



**David Jan Sorkin.** *Jewish Emancipation: A History across Five Centuries*. Princeton: 2019. 528 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-18967-3.

**Reviewed by** Yaakov Andrea Lattes (Yaad Academic College)

**Published on** H-Judaic (June, 2020)

**Commissioned by** Barbara Krawcowicz (Norwegian University of Science and Technology)

This volume by David Sorkin examines the emancipation of the Jews—a central development of Jewish history which according to this author unfolded over five centuries. Although the emancipation took place in various countries under different conditions, the main thesis of the book is that there were mutual influences as well as political and ideological links.

The book is composed of twenty-seven chapters, starting from the early modern period, when new colonies of Jewish merchants, or those who professed themselves as such, were formed in Ancona, Venice, and Livorno, and then in Bordeaux, Hamburg, Amsterdam, and finally, London, where these Jews in various ways obtained residence privileges, trading rights, and a degree of autonomy in managing their affairs. In Central and Eastern Europe, on the other hand, Jews within the Polish Crown territories had since the thirteenth century enjoyed royal privileges allowing them to manage themselves independently, without being subject to municipal jurisdiction, and also to trade and freely profess their worship. After the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was created in the sixteenth century, many Jews were invited to reside there to work as administrators of the nobles' properties and as lenders of money, obtaining collective privileges as communities.

The volume continues its chronological as well as synoptic analysis, studying the processes of gradual acquisition of civil rights, for example in England with the so-called Plantation Act of 1740, then in Holland and Bordeaux in France, where in June 1776 the Jews obtained the *lettres patentes* allowing them freedom of residence and trade. In Eastern and Central Europe, after the partitions of Poland in 1772, Jews found themselves under different authorities: for instance in Galicia, the Habsburg emperor Joseph II extended some rights of equality already granted to other Jews, while in tsarist Russia, which prohibited Jews to live now in the new territories, Catherine allowed some Jews to reside in certain cities such as Riga. At the same time in France, the Revolution altered the previous political status of Jews, abolishing the ancient conception of social estates. However, only gradually and after long discussion were some rights granted, first to Jews who already lived in Alsace region, and later in the territories conquered by Napoleon.

The volume continues describing the long processes that during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries led in some countries of central and western Europe to Jews being seen as "tolerated" and in others as "naturalized." In the Habsburg Empire Jews were "tolerated" according to Joseph II's famous edict of 1781-83, which opened schools and universities to them and allowed them a range

of previously prohibited occupations, such as transport, handicrafts, and arts. In British as well as Dutch colonies legislation initiated a process of naturalization whereby Jews received a pledge of equal status with their Christian neighbors which included freedom of religion and trade and property rights, while in the same period, in Russia the tsars introduced a policy of segregation.

The last chapters are dedicated to the twentieth century, that is, the loss of political and civil rights in Nazi-dominated Europe, which is defined as a process of "de-emancipation"—depriving Jews of citizenship through many legislative acts that peeled away their rights in an almost exact reversal of the emancipation process. Sorkin discusses also the legal situation of Jews in the Arab states formed after the colonial period during the 1960s and concludes with an analysis of the various groups which form the modern State of Israel.

In fact, Sorkin's enormous work analyzes case by case, country by country or even city by city, the variety of situations in which Jews began to obtain legal rights, showing that the emancipation of Jews in Europe followed a tortuous path, with ups and downs and differences between countries but at the same time, with influences and conceptions transferred either diachronically or synchronously. The result is a wide-ranging as well as detailed overview of this long and complex process, a transnational and comparative presentation of the phenomenon of emancipation.

This is a pioneering study as since it proposes to reevaluate the existing historiography concerning a particular historical development in a wide transnational context instead of focusing on a single event or country and extending its perspectives. In fact, until some years ago, historians tended to focus on a specific topic, a specific country, or a specific period, while in more recent years an opposite tendency has developed to widen historical research from both geographic and synchronic points of view so as to reconstruct the reciprocal influences affecting apparently different and dis-

tant social nuclei, seeking to study what is defined as a kind of global history without boundaries of time or space. This ambitious type of research brings about a broader and more complex view of reality, thus offering new and stimulating ideas for further investigations. As it requires great knowledge of heterogeneous cultures, this kind of inquiry should lead to a practice that characterizes other disciplines: the formation of teams of scholars able to compare distinct approaches. In fact, in order to develop this kind of research it is necessary to use a very wide and interdisciplinary bibliography, written in many different languages. Sorkin's study indeed builds upon an impressive quantity of sources. However, regrettably, at the end of the book there is no bibliographical list of all of them, which would have been very useful to scholars.

*Andrea Yaakov Lattes teaches at Yaad College in Tel Aviv, and is president of ASSEI, the Israeli Association for the Study of History of Jews in Italy.*

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic>

**Citation:** Yaakov Andrea Lattes. Review of Sorkin, David Jan. *Jewish Emancipation: A History across Five Centuries*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. June, 2020.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54565>



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