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Joshua Schreier, *The Merchants of Oran: A Jewish Port at the Dawn of Empire*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017. xi + 199 pp. Maps, images, notes, bibliography, and index. \$50.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9780804799140

Review by Rachel E. Schley, Harvard University.

For quite some time, historians of French empire have focused on the decades after the establishment of the Third Republic in 1870, a storied period of consolidation, modernization, and colonization for France and other European powers. With important exceptions, the history of the beginning of French rule in North Africa was either underexplored or circumscribed by a traditional narrative centered on 1830 as a decisive turning point in the advent of the French colonial regime and the progress that it drove. Over the last few decades, however, historians have begun reappraising this “early colonial” period (1830 to 1870) and the ideologies and individuals that shaped the brutal and protracted conquest of Algeria.^[1] Though this reappraisal has addressed some of the assumptions underpinning the periodization of French Algeria, few historians have tackled the question of the continuities between colonial Algeria and its pre-colonial past or, more specifically, the formidable commercial networks and Mediterranean powerbrokers that influenced the transition from one empire to the next.^[2] This is precisely what Joshua Schreier’s *The Merchants of Oran* addresses. In so doing, it offers an important and opportune contribution to the history of French Algeria and to the history of Oran and its Jewish mercantile elite during the late Ottoman and early colonial period.

Schreier’s first book, *Arabs of the Jewish Faith: The Civilizing Mission in Colonial Algeria*, explored the varied ways in which Algerian Jews, largely based in and around Oran, responded to French colonialism. This study challenged a longstanding narrative that characterized the assimilation of Algerian Jews to the French body politic as inevitable and unidirectional—a process that culminated in the famed Crémieux decree of 1870, which granted French citizenship to all “indigenous” Jews living in French-administered Algerian territories. In revisiting Oran, its influential Jewish merchants, as well as the French civilizing mission and questions of Jewish agency, *The Merchants of Oran* treads some familiar territory. But in highlighting the life and career of the wealthy, Moroccan-born, Jewish business man Jacob Lasry and in tracing his ventures—as well as those of his Jewish cohort—across the history of a commercially vibrant, Mediterranean port city, Schreier indeed offers “fresh perspectives on North Africa, the place of Jews in it, and the early French conquest” (p. 4).

While this book focuses on illuminating the history of a motley crew of Jewish merchants who navigated the calamities and opportunities of empire to build Oran’s commercial might, it is Lasry who lies at the heart of this story. And it is through the lens of Lasry—his business deals, consular patronage, philanthropy, imperial alliances, rivalries, and even marital habits—that the author challenges abiding narratives in both French and Jewish historiography concerning Ottoman Oran, the French civilizing mission, as well as notions of Jewish power and group identity.

Lasry moved to Gibraltar in early adulthood, joining a prominent community of Moroccan Jewish merchants who supplied the British garrison there with trade from Morocco and the Ottoman Regency of Algiers. In time, he married his first wife, became a British protégé, and then, in search of opportunity, moved his family to Oran in the 1820s. Over the course of the 1820s and 1830s, Lasry built a business portfolio that would make him one of Oran's wealthiest businessmen and landowners. His influential place in Ottoman society carried over into early French colonial society, during which his wealth, networks, and social standing grew. After the occupation of Oran by French troops in 1831, Lasry became a principal (even if somewhat contentious) ally to "France's underfunded and ill-supplied conquest of Algeria" (p. 114). In 1854, he became a French citizen, after which he was appointed president of the Jewish Consistory of Oran, an institution purposed with moralizing and attaching Oran's supposedly uncivilized Jews to France. [3]

Much of the scholarship on French Algeria tends to focus on religion and race as the most powerful makers of identity and status under French colonial governance. Yet, in exploring the transition from Ottoman to French rule, Schreier makes a compelling case that the status of North African merchants, like Lasry, was often far less defined by religion or colonial notions of indigeneity, but rather by commercial clout, political connection, and wealth. A man of tremendous influence in Ottoman, British, French, Jewish, and Muslim circles, Lasry juggled many affiliations and identities in his "successful evolution from a North African merchant into a colonial 'civilizer'" (p. 11). To some, he was an "English subject" or a "British Jew," to others, a "Moroccan," or an "indigenous Jew"; or, he was simply "the Jew Lasry." He spoke Arabic, Spanish, and perhaps French and English, enjoyed British consular protection, and even possessed a Gibraltar passport at one point. That this Moroccan-born, British-protected Jew—and likely polygamist—not only helped to bankroll the French conquest, but also became an official agent of France's civilizing mission underlines the contradictions of French colonialism and the progress it purported to bring. Moreover, the fact that a diverse and divided group of Jewish merchants were not only vital to the commercial life of Oran and the western Mediterranean—but also to the early French occupation—complicates a traditional historical portrait of Algerian Jews as an oppressed and religiously-defined community awaiting emancipation by France.

Over the course of six chapters, ordered chronologically and thematically, Schreier threads the story of Lasry and his Jewish colleagues into a broader story about Oran's shifting fortunes and opportunities in the western Mediterranean. Chapter one offers an overview of the history of Oran; from its founding in 903 CE by merchants from Umayyad Spain, to the Muslim and Spanish dynasties that wrangled for control of Oran over the next millennium. During this time, Schreier emphasizes, Oran was defined less by a given political order or "the East-West binary that took hold in Lasry's lifetime" (p. 26). Instead, Oran's identity was rooted in its geography: a protected bay, access to fresh water, and proximity to trans-Saharan caravans and Iberian and southern European markets that enabled North African, Iberian, Genoese, and Venetian merchants (among others) to facilitate a transnational movement of textiles, agricultural products, luxury goods, livestock, metals and more between Oran, the North African interior, and the western Mediterranean. By the eighteenth century, however, Oran was in decline. The Jewish communities who were instrumental in building Oran's robust, early modern trade networks were expelled by the Spanish in 1669. As the city suffered bouts of violence, plague, and food shortages under successive spells of Ottoman and Spanish rule, Oran grew isolated from its commercial lifelines. When the Ottomans took control of the city, once again in 1792 after a devastating earthquake, "little remained of its once substantial wealth and mercantile importance" (p. 36).

Chapter two chronicles how a diverse community of Jewish merchants "played an outsized, if underexplored, role in Oran's rebirth and reintegration into Mediterranean commerce" in the decades prior to the French conquest (p. 66). Schreier offers a counter-narrative both to an enduring story of Jewish absence or marginality in Muslim societies, and to a colonial narrative of Ottoman Oran—and North Africa more generally—as backward and despotic. Using commercial and consular records, he shows how Oran was economically revitalized by the enterprising leadership of the Ottoman Regency of

Algiers, rather than by French conquerors, as early chronicles proclaimed and subsequent histories have assumed. In the effort to rebuild Oran, Ottoman governors invited Jewish and Muslim merchants to settle there and to reconnect the city to its early modern commercial networks. Jewish merchants, in particular, were central to this process and their trade “was frequently the largest in Oran” (p. 56). Hailing from Morocco, Gibraltar, and coastal cities throughout the western Mediterranean, merchants like Lasry, as well as the famed Bacri and Busnach families, helped to revivify the city’s commercial life by renewing trade with the North African interior and Iberian and southern European markets. In addition, Jewish merchants forged crucial political and commercial alliances with British and French vice-consuls, Ottoman governors, and Muslim merchants, demonstrating that business interests had a powerful way of transcending confessional and national boundaries.

The French bombardment of Algiers plunged the Ottoman Regency into chaos. Far from inaugurating an era of progress, the conquest disrupted the dynamic trade that flowed through Oran, destroyed local populations, and ensnared French soldiers in a colonial morass they were ill-equipped to handle. Schreier consciously “decenter[s] France” in his exploration of the early conquest (p. 73). As such, chapters three and four offer a nuanced discussion of the varied experiences of Jewish merchants, as well as their British, North African, and Ottoman partners, all of whom attempted to safeguard their respective interests amid a period of profound uncertainty and chaos. Beyond the French, Ottoman, and Jewish threads in this story, Britain also looms large. Oran was a crucial hub for British interests in the Mediterranean. France’s abrupt siege of Algiers thus threatened to not only undermine Jewish mercantile interests, but those of the British empire as well. In response, British consular agents waged a proxy battle against French expansion by backing the Ottoman Regency and by protecting Jewish merchants in Oran who were vital to the provisioning of British Gibraltar.

Jewish merchants in Oran, however, were neither hapless victims nor mere pawns in an inter-imperial contest over the future of North Africa and its place in Mediterranean commerce. Lasry, for example, was undeterred by the French conquest and attempted to circumvent early French trade restrictions by leveraging his influence across British, Tunisian, Sicilian, and Muslim consular and legal channels in order to preserve his export business. Moreover, French military leaders partnered with Jewish businessmen for their commercial acumen, regional expertise, linguistic skills, and aid in avoiding “too sharp a conflict with Great Britain” (pp. 72-73). And though they were clearly industrious and powerful, the Jewish merchants of Oran were not part of a unified, “indigenous” community as subsequent colonial policies and histories would assume. Rather, they were divided by numerous factors, such as fortune, language, legal status, personal circumstances, professional ties, religious habits, and origin. Schreier elucidates these differences in discussing Lasry’s Jewish colleagues, such as Mordecai Amar, Joseph Cabessa, and Judah Sebbah, as well as the contentious entanglements, diverse backgrounds, and even violent rivalries that shaped inter-Jewish relations in Oran.

Chapters five and six explore Lasry’s role as a crucial and opportunistic ally to France’s military occupation and civilizing mission, further demonstrating how North African Jewish merchants navigated the turbulent transition from Ottoman to French rule and found opportunities to amass wealth and prestige along the way. As the French military expanded its occupation in Algeria in the mid-1830s, it relied heavily on North Africans to “organize, underwrite, and carry out [its] exploits” (p. 22). Focusing on two episodes—when Lasry served as an intermediary for General Bertrand Clauzel in the expedition to Tlemcen (in western Algeria) and when Lasry served as a major lender to General Yusuf, the Tunisian Muslim commander who led the French campaign to seize Constantine (in eastern Algeria)—chapter five explores the “business” of France’s “heavily outsourced” conquest (p. 123).

Chapter six brings us to the 1840s, when French colonial rule began to consolidate across northern Algeria. Relying on a rich variety of sources—consistorial correspondence, rabbinic literature, colonial municipal proceedings, and property records—Schreier offers a fascinating discussion of how members of Oran’s mercantile elite helped “to define and even subsidize French colonial institutions and practices,”

indicating, once again, the extent to which France's civilizing mission, like its military occupation, depended upon Oran's wealthy Jewish merchants (p. 137). For the author, colonial institutions like the consistory fostered "a new colonial public sphere" in which Lasry and his colleagues could articulate and experiment with new forms of identity and Jewish subjectivity (p. 147). As such, Schreier argues, these institutions and practices eventually distilled Oran's diverse Jewish merchants into a new colonial and social-scientific category of *israélites indigènes*.

While this process paved the way for the aforementioned Crémieux decree, it also had grave consequences for the future. As Schreier concludes, "French policies initiated in the first years of colonization began the process of Jewish reification, minoritization, and isolation from their Muslim neighbors" (p. 156). These concluding arguments are compelling, clearly articulated, and bolstered by a great attention to detail and historical evidence. Yet the reader is also left wanting to know more. Did the creation of a new colonial public sphere have specific implications for the subjectivities of Algerian Muslims or the heterogeneous settler population? If *israélites indigènes* was crafted as a social-scientific category, what about the Muslim equivalent? Did similar efforts to distill the diverse and divided European settler population likewise influence the creation of these colonial categories and subjectivities? Additional contextualization and explanation could have helped clarify these concluding arguments and the important legacies they identify in the history of late Ottoman and early French Oran. Nevertheless, this is an important and thought-provoking contribution to the history of Oran and its Jewish mercantile elite; a study that will interest scholars of empire, France, Jewish history, as well as those curious about the economies of port cities amid chaotic shifts in imperial governance.

NOTES

[1] Several recent examples of this reappraisal are Osama W. Abi-Mershed, *Apostles of Modernity: Saint-Simonians and the Civilizing Mission in Algeria* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010); Joshua Schreier, *Arabs of the Jewish Faith: The Civilizing Mission in Colonial Algeria*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010); Jennifer Sessions, *By Sword and Plow: France and the Conquest of Algeria* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011); Oissila Saaidia, *Algérie coloniale. Musulmans et chrétiens: le contrôle de l'Etat (1830-1914)* (Paris: Éditions CNRS, 2015).

[2] An example of an exception to this trend is Julia A. Clancy-Smith, *Mediterraneans: North African and Europe in an Age of Migration, c.1800-1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

[3] On the history of the Algerian Jewish consistory, see Schreier, *Arabs of the Jewish Faith*; Valérie Assan, *Les consistoires israélites d'Algérie au XIXe siècle: "l'alliance de la civilisation et de la religion."* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2012).

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