Reorienting Imperial Jews: Constantinople at the End of Empires

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**The Armistice of Mudros**, signed between representatives of the Allied forces and the Ottoman Empire on October 30, 1918, marked the end of Ottoman involvement in World War I. Two weeks later, Allied warships arrived in the Ottoman capital of Constantinople (today Istanbul), heralding the beginning of the occupation of the city by British, French, and Italian forces, who would remain until September 23, 1923. Several months after the initial occupation, the French general Franchet d’Espèrey rode from the quay below the Galata Bridge to the city’s French embassy on a white horse given to him by a Greek Orthodox man. The significance of this act was not lost on Constantinople’s population, including the city’s 90,000 Jewish residents. All likely knew that Sultan Mehmet the Conqueror had ridden into Constantinople on a white horse after capturing the city for the Ottomans from the Byzantines in 1453. Indeed, the city—like the Ottoman Empire—was undergoing vast transformations, but into what?

This uncertain future troubled all of the residents of the religiously, ethnically, linguistically, and nationally diverse capital. It was of particular concern for Constantinople’s Ottoman Jews. They had dealt with the challenges of imperial citizenship by fashioning themselves as a model Ottoman minority whose fate was closely tied to that of the Ottoman state and its Muslim subjects. But now that the empire had been defeated, how should they imagine a future? Should Jews align themselves with the Great Powers like their Armenian and Greek Orthodox compatriots did, with an Ottoman Empire that might still persist, with a Jewish state that existed in potentiality, with Turkish nationalist forces combating Greek irredentism in Anatolia, or choose to leave it all behind and migrate to more promising shores? And how—given this ongoing political uncertainty—should Con-
Baker standing in front of the “American Bakery” which displays signs in Armenian, Ladino (in Hebrew characters), English, Ottoman Turkish, Greek, and Russian with samples of bread attached to the mullions. Ortaköy, Istanbul, Turkey
stantinople’s Jews overcome the pressing daily concerns of living in a city that was now the most expensive in Europe? Answers to these questions came from an exceptionally diverse group of Jews living in Constantinople. Examining how these various groups of Jews sought to address the present and envision the future, I argue, highlights the centrality of Constantinople as a stage for the transformation of Jewish identities and connections at the end of empires.

Indeed, Constantinople’s Jewish community was, in fact, composed of several distinct Jewish populations bearing a plethora of nationalities that were often forced to grapple with each other even as they sought to negotiate the political and social changes that accompanied the collapse of empires around them. The largest of Constantinople’s Jewish communities was the Ladino-speaking Sephardi community, many of whom were Ottoman subjects. Four other smaller groups of Jews joined them: a German-speaking Ashkenazi community composed predominately of subjects of the newly defunct Habsburg Empire; an Italian Jewish community; a Yiddish-speaking congregation from what had been the Russian Empire; and a handful of Jews from Iran and the Caucasus. Further swelling the city’s Jewish ranks were thousands fleeing pogroms in the Ukraine, for whom Constantinople was transformed into a way station of temporary refuge in prolonged transmigrations to the Americas or Mandate Palestine. So, too, a number of hopeful chalutzim clustered in the city, seeking entry into once-Ottoman Palestine. Attempting to come help the large number of indigent Jews—both native and refugee—in
the former Ottoman capital were international Jewish philanthropic organizations. Here the dominant presence of the American Joint Distribution Committee mirrored the growing prominence of the United States and, by extension, American Jewry on a global scale. Constantinople, indeed, had become a crossroads for multiple communities of Jews with divergent pasts and trajectories for their futures who were all navigating the tumult that accompanied the demise of longstanding empires and the rise of new nation-states.

Overarching political uncertainty in Constantinople during the five years of its occupation exacerbated intra-Jewish conflict in the occupied city. The 1920 Treaty of Sèvres ceded parts of Ottoman territory to Greece and a nascent Armenia, as well as dividing most of the remaining Ottoman lands into British, French, and Italian zones of influence or mandates. But Constantinople remained under demilitarized international administration. Only with the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne that led to the establishment of the Republic of Turkey did Constantinople’s status became clear—the erstwhile capital of the multireligious and multiethnic Ottoman Empire would now play second fiddle to landlocked Ankara, the new capital of a significantly less diverse Turkey. During the years of occupation, Allied forces struggled to govern a city where contestations over the distribution of Ottoman territory often boiled over into firefights on the streets between denizens of different religious or ethnic backgrounds and political affiliations. Concurrently, all of Constantinople’s permanent and temporary residents—Jewish and non-Jewish, Ottoman and non-Ottoman subjects—worried about daily concerns such as finding adequate housing, affording food, supporting war widows and orphans, and reestablishing schools. Further, thousands of residents of the city, including many Jews, Greek Orthodox, and Armenians, emigrated from the unstable occupied city, only to find themselves unable to return after it came under Turkish control. Life in the city was precarious, with the imperial order increasingly distant, but the contours of a new national existence equally undetermined.

My book project as a Frankel Fellow explores how Constantinople’s Jewish residents—themselves forming a microcosm of the Jewish world—sought to make sense of a world torn apart by war and the collapse of longstanding empires. It explores how they struggled to position themselves advantageously for whatever future they imagined for themselves and their community. Drawing on an array of memoirs, press, and archival sources, this book takes the occupied Ottoman capital as a central stage upon which Jewish and imperial affiliations collided and coalesced, a key nodal point in multiple overlapping networks of Jewish affiliations that stretched across the globe. It seeks to explore how the movements of Jews to and through Constantinople shaped Jewish sub-ethnic affiliations and upended hierarchies during moments of imperial and national conflict that reverberated throughout the Ottoman capital. It argues that the presence of diverse Jewish groups and individuals for whom Constantinople became a Jewish center did not presuppose increased Jewish cohesion. Rather, the upheavals that World War I had wrought on an international, national, and global scale exacerbated intra-Jewish tensions as various groups vied for increased financial support or against contributing more than they deemed possible.

Constantinople became a city at the crossroads, of imperial identities and legacies, of national imaginings, of Jewish cohesion and sub-ethnic affiliations, and of possible and no-longer-possible futures.