

The Jewish Involvement in the Colonial Movement

Mariusz Kałczewiak
Universität Potsdam

Contact: kalczewiak@uni-potsdam.de

Abstract:

Colonialism and the Jews is a thought-provoking volume examining the intersections of Jewish and colonial history. Looking at Jews as agents and subjects of empires, at their political engagement within imperial systems and at Zionism's links with colonialism, it is an important reference book for everyone trying to better understand the role of minorities in multinational colonial empires. Articles ranging from studies on Jews in French Morocco to Jewish return migration within the British Empire provide for a broad comparative perspective elucidating how Orientalism, Jewishness, and modernization intertwined within European colonial empires

How to cite:

Kałczewiak, Mariusz: "The Jewish Involvement in the Colonial Movement [Review on: Katz, Ethan B.; Leff, Lisa Moses & Maud S. Mandel: *Colonialism and the Jews*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2017]". In: KULT_online 57 (2019).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2019.232>



The Jewish Involvement in the Colonial Movement

Mariusz Kałczewiak
Universität Potsdam

Katz, Ethan B.; Leff, Lisa Moses & Maud S. Mandel: *Colonialism and the Jews*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2017. 359 Pages, 40 USD. ISBN 978-0-253-02462-6.

Abstract:

Colonialism and the Jews is a thought-provoking volume examining the intersections of Jewish and colonial history. Looking at Jews as agents and subjects of empires, at their political engagement within imperial systems and at Zionism's links with colonialism, it is an important reference book for everyone trying to better understand the role of minorities in multinational colonial empires. Articles ranging from studies on Jews in French Morocco to Jewish return migration within the British Empire provide for a broad comparative perspective elucidating how Orientalism, Jewishness, and modernization intertwined within European colonial empires.

Where are Jews in colonial history? This is a central question which the volume *Colonialism and the Jews*, edited by Ethan B. Katz, Lisa Moses Leff, and Maud S. Mandel attempts to address. The editors manage to convincingly show a broader context of Jewish involvement in the colonial history, exceeding contemporary, narrow approaches that limit the scholarly focus only to the intersection of Zionism and colonialism. The editors argue for an 'Imperial Turn' in the study of Jewish history, underlining that European states in which Jews were first emancipated and then engaged in integrationist projects were not only nation-states, but also empires. The latter factor indeed allows for a better understanding of imperial hierarchies, of European concepts of 'Orient' and of Jewish links with other groups within the empires. The contributors suggest that Jews do not fit neatly into the dichotomous frameworks of colonialism which see only victims and perpetrators of colonialism. Jews sympathized with the discrimination faced by colonial subjects, but also saw an individual and collective potential in the colonial projects of European states. As the editors aptly put it, diverse colonial actors wrestled with Jews' uncertain place in the colonial order (13).

The volume engages with Jewish involvement in the colonial empire of France and to a lesser extent with Great Britain, Germany, and Eastern European states. Part one examines Jews as subjects and/

or agents of empires, whereas part two looks at how empire became a territory of Jewish political life. Frances Malino examines Jewish female teachers in North Africa and their relationship with the metropolitan institution supervising their work – the *Alliance Israelite Universelle*. Israel Bartal takes a close look at the similarities and differences between Jews in Russian and French empires while Susannah Heschel analyzes the Jewish contribution to the development of Islamic Studies in 19th century Germany in the context of Orientalism and German imperialism. The final part of the book engages with the question to what extent Zionism was/is a form of colonialism. The editors include Derek Penslar's analysis "Is Zionism a Colonial Movement?" from 2006, coupling it with polemic articles by Joshua Cole and Elizabeth F. Thompson. The latter argues that Penslar uses different methods concerning Jewish nationalist writing in Europe (which he uses to historicize the Zionist enterprise) and the Zionist practice in Palestine. Thompson suggests that this spatial separation of methods introduces critical distortions to Penslar's presentation of Zionism in Palestine. Although the assertions of Thompson sound solid and nuanced, Penslar's claims of the dual, colonialist and anticolonial character of the Zionist movement are more convincing.

One of the most interesting contributions in the book is Tara Zahra's text on Eastern European visions of colonization. Zahra argues that Eastern European nations developed a distinct type of colonial enterprise - 'emigrant colonialism', which sought to build ethnic enclaves in Argentina or Brazil but not to rule over the territories they settled. In Central and Eastern Europe at the turn of 19th and 20th centuries emigration was seen as a substitute for a colonial conquest and a solution for the 'surplus' population problem. Zahra's interdisciplinary approach puts the Zionist enterprise within the context of Eastern European national colonization projects and argues that they were cross-fertilizing each another. For instance, Zahra suggests that neither Jews in Palestine nor other Eastern Europeans in South America had a clear position towards local indigenous populations. Moreover, Zahra convincingly argues that Eastern Europe was perceived as the object of the imperial fantasies of German or Russian empires rather than as an agent of colonialist expansion on other continents itself. Zahra is right in remarking that post-colonial theory has only marginally tried to understand how Eastern Europeans referred to the world beyond Europe. This is partly explained by the fact that, except for Zionism, all forms of Eastern European emigrant colonialism failed and are seen as forgotten dreams.

The section examining Zionism as a colonial enterprise adds a contemporary context to the study of Jews' role in colonial history. Derek Penslar's aforementioned text criticizes that many scholars wish to establish a complete congruence of or a total separation between Zionism and colonialism. Instead, he suggests situating Zionism simultaneously in colonial, anticolonial, and postcolonial discourse and practice. He agrees that Zionism has elements of European settler colonialism and contains

a powerful mission civilisatrice, but simultaneously points to its origins as an act of resistance by colonized Eastern European Jews. Penslar argues that before 1948, Zionist institutions had limited ability to command the fates of Jews and Arabs in Palestine and consequently differed from other colonial systems. Penslar bases these arguments on a comparative study, ultimately suggesting that Jewish nationalism was in many aspects similar to other resistant nationalist movements, such as the Bengali one.

Colonialism and the Jews is an important contribution integrating empire into the story of Jewish modernization. Its comparative approach allows for a better understanding of how imperial structures influenced Jewish lives in multiple locations. While the editors explain their focus on the French empire and its Jewish subjects in North Africa, it would be productive to analyze Jewish involvement in colonial systems of Imperial Russia and Habsburg Austria in detail, as most of the world's Jews lived there at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Taken as whole, *Colonialism and the Jews* couples Jewish history with the history of colonialism and imperialism in an innovative manner, providing valuable insights for both disciplines.

German Abstract:

Die jüdische Beteiligung am Kolonialismus

Colonialism and the Jews ist ein materialreicher Sammelband, der die Schnittstellen innerhalb der jüdischen Geschichte und Kolonialgeschichte untersucht. Das Buch betrachtet die Juden als Agenten und Untertanen von Imperien, analysiert ihr politisches Engagement innerhalb der imperialen Systeme und stellt Parallelen zwischen Zionismus und Kolonialismus dar. Es ist ein wichtiges Werk für alle, die die Rolle von Minderheiten in multinationalen Kolonialreichen besser verstehen wollen. Die Beiträge reichen von Studien über Juden im französischen Marokko bis hin zu jüdischer Rückkehrmigration innerhalb des Britischen Imperiums und bieten eine aufschlussreiche, vergleichende Perspektive, die verdeutlicht, inwiefern Orientalismus, Jüdischsein und Modernisierung sich in den europäischen Kolonialreichen verflochten haben.

Mariusz Kałczewiak
Universität Potsdam

Contact: kalczewiak@uni-potsdam.de

How to cite:

Kałczewiak, Mariusz: "The Jewish Involvement in the Colonial Movement [Review on: Katz, Ethan B.; Leff, Lisa Moses & Maud S. Mandel: *Colonialism and the Jews*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2017]". In: KULT_online 57 (2019).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2019.232>