

Introduction

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Jewish Labor Movement in the Balkans, the Case of Salonika, Ottoman Empire

*In memory of Avraam Benaroya,
hero of the working-class movement*

Articulating the past historically
does not mean recognizing it “the way it really was”.
It means appropriating a memory
as it flashes up in a moment of danger
(Benjamin, 2006, 391).

Introduction

In the field of social history as a branch of historic research that emphasizes social structures and the interaction of different groups in society rather than affairs of state, we focus on the outgrowth of economic history that it expanded as a discipline in the 1960s. Locality and nationalities as historical analytical categories are also involved in modern historic literacy. The aim is to rethink Marxist analysis on specific historic issues.

The purpose of this study is: a) to highlight Jewish labour in Ottoman Thessaloniki. It is a product of my collaboration with Alex Dagkas, a two-volume work (in French, 2023) which will present detailed evidence of the Jewish labourers' history in Ottoman Thessaloniki, b) to provide a stimulus for discussion, to integrate the Jewish labour movement into a framework of observation of social processes that will be based on contemporary theoretical and methodological approaches according to this issue.

Touted as the Jerusalem of the Balkans, the Mediterranean port city of Salonika (Thessaloniki) was once home to the largest Sephardic Jewish community in the world. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the city's incorporation into Greece in 1912 provoked a major upheaval that compelled Salonika's Jews to reimagine their community and status as citizens of a nation-state. Naar's book *Jewish Salonika* (2016) is the first study to tell the story of this tumultuous transition through the voices and perspectives of Salonikan Jews as they forged a new place for themselves in Greek society. He traveled the globe, from New York to Salonika, Jerusalem, and Moscow, to excavate archives once confiscated by the Nazis. Written in Ladino, Greek, French, and Hebrew, these archives, combined with local newspapers, reveal

how Salonika's Jews fashioned a new hybrid identity as Hellenic Jews during a period marked by the rising nationalism and the economic crisis as well as the unprecedented Jewish cultural and political vibrancy. Salonika's Jews—Zionists, assimilationists, and socialists—reinvigorated their connection to the city and claimed it as their own until the Holocaust. Through the case of Salonika's Jews, Naar recovers the diverse experiences of a lost religious, linguistic, and national minority at the crossroads of Europe and the Middle East.

A series of modernizing measures taken by the Ottoman authorities in the city enhanced the process of revival. The city expanded. It was lit by electricity, electric street cars were installed, the port was modernized and a railroad connection with the rest of Europe was established. From 1873 the Jews received advanced European education thanks to the Alliance Israélite Universelle Schools. It was at that time that the first newspaper was ever published in Thessaloniki. It was the Jewish paper "El lunar" (1864). Industrial development was launched too, with the big steam mill of the Italian Jews of the Allatini family (1854).

The Jews dominated the commercial scene, were active in all professions and were by far the largest labour power in the city. That is why the city streets were deserted on the Sabbath and on Great Jewish Holidays. In 1891, the Jewish Community founded the working-class neighbours hoods of Baron Hirsch and Kalamaria and established a whole chain of brilliant and unique charity institutions. They created a welfare system that has not been equaled in any other Diaspora community (Allatini and Mair Aboave orphanages, the Baroness de Hirsch Hospital, Mental Asylum, Saoul Modiano Old People's Home, Bikour Holim Health Organization, etc.). The community had more than 30 Synagogues, numerous chapels and parish schools and the great traditional "Talmoud Torah Agadol" School. After the revolution of 1908 the socialist organization "Federation" was founded and the first Zionist groups made their appearance (Bene Sion, Kadima Macabbe, Misrahi, etc.). On October 26, 1912, Thessaloniki becomes Greek.

The leaders of the Community were immediately received by King George I and the Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos, who promised to respect the rights of the community and offered total equality in the eyes of the Law. According to the Greek Authorities Census, the Jews of Thessaloniki numbered 61,439 as compared to 45,867 Muslim, 39,936 Greek and 10,600 people of other origins. A few years later the city was devastated by the 1917 fire. The Community was cruelly hit. It numbered 53,000 homeless members. Almost all synagogues, schools and charity institutions were destroyed. In Rosen's paper (1994) we also read about the updated, contextual picture of the Salonikan Jewish working world from the Balkan Wars (1912/3) until the onset of the dictatorship of Ioannis Metaxas (1936). This portrait of the interwar working world in Salonika also refutes the commonly accepted view of the success of Zionism in that city.

The research data

In this paper we present some elements from the new book Dagkas & Vamvakidou (2023) titled *Le mouvement professionnel et socialiste juif dans la ville de Salonique, 1909-1918*.

The issues of the institutional organization and modernization of the Jewish community are presented according to the dictates of the Ottoman reforms, Tanzimat (1839–1876). In this ottoman political context, we focus on the areas of community administration, the Community's public institutions and its initiatives for the creation of new Jewish working quarters after the fires of 1890 and 1917. The metropolitan role of the community is analyzed. We focus on the educational and ideological activity of the community, as the modernization of Jewish education (1873–1910) formed the basis of its institutional as well as ideological rebirth. The pluralistic social and cultural identity of the community is also examined: first of all, as to its special position in the emerging Zionist movement and secondly, to the challenges it accepts or creates itself until it succeeds in integrating itself into the new national state, Greece.

The research problem

The researching historical issue is the development and consolidation of socialism within economic, political and social factors in European and Balkan territory around the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. The focus is on the activity of the Jewish community in Thessaloniki and the establishment in 1909 of the Jewish socialist organization, Federation. During the course of the Second (Socialist) International, after 1889, in the midst of theoretical counter-appeals as to the dilemma of reform or revolution, the members of the labour movement, among them great Jewish Marxists from Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia and other Balkan countries, had a production of economic and social theories, and further intense action.

The Second International (1889–1916) was an organization created on July 14, 1889, by socialist and labour parties who wanted to work together for international socialism. It continued the work of the First International, which stopped being an organization in 1886.

In Ottoman Salonika, the Jewish Socialist Federation was an organization of unprecedented mass, rallying point of the numerous proletariat of the city's Jewish community, receiving from its foundation in 1909 ideological attacks by the Bulgarian and Serbian socialists (Stavrianos, 1942, Dimou, 2009)

More than any other ideology of the nineteenth century, socialism came into being as a trenchant political answer to the challenges of modern mass industrial society. Born of the underbelly of capitalism, socialism proposed a comprehensive futuristic vision of a fairer social order and offered a vastly powerful ideology to those who sought to change the world and who repudiated distress as the predestined condition of humanity. From its origins in Western Europe, socialism spread to other parts of the

world, informing the political imaginary of societies that sought to cross the threshold of modernity.

The emphasis of our analysis (Dagkas & Vamvakidou, 2023) is on social movements and theory of social action according to Alain Touraine's thinking (1971), in order to understand the role of social movements in societal transformation processes, as well as in developing theoretical tools and systems of interpretation on the complex interplay between the societal structures and social action.

In the three countries under analysis (Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece), in the nineteenth century, the Serbian Radicals and the Bulgarian Socialists appear to display a more egalitarian social structure. The radical intellectuals in Serbia, with negligible exceptions like Pera Todorović and Svetomir Nikolajević, were predominantly of modest social origins, not far removed from the social groups (peasants, artisans) that they claimed to represent. The founding father of Serbian radicalism, S. Marković, wrote that fifty years ago in Serbia there were hardly any other classes but peasantry. We are all sons or grandsons of peasants (in Dimou, 2009 & McClellan, 2016).

The formation of the political sphere in nineteenth-century Greece rests on a precarious, almost paradox combination. Whereas on the one hand the Greek state had a functional liberal constitutional system since 1864, perhaps the most liberal of its kind in the Balkans, on the other, it nurtured a very conservative and introspect intellectual establishment. In the realm of the history of ideas, this ideological "regression" meant a clear retreat from the liberal political ideals and visions that had inspired the movement of the Greek Enlightenment and the revolution of independence.

After 1912, in Thessaloniki, the Jewish organization continued struggling for peace, social justice and emancipation of the working class, until 1918 when joined the unified Greek labour party.

The Greek labour party was founded in 1918 as the Socialist Labour Party of Greece and adopted its current name (KKE) in November 1924. It's a Marxist–Leninist political party in Greece, the oldest political party in modern Greek politics. The party was banned in 1936, but played a significant role in the Greek resistance and the Greek Civil War, and its membership peaked in the mid-1940s. Legalization of the KKE was restored following the fall of the Greek military junta of 1967–1974.

The specific researching issues in this social historic research refer to:

a) the international Conditions (end of the First World War, 1918). Over 30 nations declared war between 1914 and 1918. The majority joined on the side of the Allies, including Serbia, Russia, France, Britain, Italy and the United States. They were opposed by Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire, who together formed the Central Powers. What began as a relatively small conflict in southeast Europe became a war between European empires. Britain and its Empire's entry into the war made this a truly global conflict fought on a geographical scale

never seen before. Fighting occurred not only on the Western Front, but in eastern and southeast Europe, Africa and the Middle East.

b) To the socialist Narratives for Economy, Society, Politics.

c) To the state of the working class in the Balkans.

d) To the professional movement of the working class as socialism in the Balkans (Ottoman Empire's period 1908–1912).

e) To Jewish socialism in Greek Thessaloniki, 1912–1918.

f) To Bulgarian Socialists in Macedonia and Thrace, 1912–1918.

g) To the Muslim populations in Macedonia and Thrace, 1912–1918.

As H. Sükrü Ilicak (2002) writes: The Socialist Workers' Federation of Salonica was established, mostly by Salonikan Jews, after the Young Turk revolution of 1908. The Federation was indeed unique in several respects and has attracted much attention from historians. However, this attention is disproportional to the Federation's actual influence on the corporate community structure of Salonikan Jewry.

Historiography issues

The methodology comes from the international economic, political and social conditions under the influence of capitalism, the cartels, the working class and currents of socialism until 1918, the end of the First World War. Eric Hobsbawm's contribution to social history highlights his pioneering application of Marxist methodology and particularly his work in thinking through the implications of Marx's *Grundrisse* for the understanding of modes of production and dialectical processes of change (in Foster, 2014). Karl Marx's *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* was written in 1857–1858. The seven notebooks of the *Grundrisse* manuscript constitute one of Karl Marx's most important works, as well as a reference work for Marxist thought as a whole.

The study of Jewish labour movements seems to be a neglected page in the history of the Jews on a global scale and especially in the Balkans and Salonika into the local and multicultural frame. Many new books on the holocaust, on family and oral histories, on education, on localities and religiosity are published because are of most interest to historical researchers in Greece. In specific the most publications in Greece since the 1990s describe and document the life and activity of Jews in Greek areas in the field of local research as case studies in each city. However, in our view, the issue of the position of the working class within society is generally the key to interpreting the economic, social, political and cultural developments of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The social division of labour in society and the unequal distribution of the produced product mark the course of the social classes, including the Jewish social classes. In particular for the Ottoman Salonika, homeland to a large mass of Jews employed with a dependent labour relationship or subsistence workers or other members of the lower social strata, Jewish labour has historically been a factor in questioning the social status quo, which sought to restore the correspondence of productive relations and productive forces.

The question of the alienation of the working world from the product of its labour was at the core of the reflection, which occupied the radical intellectuals after the 19th century as a reflection in the workplace in Ottoman Salonika. In this city with a long Jewish history, strange phenomena were occurring. Someone was walking down the street and heard people speaking Spanish. A part of the Jewish population presented itself with elements identical to those of the upper bourgeoisie in Europe, and not only in appearance but also in education and culture.

Thus we are wondering about the significations of Jewishness? Europeanness? Ottomanity? Greekness? Otherness? Among men and women?

The answers could be found in the specific thematics as they are coming out of the archives and the comparative analysis:

The educational issue is very important in our interpretation because education can both reproduce capitalism and have the potential to undermine it. However, in the current system, education works mainly to maintain capitalism and reproduce social inequality (Cole, 2019).

The gender issue is also significant because the Jews women and children workers at the 19th.

In fact, Salonikan women had little in common with their sisters in North Africa and the Near or Middle East, who were treated more or less as servants (Rodrigue 1989, 82–87). Although the Salonikan Jewish man was also the official head of the Sephardic household, he did not impose his “superiority” through conduct that was any more despotic than that of the contemporary Western man (Benveniste 1982, 13–26). Salonikan customs (Molho, M. 1950, 341) and literature (Sciaky 1946, 213) which merit a study in their own right—reveal women in a very different role from that of a servant.

The position of Orthodox Christian (Greek) women, who were their principal minority fellow-citizens, might have been considered at this time as preferable, since the Greek Girls’ School had been the first to be established in Salonika, in 1845 (Papadopoulos 1910). It is likely that some middle-class Jewish girls attended this school, though there are no sources earlier than 1891 to confirm this (Abatzidou, 1994). It is also possible that Jewish pupils attended the school of the Sisters of St. Vincent, founded in 1855, since it is known that most of the pupils in the girls’ school founded in 1857 by a missionary couple named Crosby were Jewish (see in <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/salonika-female-education-at-end-of-nineteenth-century>).

The Jewish community, despite being the largest (Molho, R. 2001, 47–48), was subject to the influences of its multi-cultural environment. This is reflected in the consistency with which progressive community leaders used the Greek example to persuade donors to support them in establishing a girls’ school in Salonika (Allatini 1875). The presence of Jewish girls in Greek schools is also corroborated by the frequent gifts of Jewish benefactors, which continued even after the creation of the first private Jewish girls’ school by the Polish Countess Farnetti in 1867 (Néhama).

The ottoman political context

Immediately following the Young Turk Revolution, strikes began in Salonika. The first strike in which tens of thousands of workers participated, including approximately 10,000 tobacco workers and 3–5,000 dockworkers, railroad workers, and bakers, was organized by the tobacco workers' trade union. The tobacco workers were the first in the city to form a trade union that was part of the Socialist Federation. From the very first year of its establishment, female tobacco workers were part of the tobacco workers' organization, though they did not take part in its management, nor in committees that negotiated with employers. Tobacco work was but a stage in the maturation of the young girls from working class neighborhoods of Salonika—a stage during which new values were introduced into their world, and if only for a short time, they were the “countesses” and the “princesses” who dared to take to the streets and demand social equality. Work ties and social and ideological relationships did not replace family bonds, but rather served as a means of incorporating the family as a whole into a larger ideological family (Hadar, 2003).

A part of the local society was devoted to social reform as followers of Jean Jaurès (1859–1914), that noble figure who preached socialism with a human face. Jewish population bought and read socialist newspapers, *L'Humanité* of Paris and *Le Peuple* of Brussels creating a new tradition in the direction of the socialization of the workers of production.

Methodology

Historical methods, also known as historiography, are the most common analytic techniques used in the discipline of history. They are generally used to explore either what happened at a particular time and place or what the characteristics of a phenomenon were like at a particular time and place. Similar to ethnographic methods, methodological discussions of historiography focus on both data collection and data analysis. This is a bibliographic research study conduct to gather and compile all the available information/data on the specific topic, but mostly is an archive study as archives are historical, non-current-documents, records and other sources relating to the activities and claims of Jewish population. Comparative analysis is also applied in the data.

Comparative-historical methods are one of several methodological traditions used by social scientists in their efforts to understand our social world. The cultural historical approach, focused on the systematics of space (where groups were located, how they migrated through time, and how sites and regions were organized) and time (dating) is also applied in the data.

Burke (2019) begins by discussing the ‘classic’ phase of cultural history, associated with Jacob Burckhardt and Johan Huizinga, and the Marxist reaction to it, from Frederick Antal to Edward Thompson. He charts the rise of cultural history in more recent times, concentrating on the work of the last generation, often described as the New Cultural History. He places cultural history in its own cultural context, noting

links between new approaches to historical thought and writing and the rise of feminism, postcolonial studies and an everyday discourse in which the idea of culture plays an increasingly important part.

Regarding the thematic of our study, many Israeli colleagues surpassed the Greeks and others, with pioneering historical research that highlighted this labour character of the Jewish community of Ottoman Thessaloniki. The secondary literature we used took into account the serious historical research of Gila Hadar, Shai Srougo, Angel Chorapchiev, and of course their mentor, Professor Minna Rozen, into whom we owe special thanks for the academic help they offered us, including access to the Judeo-Spanish language, that charming Judeo-español. Along with the modern Israeli historical production, our care is to search and consult the modern secondary literature, modern studies, coming from Turkey, Bulgaria and elsewhere, in addition to older studies which served as aids in our research.

In this study of ours, the particularity of the Jewish community of Ottoman Thessaloniki, the Jewish city (*ville juive*), is highlighted, compared to other regions in Europe and the Balkans.

The first documentation is the disposition of local Jews in each place to join a social struggle. In the neighboring states, the example of Romania, a country with a solid mass of Jewish population, offers itself for comparison. Apart from the pioneering Jewish intellectuals and workers, who contributed with programmatic positions to the articulation of the Romanian professional movement and also with guidance for projecting claims and further for spreading the ideas of socialism, the response of the mass of Jewish workers and other members of the lower social classes in the professional and political movement was limited. In another example, the mass of Jewish workers in other cities of the Ottoman Empire, for example Istanbul or Edirne, were not responded to mass integration into a modern movement.

The second documentation that highlights the particularity of the Jewish workers of Ottoman Thessaloniki was the organizational structure of the trade union and political movement. The model of the Bund organization in Russia, from the beginning of the 20th century was a source of inspiration for the pioneer workers of Ottoman Thessaloniki. They tried to create a Jewish trade union and political organization, which would not be bound by the particular Jewish tradition and culture. They wanted to align with internationalist visions by engaging in a social struggle for improving their position within Ottoman society and further for the pursuit of the implementation of the socialist model of organization of society.

Discussion

The classical approach to the issue with the analysis category of social class gives way, in many studies to the cultural and psychoanalytical approach, which gives rise to skepticism in the followers of rationalism who move research within the context of modernity. We observe that the approach of a historical event based on culture claims a major role, in the modern studies of many colleagues, in relation to the classical socio-

economic approach. However, culture-based analysis reveals aspects of social reality that were previously indiscernible.

Our opinion is that, in the science of History, the small stories that make up the grand narrative, what we call in History *le grand récit*, do not conflict with the consideration of each small story that describes the events independently of each other.

The history of everyday life and microhistory enjoyed tremendous popularity in the 1980s. But by the end of the following decade, it, along with social history as a whole, had been largely eclipsed by the new cultural history popular in the United States, which looked to the insights of postmodernism and the so-called linguistic turn for inspiration.

In the grand narrative, the mode of production, and the relations of production on the basis of which people are brought into the process of production, is at the center, and from there codes, values, consciousness, and culture itself are constructed. But it is found that the observation of the historical event is enriched by the consideration of the culture which appears, in some cases, to claim its autonomy.

The question of culture was an important parameter, according to our study, as it related to the Jewish community of Ottoman Thessaloniki, and to its composition of competing social classes. Within the Jewish community there were different tendencies, opposing each other. Assimilationists, Zionists, Socialists, each trend with its own ideas, its own culture, and its own acceptance by members of different social strata. For example we notice that bourgeois were members of the socialist movement and workers were members of the assimilationist movement.

The striking observation is that, in cases where there was a common danger to the Jews, as for example the change of state regime in Thessaloniki after October 1912, there was a coupling of the otherwise opposing tendencies: pairing of cultural identities.

Each Jew was the stranger, the other (Kristeva, 1991) in a new social reality where the uniform cultural identity of the surrounding people, the Greeks, who very quickly composed the new demographic majority, was different from the Jewish cultural identity.

The change of state regime in Thessaloniki after October 1912 was accompanied by the will of the state power to Hellenize and homogenize the city, in contrast to the steady situation under Ottoman rule where the traditional cultural identities of the different national communities coexisted. At the same time, state power, as an expression of a social regime that had the characteristics of a modern urban bourgeois regime (we are talking about the model, not about the distortions which were endless) placed the Jewish workers in a process of living in conditions of a capitalist mode of production, where they were recognized labour rights, the right to trade unions, the right to strike, the state's obligation to institutionalize advanced social conditions such as health care and pensions. These historic movements in Thessaloniki, until the end of the 1920s covered by our study, were postponed due to continuous wars and martial law (Second Balkan War 1913, First World War until 1918, presence of French forces in the city until 1920, Ukrainian campaign 1919).

Due to the circumstances, it did not work until then to integrate the Jewish workers into the modern social system in the direction of seeing visible changes in their life and work and starting to feel integrated into the new political civic reality. In conclusion, our historical research on the Jewish labour of Ottoman Thessaloniki is a wandering in a world with special cultural characteristics, a wonderful world that historically had the characteristic of questioning traditional social structures, with adherence to the principles of modernity.

It seems, we need to debate with Traverso's (2019), thesis about The Jewish Question, as well as with Abram Leon's (2022) because they track a longstanding debate in the Marxist tradition on the so-called Jewish Question, beginning with Karl Marx and continuing all the way to Moishe Postone (1996). In 1890, Frederick Engels, Karl Marx's longtime and closest collaborator, wrote an illuminating letter on antisemitism, which read in part, Anti-Semitism betokens a [backward] culture, which is why it is found only in Prussia and Austria, and in Russia too. Anyone dabbling in anti-Semitism, either in England or in America, would simply be ridiculed, while in Paris the only impression created by M. Drumont's writings—wittier by far than those of the German anti-Semites—was that of a somewhat ineffectual flash in the pan. This statement was representative of the Marxist position in two regards: first, Engels clearly denounced antisemitism, but he did so not as a matter of political program, but rather of modern sensibility.

Contemporary history enjoys no less sanctity. The contemporary historian must admittedly remain particularly aware that the questions that motivate him or her may be dictated by current controversies and thus soon superseded. The contemporary historian should self-consciously seek to anticipate, say, frameworks that successive generations might pose and not just the agenda of the moment. Some anticipation of the future, at least as a spectrum of possible issues and inquiry, as well as contextualization in terms of the remote past, remains necessary for the staying power of contemporary history.

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