



Journal of Balkan Libraries Union

ISSN 2148-077X

<http://www.balkanlibraries.org/journal>
<http://dergipark.ulakbim.gov.tr/jblu>

Book Review

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Journal of Balkan Libraries Union, Vol. 3, No. 1, pp. 2-3, 2015.
Digital Object Identifier: 10.16918/bluj.67887

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Salonica, City of Ghosts

by Mark Mazower

Istanbul, 2013

ISBN 9786051068282

Mark Mazower, a well-known professor of history from the Columbia University, wrote his *Salonica, City of Ghosts: Christian, Muslims and Jews (1430-1950)* more than a decade ago. His book is a product of almost 20 years of work. It is written as a chronicle of events that affected various aspects of Thessaloniki between 1430 and 1950. It can also be read as a biography of a unique city across the Balkans and Europe.

Before being taken by the Ottoman Empire in the 15th century, Thessaloniki was under the control of the Byzantines where the Christianity was highly strong. For Mazower, it was the advent of the Ottoman administration to the city that contributed to construction and strengthening of the multicultural identity of the city enriched with the settlement of Muslim millet and others. In this respect, Mazower underlines the Ladino-speaking Jewish refugees of Thessaloniki who were expelled from Spain and found a safe haven on the Ottoman lands; Jews would constitute the largest religious group of the city by the 16th century and would survive until the German occupation of Thessaloniki in 1943. In his book, Mazower underscores how and why all three main constituents of the city, i.e. Christians, Muslims and Jews managed to survive and coexist till the end of the Ottoman administration of Thessaloniki in the early 20th century. Salonica is composed of three main parts. In the first part, *The Rose of Sultan Murad*, the author elaborates strengthening of Islam under the Ottoman administration of the city and emphasizes the arrival of Jews to Thessaloniki. Here, it is underlined that although three main confessions and their believers shared the same space and coexisted, they also had some frictions and problems regarding their rights and obligations that never resulted in a major friction that could endanger the peace and security of Thessaloniki. The second part, *In the Shadow of Europe*, informs the reader about the impact of Europe and European ideas on the city and its

inhabitants. It emphasizes how the concept of nationalism affected the balance between the cohabitation of three major confessions and the fate of Thessaloniki. In this framework, Mazower sheds light on the Greek War of Independence (1821) and its impacts on the Greek inhabitants of the city. As it is blatant from its title, *Making the City Greek*, the third section is devoted to explain how the multiethnic and multiconfessional identity of Thessaloniki was deconstructed and started to get transformed into a monoethnic and monoconfessional starting from the early 1900s.



Mazower's *Salonica* is an authentic and powerful book for several reasons. First, main issues that he discusses are written with a chronology by using various written sources ranging from memoirs to official reports and archival materials in different languages, which authenticates and enriches the whole story that Mazower tells to the reader about the history of Thessaloniki. Second, it makes the reader to see and interpret the past through the eyes of all three main constituents of the city. That is, the reader may feel sorrow towards Muslims sufferings at a page followed by the same or similar feelings towards Jews and Christians in the following ones. Provided that histories of the Balkan countries and cities are generally accepted to be selective and one-dimensional, the resourceful *Salonica* enables the reader to understand and interpret the history of a city from different perspectives.

In his book, Mazower focuses on the period regarding the Ottoman administration of the city that lasted for five centuries, which is also evident from the main title of his book. He actually underlines how the three main religions, i.e. Islam, Christianity and Judaism, coexisted peacefully as well as the main policy of the Ottoman Sultans in Istanbul towards the religious cohabitation in one of the most significant cities of the Empire across the Balkan Peninsula. While doing so, he overtly shows the reader that the mingling of the three main religious groupings had never turned out to form a mixed Thessalonian identity. Put it differently, differences between the three main faiths never mixed or blended together so as to form a new identity; religious, cultural, religious and linguistic differences between the three main component groups prevailed and coexisted peacefully.

Mazower indicates that survival of their differences, on the one hand, in their own districts actually contributed to the rich multicultural identity of the polyglot Thessaloniki throughout centuries. Nevertheless, this also provided a fertile ground for sowing the seeds of Greek nationalism that would not only result in changing the balances among the three main components of the city in favor of Greeks but also contribute to gradual Hellenization of the once-multicultural Thessaloniki. Mazower shows how the multi-confessional character of a metropolis had started to change with the Greek inheritance of the city in 1913; all of the Muslim Turks had to leave the city with the 1922-1923 Turkish-Greek population exchange process that will be followed by the collapse of the Thessalonian Jewry after the advent of the Nazi forces during the Second World War.

Moreover, along with emphasizing waves of plague, calamities, famines, corruption, violence and chaotic circumstances Mazower casts particular attention on the great fire of 1917 in Thessaloniki that helped to the physical disappearance of the historical richness of the urban center of the city such as mosques, synagogues, etc. that would be followed by the departure of Turks and Jews from the city. Thus, Thessaloniki would gradually lost its centuries-old civilizations and transform into a monoethnic and monocultural Greek city and "an ethnically and linguistically homogenized bastion of the twentieth-century nation-state" (p.11). As of 2015, those visiting Thessaloniki will still find a little about the once-robust Muslim Turkish and Ladino Jewish identities across the city since the non-Greek identity of Thessaloniki gradually disappeared.

Mazower's *Salonica* was first published in 2004. However, its popularity continues attracting those readers who are keen on developing their knowledge on the rich history of Thessaloniki. In recent years, the book has already been translated into Greek and Turkish languages so that more readers, now, can learn about the rich, vibrant and flamboyant past of Thessaloniki.