

Julia Phillips Cohen,

Becoming Ottomans: Sephardi Jews and Imperial Citizenship in the Modern Era,

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One of the main promises of the modernizing Tanzimat reforms of the nineteenth century was the creation of a new civic order whereby the subject communities – particularly Christians and Jews – would be treated as equal imperial citizens irrespective of their religious and ethnic affiliations. It was expected that the promises of this new order would further cement relations between the state and its subjects. The available research suggests that this promise of equality was not welcomed by the empire’s Muslim elite. The responses of other communities – i.e. Orthodox Greek, Armenian and Jewish – to these modernizing reforms, however, have not been studied in detail.

Becoming Ottomans: Sephardi Jews and Imperial Citizenship in the Modern Era by Julia Phillips Cohen explores Sephardi Jewish elites’ struggle to fit their community into the above-mentioned new civic imperial order in the late Ottoman Empire. It focuses on the Jewish elites’ responses to the modern reforms and the ways they imagined and invented their coreligionists as loyal and ideal imperial citizens. In surveying these elite responses, the present study analyses the private and public transcriptions of this process of invention/imagination in the Hamidian, Second Constitutional, and post-Ottoman periods. It addresses the question of how the Jewish elites’ vision of ideal imperial citizenship and model community resonated in the larger Ottoman Jewish community and abroad.

Julia Phillips Cohen argues that the aspiration to imperial citizenship among Ottoman Jews started much earlier than most studies suggest, and notes that ‘already by the mid-nineteenth century, Ottoman Jews as well as other Ottomans across the empire had begun to attempt to understand, debate, and perform their newly acquired roles of imperial citizens’ (p. xiii). In contrast to top-down imperial patriotic projects, she further claims, ‘Ottoman Jews fashioned their own form of patriotism from below.’ Yet, this process of inventing a model community ‘with a special relationship to the state’ was, according to Cohen, ‘fraught with contradictions’, since they had to compete with other groups – i.e. Christian communities – to garner the attention of the state, putting new strains on Ottoman Jews’ relations with other groups in the empire.

In delineating the transformation of the late Ottoman Jewish community, the book takes as its starting point the post-Mahmud II (r. 1808-1839) period, an era when the Jewish community felt particularly insecure because of the murder of a number of its leading businessmen. These terrifying experiences resulted from a top-down authoritarian modernization policy which aimed at the eradication of one of the most powerful centrifugal actors, the Janissaries and their Jewish business partners. The murders were followed almost immediately by the declaration of the Noble Rescript of the Rose Chamber (1839) which guaranteed the life, honor, and property of all Ottoman subjects, and the *Islahat Fermanı* (1856) which heralded even more radical changes for Ottoman society in general and Ottoman Jews in particular. The book argues that these modernizing reforms laid the foundation 'for the creation of an equal Ottoman citizenry undifferentiated by religion.' It was within this milieu that the Ottoman Jewish elite - with the active involvement of their European brethren - 'began to propagate new discourses of belonging' (p. 11).

Becoming Ottomans chiefly traces the making of Ottoman Jewish model communities in Salonica, Istanbul and Izmir whose members were envisioned as loyal imperial citizens. According to Cohen, the proclamation of the First Ottoman Constitution (1876) and the opening of the first Ottoman Parliament, which drew representatives from all regions and communities of the empire, coupled with the wars with Serbia and Montenegro (1876) and Russia (1877) 'dramatically propelled the Ottoman Jewish patriotic project' (p. 20). In the light of these developments, the first part of the book investigates the processes through which various Jewish communal leaders from the above-cited cities 'attempted to mobilize their communities to patriotic and philanthropic ends' (p. 22) and also to create new bonds between Jews and their Christian and Muslim neighbors. In inventing a Jewish civic imperial citizen, the Jewish elites, the book shows, utilized journals to warn and instruct their coreligionists concerning proper types of public behavior; they 'sought to eradicate the image of poor and backward Jew roaming the streets with outstretched hand, replacing it with that of enlightened and philanthropic citizen...' (p. 24). As Cohen notes, the Jewish leaders' concern here, besides earning the respect of their Christian and Muslim neighbors, was also to gain the attention of their state. In that regard, one sees in this period an active involvement of Jewish elites in education to provide their community members - who were believed to be underrepresented in government offices because of the language barrier- opportunities of upward social mobility by offering them languages classes or compiling Ottoman-Ladino dictionaries.

The process of creating a model community also involved the invention of new traditions. Chapter 2 outlines the discussions around the organization of two occasions: the celebration of the four-hundredth anniversary of the arrival of Spanish Jews in Ottoman lands following their expulsion from Spain in 1492 and the 1893 Chicago Exposition. Ottoman Jewish elites believed and expected that the proposed holiday and public celebrations of the four-hundredth anniversary would further contribute to their community's image in state circles. The author uses a description of the discussions surrounding the four-hundredth anniversary celebrations to explore the alternative visions of model community that existed among the Ottoman Jewish secular and religious elites. Unlike the four-hundredth anniversary commemoration, the exhibit for the Chicago Exposition, organized by Elia Souhami, a prominent Jewish entrepreneur and philanthropist, was widely covered in the Ottoman and Jewish press because of its less controversial nature. Cohen claims that the two events had distinct outcomes. While the former ran the risk of upsetting the political sensibilities of Abdülhamid II (r. 1876-1909) by 'parading differences' (p. 74), the latter – i.e. the 1893 Chicago Exposition – served the idea of Ottomanism wherein differences were downplayed and more importantly it had no potential to disturb the political sensibilities of the reigning sultan.

Within the milieu of escalating ethnic confrontations and violence in the last decades of the nineteenth century, Cohen identifies a shift from a civic to an Islamic form of Ottomanism whereby the Jewish community was expected to reclaim and find new ways of demonstrating its loyalty to the state. Chapter 3 outlines the Jewish elites' behavior in the new political context which prioritized Islamic-Ottomanism. By looking at the 1896 Armenian Massacres and the Ottoman-Greek War (1897) respectively, Cohen scrutinizes Jewish elites' responses and the repercussions of these events on inter-communal and community-state relations in the empire's capital as well as Salonica and Izmir. On the one hand, the Jewish elites of these cities strove to maintain friendly relations with their Orthodox/Christian neighbors; on the other, they sought alternative ways to demonstrate their own loyalty to the state. In this atmosphere of war and impending inter-communal conflict, Cohen writes, Islamic Ottomanism offered the Ottoman Jews a disturbing option. 'Responding to the growing politicization of Islam in the empire, on the one hand, and to long-standing frictions and competition with Ottoman Christian groups on the other,' Jews across the empire 'came to express their identification with Ottoman Muslims, and even with Islam, throughout the period' (p. 79). The 1896 Armenian Massacres, in which some members of

the Ottoman Jewish community also took part, and especially the war between the Ottoman Empire and the Kingdom of Greece (1897) constitute two crucial historical instances in the present work where the loyalties of the Ottoman Jews to the state were tested. Under these circumstances, the compulsory rapprochement between parties echoed in their relations, as Ottoman Jews ‘emphasized their identification with their “Muslim brothers” in speeches and the press and attempted to make such links concrete through their participation in projects clearly marked as Islamic’ (p. 100).

The short-lived liberal atmosphere of the 1908 revolution has been described as a period of intellectual flowering in the late Ottoman history, one in which several journals and organizations were formed. As Cohen argues, ‘various competing Jewish groups [the Zionists, anti-Zionists, socialists and liberals] battled one another while striving to earn the attention and support of the new regime.’ In keeping with this political atmosphere, ‘Jewish leaders found it increasingly difficult to speak of Ottoman Jewry as a single collective.’ The final chapter takes the occasion of Sultan Mehmed V’s (r. 1909-1918) 1911 visit to Salonica as a lens through which to observe the conflicting visions of loyalty between various Jewish social and political organizations. Cohen describes this competition as a ‘symbolic battle’, a battle over who could best appropriate the symbols of the new regime by erecting arches and hosting galas to embody the slogans of the new regime.

The modernizing reforms, which promised the creation of a new civic order, have been studied mainly from the perspective of the state and ruling classes. Moreover, these studies have focused exclusively on the experiences of Muslim subjects of the empire. The repercussions of these reforms among the other subject populations, especially the non-Muslims, constitute an understudied field of late Ottoman history. How did the Tanzimat’s promise of equal imperial citizenship – a promise designed specifically to address the concerns of Christian communities – resonate among these subject *millets*? The present study explores the reception, negotiation, and adaptation of these ideals by Ottoman Sephardi Jews in general and the Jewish elite in particular in the era following the Tanzimat. By exploring the Jewish elites’ responses, the present study provides an important insight into the experiences of one of the underrepresented communities of late Ottoman history. It outlines the elites’ concerns and expectations as well as the challenges that awaited them and their community. Furthermore, it portrays the elites’ precarious task of seeking a balance between their community and the state

in order to become a model loyal community, while at the same time maintaining inter-communal relations with Orthodox Greeks and Armenians.

The present study challenges the conventional narrative which attributes a special nature to Ottoman/Turkish – Jewish relations. In contrast to the myth of a special relation based on collaboration after 1492, the book successfully explains the processes and the means utilized by the Ottoman Jewish elites to realize the Ottoman Jewish model project. In that sense the relations between the two parties could at best be described as an invention which addressed the Ottoman Jewish elites' desire to fit their community members into the new imperial social, economic, political and legal order.

Despite reasonable expectations that the book will provide an account of how Ottoman Sephardi Jews became Ottomans, the emphasis here is not so much on Ottoman Sephardi Jews as a community but on the Jewish elites. Through the book one reads the elites' concerns and responses on behalf of their community. Thus, it was not the 'Ottoman Jews' in the book who 'collectively took it upon themselves to learn and teach each other how to become citizens of their empire', but the Ottoman Jewish Sephardi elites who imagined and invented their coreligionists as members of a model community. Though the book describes the responses and mobilization of Ottoman Jewish youth and women during war efforts, it would be interesting to see how the values formulated and propagated by the elite resonated among the Jewish subaltern classes.

Relations between the state and its subject non-Muslim populations in the modern period have often been seen through the lenses of nationalism and ethnic and religious conflicts and the non-Muslim *millet*s were further imagined as a single collective irrespective of social, political, and economic distinctions. However, as Cohen's book demonstrates, these relations had nuances which cut across religious, ethnic, and class differences within the communities as these groups came to embody alternative and contending visions of model communities and loyalties. In that regard, by providing an analysis of the invention of a model Ottoman Jewish community, *Becoming Ottomans* enhances our perspective on the Ottoman modernizing reforms and how the Tanzimat ideals and promises were negotiated, adapted and challenged by the Jewish elite - a project which also had repercussions in Republican Turkey.

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