

---

H-France Review Vol. 18 (September 2018), No. 183

Joëlle Allouche-Benayoun and Geneviève Dermenjian. *Les Juifs d'Algérie: Une histoire de ruptures*. Aix-en-Provence: Presses Universitaires de Provence, 2015. 314 pp. Sources, bibliography, and glossary. 25.00€. (pb). ISBN 978-2853999984.

Review by Joshua Schreier, Vassar College.

The edited volume, *Les Juifs d'Algérie: Une histoire de ruptures* is uneven. At its best, its chapters shed light on the tortured relationship between French colonial republicanism and the colony's Jews, a diverse set of colonized subjects that, while legally passing from *indigènes* to French citizens in 1870 (and back, between 1940 and 1943), never quite achieved the quality of fully "abstract" French citizens. Far more frequently, however, the book's contributors resuscitate a triumphalist modernization narrative, whereby colonialism serves as a vehicle for European dynamism and progress, which stand in timeless opposition to Oriental tradition and intolerance. Unifying many of these essays is the tension between the inexorable march of Algerian Jewish emancipation, westernization, and assimilation on one side, and Muslim anti-Judaism and settler anti-Semitism on the other. Despite this limiting opposition, the critical reader stands to gain from the collected research into a topic that has only begun to attract substantial scholarly attention in the last decade or two.

The origins of the book lie in a 2012 colloquium entitled "Juifs d'Algérie: du dhimmi au citoyen français." Most contributors are professional historians or social scientists; but they share space with unaffiliated scholars, a filmmaker, a journalist, a rabbi, and academics with other specialties. The two co-editors loom large; Joëlle Allouche-Benayoun is the primary author of the introduction as well as a historical overview bearing the same title as the colloquium. Geneviève Dermenjian collaborated on the introduction and contributed two comparatively lengthy chapters, "The Jews of Algeria between Two Hostilities (1830-1943)," and "The Anti-Jewish Press (1870-1940)." Most of the other contributions also tend to pivot around anti-Semitism/Anti-Judaism, colonial assimilation and emancipation, and memory. To give several examples, Denis Charbit writes on "the Historiography of the Crémieux Decree," Valérie Assan discusses the "Rabbis of France and Algeria and the 'Civilizing Mission,'" and the filmmaker Jean-Pierre Lledo inveighs against "Muslim Judeophobia in Algeria." Ethan Katz offers a French-language version of his previously published discussion of the changing perspectives of Jewish collective memory entitled "Between emancipation and anti-Judaism." While several of these pieces make reference to Jews in precolonial North Africa, and the final section looks at the post-1962 period, the majority of these pieces focus on the period of French colonial rule. Given that the book has nineteen different contributors, twenty-one separate chapters, and six subcategories, including an *avant-propos*, a *préface*, and an introduction, the following review

will not summarize every chapter, but rather draw examples from several pieces to make larger points about the scholarship of the book as a whole.

As both the title of the colloquium and the chapter titles included above suggest, there is little here that departs sharply from the liberal historiographic trajectory of Algerian Jews as it was traced by earlier generations of scholars. The *avant-propos* and the other two pieces that make up the opening section set the tone: France's colonial project of acculturation, argues Philippe Portier, worked because it "was desired by the Jews themselves" (p. 9). The implication is that colonial policy and historical contingency mattered less than inherent religio-cultural traits in Algerian Jews' supposed gravitation toward colonizers' culture and institutions. "Jews placed their children in French Jewish schools starting in 1830, they increasingly spoke French, they accepted registration with the *état civil*.... In the 1860s, the urban youth abandoned their (traditional) clothing and adopted western dress" (p. 9). This all took place, Portier notes, before the profound legal transformation of the 1870 Crémieux decree which conferred French citizenship (and thus voting rights) collectively on the vast majority of Algeria's Jews (save several smaller Saharan communities). What explains this seemingly predetermined transformation? "Jews had until then been satisfied by simply dreaming of their passage through the Red Sea," but by colonizing Algeria, "France...gave an element of reality, still imperfect, of the promise of liberation." In contrast, it is implied that Muslims refused this liberation, at least in those articles that discuss Muslims. In other words, a fundamental component of the Jewish religious character (as opposed to colonial policies, emphasized by most recent scholarship) set them on a path away from their local North African-Islamic cultural milieu.

Echoing this positive portrayal of colonialism, combined with a religious interpretation of Jews' responses to it, the contributors tend to narrate the Algerian Jewish evolution away from their North African Arabo-Berber culture as a "liberation." Allouche-Benayoun's chapter, "The Jews of Algeria: From Dhimmi to French Citizen," draws on earlier work by the historian Richard Ayoun to suggest that "the profound mysticism" of Algerian Jews led them to interpret the coming of the French through the words of the late fourteenth-century Algiers-based rabbi (and refugee from Spain) Isaac bar Sheshet: Allouche-Benayoun imagines her nineteenth-century subjects asking themselves "is this God's plan, who liberates the Jews from the yoke of the Muslims much like from the Spanish terror...?" (p. 29). According to this narrative, Jews' acculturation and assimilation to France, and thus their radically different experience from Muslims, was less a product of colonial policy and practices than pre-determined by profound, if mystified religious worldviews.

Most sections (including those by the same author) present a negative, Orientalist picture of North African society, with Islam organizing its rigid social hierarchy. French colonialism, in contrast, appears as a disruptive, modernizing force that initiates and sustains Jewish progress. For example, Allouche-Benayoun renders the arc of Algerian Jews' experience with French colonization as a legible trajectory from Islamic darkness, through trial and tribulation, into French secular enlightenment. "It is in this global context of humiliation and oppression," she suggests, "that one must understand the history of relations between Jews of Algeria and France" (p. 29). The first contact with the French Army, she states, led Jews "to drive back their Berbero-Arab identity, an identity of a man humiliated and made inferior (*infériorisé*)" (p. 17). By July of 1962, when more than 90 percent of Algerian Jews left for France, they had "adopted the French identity, an identity which was for them the symbol of a free, liberated

man which coexisted from the beginning for France with their religious identity, increasingly cantonized into the private sphere” (p. 17). There are several problems with this framing, but for the time being, suffice it to say that Allouche-Benayoun’s summary bypasses several decades of scholarship that offer insight into how colonial institutions and laws created or cultivated different identities, or why certain populations could or would adopt one that promised social advancement, not to mention the prices they paid for it. It has been established, notably, that “adopting the French identity” did not happen quickly or without significant resistance, and that this was an effect of colonial policies that crystalized pre-existing religious divides into new “imperial identities” that helped organize and justify the racist colonial order. Nearly invisible in this account is the violence bound up in nurturing those differences, namely by offering radically different privileges and opportunities to different colonial subjects.

Several of the volume’s other articles cast shadows across this sunny picture of the modern, secular order, in which Jews, freed from *dhimmitude*, enjoy equality in a religiously “neutral” public sphere. Geneviève Dermenjian’s piece, notably, shows how the Crémieux decree helped turn anti-Judaism into “a political movement,” with leagues, parties, and activists. “Electoral anti-Judaism,” she explains, surfaced around the times of elections: aggrieved politicians and parties accused Jews of “voting as a block” (p. 149) in lockstep with their leaders, and of exercising rights that many believed should be reserved for those of “European” origin. What is left unexplained is how colonial “emancipation” prepared the ground from which this violence grew. The selective “emancipation” of Jews in 1870, after all, was a politically motivated decision, rooted in the new Third Republic’s adoption of a French Revolution-era narrative that cast Jews as the archetypical “oppressed” and “corrupted” men. The nascent Third French Republic helped define its emancipatory character by evincing its power and generosity to naturalize Jews (echoing the 1791 granting of civic rights to French Jews) from a Muslim “ancien régime.” Most European settlers, whose “French” status was subject to doubt due to their non-French, southern European backgrounds, argued Algerian Jews were much like Algerian Muslims (though despised by the latter), and rallied to reinstate their legal “indigeneity” —an imported social and legal category that served to secure and protect settlers’ privilege. Read together, the articles suggest—without clearly explaining—that if the secular, colonial republic had nullified religiously-mandated Jewish inferiority in Algeria, it also introduced a new logic for violent anti-Semitism.

While Dermenjian’s argument does not articulate differences between forms of anti-Jewish sentiment, the events she describes suggest just how “republican” the new anti-Judaism was. Anti-Jewish violence, she notes, spiked around elections, and anti-Semites consistently accused Jews of voting as a block behind their leaders. In essence, the “anti-Jewish parties” were accusing “emancipated” Jews of not behaving like the rational, autonomous liberal subjects they should be. In other words, Jews were like Muslims, whom French observers consistently insisted were (non-autonomous) beings entirely subject to the strictures of their faith. France’s colonial order may have “emancipated” Jews’ from their *dhimmi* status, but the logic of bifurcating society into subjects “naturally” deserving of rights versus those non-autonomous subjects undeserving of rights placed Jews into the crosshairs of an even more virulent hatred and violence, articulated in specifically modern, secular, and often republican terms.

The volume does not spell out the connections, but it does provide evidence of continuities between the emancipatory, but anti-Semitic colonial order that France brought to Jews in Algeria, and the sufferings of the Jews during the Vichy period. Jacob Oiel’s section, “The

Internment Camps in Algeria (1941-1944)," notes that with the law of 7 October 1940, Algerian Jews quickly lost the Republic's greatest gift, their citizenship (a similar fate awaited Algerian Jews residents in Marseille, as outlined in René Dray-Bensoussan's contribution, "The Jews of Algeria in Marseille during the Second World War"). Oliel details the various ways in which French authorities utterly failed to protect Jewish citizens. "In Algeria," he notes, "the authorities did not wait for orders from Vichy to render arbitrary anti-Jewish decisions: from 27 June 1941, the Prefect of Algiers...ordered the arrest of sixteen Jewish notables, judged the most important of Algiers, and seized their belongings..."(p. 154). In the same year, dozens of camps were opened "to receive thousands of the condemned" including "Spanish republicans, members of the International Brigades, opponents of the Vichy Regime, or communists, trade unionists" and many Jews (p. 156). Oliel outlines the horrible conditions, including details of the brutal forced labor, the diseases, infections from work injuries, not to mention the outright torture and killings. Even after the allied "Operation Torch" began restoring nominally republican rule in North Africa in late 1942, months would pass before camps were emptied or full rights were restored. Oliel's painfully detailed section on World War II-era persecution in Algeria indirectly illuminates the limits and fragility of French colonial emancipation.

Despite the eagerness with which settlers (and other French citizens) participated in the horrors that Oliel and Dermenjian document, the filmmaker Jean-Pierre Lledo insists in his chapter "Muslim Judeophobia in Algeria" that the subject of his study had "nothing to envy of" its European counterpart, and it was "above all, far more enduring" than settler anti-Semitism (p. 179). Most of the article focuses on the FLN and the war, and suggests that the FLN and the post-colonial absence of Jews in Algeria represents a continuity with a timeless, universal Muslim anti-Judaism that had "humiliated, made inferior, [and] 'dhimmi-ized'" Jews throughout history (p. 179). Furthermore, he insists that the FLN's vision of independence had always included the country's "ethnic cleansing" (p. 185). He dismisses any investigation into the colonial dynamics or historical contingencies that might have led the FLN to politically profit from targeting Jews. Indeed, when Algerian Jews themselves have tried to understand their exclusion from the post-independence Arab states as rooted in exclusionary colonial policies, Lledo sees "auto-accusation," "Stockholm syndrome" or internalized *dhimmitude* (p. 185). The resulting article is essentially a catalogue of anti-Jewish statements, incidents of violence, and other "Muslim" misdeeds. Needless to say, one need not excuse the FLN's singling out of Jews to fault the astonishing a-historicism of Lledo's argument: a thirteen-hundred-year Jewish presence in Islamic Algeria, followed by Jews' near-total disappearance on the heels of European colonialism, represents a continuity. Nor does his animus against Islam serve as a convincing substitute for any analysis of the colonial dynamics that cast Jews as apparent "colonialists" and vulnerable to the FLN's anticolonial, nationalist rhetoric.

Departing somewhat from this a-historicism, several articles do not presume a "natural" Jewish predisposition toward assimilation to France, but rather explore processes that encouraged it. Denis Charbit, building in part on Benjamin Stora's work, submits in his "Historiography of the Crémieux Decree" that the law, though not conceived of as a tool to divide and conquer, may still have sowed the seeds of division between Jews and Muslims, suggesting that its sponsor "does not seem to have been conscious of the partial character of his decree, despite his republican ideals, his quest for justice, and his inclination toward the universal application of human rights" (p. 58). This may very well be true, given the confidence so many Europeans had in their own supremacy. He is also right to emphasize that the legacy of Crémieux must be examined not just through its Jewish beneficiaries, but also for "those who were left outside its

field of application” (p. 58). Unfortunately, the more expansive analysis Charbit calls for is outside the purview of his historiographic essay.

Valerie Assan’s piece on rabbis and the civilizing mission, meanwhile, explores the *Consistoires Israélites*, French Jewish institutions intended to “civilize” and “attach” the Jews of Algeria to France, in other words, colonial institutions that cultivated differences between Jews and their Muslim neighbors before the 1870 Crémieux Decree. Yet, following Charbit, the denial of equal rights to Muslims should take a more central place in Assan’s analysis if we are to understand the dramatic transformation of Jewish subjectivities under French rule. Central to this story is the founding of the rabbinical school at Metz in 1829, an institute intended to train rabbis of an enlightened “new type,” (p. 67) ready to “uplift” Algerian Jews with a supposedly modern, French understanding of Judaism. The article correctly identifies a colonial dynamic that emerged, whereby French rabbis trained at Metz predominated in the consistories, while rabbis designated “indigenous” by French law were consistently marginalized. But if the consistories pushed indigenous rabbis to the sidelines, focusing only on the intra-Jewish dynamic occludes the far larger, and far more sinister, colonial project in which the consistories were bound up. Notably, the “civilizing mission” toward the Jews cast the French as liberators of Jews from Islamic *dhimmitude*, a narrative that helped justify subjecting the vast majority of Muslim Algerians to the inferior legal status of *indigènes*. The article portrays France’s early nineteenth-century movement to “regenerate” the Jews of France as the “same social and political project that the Jews of France proposed to apply to the Jews of Algeria in the middle of the 1840s.” (p. 66) Yet there was a profound difference between the policy of regenerating Jews in France, which was intended to reduce cultural and linguistic difference, and the civilizing mission in Algeria, which was intended to cultivate differences and bolster France’s multi-tiered racial hierarchy in Algeria.

The consistorial policy, after all, was based on a subset of the self-fulfilling, racist assumptions upon which the wider, French colonial regime was built. And while this volume makes available a wealth of interesting and valuable research, it does not adequately problematize the underlining assumptions that justified both the selective emancipation and (during the early 1940s) the selective persecution of Jews in the French empire. This is because any discussion of Algerian Jews, their naturalization, and their assimilation under the auspices of the French empire, must also critique the imperial logic underlying this supposedly emancipatory process. French colonialism, after all, assumed that only some people, based on their race or religion, are worthy of uninterrogated access to respect, political rights, and social mobility. Other people are not.

## LIST OF ESSAYS

Philippe Portier, “Avant-propos”

Franklin Rausky, “Preface”

Joëlle Allouche-Benayoun (avec la collaboration de Geneviève Dermenjian), “Introduction”

Joëlle Allouche-Benayoun, “Les Juifs d’Algérie: Du dhimmi au citoyen français”

Denis Charbit, “L’historiographie du décret Crémieux: Le retour du refoulé”

Valérie Assan, “Les Rabbins de France et d’Algérie face à la ‘mission civilisatrice’”

Philippe Danan, “Les Juifs de Constantine au début de la présence française”

Sabrina Dufourmont, “Une Facette méconnue: Les interprètes juifs de l’armée française lors de la conquête de l’Algérie (1830-1870)”

Danièle Ian-Agou, “Les Juifs d’une oasis: Bou-Saâda (1881-1962)”

Geneviève Dermenjian, “Les Juifs d’Algérie entre deux hostilités (1830-1943)”

Geneviève Dermenjian, “La presse antijuive (1870-1940)”

Jacob Oliel, “Les camps d’internement en Algérie (1841-1944)”

Renée Dray-Bensouan, “Les Juifs d’Algérie à Marseille pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale”

Jean-Pierre Lledo, “La judéophobie musulmane en Algérie avant, pendant, et après la période française”

Ethan Katz, “Entre émancipation et antijudaïsme: La mémoire collective des Juifs d’Algérie dans la longue durée (1930-1970)”

Annie Stora Lamarre, “Transmission mémorielle au féminin: Constantine-Paris”

Danielle Sahan-Feucht, “Poétique d’une reconstruction identitaire au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle”

Jean-Paul Durand, “Le cimetière de Saint-Eugène: Lieu de mémoire des Juifs d’Alger”

René-Samuel Sirat: “Témoignage”

Eliezer Ben-Rafael, “Juifs d’Algérie en Israël”

Benjamin Stora, “Des parents juifs d’Algérie dans la tourmente du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle”

Joshua Schreier  
Vassar College  
joschreier@vassar.edu

Copyright © 2018 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither

---

bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172