

The JUST Act Report: Greece

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Overview

The Jewish communities of Greece are amongst the oldest in Europe, dating back more than 2,000 years. Of the estimated 71,600 Jews who lived in Greece at the time of the 1941 Nazi invasion, at least 58,885 perished in the Holocaust. Most Jews lived in Thessaloniki, formerly known as Salonika, which had been the religious and cultural hub for Sephardic Jews expelled from Spain in 1492. Between March and early June 1943, the Germans deported 48,974 Jews, most from Salonika, to Auschwitz where nearly all perished. In addition, Bulgarian authorities deported more than 4,000 Jews from Bulgarian-occupied parts of Greece to Treblinka.

From September 1943, Italian forces occupied Athens and parts of Greece but were not engaged in the mass murder of Jews. Thousands of Jews who resided in the Nazi-occupied areas fled to the relatively safer Italian zone, causing the Jewish population of Athens to rise from 3,500 before the war to as many as 10,000. After the Italians surrendered to the Allies in September 1943, the Nazis occupied all of Greece and began deporting Jews from Athens in April 1944. The Nazis also deported Jews from other communities of the mainland, as well as from the ancient Jewish communities on Greek islands, by summer 1944.

Approximately 10,000 Greek Jews survived the Holocaust, many due to assistance from other Greek citizens and Greek Orthodox Church leaders. Yad Vashem has named more than 200 Greeks as “Righteous Among the Nations.” Comprehensive statistics on Holocaust survivors, however, are not available because an undefined number of Holocaust survivors left for Israel and the United States after World War II (WWII).

Post-war Greek governments put Greek war criminals and collaborators on trial, including three prime ministers installed by the Nazis. In 2014, Holocaust negation and denial was made illegal, punishable by jail and fines. Descendants of Greek Holocaust survivors have been eligible for Greek citizenship since 2017.

According to the World Jewish Congress, Greece is currently home to between 4,300 and 6,000 Jews. In Thessaloniki, as of mid-2019, there were 94 remaining Holocaust survivors, including 12 who spent time in Nazi concentration camps. Holocaust survivors in Greece do not receive a special government allowance, but they do receive social welfare benefits available to Greek citizens facing health-related vulnerabilities, disability, or poverty. Established in 1945, the Central Board of Jewish Communities in Greece is the umbrella organization for the Jewish community in the country; it allocates resources to rehabilitation programs for Jewish citizens.

Immovable Private, Communal/Religious, Heirless Property

Greece initiated several directives and restitution laws at the end of WWII. In 1944, the Greek government was the first European government to state clearly that Greece should under no circumstances benefit from abandoned or confiscated Jewish property.

Greece was among the first countries to enact private property restitution legislation. On October 27, 1944, the liberated Greek government enacted Law No. 2/1944 providing for the return of all properties originally belonging to Jews. On May 23, 1945, Compulsory Law No. 337/1945, concerning the Annulment of Law 205/1944 regarding the Administration of Jewish Properties Abandoned or Impounded by the Occupation Authorities, was passed. On December 31, 1945, Compulsory Law 808/1945 ordered the immediate return of

Jewish property by the trustees to the original owners. Communal property was returned to the Jewish community in Greece under the same set of laws applicable to private property restitution.

The Central Board of Jewish Communities in Greece allocates resources to rehabilitation programs for Jewish citizens. To supplement the Central Board's work, the Organization for the Relief and Rehabilitation of the Israelites of Greece (OPAIE) was founded in 1949. OPAIE administers formerly Jewish-owned property left heirless after the Holocaust era. It allocates resources to the Central Board for community-rehabilitation programs and acts as the successor organization for all Jewish heirless property in the country.

The most emblematic case in which the physical return of property was not feasible was addressed in 2011 through the passage of Law No. 3943, under which the Greek government agreed to pay €10 million (the equivalent of \$14 million in 2011) to the Jewish community of Thessaloniki as compensation for the Nazi destruction of the city's historic Jewish cemetery. After WWII, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki was built on part of the cemetery's land. The Jewish community relinquished its claim to the property as part of the settlement.

Greece passed heirless property legislation related to the Holocaust in 1946. Emergency Law 846/1946 on the Abolition of the Right of the Greek State to Inherit Jewish Property prevented Greece from assuming title for heirless Jewish properties. In Greece, property generally reverts to state ownership when there are no heirs to claim it.

OPAIE claims more than 100 properties owned by Jews before the war are now used as government facilities. In 2017, the country's Supreme Court issued a ruling in favor of OPAIE for one of these properties in the city of Rhodes that had been unlawfully registered and claimed as state property. In 2019, the Jewish community and the Ministry of Finance agreed to jointly review, register, assess, and negotiate the disposition of other Rhodes properties through out-of-court

settlements. An intergovernmental committee has been formed to examine similar cases throughout the country.

Movable Property: Nazi-Confiscated and Looted Art

Greece has conducted research on archaeological sites and artifacts that were plundered by the Nazis. The resulting information has not been made public so as to limit the risk of underground markets in these objects. Greece was the host of the fourth workshop of the European Shoah Legacy Institute's Provenance Research Training Program, which was held in Athens in June 2014. Provenance research, however, is still limited at museums and other cultural institutions in Greece.

Judaica and Jewish Cultural Property

The Jewish Museum of Greece in Athens holds a few looted Judaica objects, with the Central Board of Jewish Communities in Greece being responsible for these items. So far as is known, no provenance research is being conducted on Judaica holdings in Greece's other cultural institutions.

The Jewish Historical Institute of Warsaw holds a number of religious artifacts that are reported to have been stolen from Greek Jews by the Nazis and found in the Eckersdorf Castle in Lower Silesia. These items included ritual objects used as important accessories for religious observance (mainly *rimonim*, which are the decorated finials or end pieces used to adorn a sacred Torah scroll, and *me'ilim*, which are decorative traditional outer coverings for the Torah). The Thessaloniki community requested the return of these items, but upon investigation, it became clear that the objects held in Warsaw were from all over Greece, not only Thessaloniki. As a result, an understanding was reached that the objects should be sent to Athens and then distributed within the country. To date, there have been no known successful restitution claims.

Greece endorsed the 1998 Washington Conference Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art. It is also a signatory to the International Council of Museums Code of Ethics.

Access to Archival Documents

The country's most significant loss of Jewish cultural property relates to the looted archives of Jewish communities in Athens, Ioannina, Larissa, Volos, Didymoteicho, Kavala, and Thessaloniki. Most of these archives are believed to be in the Russian State Military Archive in Moscow. The Jewish community of Thessaloniki has a pending case against the Russian government for the return of these archives.

Access to Greek state and military archival material is relatively unhindered. Some issues pertinent to the copying, transfer, and retention of archival documents outside of Greece are under review.

Other available archival resources include the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki's 2009 published list of more than 37,500 names of the tens of thousands of Jews deported to concentration camps from all over the country. The Jewish Museum of Greece's Oral History Archive contains oral testimonies of some 115 Holocaust survivors.

On May 7, 2019, the parliament passed legislation defining as "religious community archives" the entire archival material filed or processed, *inter alia*, at the Central Board of the Jewish Communities in Greece and at the offices of individual Jewish communities. The law directs that all religious community archives should be preserved in good condition, be accessible to the public, and be catalogued under the national directory for archives of the state archives authority.

Education, Remembrance, Research, and Memorial Sites

Greece has dedicated resources to achieve Terezin Declaration goals, including the promotion of Holocaust education and remembrance. Greece is a member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) and will hold the IHRA chairmanship in 2021. Government officials regularly participate in commemoration ceremonies, including International Holocaust Remembrance Day on January 27. As the deportation of Jews from Thessaloniki began on March 15, 1943, that date is also recognized as a day of remembrance. President Pavlopoulos officially opened the new wing of the Jewish Museum of Thessaloniki in October 2019, noting that it would serve “as a beacon for the fulfillment of the permanent duty to remember the Holocaust, at a time when admirers of Nazism and fascism are emerging again in Europe.”

Greece has multiple Holocaust memorials, many of which commemorate locations where Jews and other WWII victims were deported or killed, or where Jewish cemeteries, schools, or synagogues once stood. Thessaloniki’s planned Holocaust Museum, for instance, will be built on the site of the old railway station where so many of the country’s Jews began their fatal journey to Auschwitz.

The public education curriculum includes Holocaust and human rights education. For secondary school students, the Ministry of Education funds annual educational trips to Auschwitz. Greek educators are encouraged to participate in Holocaust courses, such as the 2017 seminars developed by the Olga Lengyel Institute in partnership with the Jewish Museum of Greece and held under the auspices of the Ministry of Education. In 2014, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki reestablished its department of Jewish Studies with funding from the local Jewish community.

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