



Devin E. Naar. *Jewish Salonica: Between the Ottoman Empire and Modern Greece.* Stanford Studies in Jewish History and Culture Series. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016. 400 pp. \$85.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8047-9887-7.

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Jewish Salonica by Devin E. Naar, Isaac Alhadeff Professor in Sephardic Studies at the University of Washington, is a very important new addition to the history of Sephardic Jews and the transition of Salonica from the Ottoman Empire to the Greek state, a history of “Jewish Salonica” as the title suggests. Winner of the 2016 National Jewish Book Award in the category of Writing Based on Archival Material, sponsored by the Jewish Book Council, and more recently winner of the 2017 Edmund Keeley Book Prize, sponsored by the Modern Greek Studies Association (MGSA), the book is already a hit. Navigating the choppy waters of Greek nationalism and Jewish identities, the book is divided into five distinct chapters (one published as an article in the past) that altogether and each one individually demonstrate the transition from a religious, self-governed community in the late Ottoman Empire to the status of religious minority that the Salonica Jews acquired from the 1920 onward. It is a significant book that will make a lasting contribution to the history of Jews in Salonica/Thessaloniki.

The individual chapters “trace key dilemmas confronted by Salonica’s Jews that reflect their attempts to navigate the transition from the Ottoman Empire to modern Greece, from the 1880s until World War II” (p. 33). The first chapter

shows how the strategies of the Jewish community complemented the state’s policies to induce allegiance from a supposedly “suspect” community toward the project of Hellenization. The second chapter narrates the debates and efforts to find a suitable religious and political leader, a chief rabbi. The search revealed the tensions among the three main groups among the Salonica Jewish elite—Zionists, assimilationists, and socialists—as they disagreed about the qualifications and characteristics of the candidates for the position and the image of Jewish Salonica each would represent. The third chapter focuses on the schools for Jewish children, both Jewish and Greek-state schools, that became the sites that transformed “the children of the last generation of Ottoman Jews into the first generation of Hellenic Jews” (p. 33); the chapter supports most convincingly the author’s argument about the Hellenization of Salonica Jews, a process that many of them endorsed and one that has not been acknowledged by the growing historiography on Greek Jewish history. The chapter hints on the possibilities of these groups to have participated in the professional and civic life of their city and their country had the catastrophic Nazi occupation not occurred. The fourth chapter shows clearly how Salonican Jewish intellectuals produced histories of

their community, seeking to define their history and image in the turbulent world of the 1930s; their contribution did indeed shape the image of Salonica as “Jerusalem of the Balkans” (p. 282), as the author convincingly argues. Lastly, the fifth chapter retells, but in its own original way, the fairly well known by now history of the construction of the University of Thessaloniki that was built on the vast Jewish cemetery, the largest Jewish burial ground in Europe. The chapter delves into the murky history of the burial ground that after decades of silence has been acknowledged with a plaque since 2014. Naar argues that the plaque text seems to be “exculpating the local authorities” by placing responsibility solely on the German occupation, ignoring the role of Greek government at the time (p. 240). The issue is not simply one of whitewashing however; there are many other reasons why the collaborationist governments of 1941-44 have been—rightly so—discredited by official discourse, and it is understandable that the Greek-state authorities would prefer to distance themselves from any acts of those governments that have stained national history. What is interesting is how the author tells the story of the destruction that started well before the arrival of the Nazi occupiers. The Jewish community fended off attempts to expropriate part of the burial ground when the city’s topography changed dramatically, first following the catastrophic fire of 1917 and then following the arrival of hundreds of thousands of destitute Greek Orthodox refugees in 1923-24 after the population exchange with Turkey. It is telling that the intentions and arguments for preserving the cemetery were successful until the 1940s, revealing the negotiating power that the Jewish community held.

Historians and those among the general public looking for a social/urban history of the city and its Jewish past in Salonica, however, will not find much. The author makes it clear from the organization of the chapters and their content that the book is mainly about the history of elite institutions in the city as they navigated their course

“between the Ottoman Empire and modern Greece,” as the subtitle suggests. The community, the rabbis, the schools, and the historians are the main focus of each of the four chapters; even in the last chapter, which deals with the centuries-old cemetery and its fate, Naar hardly mentions the lower classes, the everyday life of Jewish Salonicans, and their interactions with non-Jews. This, in a way, is the distinct characteristic of the book, because it differs significantly from the several works about late Ottoman cities that came out in the two previous decades and stressed—almost naively sometimes—a perceived conviviality between different religious and ethnic groups under the watchful supervision of the sultan’s court, as the Ottoman Empire went through the Young Turk revolution and eventually its Turkification during the First World War with dire consequences for the Armenians and Greeks in the empire. Thessaloniki was spared from the carnage of the First World War but experienced a massive transformation because it formed the base of the Army of the Orient of the French and British troops battling the Central powers in the Balkans. The city also served as the temporary capital of the Venizelos camp during the national schism, in 1916-17, when the country was divided and found itself on the brink of civil war; such a calamity was averted only when the British and French governments forced the Germanophile King Konstantine to leave the country and Greece entered the war on the side of the Entente, with irreversible consequences, not least for Thessaloniki. When Greece was defeated in the war with Kemal Atatürk’s Turkish independence army in 1922, the Lausanne Treaty arranged the exchange of Muslim with Christian populations, which resulted in the uprooting of almost a million Christians from Asia Minor. Many of them arrived in Thessaloniki, changing the city’s history forever; the event had a direct impact on the history of Jewish Salonica nonetheless, as tensions between the thousands of refugees and the Jewish population emerged. Scholars of modern Greece will have no difficulty

relating Naar's account to these events, but non-Greek history specialists will probably encounter some difficulties. Key points in the chronology of those events are not mentioned nor discussed in any meaningful detail or depth to situate the history of Jewish Salonica in a broader—Greek national—context after 1912.

The impact of the period 1912-23 is generally absent from the book and it could have served as a transition for the period from the late Ottoman era to the incorporation of Thessaloniki to the Greek state, as it was in fact crucial for the history of the city. Other parts of the history of Jewish Salonica and the city in general deserve more attention. The 1917 fire and its consequences are mentioned a few times but only insofar as the relocation of the thousands of Jews who lost their homes, businesses, and synagogues is discussed. How did the rebuilding of the city center take place and how did the Jewish elite and subaltern groups promote their interests? What were the conflicts over properties? How did the devastating fire shape power relations and the balance of class relations among the Jewish population and with city and state authorities? We learn in the conclusion that by the end of the 1930s the communal council had devised plans to move its main building back to the city center but not much else about the challenges of the Jewish residents who moved out of the center following the devastating fire.

There is also a misunderstanding of some turning points in the history of the city in relation to key developments in the history of the country; a lot changed between 1912, when Salonica became Greek, and 1919, when the occupation of the territory around Izmir brought the vision of the "Great Idea" (the vision to include all Greek Orthodox people in the same state, at the expense of the Ottoman Empire) closer, with a catastrophic outcome in 1922. This was a "stepping stone enroute to Asia Minor" only in retrospect and according to the narrative that Greek historians

have offered (pp. 24-25). Several similar arguments regarding the Greek nationalist project are also exaggerated; few Greek historians believe, for example, that the Great Idea project "aspired to transform Greece into a new empire" and therefore Salonica Jews stood in the way of such a project (p. 27). Hence the Salonica Jews emerged as a "neo-millet," a neologism offered by the author to depict the status of Jews in Greece after 1920. This argument is the most convincing of the book: the Jewish communal authorities adjusted their status from a religious community to a religious minority following the Lausanne Treaty.

Equally important for the history of the city in the interwar period are the so-called Campbell riots. It would have been helpful if the author had offered an interpretation for the reasons of the outbreak of riots in the Campbell district. There is only one brief mention in the chapter on the cemetery, a hint that some university professors and students stirred or even started the riots, but surely a history of Jewish Salonica deserves a more extensive discussion of the only incident that tested Greek Orthodox-Greek Jewish relations. The lack of Greek sources, besides the occasional Greek newspaper of Thessaloniki and the sporadic use of some documents from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Athens—not the most appropriate for the study of Greek Salonica (post-1912)—compromises the ability for the book to engage meaningfully with the information that can be found in sources produced by the Greek state and other similar documents. Such sources would have revealed the perspective of the Greek Orthodox elite groups and institutions but, to be fair, would also have turned the book into a different project. More engaged conversation with books that are central in any analysis of modern Greece, by Thomas W. Gallant (*Modern Greece* [2016]), Richard Clogg (*A Short History of Modern Greece* [2013]), and others, on the Greek history of the city such as that of Vassilis Kolonas (*Thessaloniki beyond the Walls* [in Greek, 2012]) would have been fruitful. There is also a notable absence

of a detailed engagement with Mark Mazower's book on Salonica, *Salonica, City of Ghosts: Christians, Muslims and Jews, 1430-1950* (2004), even though that book deals with a much longer period (1300-1950) and the focus of *Jewish Salonica* is much more limited to the late nineteenth century and the interwar period. Other works, such as the dissertation by Paris Papamichos-Chronakis, also have contributed significantly to the history of interwar Thessaloniki.[1] There is also little discussion of the historiography on other Greek Jewish communities, in cities with much smaller populations than Thessaloniki obviously, that nevertheless provided a testing ground for the Greek state and its relationship with religious minorities. Athens, Halkida, and especially Corfu, the city with the second largest Jewish population in Greece, which became part of the Greek state in 1864, could have provided an interesting comparison and complemented Katherine Fleming's book *Greece: A Jewish History* (2008). Issues of political rights, communal representation, and the international dimensions of local affairs that involved Christian-Jewish relations were not entirely new in 1912 when Salonica became part of the Greek state; it was in Corfu after all that in 1891 in one of the most serious outbreaks of anti-Semitic violence the Greek authorities were forced to intervene after intense pressure from foreign governments. Salonica/Thessaloniki however was indeed exceptional, both in its demographic characteristics of the Jewish population and especially the way this population was perceived and managed by the Greek state. Naar is definitely convincing when he argues that we should avoid seeing history as teleology, and invites us to rethink and reconceptualize the history of Jewish Salonica beyond the catastrophic Nazi occupation and the end of the city as "mother of Israel."

The fourth chapter stands slightly apart from the others; it is a chapter about the Jewish historians Salonica produced in the interwar period. The connection between the period that constituted one of the most severe institutional crises for the

Jewish population (the inability to appoint a chief rabbi) and the production of key historical works by Jewish Salonicans that shaped the history and memory of the city as "mother of Israel" is not that obvious, as the author argues. It is not entirely clear how this chapter fits the argument about the Hellenization of the city and its Jewish population, except perhaps from the point of view of two historians who over time changed their narrative to set the beginnings of Jewish presence in the city from the settlement of Jews from Spain and Portugal during Ottoman times to antiquity, once the city became Greek, to emphasize the millennia-old Greek-Jewish relations.

The chapter on the cemetery systematically depicts the relentless efforts of Jewish authorities to save their burial ground from expropriation. While by 1929 the concerted efforts of Jewish institutions and intellectuals both in Greece and abroad secured the pledge of liberal prime minister Eleftherios Venizelos that the cemetery would remain intact, the economic crisis of 1932 (also hardly discussed in the book) and especially the coming to power of dictator Ioannis Metaxas threw the issue again out in the open. The pressure this time was overwhelming and the destruction started (even partially) during the late 1930s, that is before the German Nazi occupation (1941-44). Here, too, problems with sources can be found; a Greek newspaper headline that advocated for a solution reads: "The space of Jewish monuments must be given as quickly as possible to the city and the university" is translated in the book as "The space of Jewish monuments will be given as quickly as possible" (p. 260). Given the debates surrounding the fate of the cemetery the translation is crucial in relation to the argument about shaping public opinion. Another point emphasizing the exceptionalism of Thessaloniki is the discussion of the Sunday holiday, which although was implemented by law in 1909 and gradually introduced in a number of Greek cities between 1910 and 1914, was introduced, as the author ar-

gues, in 1924 as a measure against the Jews of Thessaloniki.[2]

The chapter on Jewish historians and the book overall cautiously deconstructs the myth of Jewish Salonica. It is clear also that now we have an excellent account of how the Jews of Salonica despite of or perhaps because of their differences as Zionists, socialists, and moderates were becoming not Greeks but Greek Jews during the inter-war period. Christians and Jews could not intermarry as civil weddings were not permitted in Greece (unlike in many other countries in Europe), a model to follow for the non-mixing of Jews and “Aryans” as Nazis sinisterly thought after they took over Greece. The Greek Orthodox in Thessaloniki were generally hostile to the Hellenization project that more and more Jews were becoming part of.[3] Even if most monuments of Jewish history are gone, the rehabilitation of memory is now more feasible with the publication of *Jewish Salonica*, a book that is already a classic in the history of the city, its Ottoman Jewish past, and its Greek Jewish present.

Notes

[1]. Paris Papamichos Chronakis, “The Jewish, Greek, Muslim and Donme Merchants of Salonica, 1882-1919: Class and Ethnic Transformations in the Course of Hellenization” (in Greek) (PhD diss., University of Crete, 2011).

[2]. See also Nikos Potamianos, “Regulation and the Retailing Community: The Struggle over the Establishment of the Holiday of Sunday in Greece, 1872-1925,” *History of Retailing and Consumption* 3 (2017): 1-16.

[3]. See also Vassilis Kolonas, *H Thessaloniki ektos ton teichon* (Thessaloniki outside its walls) (Thessaloniki: University Studio Press, 2012).

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