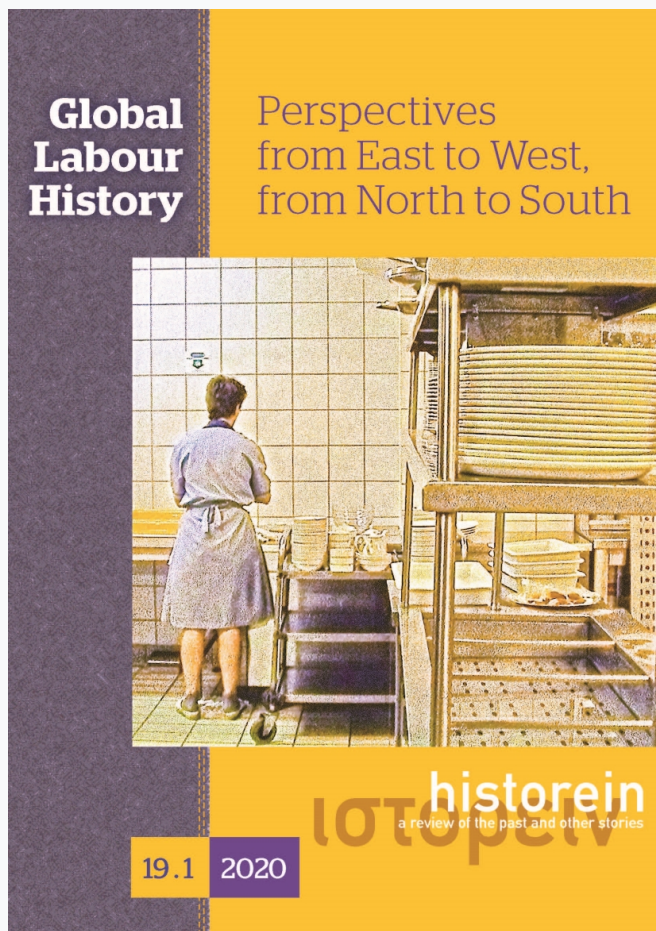


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Anna Mahera and Leda Papastefanaki, eds.,
Εβραϊκές κοινότητες ανάμεσα σε Ανατολή και Δύση, 15ος-20ός αιώνας: Οικονομία, κοινωνία, πολιτική, πολιτισμός [Jewish communities between East and West, 15th–20th centuries: economy, society, politics, culture]

Stefanos Dimitriou

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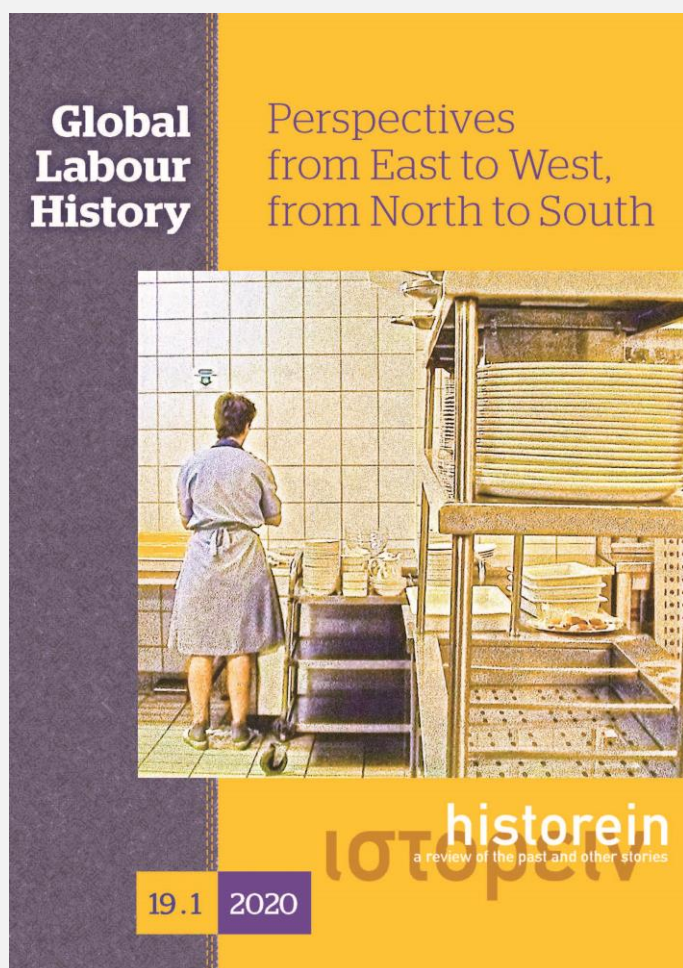
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[Jewish communities between East and West, 15th–20th centuries: economy, society, politics, culture]

Ioannina: Isnafi, 2016. 384 pp.

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I

This collective volume consists of 24 articles, divided into six sections, presented at a national conference bearing the same title, organised in 2015 by the Department of History and Archaeology of the University of Ioannina, in collaboration with the Jewish Community of Ioannina. The volume opens with a preface by the president of the community, Moses Elisaf, a medical school professor, which is followed by a detailed introduction by the editors of the volume, Anna Mahera and Leda Papastefanaki. It is an elegant publication, containing articles in Greek and English, a collective work that includes the fields of modern research on the history of Jewry and reveals relevant research findings as well. Regarding the thematic structure, the first section includes studies related to the cultural composition of Jewish communities. Rika Benveniste's article considers the concept of "exile" in the consciousness of the Sephardic Jewish community. Daphne Lappa examines the relations of Jewish communities with the Venetian authorities and Christian communities in the eastern Mediterranean in the eighteenth century. Annette B. Fromm focuses on the particular character of the Romaniote Jewish communities, while Fragiski Ampatzopoulou studies the blood libel in modern Greek literature. Finally, Mahera's article is concerned with the antisemitism as manifested in the Dreyfus affair, with regard, also, to French Jewishness. In the second section, Eleni Kourmantzi and Dimitris Kargiotis examine the inculcations of Jewish identity in literature, exemplifying them via the Ioanniote poet and scholar Joseph Eliyia. In the third section, Papastefanaki focuses on how a social history of the Ioanniote community took shape in the twentieth century, Evangelhos Chekimoglou examines how religious identities influenced the urban transformations of Ottoman

Thessaloniki, and Sakis Gekas focuses on the Jewish communities of Corfu during the nineteenth century. Finally, Eyal Ginio researches the Jewish community of Kavala (1912–1918), while Philip Carabott examines the founding of the Israelite Brotherhood of Athens in the late nineteenth century.

The fourth section focuses on business networks and the emerging internal competition. Andreas Bouroutis deals with the activity of the Alliance Israélite and Hilfsverein der Deutschen Juden in Ottoman Thessaloniki, Ioanna Sapfo Pepelasis and Dimitrios Varvaritis examine the presence of Jews in the field of joint stock companies (1830–1929), whereas Anna Mandilara focuses on the relations of the elites, Greek and Hebrew, in the Ottoman Empire. The fifth section has as its central themes the wartime occupation, resistance and the Jewish genocide. George Margaritis examines “economic antisemitism”, Maria Fragkou, the policy of the Italians towards the Jews, Maria Kavala, the executions of Jewish communists in Thessaloniki (1941–1942), while Odette Varon-Vassard and Iason Chandrinos address Jewish participation in the liberation struggle and the resistance. The last section deals with the genocide. Stavros Zoumboulakis examines the relations between Christian antijudaism and antisemitism, tracing the origins of antisemitism in the New Testament, Michal Govrin studies the continuation and transmission of the memory of genocide, Hagen Fleischer and Anna Maria Droumpouki address the *Holocaust* TV series and television narration of the genocide, while Eleni Beze focuses on the dialogue of leftwing and Zionist Jews after the war.

II

It is quite common for such collective volumes to have a loose, inner coherence due to the different interpretative starting points, the different aspects of research and interpretative considerations, through which the contributors to the volume formulate their final conclusions. These conclusions are crystallised into interpretative judgements, so they are subject to control and criticism, and, for this reason, it is necessary for these judgments to be based on a corresponding justification. This is eventually, in my opinion, often inevitable and, hence, legitimate. In other words, it is difficult to maintain a common narrative thread and, at the same time, illuminate different and diverse aspects of the subject. As it is often the case, edited volumes comprising many articles on a certain subject fail to relate with one another and contribute equally to the central theme they claim to be addressing. In this case, however, things are different. The reader will be pleasantly surprised to find that all the articles are in conversation with one another. The internal structure of the whole volume, as well as the individual layout of each article, allows the reader to follow the exposed problem at a steady pace, from the first article to the last, or, if so desired, in the opposite direction. This means – and it came up during my own reading and I don't feel I'm

generalising – that, even if readers start to read in reverse order or even from the middle of the volume, by the time they have read all the articles, they will have formed a single, but not linear, narration of the history of the Jewish communities, ending in, but also bearing the broad context of, the unique event of the Jewish genocide. If this framework is clear, then the reader can see how the articles rely on one another, how they support and pace each other, so that the whole, unified, but always multilateral “text” of the entire volume does not fall apart.

III

The fact that “the text does not fall apart”, namely the whole, single text, constituted by all the individual contributions that make up the main subject of the collective volume, means that its joints stand. And they stand, because there is something supporting them. In essence, the internal coherence of the broad theme of the volume is due to the fact that there is a framework within which the articles are interconnected and bound. In my opinion, this framework is the fact of the Jewish genocide and its uniqueness. This is, of course, a personal judgement, but, in a book review, the reviewer – and inevitably someone who is being judged for his or her criticism – is first and foremost a critical reader. I refer to genocide and not holocaust, so I have to explain and justify this choice, which equates to a clear position: The term “genocide” clarifies what happened as a methodical, systematic and bureaucratically organised extermination of people. In the long, haunted tradition, as it is historically documented, of genocides, this particular genocide, the genocide of the Jews, constitutes the most extreme, terminal and hideous form of genocide. Of these three predications of Jewish genocide, the definition with high semantic and moral weight is that of the genocide of the Jews, which, apart from being extreme and most disgraceful, is terminal. But terminal regarding what? What limits does the Jewish genocide reach and test? I think it tests the limits of the concept of “human”. By itself, this wording does not say much. It refers to a concept of humanity which, without being totally unnecessary, is so obvious that it can hardly enlighten us. However, this point of view is clarified further if linked to the question “Which anthropology does Nazism require?” or, alternatively, “Which is the idea of ‘human’ that Nazism presupposes?”. Each of these similar formulations of the common question may lead us to the fact that Nazism has defined a rule, a maxim, according to which “human” is defined, so whatever – and, more precisely, whoever – deviates from this maxim, he or she is eliminated as something redundant. This is the initial premise of my argument. Now we have to see which idea of “human” the anthropology of Nazism is contrasted with.

In European constitutional culture, a dominant position – reflected in the respective constitutional texts – is held by the concept of “human dignity” or “value of man”. It is preunderstood, in this sense, that the concept of “man” has an inherent value and, therefore, that the concept of humanity does not merely coincide with the sum of all living

beings inhabiting the planet and having the biological traits arrayed in the creature called “man”. Man is more than the sum of these attributes. But this broader meaning is shaped within a particular tradition, and only within the spirit of this is the notion of the value of man recognisable. One should start from the Greek and, foremost, Roman tradition and *dignitas hominis*, but this would require extensive work. A good starting point would be the humanism of the Italian Renaissance of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as it ends in the eighteenth century and overwhelms it, and it is clearly discernible in the tradition of natural law theories, as well as in Locke’s liberal and Rousseau’s democratic republican traditions, but also in Kant’s position, according to which autonomy is the basis of human dignity. It is the tradition of European scholarship and the humanities, of *studia humanitatis*, and the maturation of the previous critical questioning. This creates a value orientation towards the idea of a free man, who thrives in the pursuit of his personal fulfilment. The shaping of our modernity is incomprehensible without these focal points of our late edification. This heritage is undertaken by the humanism of the Enlightenment with the American and French revolutions and the genesis of democratic humanism. The very concept of human rights is transcribed in human rights, and these capital primers declare not an institutional, genuine, rights-oriented order, but the constantly threatened acceptance that man has rights and inherent value because he is a human being. This is what the legacy of natural law has bequeathed to us; this heritage has been taken up by the tradition of positive law and European constitutional culture. This is the second premise of my argument.

In this tradition, with all the problems and internal antinomies, we could all meet. Besides, representative democracy is the underlying circumstance of our coexistence, despite all our differences. It is the place of our common political self-existence and self-understanding. This potential presupposes the aforementioned tradition. Could we, thus, say it is sufficient to renew our confidence in this humanism, so that we could hope that no phenomenon, like Nazism, will cast its shadow on us? Could we ground such a belief in the common places of the humanistic tradition? Such an optimistic belief – let alone such certainty – might have been possible before the Jewish genocide. After that, however, it makes no sense. It does not have this sense. But could it have another? Let’s examine it more thoroughly: The anthropology of Nazism attributes to the notion of “man” a meaning which presupposes, for its understanding, the well-known Goebbels notion that the French Revolution dies with the Third Reich. All the aforementioned tradition, which was crystallised during the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, namely, dies. The notion of “man” is given a new meaning by Nazism through the rendering of a series of biological properties that the notion of “man” supposedly bears, otherwise the nonbearer is not a human being. So, a list of human beings can be drawn up to determine on which of these beings these properties are predicated, such as the predicates in a subject, within a

sentence, so that the corresponding sorting can be done. A sorting is self-evidently an option. Therefore, some will be considered people, because they have been chosen as such due to inherent properties, whereas others will not. They will be the chosen people. But what about the others? They are considered to be a mistake of nature and, through an industry of terror and extermination, they disappear. At this point, there is something interesting: from the rational organisation of the state, the Nazis maintained an effective bureaucracy. The extinction of the Jews became part of the phrase “I was just doing my job”. This is what Eichmann said, when he claimed he was arranging the train itineraries that were taking the Jews to the concentration camps. Nazism reorganised the state bureaucracy based on a kind of rationalism with no value content, in order to achieve the effectively planned extermination of people who did not meet the Nazis’ concept of man. This is why Primo Levi’s aporetic thought “If this is a man” will always be a benchmark for this reflection. What reflection? The very question leads us to the abovementioned tradition. Our thinking of the Jewish genocide as a unique event, not comparable to any other, but at the same time universal, which belongs to all mankind, means that it tests our moral freedom. The latter, however, requires an awareness of moral responsibility. This is the third premise of my argument. Now, we come to the point that this tradition may have some meaning after the Jewish genocide. Moral responsibility, without which moral freedom does not exist, obliges us to be aware that the extermination of the Jews exceeds the limits of the term “Holocaust”. The very concept of genocide is now defined by reference to this particular genocide. This is the defining concept. The Jewish genocide tests the limits of human self-worth. It therefore tests, as well, the boundaries of a culture in which man can have self-worth. It also tests the limits of reflective awareness that, yes, this can also be man. This is why it tests our moral freedom. Because it tests our moral responsibility not to forget that man can also be this, the exact opposite to what Levi saw. Man has his roots in memory and is remoulded through it. And it is open and uncertain what man can become, as it is open whether our dormant conscience will become critical autonomy and self-determination towards freedom. But this will, also, end up in moral responsibility. The Jewish genocide is simultaneously unique and universal, as every individual’s moral responsibility is unique and universal, in reference to the moral freedom of one’s own and humanity’s as well. For man can, also, be this very last thing. And again, we get moral responsibility as an act of self-determination. It is a circle.