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The Jewish Communities of Rhodes and Kos

A Transnational Community between Ottoman Collapse and the Italian Empire

The origins of the Jewish communities of Rhodes and Kos extend back into antiquity. Records of a small settlement in the islands occur as early as the first century BC. The small community of Greek-speaking Romaniote Jews was integral to commerce in the life of the Byzantine Mediterranean. After Ottoman empire capture of the islands in 1522, the community changed shape dramatically as the Aegean islands began to absorb the diaspora of Jews expelled by the Spanish sovereigns. The Jews from Spain brought with them a new Judeo-Spanish language, Ladino, as well as the religious rites of Sephardim. By the turn of the century, the Jewish community was almost one-quarter of the local population in the town of the port of Rhodes.¹

Globalization and the draw of new sources of wealth and labor led the community to migrate in large numbers beginning at the turn of the century. Yet the population decline was not so disruptive to the fabric of the community when one also accounts for kinship patterns as well as the way patterns of migration established abroad new communities of Rhodes and Kos originating Jews, often called *Rhodeslis*.² It was common practice for members of the Jewish community to return home to choose a spouse from their extended family (also called endogamy), thus leading to the legendary so-called “bride bazaars” when men returned to the shores of the island to choose a spouse. Memories and stories of the islands followed community members abroad and a growing sense of the islands as storied ‘home’ paralleled their greater mobility throughout the world.

Rhodesli communities were therefore already a transnational community and established in pockets from Los Angeles to the Belgian Congo when the Italian state took the islands by fiat in 1912 from a weakening Ottoman empire. The Italian period has commonly been narrated as a ‘golden age’ in which the Italian investment into rebuilding Rhodes and supported the welfare of the Jewish community. Yet the Italian period was to prove the last phase of a Jewish minority in Rhodes and Kos. In 1944, during the Nazi occupation of the islands, the last remaining Jewish residents in the islands (about 1800 persons) were deported to concentration camps in Poland. There were only 100 survivors from the camps and none of them returned to the islands after the war. The diaspora of the Jewish community from the islands has ultimately engendered their survival into the twenty-first century but their past in the islands continues to be debated.

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2 Hirschon, Renee, “Jews from Rhodes in Central and South Africa” in *Encyclopedia of Diasporas: Immigrant and Refugee Cultures Around the World*, Vol II, Melvin Ember, ed. (New York: Springer, 2007), p. 925-934; Keretz Yitzchak. “The Migration of Rhodian Jews to Africa and the Americas, 1900-1914: The Beginning of New Sephardic Communities.” In *Patterns of Migration, 1850-1914: Proceedings of the International Academic Conference*, Aubrey Newman and Stephen Massil, eds. (London: The Jewish Historical Society of England and the Institute of Jewish Studies, University College, London, 1996).



FIGURE 1: Jewish girls' school, the Alliance Israelite Universelle, Rhodes, early 20th century.

The Jewish communities of Rhodes and Kos today are but a *memento mori* of an Ottoman past in the islands—almost solely constituted by monuments that remember the community's deportation and destruction during the Second World War. The diaspora gathers in their storied homeland on the anniversary of the deportation, July 20th, to remember the loss of their community. But the permanent year-round community is miniscule and does not constitute a recognized minority (unlike the Turkish community). The multi-ethnic, Ottoman past in the islands is hawked to visitors through the trappings of contemporary mass tourism. The old Jewish quarter in the two islands, called the *Djuderia*, has become another Greek neighborhood with Greek toponymy and Greeks residing in the old Jewish houses, a transformation that reflects a delicate legal situation. The Jewish community was not only not Greek speaking in modern times, but because of the Italian empire's rule of the islands (1912-1943), it was also never at any point part of the Greek nation and *Rhodeslis* have never held Greek nationality. Since the islands were not officially part of Greece at the time of the Second World War, the Jewish community of the islands has not had entitlement to the Greek state's reparations to survivors of the Holocaust.¹

1 Rhodes and Kos fell outside of the purview of the official Organization for the Welfare and Reparation of Israelites of Greece (Οργανισμός Περιθάλψεως και Αποκατάστασης Ισραηλιτών Ελλάδος). Alexis Rappas, "Memory and Property in Insular Spaces: The Case of Postcolonial Rhodes" Working Paper presented at "Islands in the Mediterranean: New Theorisations of Insularity" European University Institute, Florence, Italy, May 2014. See Esther Fintz-Menasce, *Buio nell'Isola*, for a description of the Jewish quarter, the Juderia, has been changed entirely to Greek toponymy with little trace of the Jewish quarter as it once was, p. 141-146.

Like all sites of the Holocaust in Europe, questions remain about how the horror of the deportations could occur, but in the case of the Jewish communities of Rhodes and Kos, such questions are complicated by further ones about questions of the community's identity, and how their experience during their last resident phase in the islands during Italian occupation impacted them during the Holocaust, and after. From 1912 until 1943, the Italian empire controlled the islands as one of their overseas colonies during which time a robust Italian commitment to expansion and investment led the Rhodes Jewish community into an important relationship with the Italian state. The most notable members of the community were often imagined by the Italian government as a key ally in their expansion into the Levant; yet later, after Italy adopted an Anti-Semitic position, began a process of de-naturalization and persecution that foreshadowed the community's demise during Nazi occupation of the Aegean. These facts have only recently begun to be documented and discussed. In the field of Italian history, the islands remain marginal to the history of Italian colonialism under both the Liberal and Fascist states. Italy's colonial interests are still remembered as primarily focused on Africa, and though new global approaches continue to widen this frame, the study of Italian empire remains marginal to European history.² Most Greek language history follows a similar pattern and while written from the perspective of the Greek national narrative barely touches upon the Jewish communities.

A new generation of research as well as the opening of new archives has however drawn increasing attention to the Jewish community encouraging a fresh interrogation of the available sources. In addition to increasing availability of the Greek State Archives of the Dodecanese Prefecture (Γενικά Αρχείων του Κράτους του Δωδεκανεσου), an entirely new body of sources was catalogued in 2013. The surveillance files of the Carabinieri—the military arm of the Italian police—links the Italian presence in the islands directly to Mussolini's regime of surveillance, and suggests the existence of a para-state, one beyond the local colonial Italian administration, which surveilled both the islands inhabitants as well as, somewhat paradoxically, the ruling Italian administration. With over 140,000 documents dedicated exclusively to the islands' inhabitants, which numbered 120,000 at the time of the Italian rule, the documentation testifies to the gross level of surveillance of the Fascist state. The existence of the archive speaks scholarly calls to revisit the myth of the 'good Italian', or the soft-peddalling of the Fascist dictatorship under Mussolini.³ The still very recent cataloguing of these documents also testifies to the challenge that the local community in the islands still faces in confronting the period of Italian occupation.⁴

Most of the surveillance documents concern the Greek community, the clear ethnic majority in the islands at the time of Italian rule. Yet researchers have also combed the documentation to find important records about the Jewish community and have further scrutinized the 1943-44 period when the abrupt collapse of Mussolini's dictatorship and the Italian armistice with the allies led to Nazi invasion and control of the islands. In their recent book, Italian researcher, Marco Clementi, and head archivist of the Greek national archives of the Dodecanese, Ireni Toliou, examine how the Italian Anti-Semitic Legislation of 1938 inaugurated a process of labeling and persecuting the Jewish

2 Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller, eds. *Italian Colonialism* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005).

3 See Paul Corner, "Whatever Happened to Dictatorship?" *Journal of Modern History* (74:2) 2006, 325-351. For a recent work of scholarship that underscores the level of surveillance and imprisonment of Mussolini's dictatorship, see Michael Ebner, *Ordinary Violence under Mussolini* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

4 For almost six decades after the end of the war these documents sat untouched in the municipality of Rhodes; they were finally partially catalogued in 2014.

communities of Rhodes and Kos that would be exacerbated during the deportations of July 1944.⁵ The authors demonstrate that the vestiges of the Fascist administration in the islands was still intact at the time of the deportations and indicate potential collaboration between the Italian military and the Nazi occupying forces regarding the labeling and collecting of the community in July of 1944. Their argument supports earlier research demonstrating that following the 1943 armistice a part of the Italian administration remained loyal to Mussolini's national-socialist republic of Salò.⁶ This new research makes clear that if the Jews of Rhodes and Kos must from here forward to be included in the history of Jews in Greece (as they have not often been previously), that they also need to be included within the Italian history of the Holocaust.

Within the wider frame of reconsidering Italian empire, the history of the Jewish community of Rhodes and Kos also offer an important lens onto Fascist Italy's relationship to ideologies of race and Anti-Semitism. One challenge of placing the Jewish communities of Rhodes and Kos within the Italian history of Fascist dictatorship, however, is the positive collective narrative of the Italians that has remained with the Rhodesli survivors and its diaspora. Memoirs by survivors of the deportations, some historical accounts and local history insist upon the Italian rule in the islands as a 'golden age' during which the community thrived and prospered.⁷ In fact, under Italian rule, the population numbers of the community continued to dwindle with emigration an increasing fact of life. Yet memoirs and histories single out the quality—and indeed, culture—of Italian rule as marking the period of Italian rule. More than one scholar has analyzed the enduring presence of popular stereotypes about Italians and Aegean natives as 'one face, one race' ('*una faccia, una razza*') within collective narratives about Italian occupation in the Dodecanese.⁸ But these studies have always theorized the presence of such "nostalgia" through the lens of Greek national identity, and have variously speculated about the ways positive memories of the Italians may imply a critique of the Greek nation-state and Greek national identity, and have overlooked what such stereotypes may reveal about local perceptions of Italian rule. To also include the Jewish community's experience in the historical record of the islands, as well as within debates about memory and a 'postcolonial'

5 Marco Clementi and Ireni Toliou, *Gli ultimi ebrei di Rodi: Leggi razziali e deportazioni nel Dodecaneso italiano, 1938-1948* (Roma: DerriveApprodi, 2015).

6 Luca Pignataro, *Il Dodecaneso italiano, 1912-47*. Chieti: Solfanelli, 2011. See also, Luca Pignataro, "The Italian islands in the Aegean from 8 September 1943 to the end of World War II" *Clio: rivista trimestrale di studi storici* 37:3 (2001): 465-552.

7 Survivors of the period have completed a number of memoirs and works of history. The following texts all touch upon the Italian period in the islands though to greater and lesser degrees. Esther Fintz Menasce, *Gli Ebrei a Rodi* (Milan: Guerrini, 1991); Hizkia M. Franco, *The Jewish martyrs of Rhodes and Cos*; translated from the original French by Joseph Franco (Zimbabwe: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994); Haham Solomon Gaon and Mitchell Serels, eds. *Del Fuego, Sephardim and the Holocaust* (New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, 1995); Lévy, Isaac Jack. *Jewish Rhodes: a lost culture* (Berkeley: Magnes Museum, 1998); Levy, Rebecca Amato. *I remember Rhodes* (New York: Sepher-Hermon Press for Sephardic House at Congregation Shearith Israel, 1987); Laura Varon, *The Juderia: a Holocaust survivor's tribute to the Jewish community of Rhodes* (Westport: Praeger, 1999).

8 The presence of these stereotypes among the Greek community has been interpreted in myriad ways. For Nicholas Doumanis, positive memories of the Italian period offer an implicit critique of the Greek national narrative, and point to dissatisfaction with the Greek nation-state. Nicholas Doumanis, *Myth and Memory in the Mediterranean: Remembering Fascist Empire* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997). For Michael Herzfeld, these myths can be located within practices of "self-stereotyping", e.g., the Greek proclivity to adopt the label of an unruly people that requires the authoritarian rule of dictatorship. Yet neither of these scholars address the history of the Jewish community, and neglect the fact that the 'good Italian' also defines, to some extent, their memory of the interwar period. Michael Herzfeld, "The Horns of the Mediterraneanist Dilemma" *American Ethnologist* 11:3 (1984), 439-454. Yet neither scholar takes into account the way the nostalgia and stereotypes of Italian familiarity with the Aegean natives cut across the divides of communal narratives.



FIGURE 2: B'nai B'rith meeting in the Notrica Foundation building 1930.

afterlife, stands to reveal a fuller picture of the Aegean and eastern Mediterranean region in its last cosmopolitan phase before the preeminence of the nation-state.

The purpose of this article is to provide a short introduction to the community's experience under Italian imperial rule and to add some further perspectives to these new discussions about the community's experience during the Second World War by touching on their sense of belonging and identity to the Italian state prior to the Nazi occupation. The article describes how the community's own experiences of education, culture, trade, and not least, global migration, closely aligned with Italian policies of expansion at the time. It reconsiders the issue of the community's positive memories by describing the Italian citizenship which came about as a result of the collapse of the Ottoman empire and the rise of the Greek and Turkish nation-states in the Aegean.

**The Jewish communities of Rhodes and Kos at the frontier of
Italy's Mediterranean expansion, 1912-24**

Italy's commitment to secure an empire in the Mediterranean had roots as far back as the Italian national unification. A significant Italian population was already established in Tunisia (including a large Jewish community originally from Livorno) by the time of the unification of the peninsula. Italy's first colonial campaigns were in East Africa at the end of the nineteenth century, and largely aimed at establishing a resettlement colony that could help resolve a mass unemployment problem and stem the massive tides of emigration toward North and South America. Yet the Mediterranean, where the peninsula had historically derived both its wealth and culture, remained an undisputed objective of Italian expansion, and in 1911, anticipating the collapse of the Ottoman empire, Italy

invaded the North African provinces of Misurata and Cirenaica. These regions were eventually annexed as Libya, inaugurating what was to prove a thirty-year commitment to colonial conquest and state-building in North Africa, also known as Italy's 'fourth shore' among nationalists. Rhodes and the other Aegean islands were soon, too, to play a very important role in Italian expansion, and at the end of the First World War, were defined as promoting an Italian a 'sphere of influence' in the eastern Mediterranean.



FIGURE 3: Jewish boys' elementary school, Scuole Israelitiche Italiane (former Alliance Israelite Universelle), Rhodes, June 1936.

The taking of Rhodes and the other the Aegean islands was a byproduct of the Italian war against the Turks for Libya (1911-12), but it was instantly a success story for the nationalists that had championed Italian expansion as a remedy for national disillusionment caused by widespread poverty and emigration.⁹ As the war for Libya had dragged on for months—well beyond what the Italian nationalists had anticipated and promised the Italian population, with Turkish reprisals unrelenting—the Italian government determined it should take another section of Turkish territory to force the Ottoman Porte to sign a treaty of peace over North Africa. Italy succeeded in convincing its Austro-Hungarian and German allies of the Triple Alliance that the Dodecanese islands were so

⁹ See Enrico Corradini, *Sopra le vie del nuovo impero: dalla Tunisia all'Egeo* (Milan: Fratelli Treves, 1912).

far to the east that they could not be considered part of the Balkans. In the spring of 1912, the Italian army swept across Rhodes and other Aegean islands while encountering resistance only from the Turkish rulers. Many Greeks allegedly fought alongside the Italian army while believing that they had come to 'liberate' them from Turkish rule.

At the time of the Italian landing, under the influence of the Young Turks, the Ottoman Porte had begun to revoke the special 'privileges' and autonomy that the islands had enjoyed since 1821.¹⁰ The Italian arrival in the islands was widely seen as a 'liberation' of the islands from Turkish rule, and the presumed reinstatement of the 'privileges' (freedom from Ottoman taxation) was heralded by the Orthodox community as proof of the Italian army's good intentions. But when the Italian administration also turned to opening a night school in Rhodes for teaching the Italian language, none of the Greek Orthodox community voluntarily enrolled in Italian language night classes. Their disdain was in definite contrast with a handful of Turks, but especially the Jewish community in the island, which greeted this initiative with enthusiasm.¹¹ Around the corner from the old Synagogue of Rhodes a monument (which still stands today) was erected in homage the first governor of the islands. In Italian, it is written, "Al Generale Giovanni Ameglio, La Comunità Israelite Riconoscente" (1913), a message of thanks to the general that led the conquest of the islands and that acted as the first Italian governor of Rhodes. The monument testifies that upon the Italian army's arrival in 1912, the Italian administration immediately established a positive relationship with the local Jewish community in the island.¹²

After an initial treaty of peace with the Ottoman empire over Libya and the Aegean, Italy obtained a further promise that it might retain the islands, along with several other areas in the Balkans, in exchange for entering World War One against its former partners in the Triple Alliance (Pact of London, 1915).¹³ The possibility of permanent sovereignty encouraged the Italian administration to secure a long-term Italian presence in the islands whatever the outcome of the war. The resident Italian government broke ground on projects to restore the Christian monuments in the islands—starting with the re-construction of the walls of old fortified city built during the medieval crusader period in the island. But the capstone of its efforts to was the project to establish a district of Italian schools that promoted the diffusion of the Italian language among the native population of the islands. Projects to spread the Italian language spearheaded by organizations such as the *Dante Alighieri Society* had been successfully adopted in North and South America during the phase of

¹⁰ A small minority of the Dodecanese population had participated in the 1821 revolution against the Turks. The nascent Greek state chose, however, to trade the Dodecanese and integrate the much larger, and closer, island of Euboea. In exchange, the Dodecanese islands received special 'privileges' exempting them from most Ottoman taxation. Islands such as Simi meanwhile had enjoyed an independent status as insular territories of the Austro-Hapsburg empire.

¹¹ For Italian education programs during the First World War see the General State Archives of the Prefecture of the Dodecanese (here forward, GAK DOD), Box K.6/Envelope 37/1915-17.

¹² The novelty of this is all the greater when one reflects that the Jewish communities had lived well under Ottoman rule and that, unlike the Greek community, they did not have the same 'national' motivations to wish that the era of Turkish rule be brought an end.

¹³ In the initial treaty of peace with the Ottoman Porte, Italy promised to return the islands once the entire Turkish population had evacuated North Africa. This was a facile promise. Documents from the Historical Archive of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs show that Italy had every intention of retaining the islands for as long as possible. See Richard Bosworth, "Britain and Italy's Acquisition of the Dodecanese, 1912-15" *The Historical Journal*, 13:4 (1970), 683-705.

consolidating an imperial program through policies toward emigrants.¹⁴ But now such institutions found new opportunity to promote Italian as an official *lingua franca* of the Mediterranean. Given the favorable relationship between the Jewish community and the Italian government, the administration was able to arrest control of the schools run by the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*.¹⁵ One French-Catholic missionary in the island complained about the transformation of an *Alliance Israélite Universelle* into an Italian operation, but the Italian administration successfully enlisted the Vatican to obtain his consent and proceeded to sacked all the French teachers at the school and replace them with Italian ones.

In the early part of its rule, the Italian government also assessed numerous applications from Jewish persons for positions within the local administration. Requests were sometimes from natives of the islands, but other requests came from Jewish persons residing in the eastern Aegean--some even hailed originally from Italian merchant cities such as Livorno—who desired to be a part of the new Italian administration. Jewish applicants were highly competent tending to have a high level of education and possessing skills such as accounting while competent in four or even five languages of the Mediterranean, a fact that was not lost on the Italian government who often found positions for such Jewish persons in the nascent Italian administration.¹⁶ When the First World War and the collapse of the Ottoman empire gave Italy, now under the rule of the Fascist party, with an unforeseen opportunity to annex not just Rhodes but fourteen Southeastern Aegean islands--including the distant and tiny island of Kastellorizo—early seed initiatives to establish an Rhodes as a major outpost of Italian language and culture in the Mediterranean were no longer far-fetched.

Official annexation to Italy occurred in 1924 through the Second Lausanne Treaty resolving the end of the Ottoman empire and the Greco-Turkish War. While the annexation of the Dodecanese was hailed as a clear victory by Mussolini’s new Fascist state, in contrast with other territories in the Balkans that it had failed to receive in exchange for its service in World War One, it raised new questions about whether the islands were one of Italy’s colonies or whether they were in some way an independent territory under the tutelage of the Italian state. Given the sensitivity of viewing a European population of colonial subjects, the Dodecanese were annexed as a “possession” (*possedimento*) and kept under the direction of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The nationality among the islands natives remained however an issue that underscored ambivalences about the Italian mandate in the islands. Since Italy’s establishment of an overseas empire with its first colonization of Eritrea in 1881, the Italian state had issued some form of Italian status to colonial subjects. In 1919, with annexation of Libya, Italy had further created a form of colonial citizenship for non-Bedouin Libyans (itself modeled on the French colonial citizenship law for the indigenous of Algeria).¹⁷ In the Dodecanese, however, the resident communities in the islands could not be equated with African natives, but nor could they be considered ‘Italians’ without creating a diplomatic upheaval.

The Italian government eventually introduced a sui generis form of citizenship called Italian Aegean Citizenship (*cittadinanza egea italiana*), which made the islands’ entire population, including the Jewish communities into subjects of the Italian state, but which bore no political rights (or

14 On Italy’s programs to diffuse Italian language and identity among its emigrants see Mark Choate, *Emigrant Nation* (Harvard University Press, 2008).

15 The *Alliance* had been instrumental for education among Jewish communities the eastern Mediterranean throughout the nineteenth century. See Aron Rodrigue, *French Jews, Turkish Jews: The Alliance Israélite Universelle and the Politics of Jewish Schooling in Turkey, 1860-1925* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

16 GAK DOD, Box 30, Series B, F.3/1918 “Forze Armate”.

17 See Florence Renucci, “La strumentalizzazione del concetto di cittadinanza in Libia negli anni Trenta” *Quaderni Fiorentini per la storia del pensiero giuridico* 33-34 (2005) pp. 319-342

responsibilities toward military service). Aegean citizenship also preserved the ‘civil statute’ or the right to marry (and divorce) according to personal religion. The first Italian governor in the islands was confident that a “small naturalization” to Italian nationality would eventually be accepted by the local population—as long as long as the Italian government revived the old Ottoman order in which the three communities, Greek, Turkish and Jewish, stayed separate from one another and autonomously managed all civil and judicial matters within their religious institutions.¹⁸

Italy’s preservation of an Ottoman model of ethnic and religious pluralism was to become an ongoing aspect of its administration and was to produce a series of initiatives aimed at reviving the ‘cosmopolitan’ and ‘Mediterranean’ culture of the islands. It is important to recall that Italian annexation occurred at the same time as the final treaties of the First World War resolved the collapse of the Ottoman empire and ended the bloodshed of the Greco-Turkish War in the eastern Aegean. In marked contrast with the rest of the Aegean region, the Dodecanese were exempted from the exchange of Greek and Turkish minority populations. The “un-mixing of the peoples” as British foreign minister Lord Curzon famously referred to the exchange of 1.5 million people between Greece and newly formed national Turkey radically reshaped the Aegean region and was the death knell to the cosmopolitan way of life in the region.¹⁹ Yet the Second Treaty of Lausanne stipulated a two-year window in which locals elected their nationality, and tacitly accepted to migrate. Italy chose to be flexible on this limitation as well as the treaty’s definition of *etablis*, understanding it as domiciled --meaning, owning property—rather than resident, and up until the late 1930s, liberally granted Italian Aegean nationality to any person who desired residence in the islands. Provided they were of ‘good moral and political conduct,’ and did not espouse anti-Italian sentiment, a person that hailed from the eastern Aegean could easily relocate to Rhodes or one of the other Dodecanese islands.

Supporting ‘Levantine’ culture and the Jewish community:

The Jewish residents of Rhodes and Kos especially benefited from Italy’s ‘liberal’ policy toward refugees from escaping the Aegean region and the Asia Minor catastrophe. Mussolini himself affirmed in a 1927 memo to the local administration of the Dodecanese that a ‘liberal’ approach to naturalization to Italian nationality was especially warranted with the Jewish community given that they often brought with them wealth and trade connections that benefited the overall objectives of the Italian state.²⁰ Moreover, since the Lausanne Treaty had not specified any national destiny for the Jewish minority, no government could contest their naturalization to Italian Aegean nationality (which was not the case with Greek or Turkish subjects).²¹ Even when they recognized that applicants had concocted a fantastic and untrue connection to the islands, the administration granted Italian

18 When the Italian consulate in Turkey read the first draft of a law for Italian citizenship to natives of the islands, he was nonplussed at the idea the natives be in some way nominated Italians “when they are above all Greeks and Turks” but ultimately the notion that in some way the population of the Aegean was “Ottomanized” and “Levantine” won out and justified the Italian empire in the islands. Lago clearly saw the restoration of the Ottoman millet system as a key way that Italy would succeed in pacifying the resistant parts of the local population. “Statuto di Rodi” Historical Archive of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (here forward ASMAE), Political Affairs Series, “Dodecaneso” 1919-30/983, Fascicolo 2392.

19 Renée Hirschon, *Crossing the Aegean: an Appraisal of the 1923 Compulsory Population Exchange between Greece and Turkey* (New York: Berghahn, 2003).

20 It is difficult to gage how many persons were naturalized based on this criteria, however, we do know that in 1938, at the deployment of the Anti-Semitic Racial Laws, the administration attempted to expel 500 Jewish persons established to be non-natives, or was one-third of the Jewish population of Rhodes at the time.

21 Circular #78, “Cittadinanza dei Dodecannesini” October 2, 1925 (GAK DOD:93/1927/163).

nationality to nearly all Jewish petitions.²² The Jewish communities of the Aegean, whether the Dodecanese (and which would later apply to annexed territories in Albania).

The situation of the Jewish communities in Rhodes and Kos however was arguably much better than the one in Libya. Italian Aegean Citizenship was a thicker nationality than Italian Libyan citizenship, and it included, not insignificantly, the right to mobility for economic purposes. A young Jewish scholar that wrote a thesis on the legal ramifications of Italian annexation of the Aegean in 1926 was not far from off the mark when he assessed that the Italians were providing a valuable form of citizenship in a globalizing world. Italian Aegean Citizenship enabled the islands’ population to emigrate and return more easily and helped to mitigate the fact that many natives of the Dodecanese had lost their main source of income when quotas had been placed on migrants from Southeastern Europe in the early 1920s.²³

Italy’s rising star in the Aegean under Fascist leadership attracted many notable members of the Jewish community in the Balkans and Aegean and brought many intellectuals from other Mediterranean and European cities. When notables learned of the public works of the Italian administration, they traveled to Rhodes to witness the Italian empire supporting the education and advancement of the Aegean Jewish community. Some of the permanent and semi-permanent notable Jewish residents in the islands included Marcus Berger, Vitalis Strumza, Davide Gaon, Michele Albagli, and Isaiah Sonne – the latter was a major Judaica scholar who went on to have an illustrious career later. The Italian administration drew these Jewish notables into a project to establish a Rabbinical College in Rhodes to provide higher education to the young men in the islands. Although the project was aborted in 1938 during the deployment of the Anti-Semitic Racial Laws, the Italian government initially saw this project as supporting not only the local Jewish community but also the Italian state’s larger interests in the region, with graduated rabbis of the program eventually servicing other Italian speaking Jewish communities in the eastern Mediterranean. By the same token, the Rabbinical College became a means to create links between the Jewish communities of the Italian peninsula and Italian Aegean communities of the empire in Rhodes and Kos. The governor of the islands from 1923-37, Mario Lago, was said to rule over a ‘Renaissance’ of the Jewish community privately hoped that the Jewish community in Rome should support the public works of the Italian administration toward the Jewish communities of Rhodes and Kos.²⁴

When the option to assimilate to full Italian citizenship became available to Italian Aegean subjects through a 1934 reform, the Jewish community was one of the main subjects to take advantage of this option.²⁵ Vitalis Strumza is an interesting and exemplary case of the path of Jewish notables that found their way into the island of Rhodes. A Jewish notable from Salonica who had been an Ottoman bureaucrat – at one point even a candidate for local representation of his Jewish community of Salonica -- Strumza moved to Rhodes in 1921 and began a career of service to the Italian administration; reportedly his appointment was partly due to his close friendship with

the Italian governor at the time.²⁶ Strumza collaborated with Isaiah Sonne, who stayed on Rhodes between 1935-1938 as a professor at the Rabbinical College, to complete a short monographs about the history of the Jewish communities in Rhodes.²⁷ One interesting aspect about the draft for the monograph project is that the Jews of Rhodes would be considered as part of the history of “Italian” Jews. Strumza also frequently communicated with the Gran Rabbi in Rome, Davide Prato, about developing the international profile of the Rabbinical college in Rhodes. Strumza applied successfully and obtained full Italian citizenship in 1934 enabling him to travel freely back and forth between Italy and Rhodes. He was even named at one point named by the Italian governor a *Cavaliere della Corona*. But he had to leave the islands just a few years later at the deployment of the Anti-Semitic Racial Laws.²⁸

Strumza’s story illustrates the ambivalences that characterized the Italian empire’s attitude towards the Jewish community. On the one hand, Jews, especially notables and intellectuals, stood to become an important class of imperial subjects and while located at an important nexus of Italian imperial interests, could help advance Italy’s broader imperial interests in the region. On the other hand, the Italian view of the native population as fundamentally ‘Levantine’ was unflinching, and they were regarded as ‘Italian’ only briefly, and largely, out of interest for Italy’s overall position in the Aegean region. Fears of nationalist uprising became increasingly present throughout the 1930s, and this extended to the Jewish community as well. A surveilled 1935 letter to the president of the Jewish community at the time, Hizkià Franco, pled for the innocence of a teacher who had recently been fired for proselytizing Betar Zionism to his students. The teacher (not incorrectly) pointed out the similarities between Mussolini’s Fascist revolution and Betar Zionism (which, like Fascism, is also oriented as a youth movement).²⁹ Yet anxieties about Italy’s fragile hold on the islands were increasing, and these justified hardline measures for removing persons who deviated from the party line, as well as efforts to ‘Italianize’ the population. These anxieties came to a head a few years later after the invasion of Ethiopia and the declaration of an Axis alliance between Mussolini and Hitler.

The 1938 Laws for the “Defense of the Race”

The local Italian administration under the direction of the first Fascist governor of the Dodecanese, Mario Lago, had largely viewed the population as an ‘indigenous’ and ‘Levantine’, but one which could be ultimately pacified through public works to their benefit. The issue of whether the Dodecanese constituted an ‘indigenous’ or ‘European’ population resurfaced again however in the aftermath of Italy’s 1935-6 invasion of Ethiopia. The invasion of Ethiopia is widely regarded as one of the catalyzing events of the Second World War with an enormous impact within international relations and precipitating Mussolini’s doomed Axis alliance with Hitler. Yet within Italy and its colonial territories, the consequences were just as far-reaching. The conquest of Ethiopia marked both the realization of fantasies of Eurafrica and an imperial community (*comunità imperiale*) in the Mediterranean, but equally, new discourses about colonial contamination and racial miscegenation. In 1937, when the first racial laws in the East African colonies went into effect, Italy

22 Royal Carabinieri Archive of Rhodes/Fondo Ufficiale Speciale Carabinieri Reali (here forward GAK CCRR)

23 Vittorio Alhadeff, *L'ordinamento giuridico di Rodi e delle altre Isole Italiane dell'Egeo*, Milano: Istituto Editoriale Scientifico, 1927.

24 ASMAE Affari Politici 1931-45 14 (36-7), Fasc. 7, “Scuole”.

25 The 1933 reform was largely created to enable Italian citizenship for Dodecanese natives living in Egypt. There a large community of ethnic Greeks, but also Jews, could be legally assimilated to Italian nationality and support the wider objectives of the Italian empire in the Mediterranean region.

26 Notes in Strumza’s surveillance file suggest that his appointment was due to partly the fact that he was a personal friend of the Italian governor at the time, Felice Maissa. “Strumza” (GAK CCRR)

27 Vitalis Strumza, *Alcuni cenni storici sugli Ebrei di Rodi*. Bologna, 1936.

28 The Italian surveillance documents capture the bitterness of the situation for Strumza in 1938. Strumza wrote to Davide Prato with extreme melancholy, “It’s useless that I should describe to you our mood here. I am getting ready to leave, my heart heavy with bitterness at the thought of abandoning this island and this environment for which I have worked passionately and with love over the past eighteen years.” “Strumza” (GAK CCRR)

29 GAK DOD k.49/series B/1938/837

reversed its earlier stance toward mixed-marriage and *meticci*, the children of mixed race couples between Italian colonists and Italian colonial subjects in Africa, by making the former illegal and denying metropolitan citizenship to mixed race children. In this heightened atmosphere of racism, the Fascist party published its manifesto for the “Defense of the Race”, and deployed an Anti-Semitic race policy against all Jews in both Italy and all its overseas territories.³⁰ While the origins of the Race Laws in Italy have long been debated by historians of Italy, the link between the establishment of an empire in Africa, and thus the founding of a ‘new civilization’ has been accepted as (at the very minimum) as a key factor in the development of Italian ideologies of race during the Fascist dictatorship.³¹

In the Italian occupied Aegean, the application of the Anti-Semitic Racial Laws in Rhodes and Kos was especially harsh, and was a dramatic reversal of fortune of the Jewish communities who under Lago had enjoyed not only patronage but also citizenship and belonging to the Italian state. The newly installed, arch-Fascist governor of the Dodecanese, Cesare De Vecchi, an original member of the Quadrumvirate that had the Fascist march on Rome, chose to issue an edict of expulsion for all Jews that had arrived in the islands after 1919, or all those Jews that had naturalized to Italian Aegean Citizenship as refugees of the Greco-Turkish War. Many eastern Aegean Jews petitioned the Italian government in Rome directly to have expulsion sentences reversed, either by pleading that they held Italian nationality as naturalized Italian Aegean citizens, or showing certificates of Italian protection, as *attaches* protected by the stipulations of the 1924 Treaty of Peace. Yet De Vecchi was categorical in his response that persons who had arrived in the Dodecanese Islands as a refugee of the Asia Minor Catastrophe had only resided the islands “in passing” (“di passaggio”) and obtained an Italian passport had only done so “given the procedures agreed about in that period about the Jewish element” (“date le facilitazioni accordate in quel tempo all’elemento ebraico”). As the Italian government had already done previously on several occasions when expelling ‘undesirable’ Turkish residents of Rhodes and Kos, De Vecchi invoked the principle of the ethnic minority created during the Lausanne negotiations and stated that given the islands ethnic majority was of Greek “race and religion,” Jewish person had no recourse to the protections of the 1924 Lausanne Treaty.³²

Those Jewish persons who remained in the archipelago because they had achieved Italian citizenship by right or option—that is, because they were natives or residents of the archipelago prior to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire—suffered the same humiliations as Jews in peninsular Italy did. Jews persons could not be teachers or caregivers to any minor who was not Jewish; run or own a business or possess property of significant value (more than five thousand lire); have any domestic help that was Italian; be part of a civil or military administration; or hold any kind of public office, and all members of the Jewish community were required to report to the local civil registry and register their religion. Especially upsetting to the Jewish community was the closing of Jewish private schools and the expulsion of Jewish children from Italian public schools. The Italian

30 As Fabrizio de Donno has argued, the alliance with Nazi-Germany that issued from the Ethiopian invasion created a new problematic for Fascist discourses of race. De Donno shows that the category *Romanità* was eventually used to resolve apparent idiosyncrasies about race and national identity that were inherent to the Italian colonial project: “With the fascist-Nazi alliance, the fascists were faced with the problem of race in a new form (which in the past they had criticized) but sought to deal with it in a way that could turn it to their advantage.” Fabrizio de Donno, “La Razza Ario-Mediterranea” in *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* (8:3), 2006: 394-412.

31 Olindo De Napoli, “The Origin of the Racist Laws under fascism: A problem of historiography” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 17 (1) 2012: 106-22.

32 GAK DOD 725/1938 “é stato solo di passaggio, non può neppure considerarsi suddito italiano di diritto a norma dell’art.30 del trattato di Losanna. Né aveva diritto ad opzione—di cui del resto non esiste traccia—perchè non appartenente alla maggioranza etnica della popolazione del Possedimento (art.32 trattato di Losanna).”

support of education and literacy among the Jewish community had been a special source of positive relations between the community leaders and the Italian administration. Given these conditions of persecution, many more members of the Jewish community voluntarily emigrated. Italy’s early adoption of Anti-Semitism therefore paradoxically saved many members of the community, as less than half of the community’s population of the mid-1920s were remaining in the islands when the Nazi deportations occurred several years later.

The Anti-Semitic Racial Laws impacted Greek and Turkish subjects as well. Mixed marriages in the Aegean were already an issue in Italian surveillance, but after 1938, it was necessary that both parties show certificates of proof of an “Aryan race” (*di razza ariana*). Marriages between Italian persons and foreign persons was now to be subject to the regulation and approval of the Interior Ministry. Under the first Fascist governor, no policy against mixed marriages between Italian settlers and natives in the islands was ever put into effect since Lago had feared local reprisals if he were to adopt a policy of open racism.³³ Through the Anti-Semitic Laws, Italy affirmed that the Greek and Turkish communities on the Dodecanese Islands were similar to an “indigenous” population, and the administration implemented a set of ideologically related programs of ethnic assimilation at the same time as the Anti-Semitic Race Laws.³⁴ These hardline measures predictably incited riots and ardent displays of Greek nationalism and helped to ensure that De Vecchi’s tenure as governor of the Dodecanese was short lived. After the departure of De Vecchi from Rhodes, the Italian administration softened its position on the expulsion of Jews in Rhodes and Kos originating from Turkey.³⁵

Yet the deployment of the Anti-Semitic Racial Laws in Rhodes and Kos nevertheless represents an important juncture in the community’s demise during the Second World War. By affirming that Jewish subjects in the Aegean had no right to protection under the Lausanne Treaty, the Italian state participated in the process of making European Jewry into or stateless persons, refugees -- or what was known at that time as *apolidi* – without legal protection. The stripping of citizenship of Jewish persons is widely recognized as one of the key mechanisms that enabled the Holocaust.³⁶ During the war itself, Rhodes became a temporary home for many stateless Jews; some were even refugees from Central Europe who arrived in Rhodes by shipwreck as they attempted to escape to Palestine. But those Jews from the Aegean, who at one time had been considered ‘Italian’ Jews, were effectively stateless as the refugee crisis swelled in Europe and expanded into the Mediterranean. Persons such as Mose Varon illustrate how unlucky it was to have opted for Italian citizenship in the 1920s. Varon had been born in Smyrna in 1922 just one year before the collapse of the Ottoman empire. He had naturalized to Italian Aegean Citizenship in the 1930s, and been a victim of the Italian Anti-Semitic Racial Laws. He had made multiple attempts to escape to Palestine, one of which included a close shave with death by drowning when he swam out to meet a ferry boat as it departed from the harbor of Rhodes, but he had always been turned back.³⁷

33 GAK DOD 639/1936 Celebrazione Matrimoni Misti, Servizio Stato Civile Carteggio General f.to Lago, 21 Settembre, 1936. See also Alexis Rappas, Greeks under European Colonial Rule: National Allegiance and Imperial Loyalty” *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* (34:2) 2009, 201-18.

34 The Greek Orthodox Churches in the islands were closed, and all languages other than Italian were banned from the schools in the island.

35 A document August 1, 1942, from the Civil Registry and Statistics (Dipartimento di Anagrafe e Statistici) of the local government of the Dodecanese Islands stated that, “vennero erroneamente compresi anche gli ebrei già sudditi turchi, i quali essendo stabiliti nel Possedimento all’entrata in vigore del Trattato di Losanna (6 agosto 1924) acquistarono di diritto o per opzione, la cittadinanza egea.”

36 See Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2000).

37 GAK CCRR “Varon”.

Varon was one of the 1,800 remaining Jewish subjects in the islands in July 1944, all of them established as stateless persons and therefore beyond the protection of international treaty, and was deported with the rest of the islands’ remaining community in what was the last deportation of the war. In contrast, with former Italian Aegean citizens, those Jewish persons who still held Turkish nationality were saved from the deportations through the intervention of the consulate in Istanbul. The real survival of the community, however, has most likely been through its emigration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century which has preserved Jewish communities throughout the world.³⁸

Conclusion: the Jews of Rhodes and Kos as a Transnational Community

This article has discussed how the Italian empire navigated the thorny question of its sovereignty in the region by leveraging the numerous ambiguities and opportunities created by the collapse of the Ottoman empire. How to re-organize the numerous and sometimes internecine groups that had once been held together under the sprawling authority of the Turks troubled international diplomacy, but it also interrupted onto, and ultimately reshaped, Mussolini’s project to achieve an Italian empire in the Mediterranean. Policies of aggressive expansion in the Aegean initially positioned the Jewish communities as potential allies and assets in the Italian state’s focus on the ‘East’ as an essential new frontier for Italian expansion, and on Rhodes as the future epicenter of a new ‘Mediterranean’ empire. Yet after the expansion of the Italian empire into East Africa (*Africa Italiana Orientale*), the regime espoused a view of Dodecanese natives as a colonial indigenous population and Jews faced the harsh reprisals of a now ardently Anti-Semitic Fascist regime. The Jewish communities of Rhodes and Kos therefore offer a further window onto the link between Italian empire and the adoption and deployment of an Anti-Semitic policy.

The arc of the Fascist dictatorship’s motivation for at first privileging, and then persecuting the Jewish community was not always discernible ‘from below’ however and the Jewish communities of Rhodes and Kos consistently sought to make their peace with the Italian Fascist regime. At times, the community viewed Fascist ideology as aligning with Zionism, and even when faced with patent racism and persecution, they still turned to their Italian nationality as an important form of belonging that might protect them from Anti-Semitism elsewhere. The Italian administration in the islands was further able to draw numerous Jewish community intellectuals, notables, and wealthy trader and merchants to the shores of Rhodes in the 1920s and 1930s, and involve them in the Fascist project to rebuild the islands into a center of ‘Levantine’ culture, and to renew the sense within the larger *Rhodesli* diaspora that the island was an important homeland. Not only did these persons believe the hearsay that the island was bound to become an important center for trade and culture in the Levant, but Italian nationality was one of the few options that was available with the end of the Ottoman empire.

What’s more, the legacy of Italian occupation in the Dodecanese is felt in the present and enables members of the *Rhodesli* diaspora to acquire Italian citizenship by demonstrating their Dodecanese heritage. In these changing times of European integration—of nationalism alongside globalization—many *Rhodesli* Jews have carried forward their ‘Italian’ heritage into present day regimes of

38 Renee Hirschon, “The Jews of Rhodes: The Decline and Extinction of an Ancient Community” in *The Last Ottoman Century and Beyond: the Jews in Turkey and the Balkans 1808-1945 (II)*, ed. Minna Rozen. Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 2002, pp. 291-307.

European citizenship, and they have used their Italian nationality to leave Africa for Europe.³⁹ The community’s last phase of residency in the islands of Rhodes and Kos is therefore intimately bound up with the idea and memory of Italian culture and identity – *italianità*, or Italian-ness. To be sure, the fact that Italy eventually adopted a hardline Anti-Semitic policy, and that Fascist Italy aligned itself with Hitler’s Nazi ideology, is not absent from collective memories of Italian rule. But one can well argue that popular memories of Italians and Aegean subjects as “one face, one race” register the peculiarly shifting landscape in the Aegean at in the interwar period. Fascist Italy was racist, but its empire also occasioned policies that would promote a great multi-national Italian empire in the Mediterranean, one which would include Italians, Greeks and Turks—as well as Jews. To adequately address the story of the Jewish communities of Rhodes and Kos in the twentieth century, then, demands a paradigm that moves beyond the ‘national’ and which locates the Jewish communities of the Aegean not so much in Greece, but at its crossroads, between Europe and the Middle East, a transnational community with strong ties not only to Turkey, Africa and the wider Mediterranean, but also to Italy and its imperial history.



FIGURE 4: David and Rivka Hasson with children at the beach, Rhodes 1922.

39 My thanks go to Joey Hasson of the Rhodesian (Zimbabwe) *Rhodesli* community who kindly gave me an interview about his experience acquiring second-generation Italian citizenship through his patrilineal links to Rhodes.