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BLOOD LIBEL IN OTTOMAN LANDS: VICTIMS, PERPETRATORS AND THE ATTITUDE OF THE RULERS

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Abstract[1]

From the twelfth to the twentieth centuries, Jews were frequently subjected to blood libel—a baseless and deeply ingrained myth accusing them of abducting and murdering Christians for use in religious rituals. While the most notorious instances of these accusations occurred in Italy, Germany, and England, similar incidents were reported across the Mediterranean, including in the Ottoman Empire. Blood libel emerged in Ottoman territories in the fifteenth century and persisted sporadically. Accusations often led to violent attacks on Jewish communities, including significant incidents in Amasya (1530), Jerusalem (1546), Phokaia (1560), Ragusa (1622), Istanbul (1633), Zante (1712), Aleppo (1830), and during the infamous cases in Damascus and Rhodes (1840), as well as Izmir (1872 and 1901). While some Catholic elites in the Ottoman Empire supported these libels, most Ottoman officials actively condemned them. Three Ottoman sultans—Suleiman the Magnificent (1545), Abdulmecid (1840), and Abdulaziz (1866)—issued edicts explicitly denouncing the accusations and taking measures to protect Jewish communities. This study explores the historical development of blood libel within the Ottoman context, examining its impact on Jewish communities and the state's response as a matter of domestic law. Drawing on archival records and existing scholarship, it highlights the Empire's approach to maintaining pluralistic coexistence while mitigating intercommunal tensions. Furthermore, by evaluating these accusations within the framework of Gramsci's Theory of Hegemony, the study explores how blood libel functioned as a hegemonic tool employed by Christian minorities to marginalize Jews, and how the Ottoman state's counter-hegemonic policies sought to uphold justice and social harmony. This analysis underscores the complexities of managing diversity in a multiethnic empire and offers insights into the enduring relevance of combating divisive narratives in pluralistic societies.

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OSMANLI TOPRAKLARINDA KAN İFTİRASI: MAĞDURLAR, FAİLLER VE YÖNETENLERİN TUTUMU

Öz

On ikinci yüzyıldan yirminci yüzyıla kadar Yahudiler sık sık kan iftirasına maruz kalmıştır; bu iftira, onları dini ayinlerde kullanmak üzere Hıristiyanları kaçırmak ve öldürmekle suçlayan asılsız ve kökleşmiş bir efsanedir. Bu suçlamaların en kötü şöhretli örnekleri İtalya, Almanya ve İngiltere'de yaşanmış olsa da benzer olaylar Osmanlı İmparatorluğu da dahil olmak üzere Akdeniz'in dört bir yanında rapor edilmiştir. Kan iftirası Osmanlı topraklarında on beşinci yüzyılda ortaya çıkmış ve zaman zaman devam etmiştir. Suçlamalar, Amasya (1530), Kudüs (1546), Phokaia (1560), Ragusa (1622), İstanbul (1633), Zante (1712), Halep (1830) ve Şam ve Rodos (1840) ile İzmir'deki (1872 ve 1901) kötü şöhretli vakalar da dahil olmak üzere, Yahudi cemaatlerine yönelik şiddetli saldırılara yol açmıştır. Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'ndaki bazı Katolik elitler bu iftiraları desteklerken, çoğu Osmanlı yetkilisi bunları aktif bir şekilde kınamıştır. Üç Osmanlı padişahı -Kanuni Sultan Süleyman (1545), Abdülmecid (1840) ve Abdülaziz (1866)- suçlamaları açıkça kınayan ve Yahudi cemaatlerini korumak için önlemler alan fermanlar yayınladı. Bu çalışma, Osmanlı bağlamında kan iftirasının tarihsel gelişimini araştırmakta, Yahudi cemaatleri üzerindeki etkisini ve devletin bir iç hukuk meselesi olarak verdiği tepkiyi incelemektedir. Arşiv kayıtlarına ve mevcut araştırmalara dayanarak, İmparatorluğun toplumlar arası gerilimleri azaltırken çoğulcu bir arada yaşamayı sürdürme yaklaşımını vurgulamaktadır. Ayrıca, bu suçlamaları Gramsci'nin Hegemonya Teorisi çerçevesinde değerlendiren çalışma, kan iftirasının Hıristiyan azınlıklar tarafından Yahudileri marjinalleştirmek için kullanılan hegemonik bir araç olarak nasıl işlev gördüğünü ve Osmanlı devletinin karşı hegemonik politikalarının adaleti ve sosyal uyumu nasıl korumaya çalıştığını araştırmaktadır. Bu analiz, çok etnikli bir imparatorlukta çeşitliliği yönetmenin karmaşıklığının altını çizmekte ve çoğulcu toplumlarda bölücü anlatılarla mücadelenin kalıcı önemine dair içgörüler sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu, Hamursuz Bayramı, Kan İftirası, Antisemitizm, Yahudiler.*

INTRODUCTION

The accusation of blood libel, a baseless claim that Jews abducted and murdered Christians for ritualistic purposes, represents one of the most enduring and pernicious myths in history. Originating in medieval Europe, this false narrative spread across Christian territories and later emerged sporadically in the Ottoman Empire, affecting Jewish communities in regions as diverse as Amasya, Jerusalem, Istanbul, and Aleppo. Despite the Ottomans' reputation for fostering a pluralistic society, these accusations periodically surfaced, often resulting in violence, social marginalization, and strained intercommunal relations. This article investigates the

dynamics of blood libel in the Ottoman Empire, examining its historical development, societal impact, and the state's responses.

The study situates the phenomenon of blood libel within the broader context of Jewish diaspora history and their interactions with Islamic and Christian societies. Jewish communities, dispersed across diverse geographies since antiquity, adapted to their host societies while retaining distinct cultural and religious identities. These adaptations often made them targets of exclusionary narratives, particularly in Christian-dominated regions, where myths like blood libel reinforced their marginalization. In contrast, the Ottoman Empire provided a comparatively tolerant environment, yet it too grappled with the disruptive effects of such accusations, particularly as they intersected with the socio-political aspirations of its Armenian and Greek subjects.

Drawing on both Ottoman archival records and existing literature, this article employs a multi-disciplinary approach to address several key questions: How did the myth of blood libel take root in Ottoman lands, and what social or political forces perpetuated it? What role did non-Muslim subjects, particularly Armenians and Greeks, play in perpetuating these accusations against Jewish communities? How did the Ottoman state respond, and what do these responses reveal about its broader approach to governance, justice, and intercommunal harmony? By exploring these questions, the study seeks to illuminate not only the historical trajectory of blood libel in the Ottoman context but also the mechanisms by which the Empire attempted to counteract such divisive narratives.

A central framework of this analysis is Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, which provides a lens to examine how blood libel functioned as a hegemonic tool to marginalize Jewish communities. The study explores how Christian minorities in the Ottoman Empire used this narrative to consolidate their own positions, often at the expense of social cohesion. Conversely, the Ottoman rulers, from Suleiman the Magnificent to Abdulaziz, sought to implement counter-hegemonic policies to uphold justice and mitigate tensions. This dynamic is particularly evident in the firm stance of Ottoman sultans who issued edicts explicitly condemning blood libel accusations, thereby reaffirming the state's commitment to pluralistic coexistence.

The article is structured to provide a comprehensive exploration of these themes. It begins with a brief historical overview of the Jewish diaspora and their general situation in Islamic and Christian geographies. This is followed by an examination of the conceptual framework surrounding the blood libel legend and its historical roots. The third section delves into the social position and historical relations of Jews within the Ottoman Empire, highlighting their integration and the challenges they faced. A dedicated section utilizes Ottoman archival documents to analyze how the state responded to blood libel accusations leveled by its Armenian and Greek subjects, emphasizing the Empire's justice-oriented approach. Finally, the study evaluates these accusations through the lens of Gramsci's theory of hegemony,

offering insights into the broader implications of the Ottoman state's policies.

Through this analysis, the article underscores the complexities of managing diversity within a multiethnic empire and highlights the enduring importance of resisting divisive narratives. By examining the Ottoman Empire's responses to blood libel, this study not only sheds light on a neglected aspect of Jewish history but also contributes to contemporary discussions on governance, justice, and pluralism in multiethnic societies.

THE HISTORICAL TRAJECTORY OF JEWISH COMMUNITIES IN ISLAMIC AND CHRISTIAN GEOGRAPHIES

The history of the Jewish people is, in essence, a chronicle of diaspora. Since their exile to Babylon in 586 BCE, Jewish communities have dispersed across much of the known world, maintaining a consistent presence despite the challenges of displacement. This diasporic existence has fostered significant cultural and social adaptability, resulting in the emergence of diverse expressions of Judaism. Jews have been profoundly influenced by the culture and lifestyle of the regions where they have lived and continue to dwell as a result of their diaspora life. This has resulted in the establishment of somewhat distinct Judaism typologies. In other words, a unified Jewish culture has not emerged.

Distinct from many other national identities, Judaism is rooted in both religious and ethnic dimensions. Jewish self-perception as God's chosen people has historically fostered a sense of exclusivity, characterized by minimal engagement in proselytism or evangelical activities. Judaism, as a religious tradition, has endured primarily through hereditary continuity, with Jewish identity seldom extending beyond birthright. This inward focus has meant that Jewish communities rarely posed a direct threat to dominant religious groups in their host societies, yet this very distinctiveness often fueled prejudice and hostility.

The arrival of Jews in Anatolia dates back to antiquity, though precise timelines remain uncertain. Some sources attribute their presence to the conquests of Alexander the Great in the fourth century BCE (Gruen, 2016, pp. 19-23), while others suggest earlier migrations during the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BCE (Bora, 2017). Regardless of their origins, it is well-documented that Jewish communities in Anatolia faced significant persecution during the Byzantine era. In Constantinople, Jews were marginalized, confined to neighborhoods like Pera, and excluded from civic and political life. Jews were in a humiliated position and were subjected to ethnic hatred both in the eyes of the state and the people (Benjamin of Tudela and Petachia of Regensburg, 2009, pp. 35-36). The Byzantine state, which aligned Christianity with its institutional framework, deliberately prohibited Jewish religious practices and maintained this policy for nearly a thousand years. The Jews who lived in Byzantine territory were viewed as a troublesome community that needed to be Christianized. To that end, Emperor Justinian (527-565) forbade Jews

from reading the Old Testament in Hebrew and compelled them to use Latin or Greek versions. He also prohibited the commemoration of Passover, which coincided with the Christian feast of Easter, as well as the production of matzah[2]. Byzantium experienced Persian and Muslim Arab invasions from the south and east, hardening its stance toward Jews even more. Emperor Heraclius (610-641) and later emperors saw Jews as a potential danger who might collaborate with enemies. Further legal limitations were put on Jews in 890. Jews, for example, were prohibited from owning Christian slaves, becoming civil servants or soldiers, testifying against Christians, or marrying Christians. Intermarriage between Jews and Christians was punishable as adultery (Shaw, 1990, pp. 1079-1082, 1103).

By contrast, the arrival of the Seljuks marked a turning point for Jewish communities in Anatolia. Disillusioned with Byzantine oppression, many Jews welcomed Turkish rule, which offered a more tolerant environment. However, it seems that despite their presence in Anatolia since ancient times, they had no power to influence politics. Because there are no references to Jews in the period's texts (Sevilla-Sharon, 1992, p. 29). They had their own neighborhoods within a walled enclave in Antalya. Though in small numbers, there were also Jews in Konya, Harran, Resulayn and Cizre (Kayhan, 2018, p. 215).

In medieval Europe, however, Jewish communities endured relentless persecution. Jews, who were shown in medieval cartoons as the murderers of Jesus and used as standard characters in stories like as *"blood libel*", *"host desecration*[3]*"* and *"needle-filled barrel* [4]*"*, were depicted in such a way that they could do practically anything. They were branded as *"the mother of all evils"* and *"scapegoats"*in societies where they were marginalized and isolated. This problem

[2] Matzah can be defined as unleavened phyllo bread. It is an indispensable part of Jewish cuisine and an integral element of Passover. According to the Torah, the Israelites left Egypt in such a hurry that they could not wait for their bread dough to ferment and the bread they baked became *"matzah*" (Exodus 12:39). Symbolically, yeast symbolizes corruption and arrogance because yeast puffs up the bread. The unleavened matzah, on the other hand, represents freedom and salvation and is the *"bread of the poor"*. It reminds one to remain humble and not to forget the days of slavery in Egypt.

[3] It was alleged that Jews stole consecrated bread and stabbed or burned it to re-enact the crucifixion of Jesus. This accusation began after Pope Innocent III approved the "doctrine of transubstantiation" in 1215. According to this doctrine, the Jews identified the consecrated bread with the actual body of Jesus and used the blood that flowed from it to cleanse themselves of bad odors or to rejuvenate their cheeks. This assumption was used to justify the massacres and expulsions of Jews in Europe during the Middle Ages. The first recorded case of the desecration of consecrated bread took place in 1243 in the town of Belitz, near Berlin. Following this incident, all the Jews in Belitz were burned to death in a place later known as "Judenberg" (Jacobs and Schloessinger, 1904, pp. 481-483).

[4] The barrel with needles was an accusation associated with blood libel. The Jews were said to have put their victims in a barrel with a needle, rolled the barrel to death, and used the blood from the barrel in rituals.

manifested itself in a variety of patterns. Even in regular incidents, Jewish communities were accused and viewed with mistrust. Jews were accused of poisoning wells, starting fires, and spreading diseases like plague and leprosy (Eroğlu, 2013, p. 218). Jews were subjected to cruel attacks and bullying by monarchs and lords in countries such as Germany, France, and Spain. The Pope used theological justifications and gatherings to encourage the armed political authorities of Europe to crush Jewish communities. He incited the Christian community by blaming the Jews for Jesus' death. Jews were compelled to leave city centers and live in secluded, closed society in the suburbs (Cluse, 2004; Laqueur, 2008, pp. 85-142). Even as Jews were occasionally valued for their roles in trade and finance, their survival was fraught with precarious toleration and persistent hostility (Chazan, 2006, p. 5).

Many researchers have investigated the vital role of Jews and Judaism in the formation of a feeling of Christian community. According to Jeffrey J. Cohen, following one of the earliest charges of ritual murder in medieval Europe in twelfth-century Norwich, Normans and English were able to perceive themselves as being one flesh in the face of the imagined threat posed by Jews (Cohen, 2004, p. 62; Johnson, 2016, p. 15).

Within the Islamic world, Jewish experiences were varied. They had troubles in Morocco and Persia, albeit they were not as severe as in Europe. The Ottoman Empire, on the other hand, provided a more favorable climate for Jews. This is because Jews were the sole religious minority in Morocco and Persia. In contrast, the Ottoman Empire created a much more pluralistic society characterized by religious diversity and tolerance (Lewis, 1996, p. 170). In this regard, the Ottoman lands are in a distinct position than the Islamic world and Christian Europe in relation to Jews.

BLOOD LIBEL MYTH AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The blood libel accusation, a baseless claim that Jews used the blood of Christians in religious rituals, has a deep historical lineage. Even during the pagan Roman Empire, anti-Jewish sentiments were expressed in similar terms. The earliest documented instance of blood libel appears in the writings of Apion (d. 48-45 BCE?), a Greek sophist from Alexandria known for his vehement hostility toward Jews. Apion alleged that Jews engaged in annual human sacrifices, fattening a kidnapped victim for a year before sacrificing them, consuming their entrails, and swearing oaths of hatred against Greeks. Similarly, Suidas, a tenth century Byzantine lexicographer, cited the philosopher Democritus (d. 370 BCE) as claiming that Jews captured and sacrificed a foreigner every seven years (Ehrman, 1976, pp. 83-84; Langmuir, 1991, p. 7).

The notion of blood possessing miraculous or curative properties has its roots in antiquity and even prehistoric beliefs. Both in ancient times and the Middle

Ages, bathing in human blood was sometimes recommended as a remedy for leprosy. Accounts suggest that Egyptian kings suffering from diseases like elephantiasis or leprosy engaged in blood baths as treatment (Gottheil et al., 1902, p. 264). During their captivity in Egypt, Jews from lower socioeconomic strata would have been particularly vulnerable to exposure to such wild practices. According to one narrative, leprous pharaoh, acting on the advice of their counselors, ordered the daily murder of 150 Jewish children to use their blood in supposed cures. This narrative influenced the later development of the blood libel myth, particularly during Passover. The story emerged that Jews used Christian blood in the preparation of matzah as a remembrance of their children killed under Pharaoh's orders (Çay & Akman, 2020, p. 47). These early Egyptian tales may represent the oldest roots of the blood libel accusation.

One of the most significant early accounts of ritual murder accusations comes from *Historia Ecclesiastica* by the Christian historian Socrates Scholasticus (d. 440). He recounts an incident in 415 CE in Inmestar, Syria, during the Feast of Purim. According to Socrates, a group of Jews allegedly captured a Christian boy, mockingly crucified him, and, in their wrath, whipped him to death (Stebnicka, 2014, pp. 47-49). This event is often cited as a precursor to the medieval blood libel accusations that later spread across Christian Europe. However, some scholars argue that the story failed to gain widespread attention outside Alexandria and had little resonance in Rome or other parts of the empire, as noted by Langmuir (1991, pp. 7-8). Cecil Roth (1933, pp. 520-526) identifies the Inmestar episode as the earliest precursor to the medieval blood libel myth following the earlier claims by Apion and Democritus[5]. The next recorded instance of blood libel would not emerge for another 729 years. These early accounts reflect the long history of blood libel accusations and the cultural myths surrounding them. Rooted in ancient prejudices and misconceptions about Jewish practices, such narratives laid the foundation for centuries of anti-Semitic violence and marginalization.

The unbroken history of blood libel against Jews began with the incident of William of Norwich in 1144. In his anti-semitic narrative, Thomas of Monmouth (d. c. 1172) alleged that William had been tortured and murdered by Jews who, he claimed, sacrificed a Christian child annually during Passover (Langmuir, 1991, p. 4)[6]. Despite the absence of any evidence supporting this accusation, subsequent investigations revealed that William had likely suffered a cataleptic seizure and was mistakenly buried alive by relatives seeking to deflect suspicion by blaming the Jewish community. No Jews were ever prosecuted or convicted for this alleged crime. Nonetheless, similar accusations arose in other parts of England, including Gloucester in 1168, Bury St. Edmunds in 1181, Bristol in 1183, and Winchester in

[5] Roth noted that the background of blood libel in Europe came from the celebration of the Jewish feasts of Purim and Passover, and closely related to this was the mockery of the Passion of Christ.

[6] William was declared a saint in Norwich and miracles were attributed to him.

1192. Although no legal proceedings occurred in these cases, the baseless belief that Jews engaged in ritual murders began to gain traction. During the same period, a significant incident occurred in Blois, France, where 32 Jews, including 17 women, were falsely accused of ritual murder. Despite being offered clemency on the condition of converting to Christianity, they refused and were executed by burning (Ehrman, 1976, pp. 85-86).

The claim that Jews consumed human blood emerged more prominently in the early thirteenth century. A particularly notable case occurred in December 1235, near Fulda, Germany, when five children of a miller were murdered. Jews were blamed for the murder, and they confessed under torture that they had killed the children to use their blood for medicinal purposes. As a result, 34 Jews were murdered (Gottheil et al. 1902, p. 261). The Fulda case marked a turning point, as blood libel accusations became increasingly widespread across Europe. Subsequent incidents included accusations in Valréas in 1247, Lincoln in 1255, Pforzheim in 1267, Weissenburg in 1270, Oberwesel in 1286, and Bern in 1294. These allegations, though unsupported by evidence, perpetuated the notion that Jewish ritual practices, particularly during Passover, involved the use of human blood (Jacobs, 1896, pp. 192-224; Gottheil et al., 1902, pp. 262-263). Over time, such claims contributed to the entrenchment of anti-Semitic myths, fueling persecution and violence against Jewish communities across Europe.

JEWS IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE: SOCIAL POSITION AND HISTORICAL RELATIONS

Jewish communities, present in Anatolia since antiquity, established early interactions with the Ottomans. Their presence in key Ottoman conquests, including Bursa, Iznik, Ankara, and Izmit, is well-documented in the travel records of Ibn Battuta (d. 1369) in the early fourteenth century and Johannes Schiltberger (d. 1440) later that century (Shmuelevitz, 1994a, p. 11). Local Jews made significant contributions to Bursa's conquest. After the conquest, Orhan Ghazi (1324-362) invited Jews from the surrounding area and Damascus to the region, in addition to the local Jewish population. The Ets Ahayim Synagogue was reconstructed to serve the religious needs of the Jewish population, and a Jewish neighborhood developed around it. Similarly, following the conquest of Edirne, the Ottomans appointed a chief rabbi to manage Jewish affairs and welcomed both local Jews and those migrating from Central Europe (Shaw, 1990, pp. 1093-1094; Sevilla-Sharon, 1992, p. 31; Özdemir, 2000, p. 6).

The collaboration between the Ottomans and Jewish communities extended beyond Bursa and Edirne. Jews supported the Ottomans in the conquests of Istanbul, Rhodes, and Belgrade, as well as in military campaigns in Iraq and Yemen. In return, the Ottomans granted Jews significant privileges, such as tax exemptions, economic opportunities, mining license, and the right to renovate or expand synagogues. Some

Jews were even provided with free housing and commercial establishments (Shaw, 1990, p. 1094).

As a result of their control of trade routes extending from east to west, the Ottomans established urban settlements in various locations. The Jewish population actively collaborated with the Ottoman rulers in these locations, thereby sharing in the expanding affluence. During the Ottoman conquests in the Balkans in the second half of the fourteenth century and the first half of the fifteenth century, a number of Jewish communities were incorporated into the Ottoman state. The majority of these were Greek-speaking Romaniote Jews who had previously resided in the Byzantine Empire, then Anatolia and the Balkans. In the fourteenth century, Ashkenazi Jews from Central Europe, who spoke German, also migrated to the Balkans and established their own communities, including in Istanbul. The tolerance of the Ottomans towards the Jewish population was motivated by a desire to stimulate economic and commercial activity (Shmuelevitz, 1994a, pp. 11-12).

When the Ottomans conquered Istanbul in 1453, the city was in a state of severe decline, with its population and economic prosperity at their nadir. The prolonged impact of Crusader dominance and abandonment since the thirteenth century had left the once-thriving metropolis desolate. Recognizing the necessity of revitalizing the city, the Ottomans implemented a deliberate policy of resettlement, bringing various ethnic and religious groups to repopulate and rejuvenate Istanbul. Among these groups were Jews, many of whom were forcibly relocated to the capital. Rabbi Elia Capsali (d. 1555) documented this migration in a positive light, emphasizing Istanbul's economic potential, the advantages of Jewish concentration in the capital, and Sultan Mehmed II's favorable attitude toward the Jewish community. Mehmed II, wary of the Christian population whom he deemed unreliable and likely to seek European support to reclaim the city, regarded Jews as a trustworthy alternative. Unlike Christians, Jews posed no immediate political threat, and Mehmed valued their contributions to the city's economic revitalization (Shaw, 1990, pp. 1095-1098).

The forced migrations of Jews to Istanbul continued intermittently until the seventeenth century, yet the perspective of the Jewish community toward the Ottoman administration remained remarkably consistent. For instance, following the Ottoman capture of Rhodes in 1523, the relocation of Jewish families from Thessaloniki to the island did not incite significant dissent among the Jewish population. Even during the late sixteenth century, when rumors circulated that Sultan Murad III (1574-1595) intended to annihilate the Jewish population and members of the wealthiest and most influential Jewish families in the capital were executed, the prevailing Jewish attitude toward the Empire remained largely unchanged. This enduring trust in the Ottoman administration can be attributed to two key factors. First, the Ottomans maintained a relatively open-door policy toward Jews, providing them opportunities to establish prosperous communities, not only in economic terms but also in cultural development. Second, Jews who served as

physicians, financial advisors, or other high-ranking officials within the Ottoman court believed they held sufficient influence to temper any drastic shifts in imperial policies. This perception of agency and inclusion helped to foster a sense of stability and loyalty among the Jewish population, despite occasional adversities (Shmuelevitz, 1994a, pp. 32-33). Thus, the Jewish community's enduring confidence in Ottoman governance, even during challenging periods, underscores the Empire's complex but largely accommodating approach to its diverse population. The Ottoman policy of integration and tolerance allowed the Jewish community to flourish, contributing significantly to the social and economic fabric of the Empire.

The migration of Ashkenazi Jews to the Ottoman Empire slowed in the late 15th and 16th centuries, but a major wave of Sephardic Jewish immigration followed the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492 and Portugal in 1497. This movement was welcomed by the Ottoman authorities. Sultan Bayezid II (1481-1512) said that King Fernando of Spain impoverished himself by kicking the Jews out of the country. As a matter of fact, it was forbidden to treat Jews badly in the Ottoman Empire, and they were asked to be treated well. It was also announced that those who harmed the Jews would be executed (Shaw, 1990, p. 1100; Bozkurt, 1993, p. 542; Eroğlu, 2013, pp. 70-71; Oğur, 2023, pp. 54-55).

The Ottoman Empire's Jewish population grew not just as a result of major waves of immigration. With the continuing territorial gains in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Jews living in conquered countries became Ottoman subjects as well. With the conquest of Arab countries in his Eastern campaign by Selim the Grim (1512-1520), the Arabic-speaking Jewish communities known as "Musta'ribe" in Egypt, Syria, and Palestine joined the Ottoman Empire. Jewish migration continued on a smaller scale until the late nineteenth century, with thousands of Jews fleeing Russian pogroms in 1881, 1884, 1892, and 1903 seeking refuge in Ottoman lands (Shaw 1990, p. 1118; Shmuelevitz, 1994a, p. 12; Lewis 1996, p. 141; Eroğlu 2013, p. 73).

Ottoman Jewry got through tough times in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, both economically and socially. The Jews, who were active around the palace and in the trade, were persecuted by both the sultan's household troops, who were made up of converted Christians, and Western European merchants. These groups tried to replace Jews with Greek and Armenian subjects. European diplomats also supported the local Christians and gained influence over the court. The Jews, on the other hand, were left alone and suffered as a result of the collaboration of European privileged merchants with local Christian communities. The nineteenth century witnessed ethnically and religiously motivated revolts by Ottoman Christians. Rebels attacked not just Muslims but also Jews in these rebellions. During the Serbian revolts of 1807 and the Greek revolts of 1821, Jews were expelled or slaughtered. During the Russian War and the Bulgarian Revolt in 1876, many Jews and Muslims were massacred in Vidin and Sofia, and their property was looted (Shaw, 1990, pp. 1105-1115).

Despite these challenges, Ottoman Jews embraced the *Tanzimat* reforms, which allowed them to regain lost positions in public administration. Unlike Christian subjects influenced by revolutionary ideas from Europe, Ottoman Jews largely preserved their traditional ways of life They were also uninformed of trends affecting European Jews such as Hasidism, the Enlightenment, the revival of the Hebrew language, religious reform, and Zionism. Ottoman Jews continued to have key positions in public administration until the fall of the empire. The Chief Rabbi was appointed as an official state official, was paid a salary, was described as both the secular and religious leader of the Jewish community and was expected to function as a liaison between the Jewish community and the Ottoman Porte [Bâb-Ali] (Bozkurt, 1989, pp. 189-190).

The relationship between the Ottoman Empire and its Jewish subjects shifted during World War I, when Britain's Balfour Declaration promised a homeland for Jews in Palestine, then under Ottoman control. While most Jews in Palestine remained loyal to the Empire and opposed the Zionist movement, the declaration increased Jewish migration to the region and strengthened Zionist activities. This development strained relations between the Ottoman state and Jewish communities in Palestine, signaling a significant turning point in Ottoman-Jewish history.

THE EMPIRE'S JUSTICE AGAINST ARMENIAN AND GREEK SUBJECTS' ACCUSATIONS

The origins of blood libel accusations against Jews in the Ottoman Empire can be traced not to the Muslim rulers or the broader Muslim populace but to Christian subjects, particularly Armenians and Greeks. These accusations were deeply rooted in historical Christian-Jewish animosities and were further exacerbated by resentment over the socio-economic transformations following the Ottoman conquest of Christian territories. Jewish communities, bolstered significantly by the influx of Sephardic Jews expelled from Spain, flourished within the Empire, achieving prominence in financial, artisanal, and commercial sectors of urban life. This prosperity ignited rivalries, as Christian communities perceived the rising influence of Jews as a threat to their traditional dominance in these spheres.

By the fifteenth century, this competition evolved into persistent socio-economic friction, intensifying over the following centuries as Armenians and Greeks also ascended to positions of affluence and power. Instances of blood libel accusations can be documented in Ottoman lands from the sixteenth century onward. However, an official decree addressed to the *qadi* of Aydın in 1595 suggests that these allegations date back even earlier. The decree references events during the reign of Sultan Murad I (1362–1389), when Jewish communities in the region were reportedly subjected to blood libel threats as part of extortion schemes aimed at seizing their wealth (Shmuelevitz, 1994b, p. 2030). These early instances illustrate the entrenched nature of blood libel as a tool for economic and social manipulation, reflecting

broader intercommunal tensions within the Empire.

Christians unjustly accused Ottoman Jews of blood libel during the Middle Ages. The most notable of them occurred between 1530 and 1540 in Amasya. An Armenian woman claimed that Jews had killed an Armenian boy and used his blood on Passover. This rumor spread among local Armenians, resulting in many days of violence, looting, and attacks on Jews. Several Jews who 'confessed' under torture were jailed and executed by local Ottoman authorities. But it was then revealed that the so-called victim Armenian boy was still alive. The Armenian slanderers were punished by the Ottoman governor. But he did little to alleviate Jewish suffering. Meanwhile, a firman was drafted at the initiative of the Sultan's personal physician, Moses Hamon (d. 1554). According to this Sultanate Firman, blood libel cases would be investigated solely by the Sultan and the Imperial Divan [Imperial Council] in Istanbul, instead of by local authorities and qadis (Shaw, 1990, p. 1103; Shmuelevitz, 1994a, p. 63; Shmuelevitz 1994b, pp. 2030-2031). Some famous Jewish writers of that period dedicated particular works to this occurrence, accusing Armenians of attempting to persecute Jews with the support of local authorities and calling them "Amaleqis"[7].

Blood libels caused discontent and insecurity among many groups in society, turning into a public order problem. The Ottoman authorities didn't stay quiet in the face of such instances or violent sentiments that threatened social peace. In several cases, even the Sultans themselves took measures in this regard. These procedures were implemented long before European powers intervened in the Ottoman Empire under the guise of minorities. The main goal here was to keep social order. On March 21, 1609, Sultan Ahmed I (1603-1617) sent a firman to the qadis in the Sanjak of Silistra, requesting that they dismiss the blood libels against Jews and refrain from filing a lawsuit. He further stated that qadis who disobeyed this order would be punished and their names would be reported to the Palace (Çay & Akman, 1990, p. 59).

Ottoman sultans frequently intervened as a force to protect Jews. In 1633, for example, two janissaries who had recently converted from Greek Orthodoxy to Islam accused Jews of murdering a Christian child before Easter. Murad IV (1623-1640) intervened to alleviate the situation, and attacks on Jews in the city were ended (Shaw, 1990, p. 1104). It is probable that these two janissaries attempted to influence government policies in this direction because of a grudge or tradition left over from their previous Christianity, as well as the power of being the sultan's household troops.

[7] The Amaleqis were the first tribe that fought against the Jews after their exodus from Egypt and tried to destroy them. Therefore, the Jews used this term to describe the communities that they saw as a terrible and cruel enemy. In the sixteenth century, some writers used this term to claim that Armenians participated in anti-Semitic activities and were the main enemies of the Jews (Shmuelevitz, 1990).

Blood libels, which emerged as a result of conflicts between Christians and Jews, were occasionally recorded among the Muslim population. In rare cases, Muslims have been either victims or perpetrators of blood libel. However, these examples are not as common or systematic as those of Christians. Except in a few exceptional occasions, Muslims have made no claims of ritual murder or blood libel against Jews. In one of these cases, Jews were held to blame after a body was discovered in the Foça fortress. It was also alleged that the Jews were mixing Muslim and Christian blood in their bread and doing so as a ritual. In response to these allegations, an order was sent from Istanbul to Menemen's *qadi* to protect and not offend Jews (Eroğlu, 2013, p. 220). According to an *Mühimme* record from the end of the sixteenth century, the allegation that some Jewish individuals kidnapped a Muslim child named Mirza and took two basins of blood from his legs caused widespread fear in Bursa. In the verdict sent to the Bursa's qadi, it was ordered that the proper investigation proceed against those who perpetrated the slander, and that the true perpetrators be punished. Innocent people were also asked to be released (*A.{DVNSMHM., vol. 69,* p. 297, decree no. 584).

The narrative in the chronicle *Debar Śepatayim*, written by Rabbi David Lekhno, a Crimeanchak Jew, provides a unique perspective on the attitudes of the Ottoman ruling class toward Jews. Following the Ottoman capture of the Morea from the Venetians, Silahdar Damad Ali Pasha (d. 1716), emboldened and increasingly authoritarian after his military victory, began reprimanding Ottoman Jewish and Christian subjects for not embracing Islam. Seeking guidance, he consulted the Shaykh al-Islām on the appropriate treatment of these groups. The Shaykh al-Islām advised him that Jews and Christians, as "People of the Book" who paid the *jizya* tax, were entitled to protection under Islamic law, and any harm against them would violate Sharia principles. Despite this counsel, an incident soon escalated tension. Rabbi David Lekhno recounts the episode in vivid detail. A Muslim boy at a bazaar took eggs from a Jewish vendor, began playing with them, and then falsely claimed to have purchased them. Refusing to pay, the boy fled with the eggs, prompting the Jewish vendor to pursue him and slap him. Witnessing this, several European merchants falsely accused the Jewish vendor of kidnapping the boy with the intention of using his blood in the preparation of *matzah*. The boy's mother, alarmed by the accusations, reported the matter to the Grand Vizier, Silahdar Damad Ali Pasha. Seizing upon this pretext, Ali Pasha ordered the arrest of the Chief Rabbi and other prominent Jewish religious leaders. The Jewish community, gripped by fear, sent three individuals—a cantor (ḥazzān), a melammed, and a butcher—disguised as religious leaders to the court in a desperate attempt to mitigate the crisis. However, a Jewish convert to Islam who was part of the Grand Vizier's household (lit. "servant") recognized that these individuals were not genuine religious elites. Exploiting the situation, he demanded a bribe to spare their lives, threatening to reveal the truth to the Grand Vizier if they refused. The three men, however, did not comply. When the matter was brought before the Grand Vizier, the convert exposed the identities of the impostors. Enraged, Ali Pasha ordered their immediate execution

by hanging, and their bodies were subsequently thrown into the sea (Lekhno, 2021, pp. 164-167).

This tragic event, as narrated by David Lekhno, is striking not only for its content but also for the chronicler's measured critique. Lekhno refrains from blaming the broader Muslim population or the Ottoman ruling class as a whole. Instead, his criticism is directed at specific individuals: the "arrogant" Grand Vizier Silahdar Damad Ali Pasha, the opportunistic Jewish-born convert within the Grand Vizier's household, and the European merchants who instigated the false accusation. These actors are held responsible for the tragedy. In contrast, the Shaykh al-Islām, representing the Muslim clerical establishment, is portrayed as a truthful and just figure who upheld the principles of Sharia law. Lekhno's account underscores the complexities of intercommunal relations in the Ottoman Empire, revealing the intersection of individual arrogance, opportunism, and communal tensions. It also highlights the chronicler's nuanced perspective, which balanced criticism of specific actors with an overarching respect for the Empire's broader framework of justice and tolerance.

Regardless of the location of the occurrence, the Ottoman administration sought to find a remedy. It didn't want any murders to go unsolved. It demanded that the true offenders be identified and punished. It also noted that the claims were unfounded lies. If Jewish homes were plundered or synagogues were attacked, the central government promptly issued measures to assist the Jews. For example, in June 1726, the Jews of Boğdan (Moldavia) sent a petition. This was due to local Christians accusing them of kidnapping one of their children on the eve of Passover. The Christians carried the body of a deceased co-religionist in a cart and incited the crowd by claiming that the Jews had murdered him. As a result, the Jews' property was looted, and they petitioned for restitution for their losses. An order thereupon was sent from Istanbul to Voivoda Mihal Bey requiring the return of Jewish property looted and destroyed by the agitators. Then, the center fired the voivode for failing to carry out the reparation immediately, and Ligorik was appointed as his replacement (*BOA, İE.HR*., no. 12/1135). It seems that the Ottoman authorities ignored the blood libel and was concerned about the Jews' safety.

While cases of blood libel were extremely rare in the sixteenth and beyond, they reoccured in the nineteenth century with a different motivation and increased in frequency. Pressure from European states also impacted the Sultans' actions. Blood libels heightened tensions between the Christian and Jewish communities starting in the nineteenth century. In this century, blood libels gained a new momentum and functionality. The Christian subjects of the empire instrumentalized blood libels to liquidate wealth of the Jews by looting their stores and companies. Armenians and Greeks used methods such as blood libel to drive Jews out of commercial and financial sectors. Indeed, on February 5, 1840, an accusation of blood libel against Jews in Damascus triggered an international political crisis. Father Tommaso, a Capuchin priest, went missing one day with his Muslim servant Ibrahim after more

than 30 years in Damascus. The rumor circulated through Christian groups that the priest had visited a Jewish neighborhood that day and was murdered by Jews. As a result, the Egyptian government detained a large number of Jews. Four of the tormented Jews passed away. Ulysse de Ratti-Menton, the French consul, became engaged in the affair under the guise of defending the priest's rights, putting Egyptian authorities under pressure. While the consul propagated anti-Jewish slanders in French and Arabic, the ruler of the city wrote to Wāli (governor) Muhammad Ali Pasha (d. 1849), requesting permission to execute the priests' murderers. Meanwhile, in the Jobar suburb, a synagogue was attacked and looted (Frankel 1997, pp. 1-2; Eroğlu 2013, p. 220).

The domestic issue that arose in Rhodes at the same time as Damascus was handled by the Ottomans in accordance with the new Tanzimat legislation aimed at transforming the empire into a modern state. A Greek Orthodox child who had gone for a walk on February 17, 1840, went missing. On the island, tensions were already high between Greeks and Jews who competed in the sponge trade. The Greek merchants took advantage of the disappearance to place their rival, a Jew named Eli Calomiti, in a tough situation, accusing Eliakim de Leon Stamboli, a half-crazed Jewish porter, of kidnapping the 10-year-old child. A Jew who fled to Smyrna reported the occurrence to the Sublime Porte. While the Governor and the British Consul supported the Christians, the incident made headlines throughout Europe. Eliakim confessed guilty under torture and claimed to have given the child to Jewish prominent David Mizrahi. Yusuf Pasha, the Mutasarrif of Rhodes, imprisoned Chief Rabbi Jacob Israel and nine Jewish leaders on March 16. On April 24, the Grand Vizier sent a letter to Pasha ordering him to send three Orthodox Christians and three Jews to the capital to testify before the empire's highest court. The boy, on the other hand, was not found during the searches and was subsequently discovered on the island of Syros. Yusuf Pasha was dismissed because it became evident that the incident was fabricated (Shaw, 1990, p. 1125; Sevilla-Sharon, 1992, p. 97; Sonyel 2014, p. 266; Çay & Akman, 2020, pp. 58-59). The Ottoman central government did not turn a blind eye to local officials' injustice and dismissed them. This record, which demonstrates that the state acted Jews fairly, also reveals the intensity of Jewish-Greek economic competition. Fearful of losing their market and profit share to the Jews, the Greeks unjustly blamed them. Furthermore, the nationalistic and religious Greeks considered the blood libels, which were supported by European nations, as an opportunity to undermine the Ottoman Empire.

In March, in reaction to parallel outbreaks of blood libel in Damascus and Rhodes, Jews in Istanbul organize and contact Western Jewish leaders. In England, a global campaign started to help Damascus Jews and put pressure on Muhammed Ali Pasha. As mediators, Moses Montefiore of United Kingdom and Albert Crémieux and Solomon Munk of France were dispatched. The delegation arrived in Alexandria on August 4, talked with Pasha numerous times, and on August 28, nine of the 13 imprisoned Jews were recognized as innocent and released (Deutsch & Franco,1902, pp. 420-421; Shaw, 1990, p. 1125; Eroğlu, 2013, pp. 223-224). On

October 27, 1840, the committee traveled to Istanbul and met with Sultan Abdülmecid, obtaining a firman declaring that the allegation of ritual murder was baseless. The firman declared that the Jews were being tortured on false accusations, that their religion prohibited the use of human and animal blood, that the blood libels could not be real, and that there also would be no religious discrimination under the Noble Edict of the Rose Chamber (*BOA, İ..MSM.*, no. 35/1005, lef 1 and 2).

Some historians believe that the blood libel incident in Rhodes in 1840 was a lesser version of what occurred in Damascus, and that the Jews of Rhodes also were saved with the assistance of Moses Montefiore and other European Jews. However, while the Damascus crisis became a global political issue, the Rhodes crisis was viewed as an internal matter of the Ottoman Empire and was settled in accordance with the Tanzimat Reform Era regulations, particularly the penal code of 1840 (Borovaya, 2021, pp. 35-39).

Despite Abdülmecid's firman of 1840, Christian subjects' blood libels against Jews persisted throughout imperial lands throughout the long nineteenth century. After the edict, until 1900, a total of 48 blood libel incidents took place: nine in Damascus, four in Jerusalem and its environs, one in Mosul, two in Egypt, one in Kos Island, one in Kusadasi, one in Beirut, one in Rhodes, one in Skopje, one in Thessaloniki, one in Corfu, three in Manisa, two in Bergama, three in Urla, two in Çeşme, two in Salihli, four in İstanbul and nine in İzmir (Shaw, 1990, pp. 1126-1127; Emecen 1997, pp. 66-67; Çay & Akman 2020, p. 57). It will be enough to provide specifics on a few of them in this study. For example, according to a Foreign Ministry record dated September 11, 1852, the body of a Greek child was found near Skopje by the water. The Jews in the area were accused of murdering the Greek child in order to add his blood to matzah bread; four Jews were imprisoned. Despite edicts declaring that this was a libel, the rumor that the boy was murdered by Jews spread day by day, and the city's Jews were insulted and punished. The central government sent an order to the Governor of Skopje, thanks to the intervention of the Chief Rabbinate. The real killers were commanded to be identified as soon as possible, and innocent Jews were released (*BOA, HR.MKT.,* no. 49/24).

According to a provincial document dated February 25, 1862, animosity between Greeks and Jews on the island of Kos resulted in a blood libel like that in Rhodes. According to this record, mentally unstable and constantly inebriated Greek named Dimitri Tarniko vanished; shortly after, it was rumored that Jews had murdered him in the synagogue. During a search of the synagogue, however, no proof was discovered. This synagogue was already small and dilapidated, with a courtyard visible from the outside. Nobody had ever seen Dimitri there before. A seven-year-old Jewish girl was the source of this lie. According to the report sent to the center, this kid was duped by a Greek grocer named Dimitri Hacı Yani, who gave her money and sweets and pushed her to lie. Some Greeks attempted to rouse the masses, as happened in Rhodes in 1840 (*BOA, A.}MKT.UM*, no. 556/15, lef 1 and 2). According to the report dated May 3, 1862, written to the Mutasarrif of the

Archipelago (Eyālet-i Cezāyir-i Baḥr-i Sefīd), a steamer and officers were sent to Kos Island from Istanbul; the incident was meticulously investigated; it was understood that the missing Greek had escaped in a fit of insanity; and the administrators were rewarded for preventing the enmity between the two nations (*BOA, A.}MKT.UM*., no. 562/65). This incident also demonstrates how the Ottoman Empire attempted to work out minority' conflicts in the Aegean Islands.

In 1865, the continuous strife between Jews and Greeks for historical and religious grounds culminated in a horrific lynching attempt in the capital's Haydarpaşa. Greeks and Armenians attacked Jews, killing over 300 people, injuring many more, and raping several women. To protect the Jews, Sultan Abdülaziz dispatched special guards to the location (Sonyel, 2014, p. 267). The Chief Rabbinate, on the other hand, requested that Abdülmecid's previous decree on this matter be renewed in order to dispel the widespread belief that the Jewish people mix human blood into their matzah every Passover and to prevent the persecution and oppression they face from other nations as a result of this. The topic was discussed in the Majlis-i Vala (Central Council) on June 25, 1866, and the renewal of the 1840 order was submitted to the Sultan. Thus, Sultan Abdülaziz issued the firman to protect the Jewish nation from all forms of unfair treatment and to secure their peace and security (*BOA, İ. MVL*., no. 555/24930, lef 1, 2, 3).

Libels and allegations against Jews were also common during a time when Greeks made up the majority of the population on the islands. It has already been stated that commercial rivalry played a significant influence in the spread of these tales. Even after the islands fell to the Kingdom of Greece, the enmities and conflicts continued. According to an archival record from April 1891, there was a rumor that Jews in Ayamavra (Lefkada) had secretly murdered a Christian girl; in response, the Greeks of Ayamavra planned to attack the Jews, who were Ottoman subjects; they beat one Jew, injured another, and planned to loot their houses and shops. This incident was reported to the Seraskierate (Ministry of War) by the Vilayet of Ioannina by telegram; the Jews were taken to Preveza by the Greek Government, and their houses and shops were sealed and closed (*BOA, DH.MKT*., no. 1831/3).

Local police and gendarmerie in the Ottoman Empire sometimes believed blood libels and harmed and frightened the Jewish population. In such circumstances, the central government intervened to enforce the law. Two occurrences in Syria and Adapazari illustrate this: The episode in Syria demonstrates the dangers of religious extremism and fanaticism. According to a letter issued by Syria's Governor, Osman Pasha, to the Interior Ministry on April 7, 1895, a big crisis erupted because of a minor *"suspicion"* (*BOA, Y..A..HUS*., no. 323/129, lef 2). Grand Vizier Cevad Pasha's usage of the phrase "zann-ı bâtıl[8]" in regard to the subject is especially notable (*BOA, Y..A..HUS*., no. 323/129, lef 1). A Greek subject who believed Jews drank the blood of Christian children assumed that a Greek boy seen

[8] It means "not based on reality, superstition, false belief".

in the Jewish quarter before Passover had been kidnapped and taken there. As a result, he got into an argument with a Jew and injured the Jew's hand. Making the same mistake, the gendarmerie sergeant who arrived on the scene found the Jew guilty and arrested him. The Greeks and the boy's father were incensed even more, believing that the Jew had committed a crime. However, the investigation revealed that the gendarmerie sergeant and the complaining Greek had slandered the Jew, and they were imprisoned. In another incident, a Greek girl in Adapazari claimed that a Muslim kid was being held in the house of a Jewish rabbi, whose servant she was, in order to use his blood. Based on this claim, the captain of the gendarmerie and the police commissioner raided and broke up the rabbi's house. The investigation, however, found that the Greek girl was lying. Following this occurrence, the Jewish Chief Rabbinate of Aleppo filed a complaint with the Ministry of Justice on March 7, 1913. According to the petition, every year before Passover, unsubstantiated rumors spread that Jews used human blood in the matzah, and the Jewish community was being disturbed as a result of these baseless accusations. Furthermore, it was requested in the petition to prevent the gendarmerie and the police from making domiciliary visits without any legal justification, just believing these blood libels (*BOA, DH.İD.*, no. 116/61, lef 2 and lef 3).

Even in the Ottoman Empire's latter days, acts of blood libel were repeated with the same patterns and couldn't be prevented. Examples demonstrate the continuity and similarity of these instances. On the other hand, despite the hostile attitude of its Greek and Armenian subjects, the Ottoman Empire made a variety of measures to protect the rights of Jews. One of these ways was to give Jews with the atiyyah set aside for Passover at the beginning of August each year. The Rabbinate was given a budget of 3600 guruş, which it divided among the Jews in the community (*BOA, DH. MKT*, no. 1698/86; *DH. MKT*, no. 81/32). This practice also demonstrates that the Ottoman Empire was not a believer in blood libel. Because no state will celebrate or sponsor a feast that incorporates a barbaric ritual. It can also be viewed as a strategy that reassured and strengthened Jewish devotion to the state. In fact, one of the evidences of this approach is the report of the District Governor of the Chief Rabbinate, dated April 23, 1895, in the form of a letter of thanks. This report indicates that Abdülhamid II made a donation of 30,000 guruş to the Jewish community for the Passover celebrations. In his letter, the Chief Rabbi expressed gratitude, praised the Sultan's justice, charity and greatness, and concluded by declaring the loyalty and servitude of the Jewish community to the Sultan. (*BOA, Y..MTV*., no. 118/86, lef 2)[9].

[9] The Ministry of Justice and Mezahib took action on January 31, 1895 in response to a petition complaining that the price of matzah eaten by Jews on Passover was too high. It was understood that the rabbinate monopolized the production of matzah and sold it at a very high price this year as in other years, thus victimizing poor Jews, and necessary notifications were made to the Chief Rabbi's district governor. See *BOA, ŞD.,* no. 2648/17.

EVALUATING BLOOD LIBEL ACCUSATIONS IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE THROUGH GRAMSCI'S THEORY OF HEGEMONY

Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony offers a compelling lens for examining the phenomenon of blood libel accusations in the Ottoman Empire. According to him (1971), hegemonic narratives are instrumental in enabling dominant groups to maintain power through ideological control rather than sheer force. Within this framework, the blood libel myth can be interpreted as a hegemonic Christian discourse, carried over from medieval Europe, that sought to marginalize Jews and justify their exclusion. This narrative's persistence in the Ottoman context, despite the state's pluralistic policies, reveals the complexities of hegemony and counter-hegemony in a multiethnic empire.

As Joshua Trachtenberg (1943) and Gavin I. Langmuir (1990) explain, the blood libel myth served as a tool for constructing a collective Christian identity by demonizing Jews. In the Ottoman Empire, Christian minorities, particularly Greeks and Armenians, perpetuated this narrative as a means of reinforcing their communal boundaries and countering perceived threats from the Jewish community. Archival data and existing literature highlight how these accusations were often motivated by socioeconomic rivalry, aligning with Gramsci's notion that cultural narratives are not isolated phenomena but are deeply tied to material and political struggles. The economic success of Jews, especially following the influx of Sephardic Jews into Ottoman cities, exacerbated these tensions, leading Christian groups to weaponize the myth of blood libel to undermine Jewish prosperity. David Nirenberg's *Communities of Violence* (1996) underscores how such accusations were not merely expressions of religious intolerance but also strategic acts of violence and exclusion in a competitive socioeconomic landscape. In this context, blood libels became an instrument for asserting dominance, destabilizing Jewish communities, and appropriating their wealth—an example of hegemonic forces manipulating cultural narratives to consolidate power.

The Ottoman Empire's response to blood libel accusations reflects a deliberate counter-hegemonic effort to challenge these divisive narratives. As Stanford Shaw (1991) and Avi Shlaim (2003) note, the Ottoman state's policies toward Jews were characterized by a pragmatic emphasis on justice and religious tolerance. The firmans issued by Sultans such as Suleiman the Magnificent in 1545, Ahmed I in 1609, Abdülmecid in 1840 Abdulaziz in 1866 and aimed to delegitimize the blood libel myth and protect the Empire's Jewish subjects from persecution. These interventions can be understood as part of a broader effort to construct a pluralistic hegemonic narrative that supported coexistence among the Empire's diverse religious and ethnic groups.

Gramsci's framework helps illuminate the role of the Ottoman state as a counter-hegemonic force. By rejecting the blood libel myth and intervening against

its violent consequences, the Empire sought to neutralize the disruptive effects of Christian hegemony on social stability. The state's actions, including investigating accusations, punishing perpetrators, and restoring order, reflect as the functional dynamics of a plural society in which the ruling elite sought to balance competing interests.

Despite the Ottoman state's efforts, the persistence of blood libel accusations, particularly in the nineteenth century, demonstrates the resilience of hegemonic narratives. As Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau (1985) argue, counter-hegemonic projects often face significant resistance when dominant ideologies are deeply entrenched. In the Ottoman case, external pressures from European powers and the growing nationalism of Christian minorities amplified the use of blood libels as a tool for economic and political gain. These dynamic underscores the challenges of sustaining counter-hegemonic narratives in the face of evolving geopolitical and social conditions.

Ottoman records on blood libel, also align with Eric Hobsbawm's (1990) observations on how constructed narratives are mobilized during periods of national and communal contestation. For Christian minorities in the Ottoman Empire, blood libel accusations became a means of asserting cultural and economic agency against both Jewish competitors and the Muslim-dominated state. The involvement of external actors, such as the European powers during the Damascus affair of 1840, further complicated the Empire's ability to counter these narratives effectively.

In conclusion, through the lens of Gramsci's theory, the dynamics of blood libel accusations in the Ottoman Empire reveal the interplay between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces. While Christian minorities employed the blood libel myth as a hegemonic tool to marginalize Jews and gain economic advantage, the Ottoman state's interventions reflect a counter-hegemonic strategy aimed at promoting justice and pluralism. As Langmuir (1990) and Nirenberg (1996) emphasize, such myths are not static but evolve in response to changing power dynamics, making their study crucial for understanding the mechanisms of societal control and resistance.

The Ottoman experience demonstrates the challenges of fostering coexistence in a multiethnic polity while confronting entrenched prejudices. By situating the blood libel phenomenon within Gramsci's theoretical framework, this analysis underscores the importance of counter-hegemonic narratives in mitigating societal conflicts and maintaining social order. The persistence of these accusations, however, serves as a reminder of the enduring power of cultural myths and the need for sustained efforts to challenge them in any context.

CONCLUSION

The history of blood libel accusations against Jews reveals the persistence of anti-Semitic myths across centuries, with their impact varying significantly across different socio-political contexts. Within the Ottoman Empire, a multi-ethnic and multi-religious state, the position of Jews was markedly different from their experiences in medieval and early modern Europe. Unlike in Europe, where blood libel accusations were pervasive and often state-sanctioned, Jews in Ottoman lands were generally protected by the ruling elite and integrated into the broader social fabric. These differences illuminate the complexities of governance in a pluralistic empire and highlight the Ottoman approach to managing intercommunal relations.

As a multi-ethnic empire, the Ottoman state included Jews as one of many religious and national communities under its control. Jews had relatively harmonious relations with the Muslim majority and the ruling elite, experiencing few conflicts or hostilities except in isolated cases. Blood libel accusations in Ottoman territories primarily arose from the Empire's Christian subjects, particularly Greeks and Armenians. These accusations were rooted in medieval European myths that Jews required Christian blood for Passover rituals. In the Ottoman context, such claims were less about religious doctrine and more a reflection of religious intolerance, financial rivalry, and political instability.

In many instances, blood libel accusations by Greeks and Armenians served as tools for economic competition. As the Jewish community gained prominence in trade, finance, and artisanal sectors, these accusations became a means to undermine their success and seize their assets. Especially from the nineteenth century onward, such libels became instruments for accumulating capital and expanding market control, transforming from isolated incidents into calculated strategies. These accusations often resulted in violent attacks, massacres, and displacement of Jewish communities, highlighting the precarious nature of intercommunal coexistence in an economically competitive environment.

The Ottoman central government consistently intervened to mitigate the impacts of blood libel incidents and protect its Jewish subjects. The Sultan, palace officials, and central bureaucrats in Istanbul issued firmans prohibiting blood libels, warning local authorities, and punishing perpetrators. Measures ranged from investigating accusations to protecting Jewish communities from mob violence. Furthermore, sultans extended privileges and gifts to the Jewish community, especially during Passover, underscoring their commitment to justice and minority protection. These policies of tolerance and intervention were rare for the era, standing in stark contrast to contemporaneous European and even other Islamic states, where Jews faced systematic persecution and marginalization.

The Ottoman Empire's management of blood libel incidents serves as an instructive example of the importance of institutional frameworks in safeguarding minority rights. It also underscores the potential for pluralistic governance to foster

coexistence in a diverse society. The Empire's approach, which combined pragmatic governance with principles of justice and religious tolerance, helped mitigate the destructive effects of baseless accusations, maintaining social order and promoting harmony.

The Empire's legal and administrative measures against blood libel accusations underscore a commitment to protecting minority rights within an Islamic framework that recognized "People of the Book." While not entirely free from discrimination, the Ottoman approach contrasted markedly with contemporary European practices, reflecting a more nuanced and, at times, progressive stance on religious tolerance.

This examination of blood libel in the Ottoman Empire reveals the significant role of state intervention in mediating intercommunal conflicts and protecting vulnerable populations. It highlights how economic competition, and social tensions can exacerbate prejudices, leading to the persecution of minority groups. The Ottoman experience illustrates that proactive governance, and equitable legal frameworks are crucial in countering baseless myths that threaten social cohesion.

Beyond its historical significance, the phenomenon of blood libel has enduring relevance. It is a stark reminder of the destructive power of hate speech and unfounded accusations. The persistence of these myths through history underscores the need for vigilance in combating anti-Semitism, religious intolerance, and social prejudice. Studying historical blood libel cases not only provides insight into the challenges of managing diversity but also serves as a warning for modern societies about the dangers of weaponizing religious and ethnic stereotypes.

The Ottoman Empire's policies towards its Jewish subjects highlight a rare and noteworthy example of peaceful coexistence in a turbulent region and era. They demonstrate how state intervention, legal frameworks, and an ethos of tolerance can counteract deeply ingrained prejudices and ensure the safety of minority communities. In comparison to the systemic persecution faced by Jews in Europe and other regions, the Ottoman experience offers an alternative narrative—one where coexistence and justice were possible, even in the face of deeply rooted societal divisions. This historical legacy remains a valuable lesson for contemporary efforts to build more inclusive and harmonious societies.

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