

**Joshua Schreier.** *The Merchants of Oran: A Jewish Port at the Dawn of Empire.* Stanford Studies in Jewish History and Culture Series. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017. 216 pp. \$50.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8047-9914-0.

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In this book, a prequel of sorts to his earlier *Arabs of the Jewish Faith: The Civilizing Mission in Colonial Algeria* (2010), Joshua Schreier challenges the conventional narrative of Jewish emancipation in Algeria at the hands of the French that began with the conquest in 1830, continued through the Crémieux Decree, and ended with the departure of Algeria's Jews for *l'Hexagone* during the Algerian War. As Schreier argues, French colonial policy sought to unify Oran's Jews by foisting upon them the homogenizing label of "indigenous." In the process, and as a prelude to naturalization, the French reified previously porous social boundaries between Jews and Muslims. As Schreier demonstrates, far from being the impoverished, oppressed, and uniform subjects of the Regency of Algiers who were waiting to be emancipated and "civilized," Oran's Jews were a diverse group "divided by language, origin, rite, and social class" (p. 155). Moreover, they were led by a merchant class that "was savvy, fractious, dynamic, and powerful" (p. 110).

Schreier's counter-narrative is told chiefly through the biography of Jacob Lasry (1793-1869), a Moroccan-born merchant and former British protégé who eventually was appointed head of the consistory, the body designed to oversee Oran's Jewish community. Lasry was once reviled

as an "avaricious Jew" in official correspondence, and his selection as "France's chosen agent of progress and civilization in Oran" appears, according to Schreier, paradoxical (p. 154). Schreier not only exposes the contradictions inherent in the new colonial order but also shows how the habits and practices of Oran's merchant elite formed prior to the French conquest allowed its members, like Lasry, to adapt and to thrive under the new regime.

In titling his book *The Merchants of Oran*, Schreier offers a nod to Daniel J. Schroeter's landmark *Merchants of Essaouira: Urban Society and Imperialism in Southwestern Morocco, 1844-1886* (1988), but this study of Oran departs from that earlier work in significant ways. First, there is the nature of the two port cities themselves. Built in the eighteenth century to be Morocco's window on the Atlantic, Essaouira was eventually eclipsed by Casablanca and survives today as a tourist destination. In contrast, Oran, once a sleepy Spanish *presidio*, has now grown to a million and half people and is Algeria's second largest city. But beyond the salient facts of the two cities' locales and histories, the two authors direct their gaze in different directions. Schroeter focuses on Essaouira's links to Morocco's interior, while Schreier emphasizes Oran's significance within the context of transna-

tional Mediterranean trade. And while the principal merchants in both cities were Jews, the relationship of these Jewish merchants to the state and the domestic economy could not be more different.

In the case of Morocco, the most prominent traders were *tujjar al-sultan*, royal merchants delegated to represent the interests of the court. As Schroeter argues, while these merchants “were responsible for distributing European imports domestically, they did not restructure the traditional Moroccan economy along Western lines” (p. 5). In contrast, Oran’s elite merchants made their fortunes in the early nineteenth century by exporting grain and cattle to Gibraltar to provision the British garrison there. Later, in the aftermath of the 1830 French conquest, they were quick to exploit opportunities to invest in real estate. One of Schreier’s central arguments is that the cosmopolitan Jewish merchants of Oran provided the much-needed local expertise that allowed an otherwise chaotic and ill-prepared French invasion to succeed.

Schreier arranges his six chapters chronologically, beginning with Oran’s history as a prosperous medieval entrepôt and its subsequent decline as the city changed hands back and forth between the Spanish and the Ottomans. Recaptured by the regency in 1792, Oran enjoyed a revival due in large part to the commercial links that arose with Gibraltar. Jews from Morocco, Gibraltar, and western Algeria who settled in Oran were crucial agents of the city’s rebirth. The second chapter, devoted to the decades that preceded the French invasion, highlights the commercial activities of its Jewish merchants, the diversity of their origins, and their relation to the local beylical and European consular authorities. In contrast to the usual portrait of a decaying regency, Schreier cites Oran’s growing prominence as evidence of the regime’s dynamism.

In chapter 3, Lasry enters the picture with a drama surrounding the merchant’s efforts to use

export permits purchased from Bey Hassan, the local sovereign under the regency, prior to his deposition. Neither the Tunisian bey appointed by the French to rule Oran nor the French general who replaced him felt inclined to honor permits issued by their predecessor. Although ultimately unsuccessful in his efforts to be reimbursed, the incident demonstrated, Lasry mobilized support from the local British vice-consul to raise the stakes of the game. In chapter 4, Schreier offers a thick description of the fierce rivalries between Oran’s Jewish merchants and the parallel struggle between British and French officials inevitably caught up in the intrigues and affairs of their respective protégés.

Despite his earlier British associations, in the mid-1830s, Lasry served as a translator and intermediary for General Bertrand Clauzel and financed the expedition against Constantine. In the 1840s he traveled to France where he took a second wife. As described in chapter 5, this new allegiance to France was hardly evidence of a change in loyalties. Indeed, Lasry “did not need to publicly jettison his Moroccan, Gibraltarian, or British affiliations when he cast his lot with France; he continued to move with the fluctuating tides of politics and commerce” (p. 114).

In the final chapter, Schreier outlines how Oran’s Jewish mercantile elite moved into the city’s colonial administration. With the consistory dependent on local money to support its efforts, France had effectively “outsourced” its civilizing mission to the notables who had always led Oran’s Jews. Despite having funded his own private synagogue and having had two wives—signifiers for sure of a North African rather than a French identity—Lasry became the consistory’s president in 1855. Dutifully, he supported its efforts to organize Oran’s Jewish life under one communal authority, evidence, as this book convincingly argues, that “the term *Jewish* began to acquire new meanings under colonial rule” (p. 155).

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