

Introduction



In the spring of 1909, a young Jewish lawyer by the name of Shlomo Yellin addressed a gathering of Ottoman notables in Beirut. Born and raised in the Old City of Jerusalem, Yellin was the quintessential polyglot Levantine: he spoke Yiddish with his Polish father, Arabic with his Iraqi mother, Hebrew with his Zionist older brother, and Judeo-Spanish with his Sephardi Jewish neighbors; he wrote love letters in English to the schoolgirl niece he later married, and he jotted notes to himself in French. At the same time, the fez- and suit-wearing “Sulciman Effendi” was the perfect Ottoman gentleman: at the prestigious Galatasaray Imperial Lycée in Istanbul, he studied Ottoman Turkish, Arabic, and Persian language, literature, translation, and calligraphy; Ottoman and Islamic history; hygiene, math, science, philosophy, geography, and French literature. After a brief stint at a German university, Yellin graduated from the Ottoman Imperial Law Academy with certification in Islamic law, Ottoman civil and criminal law, and international commercial and maritime law.¹

On that spring day, Yellin’s Ottoman Turkish-speaking audience likely consisted of members of the local branch of the Committee for Union and Progress (CUP; the so-called Young Turks), the underground political party which had carried out the July 1908 Ottoman revolution. Yellin was a member of the Beirut CUP branch, and he later dedicated two pamphlets “in profound admiration” to the movement. Undoubtedly, some members of the audience also belonged to one of several local Freemason lodges to which Yellin had earlier submitted an application for membership while extolling Masonic support for the values of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Whatever their institutional affiliation, what is certain is that Yellin’s audience of white-collar *effendis*, or gentlemen, like himself—lawyers, doctors, businessmen, journalists, school teachers, clerks—were fellow Ottomans who were as committed to and concerned about the future of the “Ottoman nation” as he was.²

“The noble Ottoman nation,” Yellin told his audience, “is made up of different groups who live together, who for the sake of the homeland [*vatan*] have shaped themselves into one mass.” He continued:

In the Ottoman Empire the different peoples are equal to one another and it is not lawful to divide according to race; the Turkish, Arab, Armenian, and Jewish elements have mixed one with the other, and all of them are connected together, molded into one shape for the holy *vatan*. Each part of the nation took upon itself the name of “Ottoman” as a source of pride and an honorable mark. The responsibility and [illegible] of our holy *vatan* must be our sole aim, and it is necessary to be ready every second and every minute to sacrifice our lives for it. . . . Now we keep [the homeland] deep in our hearts as a basic foundation of our national education. The life of the homeland is bound up with that of the nation.”³

At the center of Yellin’s narrative was the first-person plural—“we Ottomans”—the Ottoman nation united in spirit and in purpose. Yellin’s Ottoman nationalism was not distant or official, but rather emphasized an intimate emotional link between individual, collective, and state, reflected in phrases such as “our beloved nation” and “lover of the homeland.” His Ottoman nationalism also tapped deeply into religion as inspiration, legitimization, and sacralized form, in many ways becoming a civic religion: he repeatedly invoked the “sacred homeland,” and his challenge to his audience to sacrifice themselves for the homeland used terms of martyrdom that were stripped of their traditional Islamic context and reinvested within an Ottoman national framework.⁴

At the same time, Yellin’s Ottoman nationalism was tightly linked to the new constitutional regime and nascent notions of Ottoman imperial citizenship. The CUP had succeeded in carrying out a “new conquest” of Istanbul, ushering in a “new era” free of absolutism, where the “holy constitution” linked the individual to the reforming, constitutional state.⁵ Also, Yellin viewed Ottoman citizenship as a contract between individual citizens and social groups. In other words, for Yellin and his audience, despite their differences in religion, in ethnicity, and in mother tongue, there was no doubt that they were all believing and practicing Ottomans, connected to their fellow countrymen in the far corners of the empire by territory, law, history, and by the mutual expectations and responsibilities of imperial citizenship.

Situated in the aftermath of the 1908 Ottoman revolution, which briefly transformed the empire from an absolutist state into a type of liberal parliamentary democracy, Shlomo Yellin and his Beirut audience were direct products of and witnesses to the challenges and accomplishments of their beloved empire. The Ottoman state had at various points throughout the previous century implemented numerous important changes and reforms, known as the Tanzimat—revamping the state

bureaucracy and legal system; embarking on an ambitious program of building, education, and public works; and promoting loyalty and identification among its diverse population. The fact that Yellin and his companions were educated in modern state institutions resulted in their being literate in numerous languages, including the official language of the state, Ottoman Turkish; fostered a familiarity with fellow subjects of different faiths, ethnicities, and regions; and led to their loyalty to and identification with the state.

At the same time, precisely because of their education, literacy, and travels, they were no doubt aware of the diminished role of the Ottoman Empire in global politics, of its uneven absorption into the world economy, and of the numerous political cross-winds which were blowing in other parts of the world. Thus, even while basking in the glow of revolutionary promise, modern citizens like Yellin and his audience were optimistic but worried about the future of the empire—how it would reform internally, how it would catch up with Europe, and what role the empire might play in a world wracked by revolution, colonialism, and the challenges of a modern age.⁶

This book examines the meaning of liberty, citizenship, and public life in the last Islamic empire. While building on earlier studies of the revolution and the late Ottoman reform tradition, this book is an innovative study of the struggles over the content and contours of imperial citizenship and nationhood on the eve of the end of empire. At the core of the Ottoman revolution is what I call “civic Ottomanism,” a grassroots imperial citizenship project that promoted a unified sociopolitical identity of an Ottoman people struggling over the new rights and obligations of revolutionary political membership. By tracing how Muslims, Christians, and Jews became imperial citizens together, I put forward the view of the Ottoman nation, not simply as an “imagined” or discursive imperial community, but as a shared field of social and political interaction and contestation.⁷

This study shifts between the imperial capital in Istanbul, which often set the pace of events and attitudes, and the region of Palestine, hundreds of miles to the south and in some ways a world away, all the while paying attention to developments in other regions and provinces of the empire. Too much of Ottoman history has been written from the vantage point of one corner of the empire alone, often determined along post-World War I nationalist lines. Instead, this study shows how permeable imperial space often was: in addition to soldiers and commodities, people and ideas flowed freely between countryside and city, between province and capital, and between provinces themselves.

With the explosion of the free press in all the languages of the empire,

the character and scope of political participation broadened dramatically beyond just the state bureaucracy or provincial notable families, and the new white-collar middle-class of teachers, clerks, and journalists entered into the public arena. Ottoman subjects (*teba'*) claimed their new revolutionary rights and entered into the Ottoman *polis* as imperial citizens (*muwāṭinūn*, Ara.; *vatandaşlar*, Ott. Turk.), marking their substantive transformation from passive beneficiaries or victims of imperial policies to active partners shaping the course of imperial reform.⁸ Ottomans throughout the empire received and interpreted the revolutionary language, rhetoric, and symbols disseminated by the dominant political forces, but they *also* produced their own set of meanings and countermeanings, both on the streets and in the press. In developing a view of Ottoman citizenship as a mass social movement that takes into account the desires, strategies, and agency of the empire's new citizens, I explore the ways in which Ottomans took seriously the promise of political change and contributed actively to shaping its meaning.⁹

Ordinary Ottomans, from Salonica to Jerusalem to Baghdad, exercised new political rights and responsibilities, tackled the challenges of ethnic and religious diversity within the body politic, and debated the future of the empire and their role within it. Among the questions that preoccupied them were: Who was an "Ottoman" and what bound the "Ottoman nation" together? What would political liberty, reform, and enfranchisement look like? What did being a "citizen" entail, and how would rights and duties be distributed equally? What role would religion and ethnicity have in the body politic and in the practice of politics in this multiethnic, multireligious, multilingual Islamic empire?

I analyze these public articulations of and engagement with the revolutionary slogans of "liberty, equality, fraternity, and justice" (Chapters 1 and 2). Memoir and newspaper accounts relate that on the streets and in the press, Ottoman Palestinians translated these tropes from the French and Iranian revolutions to their own imperial and local settings, and common citizens employed the spectrum of these ideas for individual and collective purposes. Intellectuals such as the parliamentary representatives from Jerusalem and Beirut, who both published chronicles of the revolutionary thinking, tell us that the Ottoman citizenship project drew on both Western liberal and Islamic notions of liberty, justice, consultation, public good, and accountability. These themes were further developed in the press and other popular media. For example, under the banner of freedom-liberty (*hurriyya*, Ara.; *hürriyet*, Ott. Turk.), the revolution served as an inspiration and legitimizing force for the rebellion of peasants against their landlords as well as for the mobilization of Greek-Orthodox Christian, Armenian, and Sephardi Jewish communities in

Jerusalem against their ecclesiastical leaderships in favor of increased representation and “modern” leadership.

The revolutionary slogans of “equality and brotherhood” were premised on an ideology of belonging to a unified Ottoman people-nation. In Palestine as elsewhere throughout the empire, Muslims, Christians, and Jews adopted the viewpoint that the Ottoman nation was comprised of all the ethnic, religious, and linguistic elements of the empire bound together in civic, territorial, and contractual terms. They proclaimed and performed their Ottoman-ness in the streets in public celebrations and on the pages of newspapers in all the languages of the empire: as one proud Ottoman declared in the Jerusalem press, the empire’s diverse religious and ethnic groups had entered into the “melting pot of the constitution” and emerged as “pure bullion, the Ottoman nation.” At the same time, this civic Ottoman nation was in dialogue with more primordial imaginings based on Romantic notions of blood and soil as well as on religious and ethnic notions of peoplehood.

By illustrating the deep resonance and widespread nature of a professed Ottoman imperial nation, this book challenges entrenched historical narratives about the role of ethnic nationalisms in the breakup of the Ottoman Empire.¹⁰ More broadly, *Ottoman Brothers* suggests an original process of forming universal collective identities in empires. To date, scholars have been uneasy theorizing imperial citizenship and nationhood, instead focusing on presumably inevitable *anti*-imperial nationalisms. According to a view dominant among European diplomats and travel writers in the nineteenth century—a view that was stated in history books until quite recently—multiethnic, multireligious empires like the Ottomans were “prisons of nations” eventually undone by the natural nationalisms of their subject peoples; they were not legitimate nations in and of themselves.¹¹ Furthermore, as the nation-state emerged as the primary model for European statecraft, “empires” and “nations” were not only depicted as mirror opposites, but in fact their essential opposition was seen as being constitutive.¹²

In other words, by the turn of the twentieth century, empires were considered holdovers of a previous age, ill equipped to meet the modern demands of a changed geopolitical environment—a view that rendered imperial change invisible and loyalty to empire unintelligible. And yet, as a recent volume dedicated to a comparative study of the “end of empire” has argued, the objective distinctions between empire and nation are murky, at best; indeed, “empires” often acted like “nations,” and vice versa.¹³ Indeed, this process of imagining, articulating, and acting as an imperial collective took a great deal of conceptual, ideological, and even linguistic work, and along the way the Ottoman “imperial-nation” took

on forms and discourses that in many ways echoed “traditional” (nation-state) nationalism.¹⁴

After establishing the centrality of notions of imperial nationhood for the late Ottoman experience, I then trace the myriad ways in which Ottoman Palestinian citizens of all faiths exercised their newly claimed and evolving citizenship rights (Chapters 3 and 4). Ottoman citizens studied and cited the constitution and other revolutionary “sacred texts” that endowed them with political power, and they utilized a variety of tools to exercise and preserve that power. One of those was participation in a months-long, empire-wide boycott against the Austro-Hungarian Empire in response to its October 1908 annexation of the former Ottoman province of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The boycott promoted Ottoman patriotism and the perceived unity of the Ottoman nation, and cemented the popularity of the CUP’s local branches as vectors of mass political mobilization. Also, in preparation for the Ottoman parliamentary elections held in the fall of 1908, Ottoman citizens continued their engagement with understanding political representation and rights at the same time that the structural balance between individual and ethno-religious group (*millet*) rights was challenged. Beyond the imperial level, Jerusalemites sought to act out their new claims to imperial citizenship on the urban stage as well, linking together broader discourses about imperial reform and modernization with local visions of progress and cooperation. Locally run institutions like the chamber of commerce and Freemason lodges became important sites for enacting the claims of civic Ottomanism.

And yet, making imperial citizens out of such a heterogeneous population spread out over three continents was not an uncontested process; among the significant challenges of the Ottoman imperial citizenship project were the divergent, indeed sometimes opposed, meanings that it had for the empire’s population. Central among those tensions was the one between the universalizing discourse and impulse of civic Ottomanism—the premise that all citizens, irrespective of religion or ethnicity, were partners in the imperial project—and the very real constraints and challenges to this universalism. The last part of this book (Chapters 5–7) examines the various competing “citizenship discourses” that registered uneven application of imperial rights and obligations as well as public allegations of relative privileges and shirked duties. The multilingual press, for example, provided a platform for centripetal *and* centrifugal visions of imperial citizenship, exemplified by the press debate over the mandatory conscription of non-Muslims and the genre of the “open letter.”

Because identity and political practice were deeply intertwined, by shifting our analysis to imperial citizenship we can see imperial multi-

ethnicity in a new light—not solely as a significant component of imperial collapse or a predictor of rising nationalisms, but rather as a constitutive force in the struggle over imperial political membership, collective belonging, and identity. As the Ottoman imperial citizenship project incorporated elements of liberal, communitarian, republican, and ethnic models of citizenship, each “citizenship discourse” had distinct visions of the imperial collective, its relationship to other collectivities (religion, ethnic group, local province), and the nature of citizenship rights and duties.¹⁵ The rise of particularistic ethnic, religious, and regional identities and interests—like Zionism, Arabism, and a Palestinian localism—reflected struggles over the contours of imperial citizenship and the boundaries around the “Ottoman nation.” In other words, rather than plotting the empire’s demise, the prewar Ottoman public by and large was preoccupied with envisioning, claiming, contesting, and implementing what it meant to be an imperial citizen.

In short, by analyzing the diverse Ottoman “citizenship discourses,” practices, and identities in play in the years before World War I, this book shows how ethnic and religious minorities both tapped into *and* were excluded from the Ottoman imperial citizenship project. In contrast to the dominant image of increasingly (indeed, inherently) independent and clashing trajectories of Ottoman center and Arab periphery, my project illustrates Arab and Jewish provincials’ active participation in and engagement with the imperial state, not their sidestepping or delegitimization of it. Lastly, my relational approach to the social history of Palestine’s various religious communities, which illustrates the high degree of interconnectedness and embeddedness of Arabs and Jews at the turn of the century, argues that the Arab-Jewish conflict in Palestine was not immanent, but rather erupted in dialectical tension with the promises and shortcomings of “civic Ottomanism.”

RELIGION, ETHNICITY, AND MIXING IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE AND PALESTINE

No longer the glorious, expanding state that inspired fear among its rivals and admiration among their intellectuals, by the early twentieth century the Ottoman Empire, long derided in European capitals as “the Sick Man of Europe,” had suffered numerous territorial losses, economic contraction, and internal unrest and fragmentation. For a Europe that idealized and normalized the homogeneous nation-state (at the same time, not coincidentally, that it conquered overseas territories and peoples), the Ottoman Empire, home to dozens of religious sects, languages,

and ethnic groups, was an anachronism. As G. F. Abbott, a British war correspondent dispatched to Istanbul in early 1909, dryly noted: "The Ottoman nation has been compared, for variety of ingredients, to an omelet. Yet, unless the political epicures are sadly at fault, it lacks the first essential of that dish, for, though stirred and beaten for centuries, the ingredients still refuse to mix."¹⁶ Another foreign correspondent likened Ottoman subjecthood to conscription: "the Greeks, Armenians and Albanians are Turkish subjects because they have to be."¹⁷

At its base, this sentiment reflected a deterministic understanding of ethnicity where ethnic groups were not only assumed to be fixed and unchanging but were also attributed with political salience. In other words, "Turks," "Arabs," "Bulgars," and "Serbs" were seen as closed demographic groups with inherently competing political interests.¹⁸ As a result, throughout the nineteenth century, the European Great Powers—Austria-Hungary, Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and Russia—directly interfered in Ottoman domestic politics, promoting Christian separatism in the southeastern European provinces of the empire (today's Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, the Balkans) where the aim was no less than to "drive the Turk back to Asia."¹⁹ This went hand in hand with outright European occupation of parts of the empire in North Africa, the Caucasus, and central Europe.

For the Ottoman state, however, population diversity was a product of, and a powerful testament to, successful empire building. The eponymous founder of the dynasty, Osman, had consolidated his power in Asia Minor in the late thirteenth century through alliance and intermarriage with local Turkic tribes and Christian principalities. As the empire spread throughout Asia, Europe, and Africa, later sultans continued to integrate their diverse subjects into the state. Among the early Ottoman troops there are examples of Christian *ghazis* (so-called holy warriors) fighting in the sultan's armies, and the Christian youth (*devşirme*) taxed into imperial service, though converted to Islam, rose to important political and military positions in the service of the state. After the conquest of Constantinople, the capital of Byzantium, Sultan "Fatih" Mehmet ("the Conqueror") retained the patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church and strategically moved Jews into the city to replace the fleeing Byzantines. Decades later, in 1492, when the Spanish monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella expelled Jews and Muslims from the Iberian Peninsula, Sultan Beyazıt II famously welcomed the exiles to Ottoman shores.

The point of this recounting is not to argue that the Ottoman Empire was a multicultural paradise, for it surely was not. As an Islamic empire it maintained an "institutionalized difference" between Muslim and non-Muslim subjects which was accentuated—or indeed erupted—in times of

crisis.²⁰ Non-Muslim populations were organized, counted, taxed, legislated, and otherwise “marked” according to their confessional or ethno-confessional communities. At the same time, however, non-Muslim communities were allowed a tremendous degree of self-governance and autonomy in the realms of communal institutions and religious law, and comparatively speaking, the status of non-Muslims in the Ottoman Empire was far better than that of non-Christians in Europe.²¹ There were numerous non-Muslims of high political status in the state, such as the Greek Phanariots or the Armenian *amira* class. Furthermore, economic conditions and contact with European co-religionists increasingly favored the *embourgeoisement* and Westernization of Christian and Jewish communities, particularly in the port cities of the empire, so much so that, on the whole, non-Muslims’ socioeconomic position was far more stable and enviable than that of Muslim peasants and workers in the empire.²²

As a result, it is misleading historically to look at religion as the only, and perhaps even the central, dividing factor in Ottoman history; class and status were clearly no less relevant. Instead, the Ottoman state throughout much of its existence looked upon ethnic and religious diversity among its subject population and state officials in an altogether pragmatic fashion; it did not care about their “identity” *per se*. As one scholar has written, for most of its history “the Ottoman state was neither seeking to meld together the separate communities nor consciously planting the seeds of further divisions among the subject peoples of the empire.”²³

This political pragmatism, to a certain extent, was born of demographic realities. For the first centuries of its existence, the Ottoman Empire had a majority non-Muslim population, and the dynasty was careful to forge favorable alliances with adjoining Christian principalities. By the sixteenth century, the split between the Muslim population and the non-Muslim population in the empire had flipped to approximately 60-40.²⁴ On the eve of the end of empire in the early twentieth century, after substantial territorial losses in southeastern Europe bled the empire of many of its Christian subjects, the Ottoman population of almost 21 million was still approximately 25 percent non-Muslim (consisting of about 5.3 million Christians and Jews).²⁵ In addition to this religious mix, the Ottoman population was even further divided ethnically and linguistically, with Albanians, Arabs, Armenians, Bulgars, Circassians, Greeks, Jews, Kurds, Serbs, Turks, and other groups in residence. Ethnic stereotypes and jokes existed, but for the most part ethnic mixing was just another factor of imperial life until the nineteenth century.²⁶

As a result of this demographic reality, in many parts of the Ottoman Empire, in particular in the Balkans, western and eastern Anatolia, Mount Lebanon, and the many mixed cities and towns of the empire,