

H-France Review Vol. 12 (January 2012), No. 15

Joshua Schreier, *Arabs of the Jewish Faith: The Civilizing Mission in Colonial Algeria*. New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 2010. xiii + 233 pp. Maps, tables, figures, notes, and index. \$49.95 U.S. (c1) ISBN 978-0-8135-4794-7.

Review by Ethan Katz, University of Cincinnati.

Until quite recently, French history's so-called "imperial turn," and growing fascination with Algeria in particular, had little impact on the study of French and Algerian Jews. Yet with scholars devoting increasing attention to "Jews and Empire," and specifically to North African Jewry and its historical relationship to colonialism, this pattern appears to be changing. In this context, Joshua Schreier's pioneering monograph makes a number of timely and important contributions. Focusing on Oran and the surrounding region, Schreier traces the impact of French colonialism in Algeria for Jews, from the 1830 conquest until the Crémieux Decree of 1870, which granted all but a handful of Algerian Jews French citizenship.^[1] Typically, historians have depicted the French assimilation of Algerian Jewry as a fairly linear process, imposed by metropolitan Jewish leaders and colonial administrators on a long impoverished and uneducated population.^[2] *Arabs of the Jewish Faith* complicates this picture considerably.

Drawing upon French colonial, military, and national archives, the British national archives and the Jewish press, Schreier examines the intersection between several groups: colonial administrators; military officers; French-Jewish reformers; and local Jewish, Muslim, and settler populations in Algeria. In the process, the author details the multiple forms of agency, negotiation, and diversity that shaped Algerian Jews' encounter with colonialism. Even as French officials adopted French revolutionary ideals to the work of colonialism, he argues, "Algerian Jews forced changes in the application of those ideals into policies" (p. 1). The author maintains that French notions of "civilization" drove colonial interventions and native Jewish resistance in realms that included communal leadership, worship, education, hygiene, gender, and family law. Schreier contends that ultimately, the same "civilizing" logics and discourses at once provided a path to French citizenship for Algeria's Jewish minority *and* enabled the exclusion of the Muslim majority.

Schreier organizes his book chronologically and thematically. Chapter one explores the place of Jews in early French efforts to bring order to Oran and other Algerian cities. Here Schreier emphasizes the key role played by the military, previously largely overlooked, in shaping policies toward Algeria's Jewish population. The author shows that a handful of Jews in Oran occupied positions of considerable wealth and influence; moreover, demographically, Jews made up about 20 percent of the city's population of 17,000 (p. 25). Under these circumstances, French military authorities perceived Jews as presenting both opportunities and challenges. While the French saw them as potential allies in the colonial project, a number of Jews' ties to local networks and entrenched economic interests made their loyalty to France at once crucial and uncertain. Officials spoke of a few Jewish traders controlling the local economy. Repeated complaints from Jews to the administration about the Jewish leadership, meanwhile, brought immediate attention to the question of potential communal reforms.

This account sheds new light on the process that led to the establishment of consistories—France’s system of state-based Jewish communal governance institutions—in Algeria. Schreier shows how the French military sought to use the consistories to normalize the legal position of Algerian Jews, aiming to forge Algerian communal institutions in a metropolitan mold. The military, rather than the French Jewish community, authored the 1845 decree creating the Algerian consistories, and governed their operation for decades. Nonetheless, this very act and its goals revealed that officials already saw Jews as having a greater capacity than Muslims to “become French.”

While this chapter deepens our understanding of the early interaction between the French military and local Jews, the author could have better clarified the reality of Jewish wealth in Oran at this time. He speaks repeatedly of “Jewish prominence” (pp. 29, 31), but cites reports that suggest that numerically, wealthy Jews constituted perhaps one percent of the city’s overall Jewish population (pp. 23, 25). Schreier’s effort to take seriously the discussions of French officials about “the problem of Jewish power in Algeria” opens new perspectives on the economic and political position of the Jews. Yet it entails an odd omission. The author acknowledges the possibility of exaggerated perceptions of Jewish influence, but seems deliberately to avoid mentioning the almost certain influence of anti-Semitism. This, despite citing views like those of General Thomas-Robert Bugeaud, who declared that “unfortunately the major part of [Oran’s] population is made up of Jews” (p. 27), proposed removing Jews from the cities, and exclaimed, “Oh that we could replace through this means, or by another, the Jewish population!” (p. 49).^[3]

Schreier’s second chapter focuses on the period following the consistory’s actual establishment in 1847. In these early years, Algerian Jews resisted French efforts to impose ideologies, personnel, and conduct on and via the consistories. Rather than the sign of backwardness depicted by contemporary French observers, the author claims that such resistance constituted a defense of local autonomy against the perceived invasion of civilization. The most aggressive efforts to reshape the community came not from the military or colonial administration, but from French-appointed consistory leaders like Moroccan-born president Emmanuel Nahon and Metz-trained grand rabbi Lazare Cahen. Nahon and Cahen worked in part from their own perceptions of how to civilize Algeria’s Jews. Within months of their appointments, they shifted consistory attention from ritual life and charity to public morality; questions of gender, health, and family were already becoming major indices of Algerian Jews’ level of civilization.

In recounting the consistory’s efforts to control religious life, the author details French efforts to establish official public synagogues and close “private” ones, and recounts the significant resistance of local Jewish leaders, including many who would later hold posts in the consistory (p. 65). The author notes how the French underestimated the religious importance of these synagogues and imposed distinctly French categories of public and private to reshape Algerian Jewry’s social and religious landscape. Many synagogue owners utilized the rhetoric of civilization to defend their houses of worship as supporting, not opposing the colonial mission. Others pointed out that their synagogue met the religious needs of a particular group in Algeria’s diverse Jewish population. Such appeals often brought a reprieve that allowed a synagogue to remain open.

Schreier links much of this early resistance to the 1848 Revolution in the *métropole*. He maintains that in a context where Algeria itself witnessed newfound grassroots political activism, “the urban Jewish population...us[ed] a democratic lexicon to understand and respond to challenges to local structures or religious authority” (p. 69). To support this novel claim, the author offers a few striking examples. In a letter of petition to the republican General Cavaignac, a group of Oranais Jews declared that they would now exercise “the liberty of thought acquired with this Republic, and [we] dare hope that you will accept our requests and

carry them out.” Their letter referenced the demand for universal suffrage popular at the time in France, and asked to select new consistory officials “by means of election” (pp. 75-76).

In chapters three and four, Schreier focuses on homes, synagogues, and schools as interior spaces that the French sought to penetrate with the civilizing project. The case of domestic spaces illustrates how colonial and French-Jewish reformers saw the family and health as key indices of civilization. In an 1843 article in the French Jewish press, for instance, one reformer highlighted what he deemed the contrast between the unveiled, accessible Algerian-Jewish woman and the closed, sequestered Muslim woman (p. 89). Others less sympathetic focused on the Algerian Jewish home as a site of “sickness,” “neglect” and “filth,” connoting hygienic and moral impurity (p. 89).

Next, Schreier returns to the effort to regulate synagogues. He shows well how private synagogues became both “loci of resistance to consistorial policy and agents charged with disseminating its orders” (p. 107). The same Jews who sat on the consistories had local ties that often commanded loyalty and influenced their decisions and priorities as consistorial officials. Further complicating matters, the Jewish population was never the monolith the French imagined. We see how migrations from Morocco and religious networks stretching from Palestine to Italy often made communal conflicts trans-Mediterranean affairs. Once again, then, Schreier shows that the colonization of Algerian Jews, “though devised in France, was deeply hued by the actions and reactions of those it was designed to transform” (p. 96).

The year 1855 that saw efforts to close private synagogues, also witnessed new laws that placed *midrashim*, or local Jewish schools, under greater scrutiny. The measures included school inspections and statistical tabulations regarding children’s health. The author contends that despite the concerns underlying such surveillance, unlike for Muslims, the French rarely framed “Jewish dirtiness” as immutable; rather it “tended to be linked to a past from which [Jews] were permanently in the process of being emancipated” (pp. 108-109). Chapter four focuses further attention on schools. French officials sought to attract Jewish students to new consistorial schools and their “civilizing” components, contrasting these with the supposed backwardness of the *midrashim*. Though reformers and officials commonly described the latter’s physical and hygienic deficiencies, attempts to shut down such schools met with stiff local resistance. In Oran, for instance, when word circulated that new French-Jewish schools would soon become mandatory, many parents feared this would mean a Christian education and instead sent their children to study under rabbis in Tlemcen or Mascara.

In 1855, new laws passed by the Ministry of Public Instruction and Religions gave local administrators greater ability to control Jewish teachers and stop competition from the *midrashim*. Civil administrators, instead of the consistory, assumed responsibility for approving or closing schools run by the rabbis; grand rabbis, born and trained in France, gained more power of supervision over Jewish religious education in Algeria. Only Frenchmen could teach modern subjects, limiting Algerian teachers to religious subjects. Yet, as elsewhere, in educational reform, negotiation rather than imposition, and native Jewish agency rather than passivity, would play crucial roles. Lazare Cahen, grand rabbi of Oran, successfully defended numerous rabbis and their schools. Authorities initially saw local rabbi Joseph ben Ayoun as a paradigm of backward education and opposition to civilization (due to his beating of students) but in time they understood that he was popular, pedagogically skilled, and supported by the grand rabbi. Officials thus forged a compromise that permitted ben Ayoun to continue teaching, but only in a Jewish private school with French instruction, allowing closer supervision.

Schreier’s final chapter brings together many of the book’s strands. He focuses on how the framework for the Frenchification of Algerian Jews drew upon the logic applied to French

Jewish assimilation by Napoleon's Assembly of Notables and Grand Sanhedrin of 1806-1807. By the 1860s, the Second Empire took a growing interest in the French integration of Algeria and Algerians. Legislators, Jewish reformers, and legal theorists all identified Jewish and Islamic family law as the greatest obstacle to the naturalization of Algerian natives. Colonial lawmakers and reformers repeatedly invoked Jews' and Muslims' unwillingness to abandon their religious traditions and fully accept French civil jurisdiction. So long as Jewish marriage remained governed by religious law, insisted many reformers, Jews would escape supervision of the state, fail to follow fully the codes of civilization, and maintain immoral practices like polygamy and divorce, forbidden under French civil law. Schreier returns here to the frequent contrast in reformers' depictions of Jewish and Muslim women. According to such representations, he argues persuasively, "Jewish women's unveiled and uncloistered existence rendered the Jews superior to Muslims" (p. 151). Likewise, from the mid-1850s, consistorial leaders took steps to curb what they called "scandalous" traditional wedding rituals of Algerian Jews, filled with ceremonies one leader defined as simply imitations of "Arab customs" (pp. 152-3).

In mapping prospects for legal reform, several colonial administrators turned explicitly to the Napoleonic precedent, drawn by its substantial attention to family law, and its establishment of the principle that Jewish law did not threaten French civil law. Suggestions ranged from convening another Grand Sanhedrin, to following its example to impose French nationality once more against the "ignorant complaints" of a colonized people (p. 165). By highlighting each of the above components, this chapter freshly contextualizes the 1865 Sénatus-Consulte and 1870 Crémieux Decree. In both instances, one's ability to attain full French citizenship hinged on the need "to separate faith and law," reflecting longstanding French historical currents (p. 171).

In his conclusion, Schreier draws out further the *longue durée*. He observes how, from the French Revolution or earlier, "regeneration, emancipation, and citizenship were intimate--and often Jewish--affairs [to] many French political leaders" (p. 178). Looking beyond 1870, he notes that the Crémieux Decree left Muslims' so-called personal status intact, so that Muslims' "legal exclusion [came to rest] in part on the legal logic that emancipated colonized Jews." Finally, he contends that his book helps to show that contemporary struggles in France over the headscarf and the burqa expose the family's ongoing centrality to notions of assimilation and citizenship, and therein connect to "a long, colonial history" (p. 182).

Schreier's book makes important contributions to Jewish and French colonial history. It crucially restores agency to nineteenth-century Algerian Jews, too often depicted as largely an instrument of the French Jewish community and/or French colonialism. The author demonstrates that "[a]s much as France exported the *mission civilisatrice* to Algeria, Algerians produced it in the colony" (p. 1). Further, rather than treat them as a monolith, Schreier highlights the myriad roles and statuses of Jews within a single empire. Moreover, he situates them in a broader Mediterranean context. The work shows convincingly that colonial administrators and French-Jewish reformers drew upon the precedents of the Revolution and Napoleon to link Algerian Jews' foreignness and means of assimilation to morality, gender, and family law. In this vein, some compared Jewish and Muslim levels of civilization, while others pointed to the alleged refusal of Jews to adapt French family law and mores. This careful analysis of the centrality of family and gender, factors heretofore largely ignored in Algerian Jewish history, may constitute the book's most compelling contribution. Furthermore, the author fruitfully compares and links the respective situations of Algerian Jews and Muslims, too often treated in isolation by previous scholars.[4]

Visually, Schreier's text is nicely set, with several photographs, and generally few typographical errors. The major exception appears in the endnotes to the introduction, where beginning with

endnote 7, the notes are off by one (thus the endnote number given in the introduction's text repeatedly does not correspond to the reference or notation found with the same number at the back of the book). This error is hardly catastrophic but it is an unfortunate mistake that the editors should have caught.

On a more substantive note, for all of its pioneering research and insight, Schreier's book has certain conceptual shortcomings. The author exhibits a problematic understanding of the "civilizing mission." Despite repeatedly employing variations of the word "civilization," Schreier never clearly defines its scholarly or historical meaning. More significantly, while he signals that he does not wish to "write off the civilizing mission as 'window dressing,'" he often seems very nearly to do so (p. 58). On numerous occasions, he reduces rhetorical and policy expressions of the civilizing mission to "tools" employed "in the service of colonial domination" (p. 180).

Likewise, even as the author describes French policies of inclusion and exclusion as inseparable, he depicts the emerging republican order and rhetoric of the nineteenth-century *métropole* as a "radical contrast" to the realities of colonialism (p. 19). Such a dichotomous framing obscures how the French revolutionary tradition, and many of its Jewish supporters, saw imperial conquest and civilization, assimilation and liberation not as opposite sides of the same coin, but as closely related, even coterminous components of human progress. In this way, the author appears to ignore scholarship of the past two decades on the complex interrelationship between inclusionary and exclusionary aspects of French universalism and colonialism, including for French Jews.[5] On a smaller but related point, Schreier never underscores the fundamental difference between Algeria and other French colonial possessions: that the former was technically not a colony but part of France itself. Recent scholarship shows how deeply this position colored the potentialities and limitations of French efforts to transform the territory and its inhabitants.[6]

These critiques, however, should not obscure the importance and value of Schreier's book. Through rich detail, ambitious scope, and provocative arguments, the book raises as many key questions as it seeks to answer. Indeed, it will become indispensable reading for scholars of French Jewry, Algeria, and empire, and points the way toward vital new avenues of research in all of these fields.

NOTES

[1] The law did not give citizenship to the several thousand Jews living in the Mزاب region of the Algerian Sahara, whose conquest the French still had not completed in 1870.

[2] Examples of works in this vein include Richard Ayoun and Bernard Cohen, *Juifs d'Algérie: 2000 ans d'histoire* (Paris: J.C. Lattès, 1982); Elizabeth D. Friedman, *Colonialism and After: An Algerian Jewish Community* (South Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey Publishers, 1988); and Simon Schwarzfuchs, *Les Juifs d'Algérie et la France, 1830-1855* (Jerusalem: Institut Ben-Zvi, 1981).

[3] This absence is underscored by the recent findings of Julie Kalman, *Rethinking Antisemitism in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[4] For an important exception, see Lisa Moses Leff, "The Impact of the Napoleonic Sanhedrin on French Colonial Policy in Algeria," *CCAR Journal* (Winter 2007): 35-54.

[5] See in particular Joan Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996); Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006); Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2005). For a highly nuanced examination of French Jewry's support for the civilizing mission and colonialism, see Lisa Moses Leff, *Sacred Bonds of Solidarity: The Rise of Jewish Internationalism in Nineteenth-Century France* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2006), especially chapter four.

[6] On this issue, see especially Shepard, *The Invention*; James McDougall, *History and the Culture of Nationalism in Algeria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

Ethan Katz
University of Cincinnati
katzen@UCMAIL.UC.EDU

Copyright © 2012 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 re-publication 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