



Julia Phillips Cohen.- *Becoming Ottomans: Sephardi Jews and Imperial Citizenship in the Modern Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 219p.

It has become a widespread –almost uncontested– conviction that Ottoman Jews and their empire shared a special relationship, beginning with the warm welcome Bayezid II extended to Sephardic Jews after their expulsion from Spain in 1492. Phillips Cohen takes to task this romantic story and places it in a broader and far more nuanced context. The special relationship myth originated not in the late XVth century, but rather as a result of far-reaching changes afoot in Ottoman society throughout the XIXth century. The Ottoman reforms, known as the Tanzimat, reshaped and reconfigured Ottoman society and its relationship with the “state.” In that sense, the title of the book is fitting: not only did Ottoman Jews “become Ottoman,” but so did the Christian minority and the Muslim majority, all of whom transformed from Ottoman subjects to Ottoman citizens.

As the nascent nation defined its boundaries of identity, Jews strived to expand the definition of “who is Ottoman” to include them. That required considerable effort, including re-writing history and inventing traditions (such as the 1892 celebration of the arrival of Sephardic Jews to the Empire). Identity was tied to shaky historical narratives. As Phillips Cohen explains, Jewish leaders simplified the origins of the Ottoman Jewish community by claiming they all descended from the Jews expelled from Spain some 400 years earlier. Thus, Jewish communities conquered by the Ottoman Empire centuries earlier were overlooked in order to present Jews as a homogenous group that voluntarily embraced Ottomanism. Phillips Cohen stresses that the element of choice made a much more appealing narrative to the non-Jewish Ottomans.

The Tanzimat opened a new field of civic participation for Jews, and they were eager to take advantage of the new opportunities. By embracing Ottoman symbols, supporting the empire, and professing loyalty to the Sultan, Jews visibly integrated into the imperial community. The first chapter, “Lessons in Imperial Citizenship,” for example, analyzes the period around the proclamation of the constitution. In the 1870s prominent voices from within the community (Aron de Yosef Hazan as one example) urged Jews to become more involved in the institutions of the empire, to engage in public life and culture, and to look around them and see how other minorities were faring. Conscription to the Ottoman army was identified as a path to show loyalty and become involved citizens, and indeed there was an effort to convince Jews to join the army. Jewish publications celebrated Jewish Ottoman soldiers, and hailed members of the community who paved the way for others.

The second chapter, “On the Streets and in the Synagogues,” reveals the craft of reconstructing narratives. Phillips Cohen presents two telling examples: the celebration to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the arrival of Sephardic Jews to the Ottoman Empire, and the World’s Fair in Chicago in 1893. Both occasions provided Ottoman Jews with opportunities to re-write their place among Ottoman minorities. The 1892 celebrations overlooked over three centuries of complex relationships between the empire and Sephardic Jews. As Phillips Cohen mentions, there were no celebration of the occasion in 1592, 1692, or 1792; and while the Ottoman Empire allowed many Jews to settle in its lands, it prevented many others from doing so. Support for the new (or rather, revised) history of the Ottoman Jews could be seen in the pivotal role that was played by the Jews in the 1893 Fair, presenting to the world the essence of Ottoman citizenship, tolerance, and identity.

Chapter Three, “Battling Neighbors: Imperial Allegiance and Politicized Violence” returns to the discussion the most prominent minorities in the Ottoman Empire: the Armenian and the Greek Orthodox Ottomans. The break the empire had with these two groups over the Balkan wars and massacres of Armenians gave the Jews an opening to claim the role of a different minority: a loyal, contributing, participating millet.

The last chapter, “Contest and Conflict: Jewish Ottomanism in a Constitutional Regime,” sheds light on the last phase of the empire before WWI and the fascinating appearance of Zionism as a competing force among Jews, along with the restoration of the Ottoman constitution and streams of Ottoman nationalism that appeared with the Young Turk Revolution.

The theme of the “model minority,” which is central in the text and the Ottoman-Jewish narrative, raises a whole new set of questions. What did

it mean to be a religious minority in a multi-ethnic, multi-religious empire? Besides the public embrace of the Ottoman Empire, the Jewish communities, especially in Salonica, Istanbul, and Izmir, took more practical steps to reaffirm the bond between Jews and the Empire. For example, they encouraged Jewish youth to enlist to in the army and fight to defend the empire. These expressions of loyalty and belonging allowed them to stake a claim to being a model minority. The process appeared within the communities themselves and was projected outward in various guises. Phillips Cohen captures the Jewish religious and political leadership’s mission as they led their communities to integrate: engaging Jews in synagogues, schools, community publications, prayers, and more. The Jewish leadership successfully recruited the community’s material and spiritual resources in order to remove barriers from becoming Ottoman.

Julia Phillips Cohen recounts a fascinating story of a religious minority that becomes a “model minority” and one that the national story would not be complete without. Drawing from a wide range of sources in Ottoman, Ladino, French, German, Hebrew, and English, Phillips Cohen traces the sources of that process. Communal newspapers, public ceremonies, military service and the construction of a complimentary historical narrative all contributed to the process of Jewish integration.

This work joins several other books recently published on Jewish communities of the Middle East in the XIXth and XXth centuries. Works by Sarah Abrevaya-Stein, Orit Bashkin, Joel Beinin, Aomar Boum, Michelle Campos, Alma Heckman, and Josh Schreier, just to name a few, demonstrate that Jewish history is inextricably intertwined with imperial and national histories. The stories of religious and ethnic minorities reflect the transformation of the modern Middle East, and histories of the region cannot overlook the experiences of marginalized communities. The case study of the Jews is especially interesting because of the emergence of Zionism, the subsequent Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the re-writing of the history of Jewish-Muslim relations, and the broad range of local responses to Zionism in those communities from the XIXth century onward. “Becoming Ottomans” is highly recommended to any reader interested in the histories of the Ottoman Empire and Middle Eastern Jews –as well as to anyone who simply cares to read a good story.

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