

H-Net Reviews

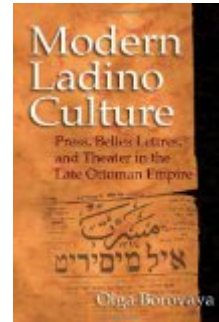
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Olga Borovaya. *Modern Ladino Culture: Press, Belles Lettres, and Theater in the Late Ottoman Empire*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012. x + 284 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-35672-7.

Reviewed by Rachel Simon (Princeton University)

Published on H-Judaic (January, 2013)

Commissioned by Jason Kalman



Impressions of Modernity: Connections between the Press, Belles Lettres, and Theater in Modernizing Ladino Culture

Mention Ladino culture, and associations spring up within a wide spectrum ranging from *Me'am Lo'ez* (the eighteenth- to nineteenth-century comprehensive commentary on several biblical books) to folklore. Olga Borovaya provides an innovative approach to the study of Ladino culture. An expert in romance philology, in recent years she has focused on the unique developments of its Judeo-Spanish expression, Ladino, the vernacular language used by the Sephardim. In this book, she examines the dramatic changes that occurred in Ladino culture during the late Ottoman period (mid-nineteenth to early twentieth centuries), instigated by the press. Contrary to previous works on various aspects of Ladino culture that had been studied separately, Borovaya examines how developments in one field, the press, influenced fiction and the theater. The book is based on extensive research of extremely rare and hard to find primary sources, located on three continents, and numerous public and private collections. The author also utilizes previous research, which she sometimes criticizes. The scarcity of these published sources results from their initial small run, loss, poor paper and print quality, and the tendency of previous owners to cut out items of interest. The study focuses on cultural expressions in the three largest centers of Ladino culture in the Ottoman Empire—Salonica, Istanbul, and Izmir—though other centers with large Sephardi populations, including some outside the Ottoman Empire, are at times mentioned. The book includes an introduction, and three parts dealing

with the press, belles lettres, and theater, each separated into two chapters analyzing the phenomena and then examining in great detail specific case studies. The book ends with a conclusion, endnotes, and an index; a bibliography is absent, most likely not the author's fault but probably resulting from a growing tendency among publishers at cost saving practices, which unfortunately makes it much more difficult for the reader to locate relevant sources. The book could also have benefited from a stricter proofreading (including the use of "Theatre" on the title page, whereas throughout the book and on the dust jacket "Theater" is used).

The Ladino press emerged in Izmir in the 1840s, followed by Istanbul in the 1850s and Salonica in the 1860s. All in all, between 1845 and 1939, about three hundred Sephardi periodicals were published, some of which were very short lived. Most were in Ladino, with about twenty in French and some bilingual. About a third appeared in Salonica and less than a sixth in Istanbul. The initial purpose of the Ladino press was to educate its readers, and it was aimed at Sephardi men who were literate in both Ladino (which used the Hebrew script) and Hebrew, and who could understand biblical and literary Hebrew references. Publishers constantly complained about the small number of subscribers and those who bought individual items, and then allowed others to read the periodical. Moreover, the habit of reading aloud to colleagues, friends, and family members was quite common,

and thus the actual number of Sephardim who were exposed to the press was larger than the number of items sold. Borovaya analyzes these developments clearly and contextualizes them with the cultural and social life of Ottoman Sephardim, examining in detail the first periodicals and those of Salonica.

As time passed, the tendency to entertain readers was added to the owners' educational initiative in order to broaden the range of readers and thus to increase the potential market of the periodicals and their revenues. This required a simpler language and a change in focus, hoping to attract less literate Sephardim, including women, most of whom did not receive a formal community-based Jewish education and very few who could read the Hebrew script. As a result, from the 1870s on, Ladino periodicals published serialized belles lettres, some of which were later published separately. Altogether, until 1939 a few hundred titles were published. Many of these novels were translated adaptations of foreign, especially French and Hebrew, works, with emphasis on works by famous authors who had already been translated into other languages, favoring love and adventure stories. Yet the Ladino product often hardly resembled the original: it was usually much shorter, with emphasis on action rather than contemplation and emotion; it had omissions due to self censorship regarding Ottoman political sensitivities and communal morality concepts; and at times it was "Judaized" through changes of names and localities. Moreover, the names of the original authors or the translators were often omitted. Because of all these changes, Borovaya prefers to regard these novels as "rewritings" rather than "adaptations." Following an original analysis of this process, several works are examined in detail in comparison to the original works.

Education via entertainment was also the aim of numerous schools, societies, and clubs, which from the 1870s initiated the staging of Ladino plays by amateur actors of both genders from among their members. At least 803 titles are known, although only about a tenth was found thus far. Contrary to belles lettres, plays were commissioned by various groups and thus their authors, including rewriters, were better compensated and acknowledged by name. Information about these plays comes mainly from the press, through either initial ad-

vertisement of a planned production or a review of a staged one. Yet these references in the Ladino press are quite stereotyped, telling little on the actual content of the play and using general and extreme positive revue of the acting and audience reception. Since many plays were staged by social and political organizations, mainly of the labor and Zionist movements, many plays had historical themes relevant to the ideology of the organizers, in addition to themes common to the belles lettres. Borovaya examines the phenomenon of Sephardi theater, contextualizing it within the theatrical scene in the Ottoman Empire, change of direction, and its role in Jewish cultural and political development, followed by a detailed examination of plays representing various trends.

Now all this is history, resulting from political, demographic, and cultural developments effecting Ottoman Sephardim. Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Sephardim, who either remained in their previous cities or emigrated, found themselves in nation-states, mainly Turkey, Greece, and Israel, which emphasized national languages at the expense of minorities' vernaculars. And although Ladino used to be the preferred method for interpersonal communication among Sephardim, and it somewhat grew in importance following the cultural developments since the eighteenth century, it never reached the cultural prestige of Hebrew, later somewhat replaced by French. Thus, following the educational, cultural, and political developments in Turkey and the devastation of Greek Jewry during WWII, the continuation of Ladino culture suffered a terminal blow.

This is a groundbreaking and comprehensive study of the modernization of the culture of a minority group. It examines the development of the Sephardi press and its impact on the emergence of Ladino belles lettres and the Sephardi theater. On the basis of exhaustive research, Borovaya combines enlightening analysis with detailed information in a study that provides an innovative approach to the study of Ladino culture and Sephardi history. In addition to scholars of Sephardi studies, this work is of tremendous importance for those interested in cultural developments among minority groups, and the interconnections among various cultural aspects.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic>

Citation: Rachel Simon. Review of Borovaya, Olga, *Modern Ladino Culture: Press, Belles Lettres, and Theater in the*

Late Ottoman Empire. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. January, 2013.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=35944>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.