

**THE IMPACT OF THE 1492 MASS EXODUS
JEWS AND THE OTTOMAN SOCIAL STRUCTURE**

by

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To my mother,
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ABSTRACT

The Impact of the 1492 Mass Exodus Jews and the Ottoman Social Structure

This study aims to question the widely accepted assertion that the Jewish population of the Ottoman Empire experienced a “Golden Age” after 1492, when the Sephardic Jews that were expelled from Europe were welcomed by the Empire. Neither the life of the Jews in the Empire in the 15th century prior to the immigration, nor that afterward, seems to deserve such an epithet; at best, and only relative to the Jewish experience in Europe, can the Jewish experience in the Empire be regarded as positive, and even then it is more accurate to call it “gilded”, not “golden”.

To fulfil the aforementioned aim, this study will proceed in four steps: first, it will examine the doctrinary approach of Islam to Jews and Judaism, thereby laying out the foundations of possible prejudice or sympathy on behalf of Muslims with respect to Jews; second, it will discuss the state of the Jews in the Ottoman Empire before the exodus -here the focal point will be the conquest of Istanbul and its aftermath. but other towns, especially Selonika, will also come into focus; third, it will concern itself with the exodus, its causes and mechanism; and fourth, it will assess the impact of the exodus on the Ottoman social structure - this it will do by examining the following relations: State-Jews; Jews-Jews; Jews-other communities; laws, social identity, integration, visibility, language, education and social life in general will be instrumental for this examination.

ÖZET

1492 Kitle Sürgününün Etkileri Yahudiler ve Osmanlı Toplum Yapısı

Bu çalışma, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'ndaki Yahudi nüfusun 1492'de İspanya Yahudilerinin Avrupa'dan sürülüp İmparatorluğa sığınmasından sonra bir Altın Çağ yaşadığı yönündeki yaygın kabul görmüş inancı sorgulamayı amaçlamaktadır. İmparatorluk Yahudilerinin ne 15. yüzyılda, sürgünden önceki yaşamları, ne de sonrasındaki deneyimleri böyle bir etiketi hak etmiyor; ancak Avrupa'daki durumla karşılaştırıldığında İmparatorlukta Yahudilerin deneyimlerine olumlu denebilir, ama bu durumda bile altın değil, belki yaldızlı bir çağdan söz etmek daha doğru olacaktır.

Bu amaç doğrultusunda dört aşamalı bir yaklaşım izlenecektir: ilk olarak İslamın Yahudilere ve Yahudiliğe yaklaşımı incelenecek, böylece Müslümanlarda Yahudilere karşı var olabilecek önyargıların temelleri ortaya konacaktır; ikinci olarak sürgün öncesi dönemde Osmanlı Yahudilerinin durumu incelenecektir. Burada odak noktası İstanbul'un fethi ve sonrası olursa da, başka şehirler de ele alınacaktır; üçüncü olarak sürgünün kendisi, nedenleri ve sonuçlarıyla incelenecektir; dördüncü olarak da sürgünün Osmanlı toplum yapısını nasıl etkilediği değerlendirilecektir - burada Devlet-Yahudi, Yahudi-Yahudi, Yahudi-Diğer cemaatler arasındaki ilişkiler; kanunlar, toplumsal kimlik, entegrasyon ve görünürlük genelde toplumsal yaşam kıstaslarına göre tartışılacaktır.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	V
ÖZET	VI
TABLE OF CONTENTS	VII
PREFACE.....	VIII
I. JEWS AND JUDAISM IN ISLAM	1
II. THE JEWS OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE PRIOR TO 1492.....	20
1. The Conquest of Constantinople and the <i>Sürgün</i> Policy.....	24
2. The Millet System and the Jewish Community	30
3. Jewish Leadership	34
III. THE MASS EXODUS OF 1492.....	38
1. Towards Expulsion: 1391-1492.....	38
2. Polemics.....	40
3. Learned and Popular Culture.....	43
4. Self Government	46
5. Commerce.....	49
6. The Expulsion.....	50
7. The Purpose and Consequences of the Expulsion	53
8. The Motive: Exile or Conversion.....	58
9. Economic Consequences.....	59
IV. THE JEWS OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE AFTER 1492	63
1. Jewish Population	66
2. Jewish Diversity/Disunity.....	67
3. Jews of the City	73
4. Community Organization.....	75
5. The Extent of Autonomy	78
6. Taxation and Finance	80
7. Clothing.....	83
8. Other Social Restrictions.....	84
9. Jews and the Military.....	86
10. Jews and Christians	87
11. Jews and Kurds.....	88
12. Jews and Arabs.....	89
13. Language and Education.....	89
CONCLUSION	92
BIBLIOGRAPHY	97

PREFACE

It is a well documented fact that upon expulsion by Ferdinand of Spain in 1492, large masses of Sephardic Jews migrated to the Ottoman Empire. The literature concerning Jews and the Jewish history, up to a great extent, coins the period under the Ottoman rule, starting from this date as a “Golden Age”

The aim of this study is to provide an understanding of Jewish life and existence as Ottoman subjects and an ethno-religious minority group, questioning whether the statement “Golden Age” is a proper epithet or a myth.

Similarities and disparities between Ottoman treatment of the Jews and their experiences in other countries, the reasons behind more than positive Jewish description of the era under Ottoman rule and the justness of the term “Golden Age” in a final analysis are the core issues of investigation.

In choosing the subject of this thesis both my former education and my professional experiences have been influential. After graduating from B.U., Tourism and Hotel Management Department, I have completed a major in Political Science and International Relations. Meanwhile, I have been working as a professional tour guide and have been conducting Jewish cultural heritage tours since 1987.

In 1992, the year of the 500th anniversary of Jewish migration to Ottoman Empire, I had completed the required courses for a masters degree in the Department of History and was about to decide my thesis subject. It was during the celebrations of the 500th anniversary that I came upon the “Golden Age” discourse which aroused my curiosity. This was further fueled

by my encounters with American Jews during the cultural tours. I conducted, some of whom were descendants of migrants from Turkey.

After having determined the thesis subject, I have encountered the problem of deciding upon a methodology which would prove to be best suitable for this study.

In the first place, I have planned to make use of oral history as a principal source of analysis. However the 'difficulty' of finding informants, either 'dönme' (converso) or Jewish, to talk about the issue imposed itself as a great obstacle. In general, people residing in Turkey, refrained from discussing the issue openly, by giving their names. When accepted to be interviewed, the information they provided was in line with the existing discourse. Hence, I had to confine the scope of this study by and large to literature review. Even then, it must be stated that the research conducted for this thesis consists mainly of secondary sources, due to the simple fact of language barrier which made impossible for me to analyse of Hebrew and Spanish sources on the issue.

Consequently, the research has been based generally on books, articles and online resources. The main difficulty in dealing with former studies on the issue was that a majority of them did not only paraphrase from a couple of well known sources, but were almost identical in their basic premises and conclusions with the ideas presented in those very sources.

This thesis proceeds in four steps: In the first chapter, "Jews and Judaism in Islam" it examines the doctrinarian approach of Islam to Jews and Judaism, thereby laying out the foundations of possible prejudice or sympathy on behalf of Muslims with respect to Jews.

The second chapter, “The Jews of the Ottoman Empire prior to 1492”, discusses the state of the Jews in the Ottoman Empire before the exodus: although major emphasis is on the conquest of Constantinople and its aftermath, other towns, especially Salonica and Adrianople also comes into focus. Consequences of the *Sürgün* policy and the *Millet* system, especially regarding the situation of the Jewish community are extensively analysed in this chapter which then concentrates on Jewish leadership. Being significantly influential in the relationships of Jewish community with the Ottoman state and occurring as a problem within the Jewish community in the later periods, an understanding of Jewish leadership and its importance, is attempted to be provided.

The third chapter “The Mass Exodus of 1492” as the name suggests is dedicated to the Jewish expulsion from Spain. This section which examines the sentiments against Jews and the motivations for their expulsion is especially relevant in reaching a final cross-analysis of Jewish experiences in the Ottoman Empire and elsewhere-here, especially in Spain where they existed in large numbers.

The chapter opens with a brief look at the century prior to and its events leading to the expulsion in 1492. It then focuses on the Polemics and the Learned and Popular Culture, outlining dominant discourses of the period, concerning the Jews. Commerce and discriminatory measures leading to the economic decline of the Jews is studied in a separate subtitle.

The expulsion and the Purpose and Consequences of it are examined regarding both parties, touching upon various theories aiming to explain the reasons behind it.

The last section of the third chapter analyses the Economic Consequences of the expulsion for the Jews and for Spain, by first providing an understanding of the era prior to the event.

The fourth chapter “The Jews of the Ottoman Empire after 1492” is the most significant section in relation to the subject of this study. It begins with a demographic analysis of the Jewish Population within the Ottoman Empire, then sets its attention on the diversity and disunity within this population, which is essential in highlighting the multiculturalism of the Jewish community and the variety of forms and interpretations of relationships with that community. Urban structure and Community Organisation, which are studied in two separate sections.

Under four subsequent subtitles, ‘the Extent of Autonomy’, ‘Taxation and Finance’, ‘Clothing’ and ‘Other Social Restrictions’, the restrictions and regulations concerning Jews and shaping their lives and at times attitudes towards them are highlighted.

The chapter then focuses on the relationships of Jews with several groups such as the military, Christians, Kurds and Arabs. Finally, the issues of Language and Education with an emphasis on the changes that took place during the Westernization of the Empire and its relevance for the Jewish community and culture is touched upon.

In sum, within these four chapters the situation of Jews in the Ottoman Empire, how this is similar to or different from conditions in other countries and the reasons behind these are examined to determine whether the era under Ottoman rule is rightfully labelled as a ‘Golden Age’.

Although this was not purposefully aimed, one of the outcomes of this thesis has been highlighting how the books and a substantial number of articles on the same subject, concerning the life of Jews under Ottoman rule, explicitly labelling or implying the era to be a “Golden Age” could be studied to reach a different reading of the case.

If this study succeeds in raising some critical questions on the mainstream perception of Jewish life in the Ottoman Empire, I will feel to have contributed to the academic debates on this subject.