

## REZENSION

**Ethan B. Katz, Lisa Moses Leff, Maud S. Mandel (eds.):  
Colonialism and the Jews**

*Ethan B. Katz, Lisa Moses Leff, Maud S. Mandel (eds.): Colonialism and the Jews, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 2017, 371 p., ISBN: 978-0-253-02462-6 (ebook), \$39.99 (ebook).*

**Reviewed by Noémie Duhaut.**

Despite significant attention to imperial history in the last decades, there has until recently been done little research on the intersections between Jewish and colonial history.<sup>1</sup> The field of study on Jews and empires is now developing more dynamically, as attested by the publication of the edited volume under review here – a publication which could not be more timely.<sup>2</sup> *Colonialism and the Jews* is launching what its editors Ethan B. Katz, Lisa Moses Leff and Maud S. Mandel announce “a Jewish imperial turn” in historiography.

This book opens with an excellent introduction highlighting the benefits of engaging these two fields of historical research. Jewish history needs colonial history to challenge “triumphalist narratives of colonialism” taken for granted by much of earlier scholarship as well as to gain a more sophisticated understanding of processes of modernisation in Jewish communities in the colonies as well as in the metropole. As for colonial historians, engaging Jewish history can help them to draw a more subtle picture of colonialism, its mechanisms and meanings. As Albert Memmi already noted in the 1950s, the position of Jews in empires challenges the neat coloniser / colonised binary. Approaching colonial history from this minority perspective thus enables scholars – as well as, arguably, broader audiences – to go beyond simplistic assessments of western colonialism as either entirely beneficial or evil.

This volume is organised around three main issues: subjects and agents of empire; Jews in colonial politics and Zionism and colonialism. The essays in the first section propose that in order to understand the variety of roles played by Jews in colonial history, the researcher should avoid categorising Jews in the colonial world in one category or the other. The first two chapters focus on Jewish intellectuals and on the political nature of their work. Examining the historiography of Jews in the Maghreb written by both Jews and non-Jews, Colette Zytnicki nuances the clear dichotomies that the Saidian model has been so criticised for. Susannah Heschel’s contribution on German Jewish orientalist’s engagement with Islamic studies underlines, like Zytnicki’s, that their scholarship was produced in and facilitated by an imperial context. Crucially, Heschel stresses that,

<sup>1</sup> A significant exception is Sarah Abrevaya Stein’s pioneering work of the last decade.

<sup>2</sup> One only has to think of Israel’s new Basic Law that defines Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People approved by the Knesset on July 19, 2018 and of controversies surrounding the British Labour Party’s stance on antisemitism in recent years to see the immediate relevance of some of the issues tackled by this volume.

through their scholarship on Islam, German Jews integrated into a Europe composed of states that were not only nation-states but also empires. Adam Mendelsohn looks at the influence (or lack thereof) of Jewish immigrants moving from British colonies to the metropole and explains why some went on to challenge metropolitan order when others did not. It is one of the rare chapters in this volume that includes class as an explanatory factor and shows a direct and concrete example of how the imperial periphery influenced the centre. Also unique in this volume is Frances Malino's use of gender as an analytical category in her chapter on the *Alliance Israélite Universelle's* female schoolteachers. While she argues that these teachers adapted Western European feminism to their own goals, her underlying assumption nevertheless seems to be that these women had to move to the metropole in order to 'discover' feminism. Israel Bartal concludes this part with an ambitious comparison of the Jewish experience in two empires that are rarely seen together – the French and the Russian one.

The essays in part two explore the role of Jewish political actors in the colonial context as well as how Jews were politically defined in this context. Ethan B. Katz opens this discussion by looking at three major French Jewish politicians who engaged in colonial policymaking and shared an inclination towards liberalising the colonial system with regard to the status of Algerian Muslims. Katz's argument brings to mind Heschel's discussion of German Jewish orientalists: focusing on status of Muslims was a way for these politicians to tackle questions of difference and inclusion in the French empire in a broader and more universal way than just focusing on the status of Jews. Tara Zahra's essay offers a novel way to contextualise early Zionism and argues that it can be seen as one of the Eastern European colonial fantasies that emerged as a response to the anxieties caused by the mass emigration of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. David Feldman's study of the British Labour Party's position on Zionism considers that anticolonialism was less important in shaping the party's criticism of Israel than usually assumed. Rather, the support of the British left for Zionism – and later Israel – depended on whether the latter continued to carry out its (socialist) civilising mission in the Middle East. In his chapter on the Vichy period in Morocco, Daniel Schroeter analyses how Jews found themselves in the middle of complex and constantly evolving power relations between the main actors in this French colony – colonial officials, European settlers and the Sultan – and how these relations affected Jewish policies and their implementation. Also challenging common understandings of antisemitism, the closing chapter similarly offers a complex picture going beyond the usual aggressor/victim binary. In her close reading of a street riot that took place in 1952 in Tunis, Maud S. Mandel encourages us not to read these events in the light of the later degradation of Jewish-Muslim relations and therefore challenges both preconceptions of Jewish powerlessness and the narrative of Jewish vulnerability in North Africa.

Part three offers a discussion of the relationship between Zionism and colonialism and opens with a republication of Derek J. Penslar's classic essay "Is Zionism a Colonial Movement?," followed by two responses from scholars of European imperialism and a final answer by Penslar. In his initial essay, Penslar rejected two opposite visions – one considering that Zionism is fully congruent with colonialism and the other denying any connection between the two. Instead, he proposed additional analytical categories and locates Zionism between postcolonialism, anticolonialism and colonialism whether in

discourse or in practice. In his answer, Joshua Cole argues that Penslar's ability to locate Zionism in between these three categories largely rests on his using a broad – and almost teleological – understanding of what constitutes Zionism as well as a narrow definition of colonialism. Cole concludes by suggesting that using colonial as an analytical category might not be that helpful since the “dynamic of inclusion and differentiation” is as characteristic of modern nationalism as it is of colonialism. Elizabeth F. Thompson's answer focuses on Mandate Palestine to argue, against Penslar, that Zionism embraced settler colonialism already in 1917. Despite disagreements on the nature of Zionism in the interwar period and on how much it should be seen in the *longue durée*, Penslar finds himself agreeing with his critics on one point: that labels such as colonial, postcolonial and anticolonial are all too often used indiscriminately as well as politically and have lost much of their explanatory power for scholars.

*Colonialism and the Jews* achieves many of the aims announced in the introduction. The contributors of this volume successfully move away from earlier narratives depicting – either explicitly or implicitly – European colonialism as bringing “progress” and “modernisation” to non-European Jews. Instead, they offer their readers a subtle understanding of colonialism and of the place of Jews in colonial history. In particular, a common thread that links many essays in this volume is the issue of power and powerlessness, with most authors discussing the question of Jewish agency and its limits in colonial settings.

Taken together, the essays in this excellent new volume suggest areas for new research – for instance the role played by Jews in the intertwined development of international law and imperialism as well as in the early construction and legitimisation of empire. Indeed, most contributions in this volume deal with the position of Jews in already established empires.

The editors stress that colonialism was not a one-way street and quote Frederick Cooper and Ann Stoler's famous dictum that “Europe was made by its imperial projects, as much as colonial encounters were shaped by conflicts within Europe itself” (p. 2) in order to remind us that this applies to Jewish history too, that “the encounter with imperialism ... shaped the contours of European Jewish modernization as well (p. 3).” Yet, only a few chapters end up reflecting on the impact of the colonies on the metropolitan core and what this meant for Jews there. Finally, although the editors note that imperialism was a phenomenon that defined and characterised Europe as a whole in the 19<sup>th</sup> and in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, most contributions in this volume tend to use either the British or the French empire as their analytical framework. Thus, although they avoid the pitfalls of national history, they tend to dismiss Europe as an additional framework. Yet, France – and, arguably, other Western European countries too – defined themselves as national, imperial as well as European powers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This meant that their Jewish minorities had to negotiate their place within these three evolving and overlapping contexts.

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**About the author** Noémie Duhaut is a postdoctoral fellow in Jewish studies at the Central European University in Budapest. She studied history at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies and at the Hebrew and Jewish Studies Department at University College London, where she obtained her PhD in 2017. She is an alumna of the Posen Society of Fellows, was a visiting scholar at Dartmouth College and a postdoctoral fellow at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 2017–18. Her work investigates how and why the elite of French Jewry constructed a supranational European identity in the second half of the nineteenth century. She is currently revising her doctoral dissertation – which focused on the campaign for the civil and political equality of Jews in the Balkans – into a book, tentatively called *French Jews and the quest for an ideal Europe in the nineteenth century*. She is also working on her new research project, a biography of the French Jewish leader Adolphe Crémieux (1796–1880).