The Merchants of Oran

Indiana University, September 2018

When French colonial authorities chose Jacob Lasry, a Sephardic cattle and grain exporter in Oran, to lead the city’s recently organized Consistoire Israélite in 1854, it could be construed as a paradox. France’s ostensible purpose in establishing the consistories in Algeria was to “organize” the culturally and religiously diverse collection of Jews Oran and “attach” them to France. Yet Lasry himself was from Tetuan in Morocco, probably knew Arabic and Spanish better than French, had married in Gibraltar, was a British subject, and likely first traveled to France only after the French began the occupation of Algeria in 1830. He was a business partner of Britain’s vice consul in Oran, and spent much of 1831 vexing French officials by mobilizing British support for his claims against them, specifically regarding business losses he blamed on the actions of a French general. Ultimately, the government’s choice of Lasry to spearhead the French Empire’s newly conceived mission to encourage the Jews of Algeria’s “assimilation” to France, and pave the way for their eventual “emancipation” as French citizens seems odd.¹

This episode, however, only appears as a “paradox” from a French historiographic vantage point, which is, of course, a natural place from which to be interrogating imperialism’s political and ideological lack of coherence.² Furthermore, this lack of

---


² Raymond Betts, *Assimilation and Association in French Colonial Theory 1890-1914* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2005) (originally published in 1960); Martin Deming Lewis,
coherence has become even more evident thanks to recent scholarship representing a self-described “imperial turn” in French Jewish history, which has produced much-needed revisions of the story of North African Jews’ encounter with colonialism, which had generally been told as a triumphalist story. At the same time, however, this work necessarily frames its inquiries within the colonial and post-colonial republic and by extension takes an interest in established Jewish historiographical tropes; notably emancipation, assimilation, and anti-Semitism. This work has also looked at the


experience of later generations of North African Jews and Muslims in France which, given Jews and Muslims’ different experiences there, compounded with their often contrasting perspectives on the ever-deteriorating situation in Palestine/Israel, has often described their relationship as a “history of conflict,” as one volume recently put it. In other words, when it comes to scholarship on North African Jews, the empire, its ideologies, and its teleologies have been hard to escape.

Yet the “paradox” of the choice of Lasry to lead the consistory does melt away a bit if we take in the view from Lasry’s Oran. In this case one might be less concerned with why a group of French officials would “choose” a Moroccan-born protected subject of Great Britain for a post devoted to turning Arabophone Algerian Jews into Frenchmen, or whether it complicates or reinforces the traditional French historiographic arc assigned to Algerian Jews, which begins in an undifferentiated, stylized past as an isolated and oppressed “dhimmi” under the yoke of an Islam far past its supposed “golden age,” and moves inexorably forward, weathering several anti-Semitic storms to eventually find its berth in full French citizenship and passionate patriotic attachment. As an alternative, it


5 Literature illustrating the contradictions of Algerian Jewish emancipation is more robust for the end of the colonial period than the beginning. Pierre-Jean Le Foll-Luciani, Les juifs algériens dans la lutte anticoloniale (Rennes, France: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2015); Joshua
may look back on why Jewish merchants had been attracted to Oran in the decades leading up to the French landing at Sidi Ferruch, how changing power dynamics in the western Mediterranean had dramatically improved pre-colonial Oran’s prospects as a port city, or how merchants who were deeply embedded in a western Mediterranean network of commerce that included Italian, Moroccan, and British ports adapted to the changed commercial conditions in the wake of the French conquest. By extension, the view from Oran might relieve Jewish merchants from their confining historiographic role as the putatively “indigenous” aids to French colonialism, and recast some of them, not necessarily as self-conscious or enthusiastic partners in the ascendant Regency of Algiers’ own recent project of westward expansion, but at least as its accomplices. Finally, given the charged and overdetermined set of meanings evoked by the contemporary social categories of Muslim and Jew, the view from Oran could shed light on what sorts of categories were operative in those days, in other words, before the emergence of the modern “problem” of Muslim-Jewish relations, at least configured as those between two putatively self-explanatory or pre-existing groups. In a word, the historian may obtain a better sense of the dynamics and texture of western Algeria, and a picture of an “alternative” or potential trajectory in modern North African history.

This all being said, prioritizing the view from pre- and early colonial Oran does not diminish the relevance of these Oran merchants’ stories to scholars of French Jewish and/or imperial history. The view from Oran suggests that pre-existing Jewish commercial class, long considered passive recipients of France’s civilizing and, more concretely, naturalizing mission in colonial Algeria, had already been influential in Oran at the time of the conquest, and continued to possess a great deal of agency to shape local institutions, trade, and civic projects, and to become formidable partners and rivals with French authorities once they arrived. As such, it helps us see at least one angle on how the empire had a role in changing the very meanings of “Muslim” and “Jewish,” two very old social markers that have, in the modern period, become seemingly self-evident and trans-historical analytic categories.

In other words, looking at Jews in a city like Oran at the very dawn of French colonialism allows us to step outside of the perspective of the French assimilating campaign directed toward Jews that led up to and included the 1870 Crémieux decree, which is important in that that this campaign remains under-critiqued in the historiography (not to mention the popular imagination). As a reminder, this decree naturalized—or “emancipated”—almost all the Jews living in Algeria as full French citizens, with several notable limitations. Certainly, recent scholarship has registered the

---

limits of this early Third Republic-era “emancipatory” act by noting that the decree did not “emancipate” the vast majority of France’s new subjects. But I would posit that the scholarship has been less insistent on how the act helped to create modern categories of Muslims and Jews.\(^7\) After all, by crowning the Third Republic with the laurels of the emancipator of Jews from their Islamic ancien regime, the government of 1870 echoed the First Republic’s granting of civic equality to the Jews of France in 1791, so Crémieux was instrumental in helping forge the conceptual link between Jewish emancipation and the Republic, an ideology that was rooted in the Enlightenment-derived, Revolution-era conviction that the Republic could forge a moral citizenry from even the most immoral of men—given what some philosophes imagined to be the causal relationship between intolerant despotism and the moral corruption of the oppressed.\(^8\) But by isolating one component of the population of Algeria and casting them in the starring role of “The Oppressed” in a particularly French Enlightenment-structured drama of emancipation, the Crémieux decree also drew upon and helped crystalize an older tradition whereby Islam functioned to help define fanaticism and despotism against (supposedly universal, but historically understood as French or European) Enlightenment and liberty. It ultimately played a role privileging Islam as the character-defining religious foil against which the autonomous subject so crucial to French republican citizenship was to be defined.\(^9\)

---


As I argue in my recent book, *Merchants of Oran*, Jewish merchants were powerful agents in late Ottoman Oran, serving a vital part in the Algiers Regency’s expansion to the west at the close of the eighteenth century. This, I argue, is important in that it adds some much-needed texture to the far-better examined historical sketch of Jews as vectors of European expansion in the Modern Middle East and North Africa. The book also suggests that Oran’s Jews have been cramped by their historiographic function as passive and long-suffering victims of Islam until France’s *Armée d’Afrique* landed on the shores of Algeria, paving the way for France’s emancipatory project. Rather, Oran’s Jews maintained significant influence and power to shape the society that emerged in the fog of blood and smoke that France unleashed on North Africa during the decades of the early colonial era. By emphasizing their agency, but also the splits between them (which I talk less about in the pages below), I hope to bring a world of western Mediterranean commercial culture into view, a world previously eclipsed by a French teleology and spectrum of social categories. In so doing, it hopefully makes it easier to see the innovation represented by France’s new caste, *les Israelites indigènes*, a social category supposedly encompassing a diverse set of individuals with a variety of interests, backgrounds, and allegiances, presented both locally and in later historiography as a seemingly natural social category distinct from their Muslim neighbors, endowed with its own historical trajectory (once again, borrowed from a French Jewish teleology). It fleshes out some of the history of Jews in western Algeria as actors who participated in their criticism of the church. See Rebecca Joubin, “Islam and Arabs Through the Eyes of the ‘Encyclopédie’: the ‘Other’ as a Case of French Cultural Self-Criticism,” in *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 32 (2000): 197-217. In the following century, Islam came to be seen as something preventing Muslims from being full republican subjects. See Naomi Davidson, *Only Muslim: Embodying Islam in Twentieth-Century France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).
commercial networks, hierarchies, rivalries, and political structures well beyond France, and describes how they adapted to and maintained influence after the dawn of modern French imperialism in Algeria. It presents an alternative problematic to the far more common inquiry into how and where Muslims and Jews failed to get along in the French or North African contexts, suggesting instead that the imperial Republic and its cacophonous colonial projects and ideologies be seen as an important actor in the creation of new and conflicting social identities, some of which bear old names, such as “Jew” and “Muslim.” But paving the way for this alternative casting requires us to look a bit more carefully at an earlier period when the invasive ideology of “emancipation” had yet to take root in Africa, and perhaps ask less about how Jews assimilated to France than about how France assimilated to North African Jews.

The Merchants of Oran

While the nineteenth century witnessed Oran’s emergence as one of French Algeria’s three major cities, it had been an isolated and decrepit presidio under the rule of Spain for much of the eighteenth century. Indeed, the Spanish general and commander Don Joseph Vallejo advised his king to abandon the recently acquired city in 1734, predicting that “This city will forever be, regardless of what is said, a deadweight for our kingdom.”10 It was then destroyed in a 1790 earthquake, occupied by the Ottomans shortly after, and remained small. In the 1860s, a French historian described Oran as

“nothing but a heap of ruins,” upon which “France would place the cradle of the proud and valiant Oran of today.”\textsuperscript{11} But this does not do justice to the stirrings of life that Oran, newly conquered by Algiers, exhibited by the early 1800s.

Algiers, we recall, was a growing, dynamic power in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Oran fell in the wake of a series of battles between Spain and the regency of Algiers. In 1775, Captain O’Reilly, the Irish commander in the service of King Charles III of Spain, failed in his bid to take Algiers despite the 300 ships and army of 22,000 men at his disposal.\textsuperscript{12} This was followed up by two more failures under the leadership of Don Angelo Barcelo to take Algiers in 1783 and 1784. Meanwhile, the beys in Mascara made efforts to take Oran from the Spanish, including a siege that began in 1775 that was reinforced in 1777. The Ottomans finally forced the Spanish into a treaty in 1786, though it was not fully completed for another five years. Not only did Spain agree to abandon Oran, it was also to provide a number of gifts and pay for an annual tribute for the privilege to trade there.\textsuperscript{13} Algiers seizure of Oran represents one chapter the growth and consolidation of the Algerian state in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.\textsuperscript{14}

But somewhat against the grain of standard roles assigned Jews in the historiography of the modern Middle Eastern or North Africa, Mediterranean Jewish

\textsuperscript{12} Eugène Pellissier de Reynaud, \textit{Annales Algériennes} vol. 1 (Paris: Anselin et Gaultier Laguionie, 1836), 16; Colley, \textit{Captives}, 68.
\textsuperscript{13} H. D. de Grammont, \textit{Histoire d’Alger sous la domination Turque (1550-1830)} (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1887), 344.
\textsuperscript{14} For an excellent overview of how the Algerian state was growing and consolidating in this period, see James MacDougall, \textit{A History of Algeria} (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), esp. 9-48.
merchants played a role in Algiers’ re-settlement, and re-vitalization of Oran. In the interest of expanding and exploiting a centuries-old port that had grown stagnant and isolated under Spanish rule, the Algerian dey Muhammad al-Kabir moved the capital of the western beylik of Algiers from Mascara to Oran, opened Oran to the interior, and in so doing, (paradoxically) opened the Iberian peninsula to grain and cattle shipped from Oran. He also repopulated the port by inviting Muslim and Jewish denizens of Tlemcen, Mascara, Milianah, and Médea to settle in the town. In the years following 1792, Jews also came to Oran from the cities of Mostaganem and Nedroma as well as the Moroccan towns of Fez and Oujda in the northeastern Moroccan rif. The late medieval commercial links that had made Oran an important port for the medieval capital of Tlemcen were renewed, and Oran saw ships arrive from various Iberian, Italian, and North African ports. Commercial ties were also re-established between Oran and the interior. One of the early French colonial mentions of Oran’s muqaddem (chief of the Jewish nation, what might be called sheikh al yahud elsewhere) involved his ability to effectively negotiate commerce between tribesmen who brought goods into town and the Jewish shop owners who purchased them.

If France and its empire has cast itself central to the modern story of Oran and the uplifting of its proportionately quite significant Jewish population (in 1832, the French estimated that Jews constituted more than half of Oran’s admittedly small population), Jewish merchants who settled in the newly open port of Oran at the beginning of the nineteenth central probably saw Gibraltar and Morocco as possessing more economic and

15 Schreier, Merchants of Oran, 47-70.
16 SHAT, 1 H 11, dos. 2. Muhammad al-Qadi to General Boyer, undated, probably February 1832. See also Schreier, Arabs of the Jewish Faith, 31
17 Schreier, “The creation of the israélite indigene,” 757.
cultural gravity than French ports such as Marseille. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the makhzen (or government) in Morocco had been pushing against increasing Spanish influence by encouraging its own maritime trade with Britain through Gibraltar.\(^{18}\) Only fourteen kilometers across the eponymous straits from Morocco, and barely 200 kilometers to the west of Oran, this British garrison shone particularly brightly in the revival of Oran. Gibraltar’s location at the mouth of the Mediterranean and in close proximity to rival powers’ naval ports rendered it strategically vital to Britain’s growing Mediterranean empire, a fact that would lead it to be declared a crown colony in 1830.\(^ {19}\)

Indeed, it was there, we learn from registries currently held by officers of today’s Gibraltarian Jewish community, that Jacob Lasry married his first wife, Rica (Rivka) Bergel (1809-1847), a Gibraltar native and daughter of a wealthy local ship building family, in 1823.\(^ {20}\) Soon after the wedding, he and his then-small family sailed eastward over the Alboran Sea, the westernmost section of the Mediterranean, to pursue expanding business opportunities, notably the exportation of cattle hides, in newly Muslim Oran. Other Moroccan-born Jewish merchants followed a similar path through Britain’s Iberian


\(^{20}\) Official Registrar of the Jewish Community of Gibraltar (RJCG), housed in the office of Mr. Mesod Belilo, Gibraltar. Thanks to Joshua Marrache for explaining the background of the Bergel family.
colony, into the western beylik of the Regency of Algiers. In 1828, the British vice consul in Oran wrote in his journal that Jacob Lasry sought help protecting one of his shipments of hides to Gibraltar, which the dey of Algiers, for some reason, threatened to block. The Gibraltar Government Archives hold the record of Lasry’s application for a passport from two years before the French occupation of Oran, where he ambiguously listed his nationality not as British or Moroccan, but as “inhabitant of Oran” in 1829. Standing in contrast to the French Jewish historiographical binary between a shapeless precolonial immobility and post-conquest emancipation and assimilation, many Jews in western Algeria were wealthy, mobile or recently settled, and aware of and taking advantage of ever-changing economic currents.

Consular records also hold key evidence of Jewish commercial prominence in Oran. These records kept track of ships coming in and going out of the port, and organized commerce along several “national” categories, with commerce juif counting alongside that labeled Sardinian, British, or French. The slice of trade categorized as “Jewish” was frequently the largest in Oran. For example, in the first trimester of 1823, 56,000 francs worth of goods were brought into Oran. This included 50,000 francs worth of sugar, coffee, and cotton fabrics, brought from Gibraltar on the English ship Benpardo, and 6,000 francs worth of cotton brought on the Algiers-based ship Massouda, presumably originating in a European workshop. According to the French consul, the

---

21 The Jewish population of Gibraltar was 900 in the late eighteenth century and would rise to 1,533 by the 1870s. See Mesod Benady, “The Settlement of Jews in Gibraltar, 1704-1783,” in Transactions and Miscellanies (Jewish Historical Society of England) 26 (1979), 87-110.
22 TNA F.O. 3/31, Diary of British vice consulate in Oran, 19 October, 1828.
24 Ministre des Affaires Etrangers, Archives Diplomatiques, La Cournveuve. (Hereafter MAE) dossier 231 CCC/2.
entirety of the merchandise brought in during these months of 1823 was attributed to the account of *commerce juif* of Oran.\textsuperscript{25} During the same season of 1825, Oran’s Jewish merchants were responsible for even more commerce.\textsuperscript{26} The same sources show Jewish commerce responsible for a great deal of the exports out of Oran, too, largely consisting of grain and cattle shipped to British Gibraltar. Merchants invested their earnings from trade in local real estate, and early colonial property records reveal Jews as many of the most important landlords in the growing city.\textsuperscript{27} Of course, given the former presidio’s ban on Jews, the very presence of Jews in Oran in the late pre-colonial period is a story of Algiers’ expansion, Jewish and Muslim dynamism, and interconnected commercial interests.\textsuperscript{28}

Jews were not only active in reviving Oran via commerce in the years before the French army unleashed chaos on western Algeria, they invested their earnings from trade in local real estate, buying buildings and land in and around the city of Oran. By the time the colonial authorities attempted to regularize property records in the 1840s through the newly established Conseil de Direction de la Province d’Oran, it was clear that Jews were some of the more important landlords in the growing city. At the first meeting of the council, on November 13, 1847, the members heard 16 requests for the certification or approval (*homologation*) of deeds of property. The names listed included David Amar,

---

\textsuperscript{25} MAE, dossier 231 CCC/2, tableau de navires de commerce entrées dans le port d’Oran pendant le premier trimestre de 1823, 31 March, 1823.

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{27} Archives Nationales d'Outre Mer (Hereafter ANOM), fol. 7K 1, Conseil de Direction de la Province d’Oran, Registre des Procès-verbaux des Séances.

Joseph Gabisson, Messaoud ben Zaguen, Abraham Kanoui (whose son would, in under two decades, marry Jacob Lasry’s daughter), Ephraim (no surname given), Nessim ben Haim, and Jacob Ben Allah. Six of the 16 names were obviously Jewish; one, Ben Haim, was registered in partnership with a man we could presume to be Muslim (Ali Kodja). The two professional titles négociant (merchant) and propriétaire (owner, landlord) are regularly coupled in early French colonial records of Jewish births, deaths, and marriages.

Gardens, which helped supply the city with fresh food, were also a prominent feature of early nineteenth-century Oran’s real estate, and the Jewish merchants became prominent investors in it—though it is possible this began only after the French occupied the city in 1831. In an 1843 listing of the gardens of Oran, for example, Jacob Lasry possessed four separate jardins extérieurs and one jardin intérieur within the central ravine framing the Ras al-Aïn stream, which supplied the city with fresh water. The only other person listed as possessing more than one garden in this area was Abraham Senanes, another Moroccan Jew who had settled in Oran, who possessed two (the military administration is also listed as having two). Another prominent Jewish family, Durand, is also on the list of garden owners in this area. Beyond Ras-al-Aïn, Lasry is listed as having two other gardens elsewhere in Oran, while the Durands had four others. Although the size of these gardens is not noted in the records, there were only 26 garden owners listed, possessing a total of 48 properties. This means that Jews owned at least one fourth of these properties, with Lasry heading the list, possessing more than any other single person. These property records, compiled less than a decade and a half after the

29 Archives Nationales d’Outre Mer (Hereafter ANOM), fol. 7K 1, Conseil de Direction de la Province d’Oran, Registre des Procès-verbaux des Séances.
French occupation of Oran, could be read as a paper trail of a pre-colonial merchant class making the transition into a sort of colonial notability.

While parenthetical to the point being made here, this is a useful place to recall my earlier point about how French colonial rule would dramatically influence how the meanings of older terms such as “Muslim” and “Jew” changed in the modern period. The descendants of these North African Jewish merchants, thanks to their considerable means and the French policies and ideologies that presented them with opportunities denied to the vast majority of Algeria’s inhabitants, would unproblematically be referred to as “Europeans” in the French press a bit more than a century later.30

In any case, the French records detailing these real estate holdings, dating from the 1840s, picked up the echoes of pre-conquest Jewish commercial might in Oran. But in addition to these French records, rabbinical decisions also contain resonances of real estate investment, notably in the form of disputes that transactions necessarily engendered. They also suggest how merchants continued to conduct business, perhaps even profiting from disruptions engendered from the conquest. Among the judgments of an Oran rabbi by the name of Faruz Karcenti, recorded in a Hebrew volume published several decades later in Livorno, entitled Gushpanka deMalka figures our man Jacob Lasry, apparently attempting to purchase real estate on the cheap.31 In a decision dated to 5594 (1833-34), Lasry purchased (or attempted to purchase) eight shops and a yard from Messaoud Teboul for a price (2,500 gruesos) lower than originally agreed. Apparently, Lasry had convinced Teboul that his land was bound to be taken and destroyed by the

30 Schreier, “A Jewish Riot Against Muslims.”
31 Faruz Karcenti, Gushpanka deMalka, section Hilchat Makirah (Livorno: Shlomo Belforte and Company, 1861), 55.
French (*lehavir veleharos velinkhol al yadei ha-alfransis*) in order to make a public plaza (*palazza*), and thus justified a lower price. At this price, however, Teboul complained that it was “a sale to which I never would have agreed” (*lo ‘altah ‘al ra’iti hamakirah*).

Presumably, Lasry was aware that the value of the land would not actually decline, and withheld this information intentionally. Rabbi Karcienty compared what Lasry did to deception and warned him (or any others who might engage in similar practices) that to cheat or deceive people when negotiating prices was forbidden (*asur lirmot et b’nei adam b’mekakh u’mimkar o lignov et da’atam*). While the ultimate fallout is unclear, the rabbi clearly ruled against Lasry in the affair.\(^{32}\) French military archives reveal a number of additional disputes concerning property sales, the sale of export permits, requisitioning wealth from surrendered cities, and usurious loans made to local allies, all suggesting how well-placed Jewish merchants in Oran, having benefited from opportunities created by the Algiers’ occupation of it in 1792, continued to do business as the conquest dramatically changed the circumstances.

The Jewish commercial class shaped Oran’s elite well into the early colonial period. In 1845, for example, it was Emmanuel Menahem Nahon, a Moroccan-born member of Oran’s Jewish elite and an interpreter for the French military, helped to organize the collection for funding a sewer system serving the Jewish quarter.\(^{33}\) Jacob Lasry, who played a prominent role in the Jewish consistory, donated land for a Jewish cemetery while serving on the chamber of commerce. Men in his circle eventually joined the French colonial *haute bourgeoisie*. In the middle years of the 1850s, an article in

\(^{32}\) Ibid.

\(^{33}\) Derrien, *Oran* 192-193.
L’illustration covered a high-society ball that was hosted by the wealthy Kanoui family.34 Entitled une soirée juive à Oran, the author described how “among the descendants of Abraham and Jacob, a certain number of families remind us, thanks of their grand fortune, the luxuries of the rich merchants that once inhabited the Italian littoral.” Remarking how the hosts were “indigenous” Algerians, the article went on to describe the mansion’s “half Arab and half European” design, including European decorated rooms surrounding an “Arab interior courtyard.” If we are to believe the report, the city’s Muslim, Jewish, and French elite were all in attendance at this “fairy-like” ball. Together, these stories point out some of the pitfalls of scholarship centering Jews’ assimilation to French rule, and illuminate instead how precolonial currents actually helped shape French colonial society in the decades following 1830.

Social Identities and the Pitfalls of Citizenship

Of course Oran’s commercial dynamism challenges several received ideas about precolonial Maghrebi Jewish social identities. Notably, it is clear that their mobility, agency, and influence underlines the ideological nature of their new, French appellation “indigenous” in the years following 1830. Rather than isolated or fixed features of North Africa’s unchanging social landscape, passed from conqueror to conqueror as French chroniclers often told the story, the very presence of Jews in Oran in the late pre-colonial period was quite recent changes: the result of craftspeople, rabbis, small-scale shopkeepers, and wealthy merchants in the western Mediterranean region following the opportunities that came in the wake of the Muslim conquest of a small but growing port

34 L’illustration, Journal universel (1855), 204.
city. Less a story of Jewish humiliation as a *dhimmi*, Oran tells one of North African Jewish agency and participation in a Muslim state’s expansion, its ending of Catholic bans against Jewish settlement on its lands, and interconnected commercial interests.35

As such, the history of Jews as vital players in Algiers’ pre-colonial expansion and Oran’s resurgence also raises serious questions---ones about what has been missing from scholarship that presents French citizenship as the goal and culmination of North African Jewish history. Even in recent work, this (unproblematized) process has been seen as threatened primarily by Muslim and European anti-Semitism. But the problems of Jewish emancipation in Algeria was not only in its unequal allocations of rights based on post-Enlightenment mythologies about Jews and Muslims, which is dramatic and important. Nor is “emancipation’s” faults limited to its work staging Islam as the ultimate foil against which Republican enlightenment was defined- in other words, that which one is to be emancipated from. But even for Jews, “emancipation” also exposed its Algerian beneficiaries to new and specifically *republican* forms of marginalization. After the Crémieux decree (and the death of Jacob Lasry, which happened within the same year or so), Algeria experienced several waves of intensely violent anti-Semitism. During the Dreyfus affair near the turn of the twentieth century, settler anti-Jewish violence far exceeded that which was witnessed in the metropole. Jews were often blamed for voting as a block, against the interests of an imagined real citizenry of European settlers.36

---


fact, non-French European *colon* used anti-Semitism to bolster their own status as French in late nineteenth-century Algerian society.\(^{37}\) It is not coincidental that anti-Semitic violence spiked specifically around that most republican of institutions, elections. Anti-Semitism would remain a defining aspect of *colon* society, particularly in Oran, through the war years, and even influence the way the *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN) later spoke about Jews’ rightful allegiances.\(^{38}\) Importantly, a consistent complaint of late nineteenth-century colonial anti-Jewish activists was that Jews voted as a block—in other words, not as autonomous, rationally-thinking, individual citizens (the real or imagined subject upon which modern democratic orders are supposedly reliant), but in blind obedience to their leaders, underlining how anti-Semitism in Algeria was often articulated in republican terms. Indeed, a similar casting of *Muslims* as non-autonomous subjects—in their case because they are supposedly the nearly powerless servants to the strictures of a faith in ways Jews and Christians are not, has structured many past representations of them as somehow not fully abstracted citizens.\(^{39}\) Finally, it is hard to forget that French citizenship proved to be a fragile institution in the twentieth century, both by the de-nationalization of Jews during the Vichy period, and of course the de-nationalization of millions of Muslim Frenchmen during decolonization.\(^{40}\)

---


\(^{39}\) Naomi Davidson, *Only Muslim*

\(^{40}\) Shepard, *Invention of Decolonization*. 
contemporary scholarship on the experience of Algerian Jews that remains fixed within the French imperial perspective, endlessly employing citizenship as an index of emancipation and progress, not only misses the immense violence that was wrapped up in French projects of “emancipation,” but it loses sight of earlier forms of Jewish power and agency.

**Conclusion: “Jewish” as Another “Imperial Identity”**

These glimpses into a dynamic and occasionally prosperous Jewish life before and immediately following the onset of French colonialism bears on the potential North African modernities that French colonialism—justified in part by the exclusionary notion of emancipation—cut short. I also hope it helps provide a point of reference illustrating the slipperiness of some common analytical categories which were in the process of tremendous transformations during the 1820s and 1830s. Appreciating the extent of colonialism’s effects on modern subjectivities underlines a point that also holds true outside of colonial contexts: terms such as “Jew,” “Muslim” and “European” are used to denote *both* local and analytic (scholarly) categories. In other words, it is important to understand that the terms scholars use now as analytic terms (notably in “Jewish” Studies) are the same used by and for a vast array of historical actors in vastly different periods and places. The only constants in the equation, ultimately, are not the groups themselves, but the labels used to define groups.

This truth is all the more important to remember given the popular and scholarly interest in the history of Muslim-Jewish relations in France, Europe more generally, and the Middle East. “Jew,” like other social identifiers, does not describe a trans-historical
constant, a single group that moves through time. The subjectivities of members of any
group categorized as “Jewish” at any given time and place is defined by local powers and
processes. They do not necessarily have a single, easily deciphered “relationship” with
institutions, states, or other social groupings, if only because they are simultaneously
produced by those other forces and entities. If the imperial turn in Jewish scholarship has
offered Jewish historians a broader field of inquiry to pursue their craft, we must keep in
mind not only that the term "Jewish" applies to a varied set of social groupings, but also
that state actors and economic transformation were never impartial observers or
background sets to dramas of local identities—they dramatically remade subjectivities
(including Jewish and Muslim ones). This points to the ideological artifice built into
narratives that attempt to trace histories of Muslim (or Christian) “relationships with” or
“treatment of” Jews over time.

This was as true at the dusk of the colonial era as it was at its dawn. While not the
focus of this paper, it is vital to keep in mind how processes involved in the
decolonization of Algeria also dramatically changed Jewish subjectivities in the years
leading up to and following Algerian independence in 1962. Depending on the political
perspective, historians generally describe Jewish-Muslim violence and the mass exodus
of Jews from Algeria during this as either a continuation or disjuncture from earlier
patterns of “Jewish-Muslim “relations” in Algeria. In this way, historians have actually
echoed a good deal of popular discourse of the 1950s and early 1960s, when polemicists
drew differing political conclusions from the supposed long history of “friendly”
Muslim-Jewish relations in Algeria. But in addition to missing how the colonial policies
discussed above had dramatically changed these subjectivities (thus rendering
comparisons of how “Jews” and “Muslims” got along in different historical epochs a question of comparing apples and oranges), these treatments often de-emphasize how the strategies of decolonization itself also recast Jewish and Muslim subjectivities. After all, the FLN’s “method” of decolonization required not only outside pressure from the United States and other countries (the “diplomatic revolution” in the words of Matthew Connolly41), but, as Jeffrey James Byrne has shown, the establishment of a “shadow state” under the noses of the French “binding the Muslim population to its subversive authority.”42 Thus the struggle involved not only military force (a domain where the FLN was definitively beaten by the French), but the FLN’s successful campaign (often violent) to establish their hegemony over justice, taxation, medicine, civil ceremonies and public culture. These ceremonies and guidelines were often informed or defined by the FLN’s reading of Islam—not surprising given that religion had organized France’s colonial hierarchy in Algeria, and most notably who was at the bottom of it. In other words, the FLN’s strategy of securing legitimacy among the people they saw themselves as representing required securing the position of arbiter of an Islamic culture whose boundaries and meaning France had helped shape. While ultimately far more of the FLN’s violence was directed at Muslims than at Jews, it did leave The Jews on the precarious margins of Algeria’s national identity, ultimately pushing them down the road—one paved by violent colonial innovations such as “emancipation” via the Crémieux decree—toward their departure for France. This, once again, dramatically reformulated Jewish and Muslim subjectivities in France and Algeria going forward.

As for *The Merchants of Oran*, it illuminates an often overlooked story of North African Jewish place, agency, and empowerment. It evokes a dynamic early nineteenth-century North African Muslim state, where Jews were major players, albeit not always treasured ones, in the story of its expansion. As such, it also presents a critique of citizenship and “emancipation” as institutions that were both deliberately deployed and became indirect causes of conquest, exclusion, and violence. Colonial republicanism was built on racial and religious stereotypes and Orientalist binaries, so citizenship served violent, exclusivist ends.\(^43\) The effect was the creation of profoundly new subjectivities in the French Mediterranean world, albeit clothed in old language: “Jewish” went from a broad religious identifier describing a wide range of people at the dawn of colonization, to describing a subcategory of precariously entitled (if only relatively) but frequently despised “Europeans” by the eve of decolonization in the 1950s. “Muslim,” meanwhile, went from describing people with a vast array of cultures, practices, and statuses to a crude, dehumanized abstraction denoting a threat; a subject whose inherently religious identity was ontologically at odds with French republican citizenship, if not modernity itself.\(^44\)

---


\(^{44}\) Davidson, *Only Muslim*. On “emancipation” as a discourse of exclusion, see Schreier, *Arabs of the Jewish Faith*. 