Alma Heckman's fascinating book, organized around a group of Moroccan Jewish communists but ultimately about a far broader set of issues involving the twentieth-century evolution of Moroccan identity and the state, is a rich, surprising, and at times challenging study. One of its key narrative strategies is to privilege several unlikely (at least to the nonexpert) historical contradictions, around which a constellation of interesting historical episodes is conveyed. For one, in the first half of the twentieth century, being at once a communist, a patriot, a royalist, a Jew, an Arab, and even a Zionist in Morocco was not impossible. Only after independence from France would political identities harden, ethnic identities carry more political charge, and several of these monikers become impossible to claim simultaneously. Second, the traditional periodization of Moroccan Jewish history (one that emphasizes the foundation of the State of Israel in 1948 and Moroccan independence in 1956 as the beginning(s) of the end) needs to be totally rethought in order to include the radical, interwar roots of Moroccan Jewish identity and politics. It also erases a rich and important history of postindependence leftist Arab-Jewish presence, patriotism, and activism in Morocco. Third, a number of Jewish leftists in the postindependence period, while suffering rejection by mainstream Moroccan Jewish institutions and imprisoned and tortured for their politics, were studiously ignored by international Jewish philanthropies that sought to bolster the murderous regime of King Hassan II, whom they considered “moderate,” relatively friendly to Israel, and the “single barrier of protection” for the Moroccan Jewish community (p. 192). Furthermore, these activists of the radical Moroccan Jewish past, once beaten, bloodied, and their putative threat neutralized, had since been dragged out of prison to be repackaged as symbols of Moroccan “tolerance” and Arab-Jewish coexistence. It is an amazing story and Heckman has rendered us all a service by telling it.

Heckman's study frequently circles back to a small coterie of activists including Abraham Serfaty (1926-2010), Edmond Amran El Maleh (1917-2010), Simon Levy (1934-2011), Sion Assidon (1948-), and several others. While Heckman admits that this group represented a small minority, often outcast by a community that was itself a minority in Morocco, she effectively uses this admittedly small cast of characters to throw a number of wrenches in the old, flawed analytical machine of Middle Eastern/North African (MENA) Jewish history. By focusing on politically radical Jews whose activism (generally) began between
the wars and who remained in the country after independence, the book subverts the triumphalist Moroccan nationalist narratives that end in 1956 as well as Zionist ones that emphasize Israel as a savior. Using the experiences and perspectives of this group as an optic allows Heckman to illustrate how communism provided a progressive, inclusive, and patriotic avenue for Jews to actively participate in Morocco’s national liberation struggle, as well as attempt to counter the putative paradox of Jewish political belonging in Morocco. This paradox, it is explained, was created not only by the Palestine issue and the Arab-Israeli conflict but also by older colonial-era French-Jewish institutions that nurtured paths of identification separating Jews from Muslim society in North Africa. The heretofore “untold story” of Jewish radicals’ involvement in Morocco’s national liberation project presents a welcome addition to a small but growing body of historiography on Jews in the MENA region that challenges a stubborn traditional narrative: Jews were consciously rooted and engaged in an Arab state’s political history, as opposed to “passive objects, uprooted by colonialism, Zionism, and Arab nationalism” (p. 3).

The first chapter argues that the treaty of 1912 (the same year witnessed a treaty that gave Spain control over the north) that formalized French control over the vast majority of Morocco also transformed people’s relationship to each other and to the state. While it encouraged many Jews to keep a low political profile while demonstrating loyalty to France as their “protector,” it also ushered in an array of political choices in Morocco. For Heckman, Léon René Sultan (1905-45), an Algerian Jewish lawyer from Constantine who settled in Casablanca, is emblematic of this moment. A Jew and committed communist with French citizenship, he also held out hope for French republicanism while sponsoring Zionist fundraising and sports programs. This sort of ideological fluidity, sometimes encouraged (in the 1930s) by the urgency of antifascism, which kept facets of the Left together, was a hallmark of the period. The flexibility was such that Jewish papers like L’Avenir Illustré could speak well of Zionism, all the while imploring Jews to never allow themselves to be deracinated from “their national foundations and country [i.e. Morocco]” (p. 32). Meanwhile, in contrast to Algerian-born Sultan, many Moroccan Jews were arriving at political awareness through a different trajectory from most Muslims. “Alliancism” grew out of the schools of the Alliance Israelite Universelle, whose Francophone, left-wing republican teachers often initiated their students onto their political trajectories. Above all, they rendered Moroccan Jews “acutely aware of their peculiar place at the intersections of Moroccan, French, and Jewish social and political worlds” (p. 31). This understudied interwar period, Heckman argues, is key to understanding Moroccan Jewish politics of both patriotism and belonging in the postwar period.

The second chapter illustrates how the World War II period, whose importance in Moroccan Jewish history has been overshadowed by the 1948 foundation of the state of Israel and independence in 1956, was actually a watershed. Without denying the role of Zionism, anti-Zionism, and Arab nationalism in nurturing dissonance between Moroccan Jews and Muslims after 1948, Heckman sees the early 1940s as a time when the most existential questions about Jewish belonging in Morocco first emerged. The defeat of the French colonial overlord at the hands of Germany, the rise of anti-Semitism among both Muslims and Europeans, the Vichy “betrayal” of the Jews, and the burgeoning anticolonial nationalist movement all served to profoundly shake Jews’ position in Morocco vis-à-vis their Muslim neighbors, not to mention their own forms of national identification. Subsequently, the American influence following the Allied landing in North Africa in November 1942, without immediately eliminating Vichy officers or their anti-Jewish policies, nevertheless further energized Morocco’s national struggle and boosted the sultan’s prestige. The Communist Party (under the chairmanship of Léon Sultan)
would begin to shift from a predominantly European party only ambiguously supporting independence, to a “patriotic” party with a more Moroccan membership, supportive of both independence and the maintenance of the sultan at the heart of Moroccan political and cultural identification. In this atmosphere, Jews who were disillusioned with French “protection” after Vichy, emboldened by American power, and anxious to secure their belonging in leftist’s inclusive vision for a future independent Morocco were drawn to communism.

The third chapter, which is organized around the theme of “tactics,” opens with the story of the arrest of Abraham Serfati in 1950 for distributing Communist Party literature. Drawing the reader’s attention to the rhetoric used by his comrades in the wake of the arrest, Heckman emphasizes how Communist Party officials appealed to Sultan Muhammad V to intervene with the protectorate government to resist this example of French “colonial oppression” that had violated Sharifian juridical authority and “sovereignty,” in order to free a “young, ardent patriot” (p. 102). In other words, the party cast the young Moroccan Jewish communist as a symbol of national freedom. This becomes one of the themes of the chapter: for Moroccan Jews seeking to participate in the national liberation movement, especially those radicalized by antifascist activism in the 1930s and 1940s, the Moroccan Communist Party allowed them to express their patriotism and vision for an inclusive, democratic Morocco. Yet it was precisely in this postwar period that Jews’ claims of belonging in Morocco, already shaken by French schools, Vichy betrayal, and Zionist inroads, became increasingly urgent. With the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, many in the Arab and Muslim worlds gave weight to a discourse embraced by many Zionists and Arab nationalists alike: Jews constituted a different nation. Leading figures in the Istiqlal (independence) party painted the Communist Party as “inauthentic” in “Muslim” Morocco, while its leaders often elided the difference between Moroccan Jews and Zionist agents (p. 105). If the sultan and other leaders insisted on Jews’ belonging, feelings on the street suggested widespread doubts. Heckman’s numerous examples of communist Jews’ claims of belonging—aimed as much at fellow Jews tempted by Zionism as increasingly suspicious Moroccan Muslims—brings to life their ideology, personal feelings, and sense of urgency. As the activist Amran El Maleh wrote in 1949, “We are Moroccans, we are not “foreigners,” as the Zionists would have us believe, who fuel the colonial fire. We are deeply Moroccan” (p. 107).

If Simon Levy and several others among Heckman’s interlocutors recalled the immediate postindependence period as “euphoric,” the fourth chapter ultimately tells a story of repression, emigration, and political splintering. Following independence, the king appointed Jews to his cabinet and others served on the constitutional advisory committee, while spirited claims of Jewish inclusion rang out from many quarters, even from leaders of Istiqlal. But such gestures soon gave way to brutal repression of leftist opposition. Additionally, popular hostility to Jews as “Zionists,” even if not condoned by the king, triggered massive Jewish emigration. Between 1948 and 1956, approximately 90,000 Moroccan Jews left, with 92,000 joining them between 1961 and 1964. But the 1967 war represented the “swan song” of Jewish life in Morocco; spurring popular boycotts targeting Jewish businesses as Hassan II’s repression continued, splitting the left into radical and more accommodationist factions. In addition to drawing attention to the plight of activists like Serfati, Levy, and Assidon (all of whom were arrested and tortured at various times), Heckman’s discussion of this period tends to highlight, to good effect, political writings by Jewish communists. These bring to light how their perspectives on Zionism and anti-Semitism reinforced each other, anti-authoritarianism, and ultimately their per-
sistence and deep sense of devotion to—and belonging in—Morocco.

In a rare moment of overlap (however slim) between Heckman’s analysis and that of mainstream Jewish organizations, she sees Morocco’s 1975 “Green March” into the Western Sahara as a turning point in Moroccan Jewish history. The fifth chapter argues that in the quarter-century or so following this event, Jews became both one of the “greatest boons and greatest liabilities” in Moroccan domestic and international politics (p. 222). While some in Morocco opposed the king’s occupation of the Western Sahara, and prominent leftists such as Abraham Serfaty and Sion Assidon still languished in Hassan’s prisons, most Jews (even some communists such as Simon Levy) saw it as a chance to demonstrate loyalty to the king. Hassan II’s public relations, in turn, also benefited, notably from his friendliness towards established Jewish community structures, Israel, and international Zionist organizations. As early as 1970, Hassan had declared Israel a “fact” that Arabs needed to accept, and the World Jewish Congress had praised Hassan as an Arab “moderate,” in part due to his willingness to allow Jewish emigration to Israel (p. 192). In 1986, the regime cooperated with the Council of Jewish Communities of Morocco to market and organize a Jewish pilgrimage back to Morocco. Under Hassan’s regime, notes Heckman, Jewish tourism became a symbol of the state’s supposed “tolerance” and “liberalism” (p. 222). In other words, while King Hassan II was productively working with Israel and international Jewish philanthropies to commodify Morocco’s Jewish past, he was quashing political opposition and denying thousands of political prisoners (including Jews) their human rights.

But, as suggested above, Heckman also uses the final chapter to outline how Hassan’s treatment of radical Jews was simultaneously a liability. This section might be most notable for the wealth of richly documented stories surrounding the hardships endured by Serfaty, Assidon, and their families; the international solidarity campaigns by Amnesty International and others to free them; and personal writings by activists. Heckman brings this section alive with a wealth of quotes and images from postcards, flyers, and even calendars produced to bring attention to Hassan II’s political prisoners. Serfaty was indeed freed in 1991, but he was stripped of his citizenship and forced into exile; only when Hassan II died was Serfaty welcomed back and his Moroccan citizenship restored. One of the final ironies of Heckman’s analysis is that in the years following the deaths of Abraham Serfaty, Edmond Amran El Maleh, and Simon Levy, after years of exclusion, imprisonment, and torture, the regime hailed them as “national symbols of Morocco’s patriotic Jewish heritage” (p. 220).

The book is not without its flaws. The organization, for one, is not always transparent, and a number of facts, stories, and even specific phrases are repeated numerous times. Furthermore, the author’s efforts to adequately represent her outstanding research by including plentiful quotes occasionally proves more robust than the book’s organizational scaffolding can handle; some examples seem to muddle the point being argued. The effect is distracting, and at times one loses the thread of the narrative. In sum, the book could be a bit more clear.

This being said, The Sultan’s Communists represents a brilliant contribution to the literature, not only on Jews of the MENA region, but on the North African Left and on Moroccan history more generally. More specifically, it offers a rich addition to a growing historiography that challenges conventional narratives about the “end” of Jewish life in the Arab and Muslim worlds, and the putative “salvation” offered by the Zionist project and its agents. To this end, I have no doubt that Heckman’s book will prove useful in a number of graduate and undergraduate classrooms, as well as, in time, generate fruitful debate beyond the academy.
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