

Filippo Petrucci, *Gli ebrei in Algeria e in Tunisia, 1940-1943*, Firenze: Giuntina 2011, pp. 194

by Daniela Melfa

In French North Africa the Jews, and other minorities in the colonised world, have been considered an 'in-between' community. They were attracted into the French sphere of influence, especially in Algeria where the Crémieux Decree (1870) led to their automatic naturalisation. On the other hand, the *grana*, Jews from Leghorn settled in Tunisia, were a bastion of Italian culture. In *Gli ebrei in Algeria e in Tunisia, 1940-1943*, Filippo Petrucci focuses on the dramatic period of the Second World War, and the numerous injustices suffered by Jews. Although the majority of North African Jews lived at that time in Morocco, the author chooses to analyse the Algerian *départements* and the Tunisian Protectorate where the census of 1941 registered respectively almost 120,000 and 90,000 Jews.

The introductory chapter deals with the French conquest of Algeria (1830) and Tunisia (1881), by examining its consequences for the Jewish population, the emergence of anti-Semitism and Zionism in North Africa. Even if historical Arab anti-Semitism is not neglected, attention is mainly on the French hatred of Jews that was progressively institutionalised. After the 1938 Italian Racial Laws that hit Italian Jews, the Vichy Statutes of 1940 and 1941 worsened conditions for all Jews in French North Africa. In his meticulous depiction of the discriminatory laws, Petrucci highlights that, paradoxically, Jews were more penalised in the Maghreb than in France. Their greater proportion over the European population in Algeria (12-14%) and the limited higher education opportunities in French North Africa rendered, for instance, fixed quotas at universities an unbearable block (pp. 104-105).

In the face of 'barbarous deeds' (p. 174), representatives of the Jewish communities did what they could to reduce distress. In Algeria, where the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* had not set up an education system as in Tunisia, communitarian schools were created. In Tunisia, in order to avoid indiscriminate roundups, religious authorities cooperated in providing a workforce. Filippo Petrucci draws abundantly on their memories (Maurice Eisenbeth, Paul Ghez, Robert Borgel and others), along with a wide range of archival sources.

In Algeria anti-Jewish measures were zealously implemented, while the authorities in Tunisia were less rigorous, at least until the Axis occupation. Through a comparative approach, Filippo Petrucci tries to understand the different fate of Jewish communities in the French possessions.

If in ‘cosmopolitan’ (p. 51) Tunisia, Jews had been victims of sporadic prejudice since the late-nineteenth century, in Algeria there was a history of deep-rooted anti-Semitism, and racist political parties. Anti-Semitism caused ‘the most sordid violence’¹ in early August 1934, when in Constantine about twenty Jews were massacred. The then mayor Émile Morinaud did not bother to return from his seaside holiday. Without interruption, under Vichy, Morinaud, along with several *pieds-noirs*, approved the repeal of the Crémieux Decree in 1940 (pp. 84-85).

Indirect administration offered room for manoeuvre used by the French Resident General in Tunisia, Jean-Pierre Esteva (1940-43), and Munsif Bey (1942-43): the former delayed the enforcement of laws and also funded Jewish charities, while the latter resumed the traditional role of protector of the *ahl al-ḳitāb* (pp. 127-128). Nowhere did the Catholic Church speak out (p. 89).

In order to grasp why the principles of the National Revolution were promoted in Algeria, it would have been useful to shed light, as suggested by Daniel Rivet², on the discriminatory nature of the colonial order, whose partition into ruling and subjected classes was in line with Petainist policies. There is just a mention of this affinity when the author evokes Aḷ Boumendjel’s refusal of anti-Semitic politics because Arabs were also subjected to racism (p. 89). Then, the intertwining between anti-Semitism and colonial patriotism would have deserved more attention. Actually, French settlers at the outposts of the French Empire were spurred on by fervent nationalism that prompted them to exceed the citizens of the *Métropole*.

The idea of appealing to the Arabs by mistreating Jews proved ill-founded. Actually, among Muslim natives, popular hostilities and ‘jealousy’ (p. 88) appeared side by side with the noblest devotion of several ‘righteous’³, such as the reformist al-‘Uqbā. This intriguing topic is briefly described, and the Muslim majority remains in the background.

¹ Jacques Berque, *French North Africa. The Maghrib Between Two World Wars*, (London: Faber&Faber LTD 1967) 255.

² Daniel Rivet, *Le Maghreb à l’épreuve de la colonisation*, (Paris: Hachette 2002).

³ Robert Satloff, *Among the Righteous: Lost Stories from the Holocaust’s Long Reach into Arab Lands*, (New York: Public Affairs 2006).

Even if some North African Jews were deported to Europe, the Holocaust was not directly experienced in the Maghreb. Petrucci wonders if this was because of logistical deficiencies or an absence of extermination plans, but he does not offer new elements to solve the issue.

Several works have been produced on the Jews of North Africa during the Second World War and the Paris-based *Société d'Histoire des Juifs de Tunisie* has made a significant contribution to which Filippo Petrucci refers (Claude Nataf, Michel Abitbol, etc.). A more articulate and in-depth analysis of the existing literature on the subject would have helped readers to appreciate the originality of Petrucci's book, just as attentive proofreading would have reduced the number of misprints.

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