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Book Review: Jewish Salonica: Between the Ottoman Empire and Modern Greece. By Devin E. Naar.

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Jewish Salonica: Between the Ottoman Empire and Modern Greece. By *Devin E. Naar*. Stanford Studies in Jewish History and Culture. Edited by *David Biale* and *Sarah Abrevaya Stein*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016. Pp. xxx+366. \$85.00 (cloth); \$24.95 (paper).

Research on the transition of nondominant groups in the territories of the Ottoman Empire from empire to nation-state remains in its infancy. The book under review by Devin Naar is a masterly account of the ways in which the Jews of Salonica adapted themselves and negotiated their boundaries during and after the transition from the multicultural, multireligious, and multinational Ottoman Empire to the homogenizing nation-state of Greece.

With a reputation as a place of Jewish refuge, Salonica has been one of the most important centers of Sephardic Jewry since the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492. This once proud and flourishing community came to an end during the Holocaust. The turning point for Salonica's Jewry was not World War I, as it was for some other Ottoman ethno-religious groups, but rather the First Balkan War of 1912, which resulted in the transfer of Salonica to Greece. Naar is reluctant to adopt the dominant historiographical approach of representing the interwar period as one of decline (*deskadensya*); rather, he considers it a period of rebirth (*renasensya*) during which the Jewish community of Salonica flourished.

Relying on archival sources in Greek, Hebrew, Ladino, and French, Naar reconstructs the history of Jewish Salonica during the interwar period not from the perspective of the Greek state but from that of the different voices within the Jewish community. He describes how the different interest groups—integrationists (the Alliance Israélite Universelle), socialists (the Workers' Federation), and nationalists (Zionists)—interacted and sometimes competed with one another in order to preserve the interests of their community. Some of the major questions Naar raises in the book could be applicable to other cases of nondominant groups who used similar strategies of co-opting, adapting, and refashioning themselves within both the new context of the nation-state and their own new status as minorities.

The book is divided into five chapters. Rather than pursuing a chronological narrative, Naar chooses a sophisticated thematic organization. Chapter 1 discusses the creation of Jewish institutions and the important role they played in the Jewish community. It also examines tensions between religious and secular interest groups on issues pertaining to representation, processes of decision making, and definition of the structures of the Jewish community. The autonomous status of the Jewish community remained largely unchanged in the transition from the Ottoman to the Greek context. The Beth Din and other Jewish institutions played crucial roles in running the day-to-day affairs of the community (67).

Chapter 2 deals with ecclesiastical politics as an important dimension of interwar dynamics within the Jewish community. The disputes over the position of the chief rabbi of Salonica represented a microcosm of the existing conflict among the different Jewish interest groups. These tensions intensified dramatically after the transition to the Greek state, as a new candidate was needed who would fit the new context (134). The difficulty of finding a suitable chief rabbi is attested by the fact that the position remained vacant for a decade (1923–33). Rabbi Sevi Koretz eventually filled the vacancy and became one of the most important rabbis of Salonica (127).

Chapter 3 deals with the educational system of the Jewish community in Salonica. From the Ottoman period until World War II the objectives of Jewish elementary education were contested by the different cultural, religious, and political currents within the

community. As education played an important role in the construction of identities, major questions were raised. Were these young Jews going to be taught to embrace the nation as Jews, or as Ottomans or Greeks? How would they reconcile their affiliation with the Jewish community with their status as citizens of Greece? Much like the millet system during the Ottoman period, the system of Greek rule gave the Jewish community of Salonica the privilege of administering its own schools. However, this did not mean that the Greek state did not interfere in the realm of education. One of the main objectives of both the Greek state and the official leadership of the Jewish community was to transform Ottoman Jews into Hellenic Jews.

Chapter 4 deals with the historiography of Salonica and the role of Jewish historians in bringing the Jewish history of Salonica “to the very center of public attention during the interwar years” (34). In this period, historical narrative was used to unify the community amid the crises and challenges that they faced. For the Jewish scholars of Salonica, writing their community’s history became a “sacred task” that “required a complete reframing of the Salonican Jewish past from a tale of Ottoman-Jewish romance since 1492 into one of Hellenic-Jewish synergy since antiquity” (192). Mercado Covo, Joseph Nehama, and Michael Molho, among others, played major roles in the process of rewriting the history of the Jews in Salonica. According to Naar, they were the ones who first described Salonica as the “Jerusalem of the Balkans” in order to “promote the historic grandeur of the Jews in the city” (235).

The final chapter of the book deals with the Jewish cemetery (Bet Ahaim) of Salonica, which was once the largest in Europe. Naar demonstrates the ways in which the “living-dead” played a crucial role in the perpetuation of the existence of the Jewish Salonican identity. In this fascinating chapter, Naar notes how the Jewish necropolis was as important as the Jewish metropolis. He analyzes the response of the Jewish community to the threats posed by both the state and the University of Salonica in expropriating sections of the Jewish cemetery. Naar maintains that the removal of a section from the Jewish cemetery demonstrates the extent to which Hellenic Judaism “failed to insert the Jews of Salonica into the narrative of their city, province, and country” (271).

There are three minor issues I would like to point out regarding this otherwise fantastic book. First, I would have expected more discussion in the form of a chapter or a long subchapter comparing the condition of the Salonican Jews and their transition from empire to nation-state with those of other Jewish communities of the Ottoman Empire. Second, it would have been beneficial to analyze the ways in which the Jewish Yishuv in Palestine perceived the Jewish community of Salonica, especially given the reluctance of the majority of the latter to consider Palestine as the Jewish homeland. Finally, I would have expected more discussion about the fate of the Salonican Jews who survived the Holocaust.

Jewish Salonica is an excellent book that invites broader discussions about ruptures and continuities between empires and nation-states. It highlights how minority groups refashion themselves during these transitions by inventing new strategies to negotiate their boundaries, redefine their identities, and protect their space with the aim of preserving the interests of their communities and preventing their decline. *Jewish Salonica* is a major contribution not only to Jewish history and Sephardic studies but also to Mediterranean, European, postcolonial, human rights, Ottoman, and Middle Eastern studies. It will be of great use for scholars, students, historians, and policy makers interested in understanding the complexities of empires and nation-states and the status and rights of minorities within these contexts.

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