

Jacob Daniels,

The Jews of Edirne: The End of Ottoman Europe and the Arrival of Borders,

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Edirne occupies a distinctive place in Ottoman and Jewish history. Once an imperial capital and long a strategic border city, it was also home to one of the most prominent Jewish communities of the empire. After 1492, Sephardic migrants reshaped the city's Jewish life, and Sephardim soon became important in demography, language, and communal leadership. A focused study of Edirne's Jews is especially significant because the late Ottoman and early Republican decades reshaped patterns of belonging, status, and mobility when new borders were taking hold across southeastern Europe. It also matters because, despite repeated acknowledgment of Edirne's importance, the city has not received a sustained, archival monograph comparable to the literature on other centres; most accounts treat Edirne episodically or as context for broader arguments.

The scholarship on Ottoman Jewry provides a framework for understanding Edirne's Jewish community, yet it remains fragmented when it comes to the city itself. Edirne appears regularly in surveys of Jewish life in the empire, but usually as a secondary reference beside Istanbul and Salonica. The few dedicated studies highlight its historical significance but mostly stop short of producing a full monograph that would place Edirne at the centre of analysis. This imbalance is

striking, given the city's role as an imperial capital, a strategic frontier, and a Jewish hub of considerable longevity.

Jacob Daniels' *The Jews of Edirne* takes this gap as its point of departure. The book follows the community across the ruptures of the Balkan Wars, the First World War, and the early Republican years, framing Edirne as both a borderland and a testing ground for new national categories. Its promise lies in connecting local textures of communal life to the larger mechanisms through which territorial and symbolic borders constrained Jewish mobility and membership. The questions it raises—about sources, method, and narrative emphasis—are entangled with an existing scholarship that is rich thematically yet thin on Edirne as a sustained case.

The broader literature—Avigdor Levy's *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire* (1994), Aron Rodrigues' *French Jews, Turkish Jews* (1990), Haim Gerber's, *Economy and Society in an Ottoman City: Bursa, 1600–1700* (1985), and Yaron Ben-Naeh's *Jews in the Realm of the Sultans* (2008)—provides the main framework for understanding Ottoman Jewish society: its institutions, education, and cultural adaptation. Few exceptions such as Naim A. Gülcü's *Tarihte Yolculuk: Edirne Yahudileri* (2014), offer important local insights but remain limited in scope. Compared to the rich historiography on Salonica or Istanbul, Edirne still lacks a broad, source-based account that links its Jewish history to the collapse of Ottoman Europe and the making of modern borders. It is into this gap that Daniels' study intervenes.

Daniels' *The Jews of Edirne* directs attention to a community long overshadowed by the historiographies of Salonica and Istanbul. Covering the years 1908 to 1934, this study situates Edirne's Jews at the fault lines of imperial collapse and nation-state formation. Daniels challenges two conventional narratives: that borderlands were primarily zones of persecution for Jews, or conversely, that they offered relative safety compared to Christian and Muslim neighbours. Instead, he proposes a more complex view, one that foregrounds Jewish agency alongside vulnerability in an environment where shifting sovereignties continually redefine belonging.

In a field often dominated by grand national narratives, the book turns the focus to a city often acknowledged but rarely examined in depth. From the outset, Daniels presents Edirne as a “secondary city” whose position at the edge of competing sovereignties makes it an ideal site for examining how the end of empire and the arrival of the nation were lived (pp. 2–4). He argues that the history of

Edirne's Jews cannot be told as a simple story of persecution or survival, but as a series of adaptations and displacements shaped by successive political upheavals (pp. 5, 12).

The narrative moves from the Young Turk Revolution, which redefined the Ottoman–Bulgarian border (pp. 2, 5, 17), through the Balkan Wars of 1912–13 (pp. 18, 20) and the conditions of Greek rule in Thrace (pp. 21–23), to the consolidation of the Turkish Republic with its policies of Turkification (pp. 19–20). Daniels' analysis culminates in what he calls “peacetime violence” (p. 73) and the 1934 Thrace Events (pp. 3–4, 8, 19), which, although not fatal in Edirne itself, provoked the mass exodus that ended centuries of Jewish presence in the city. He frames this not only as displacement but as a process by which Jews were gradually rendered “invisible” through new political and symbolic boundaries.

Beyond its narrative, the book's strength also lies in its careful scholarship. Daniels draws on a wide range of sources –Ottoman and Republican archives, local and regional newspapers, memoirs, and communal records– while surrounding his analysis in an extensive secondary literature (pp. 15–16). This evidentiary breadth allows him to move between the local and the regional, situating Edirne as a case study with broader implications for the study of minorities and borderlands. His first chapters on economic life –merchants, peddlers, and artisans adapting to shifting markets and regulations– add a material dimension often missing from accounts of minority history, while his treatment of antisemitism situates the Thrace Events within a longer trajectory of marginalization and state-sanctioned hostility rather than as a single rupture (pp. 74–75). The analysis is reinforced by an exhaustive bibliography, substantial notes, and a carefully structured index, together with photographs that ground the text in the material and spatial realities of the city. These visual sources complement the archival and documentary base, underscoring Edirne's presence as both a lived environment and a contested borderland. By integrating political, social, cultural, and visual dimensions, Daniels presents Edirne as a microcosm of how borders reshaped communities and altered the conditions of minority life.

Daniels' tracing of Edirne's Jews places local history at the heart of large-scale transformations, arguing that borderland experiences of resilience and fragility are essential –not peripheral– for understanding the collapse of empires and the creation of nations. This centers his argument that local Jewish survival strategies illuminate broader processes of minority exclusion and belonging.

The study also positions Edirne as a crucial vantage point for understanding the transition from empire to nation, but it does so by privileging the twentieth century. Daniels largely brackets the early modern period. This is a deliberate historiographical choice: he situates his analysis not in continuity with debates on early modern urban Jewish economies, but in the ruptures of the Balkan Wars and their aftermath. The effect is to underline Edirne's significance in the borderlands of modern Europe rather than in the internal history of Ottoman Jewry.

In terms of socio-economic life, Daniels acknowledges communal institutions and Jewish integration into the city but does not reconstruct the economic landscape in the detail offered by Gerber's Bursa. Shopkeepers, peddlers, and small traders remain in the background, and questions of credit, capital, or rabbinical authority are not central. Instead, Daniels privileges political transformations, showing how new borders destabilized communal structures irrespective of their material base. This emphasis makes sense given his focus on sovereignty and displacement, but it also leaves less room for understanding how economic continuities shaped communal resilience.

Daniels approaches integration primarily through the prism of nationalisms and border regimes. His Jews are citizens, migrants, or minorities before they are neighbours or cultural participants. This does not invalidate his argument, but it highlights the difference between a border-centred history and a cultural history of acculturation.

A similar observation applies to education. Daniels does not foreground AIU institutions or the broader politics of pedagogy. For him, the key moments are political: the Young Turk Revolution, Balkan Wars, Greek occupation, and the Republican turn. In these contexts, Jewish schools appear as markers of loyalty or civic participation rather than as sites of cultural negotiation.

Perhaps Daniels is at his most persuasive when he situates Edirne's Jews in the storms of the early twentieth century. His account of the Young Turk Revolution, the Balkan Wars, the brief years of Greek rule, and the Thrace Events of 1934 shows, with impressive use of sources, how quickly the promise of equality could collapse into cycles of violence and exclusion. Daniels is less concerned with discourse and more with the lived effects of border regimes: the harassment, fear, and displacements that gradually extinguished Edirne's Jewish community. This is both a strength and a limitation. It grounds the book in the lived experience of a city but leaves the ideological genealogy of antisemitism less fully explored.

What gives the book broader resonance is Daniels' conceptual framing of borders. He depicts them not simply as political lines but as forces that *reclassified, erased, and silenced* communities, turning Edirne's Jews into what he describes as increasingly "invisible." This aligns with recent scholarship that treats borders as cultural and symbolic as well as territorial. It also echoes arguments that borders shape daily practices, memories, and symbolic orders, becoming spatial and identity-forming spheres rather than mere cartographic demarcations. Like many other borderlands in their diverse historical forms, the shifting borders around Edirne were experienced not only as lines of sovereignty but as thresholds of belonging, markers of cultural possibility, and eventually, spaces of erasure. His contribution is thus to embed these insights in the thick description of a single city, showing how sovereignty, migration, and identity were constantly remade in the early twentieth-century borderlands.

Essentially, Daniels' work makes several notable contributions. Most importantly, it restores Edirne to the map of Ottoman Jewish studies, offering a richly documented case that demonstrates how borderlands were not peripheral but central to the processes of imperial collapse and national consolidation. By focusing on the period from 1908 to 1934, the book bridges Ottoman and Republican contexts and shows the continuities in the precariousness of Jewish life across an era of ruptures. Its attention to borders as political and symbolic structures provides a valuable corrective to historiographies that privilege metropolitan centres or reduce minorities to passive victims. The breadth of sources, together with the extensive bibliography and apparatus, makes the study a valuable reference point for future research.

However, the book's focus also narrows the lens in ways that invite further inquiry. Comparatively everyday cultural and social practices remain underexplored, despite their importance in the wider historiography of Ottoman minorities, and the study offers only a limited comparative frame with other Jewish centres. Gendered perspectives are likewise marginal in Daniels' account, and the absence of women's networks, household adaptation, and everyday forms of cultural borrowing is particularly striking. Finally, a deeper conversation with the wider border studies literature might have given this framing more edge and explanatory power. These limitations do not diminish the book's achievement but rather suggest directions in which its insights might be extended.

Daniels' *The Jews of Edirne* is an important intervention in both Ottoman Jewish history and borderlands studies. By restoring Edirne to the frame, Daniels compels us to reconsider how the collapse of empire and the making of nations were lived at the margins, where borders were experienced as political, cultural, and symbolic ruptures. The book's strengths lie in its empirical grounding and its insistence on visibility for a community too often downgraded to footnotes. Its silences –on gender, on everyday life, on comparative frames– do not detract from its value but rather point to avenues for further research. For historians of empire, nation, and minority, Daniels' study is a reminder that borderlands are not peripheral but constitutive spaces, and that the fate of Edirne's Jews speaks to larger questions of belonging, exclusion, and historical memory in modern Southeast Europe.

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