



UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS PRESS

Immigration & Ethnic
History Society

Reconceptualizing Diaspora

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Reviewed work(s):

Atlantic Diasporas: Jews, Conversos, and Crypto-Jews in the Age of Mercantilism, 1500-1800
by Richard L. Kagan; Philip D. Morgan; Homelands and Diasporas: Greeks, Jews and their
Migrations by Minna Rozen

Source: *Journal of American Ethnic History*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (Spring 2012), pp. 77-79

Published by: [University of Illinois Press](#) on behalf of the [Immigration & Ethnic History Society](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/jamerethnhist.31.3.0077>

Accessed: 09/04/2012 04:27

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RECONCEPTUALIZING DIASPORA

Atlantic Diasporas: Jews, Conversos, and Crypto-Jews in the Age of Mercantilism, 1500–1800. Edited by Richard L. Kagan and Philip D. Morgan. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009. xvii + 307 pp. Tables, notes, and index. \$60 (cloth); \$30 (cloth).

Homelands and Diasporas: Greeks, Jews and their Migrations. Edited by Minna Rozen. London: IB Taurus, 2008. 352 pp. Notes and index. \$100 (cloth).

Beginning with the rise of nationalism, social theorists regarded the state of diaspora as a pathological condition in which a group of people is brutally separated from its natural homeland, only to languish in helpless despondency until an eventual, triumphant return to the land of origin.¹ This morbid conception of diaspora is of little use to contemporary scholars of migration and ethnicity, who tend to focus on the vibrant cultural syntheses that global mobility produces. The essays collected in Richard L. Kagan and Philip D. Morgan's *Atlantic Diasporas* and Minna Rozen's *Homelands and Diasporas* add to the growing body of literature that rejects the negative valence that once had accompanied any discussion of diaspora. Instead, they use the concept of diaspora to craft transnational histories that emphasize hybridity and complicate notions of homeland and identity.

Rozen's *Homeland and Diasporas* is the more ambitious of the two volumes, compiling essays that investigate various moments in the long history of both the Greek and the Jewish dispersions across the globe. Much like its subjects, this volume traverses both time and space. It includes essays that range from ancient times to the modern period, and that focus on locations throughout the world. The strongest portions of the book are the contributions of editor Minna Rozen, which provide a broad overview of the Greek and Jewish diasporas and highlight the lessons we can learn from examining and comparing, as she puts it, the "people of the book" to the "people of the sea" (p. 35).

Rozen's primary rationale for juxtaposing Greeks and Jews rests on the very long-term nature of the diasporic experience of both groups. Their dispersals long preceded the advent of modern nationalism and the nationalist myth of a singular homeland as the spiritual center for a culturally homogenous diasporic people. In contrast, the essays in this volume uncover the ways in which Greeks and Jews transformed multiple areas of residence into homelands, and how multiplicity, rather than uniformity, characterized their dispersed communities. For instance, as Shmuel Refael's essay reveals, the Sephardic Jews living in Salonika, Greece, in the early twentieth century, wrote poetry that simultaneously romanticized Spain (from where their ancestors had been expelled in 1492), Jerusalem, and Greece as their spiritual homes. Likewise, Vasiliki Seirinidou points out the diversity of

the “Greek” community in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Vienna, which was comprised not only of ethnic Greeks but also of Vlachs and other groups who were as likely to declare loyalty to their Balkan heritage as to Hellenic roots. Taken together, the articles in this volume uncover a history of diasporic imaginations that defy the nationalist notion of dispersed peoples unified in their fidelity to only one, true, cultural homeland.

Though its contributions are significant, the very organization of *Homelands and Diasporas* limits the potential of this volume to challenge nationalist conceptions of ethnic identity. While Rozen herself does an admirable job at highlighting similarities between the Greek and Jewish diasporas in her preface and introduction, the vast majority of articles in this book deal with either Greek or Jewish diasporic history, rarely examining the ways in which the identities and dispersals of these two peoples intersected to create hybrid communities and affiliations. Of the sixteen articles compiled in the volume, only two integrate the book’s dual focus on Jews and Greeks: Aryeh Kasher examines the legal status of Alexandrian Jews in the Greco-Roman world, while Shmuel Refael’s aforementioned article investigates the multiple homelands of Greek Jews. Otherwise, the articles treat Greeks and Jews as two radically separate peoples with quite bounded ethnic identities. Additionally, and I don’t think incidentally, the articles focusing on Jews were all penned by scholars from Israeli universities, while scholars from Greek institutions composed the essays on the Greek diaspora. Consequently, the very structure of the volume reinforces the nationalist ethos that the volume attempts to displace.

Perhaps counterintuitively, the borders surrounding ethnic and religious identity end up feeling more porous and fluid in Kagan and Morgan’s *Atlantic Diasporas* than in Rozen’s volume. Though Kagan and Morgan focus only on one ethnic group instead of adopting the comparative approach favored by Rozen, the Jews that travel through the Atlantic world in this volume navigate a dizzying array of racial, religious, and political affiliations. Jonathan Israel’s contribution, a useful, sweeping overview of the Sephardic Jewish presence in the Atlantic basin, provides crucial context to the volume by showing how the Jews of Spain established new communities and trading networks throughout the Atlantic world after their expulsion in 1492.

Though much of the volume concentrates, and justifiably so, on the commercial exploits of Sephardic Jews in the Atlantic Basin, the most fascinating contributions to this volume show how the conditions of this particular diaspora challenged the boundaries of Jewishness in complex, often unexpected ways. Bruno Feitler, for instance, reveals that in the moment of religious freedom that occurred during the brief Dutch reign over Brazil between 1630 and 1654, Jews who had always upheld their religious traditions worked to define their relationship to “New Christians,” former Jews who chose to convert to Catholicism rather than face expulsion. The impulse to include the New Christians in the community of their former faith con-

vinced Jews to relax strictures that firmly separated Jew and Catholic, such as the law prohibiting uncircumcised men from participating in Jewish ritual.

Sephardic Jews were also forced to expand their communal boundaries, as Aviva Ben-Ur points out, in the Dutch colony of Suriname, where people of African origin comprised the majority of the population and Jewish slaveowners often engaged in sexual relationships with the women they owned. Suriname's Jews found ways to accommodate these relationships and the children they produced within their communal structure, blurring the firm lines of separation between Jews and non-Jews, Europeans and Africans.

Certainly, scholars of the Atlantic world will learn a great deal from discovering how Jews participated in the diverse societies that arose in this region between 1500 and 1800. Yet this focus on the Atlantic world begs the question, raised by Adam Sutcliffe's essay, of whether focusing solely on the Atlantic region limits our sense of the remarkable, global scope of the Sephardic diaspora during this period. After all, as we learned from some of the essays in Rozen's volume, the Sephardic traders operating in the Atlantic world were part of a worldwide trading network that extended to centers of commerce in Livorno, Aleppo, Izmir, and other ports on the Mediterranean Sea. Sephardic traders who forged connections between the Atlantic and the Mediterranean maintained an economic bridge between the Christian and Muslim worlds, a fundamental element of the age of mercantilism that a narrow focus on Atlantic commerce threatens to obscure.

But while one can quibble over the organization and focus of each of these remarkable volumes, this should not detract from their enormous accomplishments. Both volumes successfully displace a history of diasporic ethnicity that has long been constrained by the demands of nationalist ideology. They embody a new history of diaspora that emphasizes dynamic, hybrid identities and complex, often multiple loyalties. It is studies like these that have refashioned the very concept of diaspora and made it into a viable model by which to examine the history of migration and ethnicity.

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NOTE

1. Indeed, these theorists often looked to stateless Jews as the paradigmatic example of this pathological condition of diaspora. For a discussion of how social theorists, both past and present, have engaged with Jewish models of diaspora, see the introduction of Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin's *Powers of Diaspora* (Minneapolis, MN, 2002), 1–33.