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The world that ended at Salonika

What the collapse of the Ottoman order did to the way the region holds difference

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The conflicts that define the modern Levant are usually read as ancient: immemorial hatreds, primordial sects, ground that was always contested. This issue argues that they are recent, and that they are the symptoms of a single rupture, the collapse of the imperial order that once held the region's differences in a workable arrangement. What looks like the eternal return of sectarian war is better understood as the long aftermath of a particular world's destruction. To grasp the present, one has to grasp what was lost.

I.

For four centuries the Ottoman Empire governed an extraordinary diversity of peoples without requiring them to become one. Its instrument was not tolerance in the modern liberal sense but a different architecture entirely: a plural order in which Muslims, Orthodox and other Christians, Jews, and a range of smaller communities were organised as confessional bodies, each with its own law, its own courts, its own internal authority, all held within a single imperial framework. Identity in this world was relational and negotiated rather than absolute. A community's belonging did not depend on its being a majority, or a nation, or even territorially concentrated. It depended on its recognised place within a web of overlapping jurisdictions.

This was not a utopia, and the point is not to sentimentalise it. The order was hierarchical; Muslims held political primacy; the arrangement had its cruelties and its limits. The point is structural: the system had conceptual and institutional room for hybrid, plural, non-national identities, and it managed difference without demanding homogeneity. That is precisely the room the modern order would abolish.

II.

The nineteenth century brought into this world an idea it could not absorb: the nation, defined as a people that is, ideally, ethnically and territorially singular, and that claims a state of its own. Nationalism did not merely add a new political form alongside the old confessional one. It dissolved the old form's logic. Where the empire had asked only that a community know its place in the web, the nation-state asked who the people were and whose land this was, and those questions admit no plural answer. A religious community, under the new logic, had to become a nation or be absorbed by one.

In the Balkans the transformation ran to its conclusion first, and its results are the template for everything that followed: the Orthodox confessional community fractured into Greek, Serbian, Bulgarian, and Romanian nations, each demanding its own homogeneous territory, and the demand was met through population exchange, expulsion, and slaughter. **The plural order did not evolve into the national one. It was destroyed to make room for it.** In the Arab provinces the same logic worked differently, Lebanon institutionalised its confessions inside the state rather than splitting into nations, Syria and Iraq sought to suppress difference

under a unifying national ideology, but the rupture was the same rupture. Everywhere, an order that had held difference was replaced by orders that had to resolve it.

III.

Nowhere is the loss more legible than in a single city. Salonika, today Thessaloniki, was for centuries one of the great cosmopolitan centres of the Ottoman Mediterranean: a city with a Ladino-speaking Jewish majority, woven into imperial commerce, Sufi networks, and the wider exchange of the sea. The Jews of Salonika were not a minority problem to be solved. They were a shaping, constitutive presence in a genuinely plural public sphere, exactly the kind of existence the imperial order made possible and the national order could not.

The city's destruction came in stages, and each stage was an instalment of the larger rupture: the Balkan Wars, the Greek annexation that made a once-imperial city the second city of a nation-state, the catastrophic fire of 1917, and finally the deportation and annihilation of its Jews in the Holocaust. The sequence is not a string of separate tragedies. It is one process, the conversion of a plural imperial cosmopolis into a national city, carried to its terminal conclusion. **What ended at Salonika was not only a community. It was a model of how human difference could be held.**

IV.

This is why the so-called Jewish Question cannot be understood, as it usually is, as a purely European dilemma about how secular nation-states might integrate their Jewish minorities. That framing is true for Europe and false for the region the conflict actually came to occupy. In the Ottoman world the Jewish presence had never been a question of integration at all, because the order did not demand the homogeneity that makes minorities into problems. The Question, in its modern and lethal form, was an import. It arrived with the nation-state and the ethno-territorial logic the nation-state carries, and it landed in a region whose own plural arrangement was simultaneously being dismantled.

Set in this frame, the collision that produced the modern conflict, Zionism, Arab nationalism, and colonial partition meeting on the same ground, is not the eruption of an ancient enmity. It is what happens when two young nationalisms, both products of the same imperial collapse, both carrying the same logic that a land must belong to a people and a people must have a land, are set down in a space where the older order that might have held them both has just been destroyed. The tragedy is not that the hatred was eternal. It is that the thing which had managed difference was gone, and nothing with its capacity had replaced it.

V.

To recover this history is not nostalgia, and the distinction is the whole purpose of the exercise. No one proposes to rebuild the Ottoman Empire, and the plural order had limits that no one should wish back. The recovery is epistemological, not sentimental. It changes what one is looking at.

Seen through the long aftermath of the imperial rupture, the region's defining conflicts stop being the symptoms of an ancient and therefore permanent condition, and become the symptoms of a recent and therefore historical one, a particular order's collapse and the failure, so far, to build anything with comparable capacity to hold difference. **Pluralism in this region is not a utopian ideal waiting to be invented. It is the ghost of a world that once existed, whose buried logic still haunts every present question of exile, sovereignty, and belonging.** That is the ground this series means to clear: not to mourn the empire, but to see the present conflicts for what they are, the unfinished business of a transition that was never completed, and to recover the knowledge that difference has been held here before.

NOTE

On the millet system and the imperial management of confessional diversity, and on the Balkan transformation of religious communities into nations, this issue draws on the standard historiography of the late Ottoman Empire. The history of Salonika as an Ottoman Jewish metropolis and its successive destructions is extensively documented. The operational consequence for Lebanon's own plural settlement is treated in the Statecraft track.

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