“Jews, Be Ottomans!” Zionism, Ottomanism, and Ottomanisation in the Hebrew-Language Press, 1890–1914

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Abstract

In recent years the study of national and civic identities in the later Ottoman period has revealed huge degrees of complexity among previously homogenised groups, none more so that the Jewish population of the Sublime State. Those Jews who moved to the Ottoman Empire from the 1880s as part of a burgeoning expression of Jewish nationalism developed a complex relationship with an Ottomanist identity that requires further consideration. Through an examination of the Hebrew-language press in Palestine, run largely by immigrant Zionist Jews, complemented by the archival records of the Ottoman state and parliament, this paper aims to show the complexities of the engagement between Ottoman and Jewish national identities. The development of Jewish nationalism by largely foreign Jews came with an increase in suspicion from the Ottoman elites, sometimes manifesting itself in outright anti-Semitism, and strong expressions of nationalism in the Hebrew press were denounced both by Ottoman and

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non- and anti-nationalist Jewish populations. The controversy over immigrant Jewish land purchases in Palestine from the 1890s led to a number of discussions over how far foreign Jews could and should embrace an Ottoman cultural and political identity, with cultural, labour, and political Zionists taking different positions. The issue of Ottomanisation should also be taken in the context of the post-1908 political landscape in the Ottoman Empire, with separatist nationalisms increasingly under the spotlight, and the debates among the different forms of Jewish nationalism increasingly focusing on the limits of performative and civic Ottoman nationalism.

Keywords

Ottomanism – Zionism – Palestine – Ottoman press – Hebrew

Introduction

Ottomanism, the ideal of political equality for all the Ottoman Empire’s diverse subjects-cum-citizens under a shared civic allegiance, existed in conjunction with a number of other isms vying for elite and popular support in the final decades of the empire’s existence. One of these ideologies, Zionism, seemed to be yet another of the national identities threatening to destroy the Sublime State from within and to disrupt the Ottomanist ideal that aimed to unify the empire’s different ethnic and religious groups. Zionism, however, was more than a local identity; it was a growing international movement that incorporated a number of contrasting and even conflicting ideologies. Zionism, with its programme of settling foreign Jews, often from the Ottoman arch-enemy, Russia, in Ottoman Palestine, posed a particular threat to the Ottoman state. Such Jewish immigrants were therefore not Ottoman Jews who might embrace (or not) the vision of Ottomanism, but rather foreigners who, in order to further their national aims, required Ottomanisation through new processes of citizenship.