

# MODERN JEWRIES AND THE IMPERIAL IMAGINATION

Sarah Stein

For scholars of modern European history, one of the most influential historiographic trends of the last decades is to take seriously the effect of the imperial project on the metropolises of Europe. Recent work in this vein, including the influential volume *Tensions of Empire*, edited by Frederick Cooper and Ann Stoler (1997) and scholarship by members of the Subaltern School, including Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* (2000), has encouraged us to appreciate how gendered and class identities on the continent were shaped in symbiosis with policies and colonial realities overseas; to recognize empires in classic nation-states (notably Germany); and to collapse the conceptual distinction between Europe's largely contiguous empires and overseas empires, inviting comparisons between the modern Russian, Habsburg, and Ottoman Empires and those of Britain and France (among others).

In certain respects, scholars of modern Jewries have been pioneers in these theoretical developments; in other regards, we have remained inured to them, resisting, even, the centrality of Jews to the story of empire. This essay queries the tension between these two opposing

dynamics, considering what scholars of modern Jewish culture have and might offer the student of empire, and contemplating how the field of modern Jewish studies has thus far and can in the future benefit from wrangling with scholarship on empire and imperialism.

Scholarship on modern Jewry is to some extent saturated with attention to empire. If one accepts that the Russian, Ottoman, and Habsburg Empires were imperial polities comparable to (if in certain critical



Jabotinsky, Vladimir, and Samuel Perlman. *Atlas*. London; Hevrat "ha-Sefer," 1925, p. 3.

respects distinct from) the early modern Dutch Empire, the modern British and French Empires, or, as some have it, contemporary America, then one could point to a rich body of scholarship engaged with Jews' place in imperial societies. Indeed, one could even credit scholars of modern Jewries with a degree of theoretical prescience. Histories of Russian, Ottoman, and Habsburg Jewries from Salo Baron's *The Russian Jew Under Tsars and Soviets* (1964) to Benjamin Nathan's *Beyond the Pale* (2002); Aron Rodrigue's *French Jews, Turkish Jews* (1995); (and, with Esther Benbassa, *Sephardi*

*Jewry* [2000]); and Lois Dubin's *The Port Jews of Habsburg Trieste* (2000); have unflinchingly demonstrated that policies in imperial borderlands rippled through imperial societies to be felt—often most acutely—by Jews.

Scholars of the Russian, Ottoman, and Habsburg Empires, for their part, have increasingly appreciated the centrality of multi-ethnicity, multilingualism, and multisectionalism to the history and experience of empire. Thus scholars of Jewish studies may also benefit from a growing number of works outside their own field that pay heed to imperial diversity—and Jews, in

particular—as central to these empires' histories: including (among many others) Geoffrey Hosking's *Russia: People and Empire* (1997); Hasan Kayali's *Arabs and Young Turks* (1997); and István Deák's *Beyond Nationalism* (1990).

And yet the assumption that the Russian, Ottoman, or Habsburg Empires were imperial polities on a par with other modern, European, overseas empires is a relatively new one: the thought that their borderlands might be understood as colonies yet controversial. When it comes

to scholarship on the Russian, Ottoman, and Habsburg cases, there is a profound disconnect between the existence of empire and the practice of imperialism. Certainly the connections and overlap between these phenomena have not been explored by scholars of modern Jewry, rendering yet tangential the theoretical and historical insights offered by recent scholarship on empire.

If regnant definitions of imperialism have excluded the three empires in which vast numbers of Jews lived in the modern period, it is also true that scholarship on Western

European colonialism is uncannily devoid of Jewish actors, while histories of the Jews of modern Britain and France—including Todd Endelman’s *The Jews of Britain* (2002) and Pierre Birnbaum’s *The Jews of the Republic* (1996), otherwise magisterial surveys of modern British and French Jewries—evade mention of imperialism altogether. Jewish *subjects* of colonial influence are, on the other hand, abundant. Scholarship on North African, Ottoman, and Levantine Jewry has amply documented the effect both of state power and Jewish philanthropic institutions (sometimes labeled “intra-Jewish colonialism”) on what has problematically been called “subaltern” Jews. (I have surveyed this literature in a contribution to *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Studies*, edited by Martin Goodman [2002]). We know less about the limits of such influence, or of the economic, cultural, and political sway that Jews in the colonies exerted on Europeans in general or European Jews in particular.

In sum, one could place the historiography on Jews and empire in two crude categories: there is, on the one hand, a rich body of scholarship (penned by scholars within and outside of the field of Jewish studies) on Jews’ place in empires that is generally *not* considered imperial. On the other hand, there is a well developed body of scholarship on the received imperial regimes of Europe (again, written by scholars within and outside the field of Jewish studies) that disassociates European Jews (or uncolonized Jews) from the practice and experience of empire.

What is at stake in these elisions? To a great extent they are the result of

the reigning predilections of our field: scholars of modern Jewry retain an abiding interest in intellectual culture, communal histories, and utopian politics (from Freudianism to religious Orthodoxy) at the expense of, say, economic, comparative, or material history. But the elision of empire and imperialism as a focus of scholarship may also be the result of at least three intellectual allergies.

First, considerations of Jews’ historical relationship to colonialism and empire have been dominated by the question of whether and/or to what extent Jewish settlement of Palestine and Zionism more generally were (or remain) colonial enterprises, work most recently summarized by Ivan Kalmar and

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Derek Penslar in the introduction to their *Orientalism and the Jews* (2005). While this scholarship, including that by Gershon Shafir and Zackary Lockman, is fascinating, thus far it remains *sui generis*. What is more, because it has been received polemically, this work may function to foreclose conversation about whether Jews were implicated in or complicit with other colonial projects.

Second, scholars of Jewish studies continue to adhere to what David Biale has called the notion of Jewish powerlessness. This tendency has prohibited the development of scholarship on Jews’ place in the matrix of imperial politics. It may also explain why Jews (as Jews per se,

rather than as bourgeois consumers, or Londoners, or intellectuals, and so on) have not been said to have experienced the rather more cultural and material “tensions of empire” (to borrow from Cooper and Stoler) that so influenced the choices, desires, and habits of other modern Europeans.

Third and finally, the specter of imperial economics is a factor in the lacuna of literature on Jews and modern imperialism. There is, of course, a well-developed literature on Sephardi involvement in the expansion of capitalist markets overseas, especially for the early modern period; this body of scholarship includes Jonathan Israel’s ambitious studies *European Jewry in the Age of Mercantilism* (1985) and

*Diasporas within a Diaspora* (2002); Jonathan Schorsch’s *Jews and Blacks in the Early Modern World* (2004); and Francesca Trivellato’s doctoral dissertation, “Trading Diasporas and Trading Networks in the Early Modern Period: a Sephardic Partnership of

Livorno in the Mediterranean, Europe, and Portuguese India” (2004). At the same time, we know precious little about modern Jews’ place in economic networks rooted in the colonial world. Our disinterest in this topic is not justified by historical realities. Both Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews were, after all, profoundly implicated in colonial economics in the modern period: through the trade of precious stones and metals, women, opium, and liquor; through their involvement in the fashion and textile industries; and through brokerage and financing.

Perhaps scholars have avoided such topics for fear of perpetuating anti-Semitic stereotypes: perhaps the challenge of imagining Jews as

perpetrators rather than victims of racist economics overwhelms. Indeed, the risks are not insignificant. One thinks of Yuri Slezkine's recent attempts, in *The Jewish Century* (2004), to identify Jews as engines of the twentieth century's successes and excesses: an approach whose professed radicalism merges seamlessly with the reactionary. And yet, if the need for sensitivity is acute, so is the need for daring. Just as our understanding of modern Jewish culture has been expanded by recent explorations of Jews' involvement in race science (including John Efron's *Defenders of the Race* [1994] and *Medicine and the German Jews* [2001], Mitchell Hart's *Social Science and the Politics of Modern Jewish Identity* [2000], and Sander Gilman's *The Jew's Body* [1991] and *Freud, Race, and Gender* [1993]), long an unthinkable topic, we may benefit from a better understanding of Jews' involvement in the symbiotic development of imperialism and global capitalism.

What is required is not simply greater attention to Jews' role in high politics or large-scale capitalist enterprises (though this, too, is welcome). We also have much to learn by situating local Jewish communities, lines of intellectual or religious inquiry, and quotidian practices within those global networks in which other Europeans were immersed. For example, we might consider, as has Rebecca Kobrin in a recent dissertation entitled "Conflicting Diasporas Shifting Centers: The Transnational Bialystok Jewish Emigre Community in the United States, Argentina, Australia, and Palestine 1878–1949" (2004), the roles émigré Jews played in colonial contexts or the ways their new homes reverberated (culturally, economically, emotionally) in their respective "homelands." We might query, as has Leora Auslander in a slightly different context (in her article "'Jewish Taste'? Jews, and the Aesthetics of Everyday Life in Paris

and Berlin, 1933–1942," published in Rudy Koshar's *Histories of Leisure* [2002]), whether Jews' patterns of consumption or self-imagining were imprinted by the imperial project in the same way as were the patterns of other men and women in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe. And, finally, we might reflect on whether the answers to these questions might push us to redraw the boundaries of modern Jewish communities, or to rethink our sense of Jews' place within the nations and empires of Europe.

Scholars outside of Jewish studies have reason to be as invested in these topics as do those of us working within the field. Work on Jews' place in the imperial web will join other recent scholarship in colonial and postcolonial studies, including Catherine Hall's *Civilizing Subjects* (2002), in disaggregating the categories of "European," "white," and "colonizer." Writing Jews into the history of imperial relations thus does more than nuance our understanding of Jews' place in individual colonial contexts: it invites reflection about the shaping of ethnic, racial, and sociopolitical identities in the modern world.

It must be noted in closing that there are signs that scholarly interest in empire and imperialism may already be waning, replaced (and in some sense outmoded) by a growing interest in globality, on the one hand, and regionalism, on the other. Perhaps we already stand, as

Antoinette Burton puts it, *After the Imperial Turn* (2003). And yet for scholars of Jewish culture, the theme of empire is resonant not so much because it has been *en vogue*, but because it raises questions that are at once broad and material, and, in some cases, quite sensitive. These queries, and the answers further research provides, have the potential to spawn a new modern Jewish history.

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*Sarah Abrevaya Stein is Associate Professor in the Department of History and the Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies at the University of Washington.*

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