "abandoning all formulae and by consciously disregarding all special courts" (Kurt Student, commandant on the island of Crete), and to fight back with "the strongest available means." Several villages, which "evidently served as sanctuaries for the gangs," should be "flattened." (Wilhelm List, Wehrmacht commander, southeast). (14)

As commander of the German paratroopers and Wehrmacht units that landed on Crete on May 20, 1941, Kurt Student was responsible for the first massacre by the Wehrmacht. Under his orders, soldiers destroyed the villages of Kondomari and Kandanos on June 2 and 3, and shot over 200 male inhabitants.

The Nazi terror in Greece, which counts among the most horrific crimes of the Nazis in non-Slavic countries, remained unknown in Germany for some time. The most brutal massacres against defenceless villagers included:

• The campaign of extermination in the Viannos region on Crete, in which over 20 villages were razed to the ground and over 500 inhabitants killed (September 14-16, 1943).

• The massacre of Kommeno in Eprius in northern Greece, where the 12th company of the first division of mountaineers murdered 317 people, including 172 women, 97 children under the age of 15, and 13 infants (August 16, 1943).

• The Kalavryta massacre on the Peloponnesian peninsula. After several Wehrmacht soldiers were kidnapped by the ELAS resistance army and subsequently killed, division commander Karl von Le Suire ordered the use of the "harshest form of retaliatory measures" in "operation Kalavryta."

On the approach to the city of Kalavryta, the 117th Jäger division destroyed over 50 villages, shot the vast majority of their residents and confiscated large quantities of livestock. Upon their arrival in Kalavryta, the invaders confined all women and children under 14 in a school building, which they set alight, while almost 700 men were shot on a nearby hill. They subsequently burnt down the area, including the historic monastery at Kalavryta (December 13, 1943).

• The massacre at Pyrgi near Kozani, in northern Greece, where 346 men, women and children were either shot or burnt alive in barns or village houses (April 20, 1944).

• The SS massacre in Distomo, Boeotia. Two hundred eighteen unarmed residents died there, mostly women, and 38 children. (June 10, 1944; on the same day, the Waffen SS murdered 642 people in the French village of Oradour.)

Relying on statements from the few survivors, the news magazine *Der Spiegel* in 1997 described the "bloodbath in the mountain town": "Men and children were indiscriminately shot, women raped and disembodied, many soldiers cut their breasts off. Pregnant women were sliced open, many victims were bayonetted to death. Others had their heads cut off and eyes poked out." (15)

In the subsequent German "combat report," all of the victims were characterised as "members of bands or suspected band members."

• The massacre of Chortiatis, Thessaloniki, which occurred shortly before the withdrawal of the Nazis. The Jagdkommando unit Schubert confined some of the residents in a house, and the others in a bakery. The soldiers fired machine guns through the bakery window, set light to the building and left the victims to burn alive. Among the 146 murdered residents were 109 women and girls (September 2, 1944).

Although there were some debates within the Wehrmacht about the tactics being used, the strategy of the village massacre was implemented, with the full support of the Nazi leadership. Hitler held "the opinion that the situation in the occupied territory was always opposed to the humanity

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of the methods" and that one could only impose oneself "if one imposed brutality and abandoned all European inhibitions". (16)

The murder of the Greek Jews

Another dark chapter of the National Socialist crimes was the virtual obliteration of the Greek Jewish community. Eighty to 90 percent of the 70,000 Greek Jews died in the Holocaust. In Thessaloniki, where the majority of the Jews, around 45,000, resided before the Nazis' arrival, almost all were deported to Auschwitz and murdered, with only 5 percent escaping death. (17)

Mainly Sephardic Jews lived in Greece, who had fled Spain at the end of the 15th century, as well as some Ashkenazi, who sought safety from the pogroms in Russia and Eastern Europe. Their position in Greek society was characterised by exclusion. Disgusted by nationalism and anti-Semitism, many Jews, especially workers, organised themselves in the socialist movement.

A few days after the Nazi occupation of Greece, the staff of Nazi ideologist Alfred Rosenberg arrived in Thessaloniki. It was his task to organise the documentation and confiscation of Jewish property, as well as the robbing of artistic and cultural items. In the summer of 1942, the moves began step by step against the Jewish population. Thousands of Jewish men were deployed to hard forced labour, where many died or became ill. The Jewish community then paid the huge sum of 150 gold francs each to the occupiers for the release of the weakest among them.

The Berlin jurist Max Merten blackmailed the community into handing over 1.9 billion drachmas. From August 1942 to 1944, he led the department of "administration and economy" in Thessaloniki and along with Alois Brunner and Dieter Wisliceny organised the transportation of the Jews to Auschwitz.

Brunner was one of the closest collaborators of Adolf Eichmann in the "final solution of the Jewish question" and headed a special SS unit for the deportation of Jews from several countries. On February 6, 1943, Brunner was sent to Greece with SS unit commander Wisliceny, where the latter took command of the "special unit for Jewish affairs."

On the day of their arrival, they introduced the Nuremberg laws, which required all people of Jewish origin to wear a star. They forced Jewish companies and businesses to close. The occupiers and their collaborators systematically enriched themselves on the booty. Already by the end of 1942, the administrator of the Greek territory had destroyed the Jewish cemetery, without permitting the graves to be relocated. The marble gravestones were used for the occupiers' building projects.

Also in February, the Jewish population was forced to move in to a special district and two camps to enable the transportation to concentration camps to run more smoothly.

On March 15, 1943, the first trains with 2,800 people departed for Auschwitz. Everyone had to buy a ticket at the German Reichsbahn for a place in a cattle wagon that transported them to their death in the camp.

Over a brief period of time—by August—the west Macedonian communities of Thessaloniki (population 45,000), Florina, Veria, Didymotixos, Souflios and Orestiada were transported to Auschwitz. The 4,200 Jews from east Macedonia and Thrachia were killed at Treblinka.

Most of the new arrivals to the concentration camps from Greece were sent straight to the gas chambers. The few "selected" had to undertake hard labour, because as Sephardic Jews they barely spoke any Yiddish or German and could not understand what was being said.

After the withdrawal of Italian troops from Greece in September 1943, the Nazis continued the persecution of the Jews in these areas: 3,000 Jews from Epirus went to Auschwitz; the entire community of the capital of Epirus, Ioannina, was wiped out in one night. From the islands Korfu, Rhodos, Kos und Chania (Crete), the Nazis deported 3,500 people on overloaded ships to Germany—the ship from Crete was sunk by a British submarine; 1,300 Jews from Athens were deported to Auschwitz.

In Greece, the stance of the rabbis and the population had a major influence on the fate of Jewish citizens. While the grand rabbi of Thessaloniki, Zvi Koretz, followed all of the Nazis' orders and helped organise the seamless deportation of the Jews without any resistance, the grand rabbi of Athens refused to provide the Nazis with a list of Jewish residents.

Instead, the Jews gave financial support to the partisans, who either accepted Jews into their ranks or accommodated them in mountainous areas under the partisans' control. At least 650 Jews fought in the resistance movement. Many residents in southern Greece saved their fellow Jewish citizens, particularly children. In this way, over 50 percent of the Jews in Athens survived, in contrast to Thessaloniki.

To be continued

Notes

(12) Hagen Fleischer, "Deutsche 'Ordnung' in Griechenland 1941-1944" in: Loukia Droulia and Hagen Fleischer (Ed.), *Von Lidicie bis Kalavryta. Widerstand und Besatzungsterror. Studien zur Repressalienpraxis im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, Metropol: Berlin 1999, p.151.

(13) Fleischer, pp. 202-204.

(14) Fleischer, pp. 154-56.

(15) Manfred Ertel, "Blutbad im Bergstädtchen", in: *Der Spiegel* 1/1998. In a Videodocument (in German) a survivor describes the horror of the massacre.

(16) Fleischer, p. 192.

(17) Gavriela Etmektsoglou, "To Olokavtoma ton Ellinon Evraion", in: *Istoria tis Elladas tou 20ou aiona. B' Pangosmios Polemos, Katochi, Antistasi 1940-1945* ["The Holocaust of the Greek Jews", in: *History of Greece in the 20th Century. Second World War, Occupation, Resistance 1940-1945*] Vivliorama: Athens 2007, pp. 175-95, here: 176. The details of the murder of Jews in Greece given here are based upon this essay.

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