

Jewish Community Economic Activities under Early Ottoman Millet System

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Abstract: From the late 15th century to the early and middle 16th century, the Ottoman Empire was the most important arena for Jewish economic activities. In important cities of the empire such as Constantinere (Istanbul), Izmir, and Jerusalem, Jewish merchants and Jewish communities mastered various types of commercial activities to a certain extent, including commerce, trade, handicrafts, and food processing. This article will explore how "limited tolerance" ensures the development of commercial activities of Jews and Jewish communities in the Ottoman Empire. The Islamic principle of obedience (dhimi) and the millet system that matches the actual situation of multi-ethnic unity in the Ottoman Empire are the political basis for the economic activities of the Jewish community. Compared with the racial discrimination atmosphere and policies against the Jewish people in Central Europe during the same period, it proves that the Ottoman Empire has a certain tolerance policy towards non-Muslim ethnic groups in the country. The millet system enables Jews to occupy a dominant position in the commercial activities of the empire and ensures that Jewish commercial activities can flourish in the Ottoman Empire. However, this tolerant policy is limited, and the Ottoman Empire's policy discrimination and religious discrimination against Jews and other non-Muslim minorities still exist widely.

After Mehmed II conquered Constantinople and made it his capital, the militarily powerful Ottoman Empire completely stepped onto the stage of history. As a superpower spanning Asia, Europe and Africa, the Ottoman Empire has always had a monopoly on traditional trade routes. The trade of various commodities, from spices to cloth and even silk, as well as the city taxes brought by them, all demonstrate the wealth of the imperial cities. Every time the Ottoman Empire established a capital, it would greatly reform the local economy and make it a new political and economic center. City construction became a way for each sultan to boast about his own achievements, such as Bursa, Edirne, Constantinople, etc., because merchants and workers are particularly important for creating cities. (Cook p.209) Mehmed II and his successor Bayezid II encouraged Jews from all over the world to immigrate to the Ottoman Empire, many of whom came from Italian city-states and were influenced and destroyed by the Catholic movement. After the Jewish center in the Iberian Peninsula was destroyed, the Sephardic Jewish community in the Ottoman Empire became the new center of the Diaspora. Under the rule of the Ottoman Empire, Jews played an important role in the social and economic life of the Middle East and the Balkans. Jews gradually gathered in various cities of the empire to form Jewish ethnic communities, accompanied by the establishment of various chambers of commerce and guilds. Jewish economic activities developed greatly during this period, and Jewish communities and businesses were also protected to a certain extent according to the Ottoman Empire's millet system.

The fact that the Levant and the Mediterranean were under the rule of the Ottoman Empire had important implications for the economic and cultural development of the Jews. The Jewish community flourished, and gathering points were established in almost every part of the Ottoman Empire. In the 16th century, there were

about 100,000 to 200,000 Jews living in every corner of the Ottoman Empire. There were various craftsmen among the Jews. They made a living by selling their products. The Jews in Constantinople also had a printing press, and they printed many precious books. Among the Jews were goldsmiths, stonemasons, painters, tailors, butchers, pharmacists, doctors, weavers, and barbers. (Eban p.198) In the Middle East, in Safed and the Holy Land of Jerusalem, the Jews formed large communities, especially in the Holy City, where the organizational form and economic and trade activities of the Jewish community in Jerusalem were preserved (Cohen p.225). In the Balkans, there were also Jewish guilds in the capital Constantinieh (Istanbul) and the Aegean city of Thessaloniki. Istanbul Jews worked in all kinds of professions, from the Sultan's personal physician to ordinary goldsmiths, stonemasons, barbers, miners, etc. For example, Solomon ben Nathan Ashkenazi was a very famous Jewish scholar and court physician who moved between Venice and Constantinieri (Istanbul) and acted as a political broker. Jews were loyal to the Ottoman Empire and had expertise in business and languages. The Ottoman government relied on Jews in trade, diplomacy, etc. (Shaw p.93) Some Jews served as financial and diplomatic advisors to the Ottoman Sultan and became court Jews. While serving as financial and diplomatic advisors to the Sultan, court Jews also engaged in business, trade, finance, and charitable activities. The most famous and legendary of them were Dona Gracia Mendes and Don Joseph Nasi, whose power reached its peak during the reign of Selim II. In many port cities of the empire near the Caspian Sea and the Mediterranean Sea, there was an active group of Sephardic Jews who frequently engaged in cross-regional exchanges. These port Jews established a trade network connecting Asia, Europe and North Africa.

The economic and commercial activities of the Jews could be fully carried out, and even many Jews could hold high positions in the Ottoman government and the Sultan's court, all because of the Ottoman Millet system - a tolerant system for treating ethnic minorities and people of different faiths in the country. In Islamic law, Dhimmi, considered as "obedient people", refers to "people of the book" such as Jews and Christians who are protected by the Islamic regime. Dhimmi have lived in the Middle East and Central Asia since the Arab Empire. Religious conflicts and ethnic conflicts sometimes provoke hatred, but this principle has always been used by various empires. As a multi-ethnic unified feudal empire, the Ottoman Millet system was widely spread to all corners of the empire on the basis of Dhimmi. Millet allowed Judaism to enjoy autonomy in internal affairs, including religious laws, education, marriage, etc. Mehmed II assured the Jews that they could continue to believe in Judaism and make a living freely. (Shaw, p.29) The millet leaders of each Jewish community and synagogue were usually local rabbis, who had the right to make decisions on the general civil and commercial behavior of the Jews on the basis of respecting the Sultan and his superiors. Compared with Christians, the Ottoman Empire also gave Jews more privileges, such as tax exemption, freedom of trade, and the right to repair synagogues.

With the protection of the millet system, the Jews' dominant position in the fields of textiles, finance, and international trade was supported by the empire, and the tax policy was flexible. Compared with the systematic political and ethnic persecution of Jews in Europe at that time, the Ottoman Empire's policy was more tolerant. After the Ottoman Empire occupied Constantinople, the special environment led to the Jews and Ottomans reaching a consensus and cooperation in the face of hostile European Christian countries (Inalcik p.7). Influenced by the reform and struggle movement of the European Catholic Church in the 15th and 16th centuries, European countries generally portrayed Jews in a negative image. During the Black Death, many countries in Central Europe blamed the Jews for the infection of villages and towns, and the Spanish Reconquista movement inevitably affected the Jewish community because they were believed to be accomplices of the Moorish Muslims. In 1492, Spain issued the "Edict of Alhambra" to expel Jews who refused to convert. After that, similar persecutions occurred in Portugal, Italy and other places. Compared with the persecution and expulsion of Jews in European countries such as Spain, the Ottomans and Jews regarded each other as allies. Ottoman Sultan Bayezid II openly welcomed the Jews expelled from Spain, saying that "King Ferdinand of Spain is impoverishing his own country to enrich mine".

However, the millet system was not as perfect as Mehmed II had promised. The political system of the Ottoman

Empire and the complexity of ethnic groups in the country inevitably led to inequality and ethnic policies. Compared with Muslim ethnic groups such as Turks and Arabs, Jews still did not get complete equality. For example, in the slaughter market, in order to protect the interests of Muslim merchants, the Ottoman authorities and laws took the initiative to sacrifice the interests of Jews. Jewish butchers could only work on Mondays and Thursdays. Yaqub, a Jewish butcher, admitted that he had slaughtered sheep on Wednesdays, and the Jewish butcher was convicted (Cohen p.86). According to the Islamic policy of obedience, Muslims are superior to Jews, especially in the political and religious fields. In politics and religion, the Ottoman Empire also imposed many restrictions on Jewish authorities. For example, Muslims are nobler than Jews or Christians in law, and non-Muslims cannot testify in court when accusing Muslims; at the same time, synagogues and churches are not allowed to be higher than the roofs of mosques. No matter how successful Jewish merchants are, they cannot live in houses higher than Muslims. This discriminatory measure against Jews is not targeted at Muslims. It is essentially the result of religious conservatism and nationalism, and also proves Islam's limited tolerance policy towards obedient citizens.

The essence of the Millet system lies in its paradoxical empowerment. It gave the Jewish community an economically superior position while keeping them permanently marginalized in the political and religious circles. For the Muslim people of the Ottomans, this arrangement ensured financial stability and political influence; for the Jews, it provided survival and prosperity in the context of anti-Semitism in Europe at the time. However, this "golden age" always depended on the will of the sultan and the empire - a fragile balance between practicality and orthodoxy. In short, in order to reduce competition with Muslims, Ottoman rulers brought limited tolerance and protection to the Jews, but the commercial activities of Jews and Jewish communities were still fully guaranteed and developed in the Ottoman Empire under the Millet system.

Work Cited

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