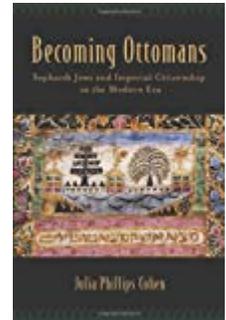


Julia Phillips Cohen. *Becoming Ottomans: Sephardi Jews and Imperial Citizenship in the Modern Era.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. 256 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-934040-8.



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Commissioned by Charles V. Reed (Elizabeth City State University)

Integral to the study of any empire is the question of defining identities, both the individual identities of communities within the empire's borders and an overarching identity defining the empire itself. This last question is perhaps the most puzzling as it is difficult to place a single identity on such a multicultural, multi-confessional, and multilingual entity as an empire, to say nothing of race and ethnicity. Julia Phillips Cohen tackles a question that straddles both of these issues, claiming that "this book asks, 'How does a community become a solution?'" as opposed to traditional narratives of minorities within empires, which tend to describe how marginalized communities and their traditions often clashed with their host authorities (p. xi). In addition, Cohen works on the Jewish community in the Ottoman Empire, which adds an extra level of complexity to the question, Jews long being defined as a nation without a homeland. She lays the groundwork for her problematic by outlining the traditional story of relations between Jews and the Ottoman Empire as one of extreme friendship and unquestioning loy-

alty and states her intention to reveal the realities and complexities behind the changing relations over time.

Cohen focuses on the nineteenth century into the early twentieth beginning with the period of imperial state reforms known as the Tanzimat (1839-76), which gave many freedoms to the non-Muslim subjects of the empire. In addition to spanning almost a century in terms of chronology, the book also covers a great deal of ground thematically. Cohen thoroughly explores the key questions of identity and subjecthood/citizenship. She examines such topics as language, publicity, and assimilation through the lens of social, religious, and military history, and provides case studies of several public events, such as festivities marking various occasions.

Historian Linda Colley claims that "identities are not like hats. Human beings can and do put on several at a time." She presents a British identity based on the "self" and "other" model, a method that never does exactly specify how such identi-

ties are created beyond merely classifying one's own society by making them adhere to the complete opposite of what is done in other nations. Historian Simon Gunn has argued that this concept of identity used in historical studies is often too simplistic.[2] As previously stated, the concept of identity within the boundaries of an empire does not lend itself to the historian being able to utilize the traditional "boxes" that would normally separate one group from the other, such as language and religion.

Cohen cites the traditional narrative for empires that fell after the First World War: state attempts to make subjects imperial citizens were a great failure. But the story she tells is one of attempted assimilation from the side of the Jewish community, while at the same time retaining their own Jewish identity, something that was infinitely possible under the Ottoman policy of religious tolerance. Another issue that often arises when discussing identities of groups in history is that of oversimplification. Cohen openly states in the title of her book that she is focusing specifically on the Sephardi communities and further explains that "Ottoman Jewry" and "Sephardi Jewry" became almost interchangeable after being conflated by journalist Aron de Yosef Hazan (p. 50). She explains that this action was deliberately aimed at his patriotic plan of portraying all Ottoman Jews as a group who had become Ottoman by choice as opposed to conquest.

A great deal of defining identity is inherent in the language used in discourse and the implications of certain words, such as "subject," "citizen," "patriotism," and significantly here, "Ottomanism." "Ottomanism" was used to help the inhabitants of the empire come to grips with new realities in the wake of the great number of reforms of the nineteenth century and was based on the assumption that all communities of the empire, regardless of religion or ethnicity, would unite in support of the empire. The desire on the part of a large proportion of the Jewish community to be

an Ottoman "citizen" instead of an Ottoman "subject" forms a great deal of Cohen's discourse as she charts many public relations projects initiated by Ottoman Jews to facilitate Jewish assimilation, from newspapers to large-scale events, such as the 1892 commemoration of the Jews exile from Spain and admittance into the Ottoman Empire and the Chicago Exposition of 1893. What is interesting is the use of the term *millet* (nation) for the Jewish community as opposed to *zimmi* (non-Muslim subject), the term used for a protected status of Ottoman inhabitants. Naturally after the Tanzimat reforms and the liberations of non-Muslim inhabitants, the term *millet* is certainly more fitting, yet archival records show *millet* being used throughout history in reference to the Jewish community while *zimmi* appears only in documents mentioning Jews thirty-five times in the state archives where they are referred to as "*zim-mileri ve Yahudileri*" (non-Muslim subjects and Jews) or variants thereof, never with the Jewish community being referred to as *zimmi* themselves. That the Jewish community has consistently been referred to as a nation (*millet*) within the bounds of the Ottoman Empire, while on the surface seeming to be a better status, may also have been more a divisive position for them with *zimmi* denoting a protected status would be expected to be applied to a community with more intimate ties with the state. By being called a "nation" this could be seen as an isolating terminology that would run counterproductive to their cultural assimilation into wider Ottoman life. In seeking a place of intimacy and belonging, the myth of the close relationship between the Jews and the Ottoman state served yet another useful purpose as did all of the patriotic projects undertaken by Jewish inhabitants of the empire.

Cohen does argue that the traditional narrative that has survived to this day is a myth and opens her text by arguing that each individual internalized their relationship with the Ottoman Empire. She also seeks to bring realism to the narrative of Jewish-state relations by admitting that it

was not always smooth sailing. For example, she recounts Jewish problems with accusations of their involvement in Armenian massacres in Istanbul and devotes a chapter (titled "Battling Neighbours") to the problems they faced with integration.

In conclusion, this text serves the highly necessary purpose of opening a dialogue that will begin to revise and review an entrenched and overly simplified traditional narrative that has been widely accepted. Cohen's inclusive methodology is solid; she covers every possible angle of her problematic and clearly outlines the key issues. Her research net was cast as wide as possible as can be seen from the extensive range of sources consulted. Her work not only is an invaluable addition to the scholarship on minorities in the Ottoman Empire but also speaks to wider questions of identity and citizenship, which will be of interest to all historians of empires the world over.

Notes

[1]. Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 6.

[2]. Simon Gunn, *History and Cultural Theory* (London: Pearson Longman, 2006), 132.

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