

# HISTORY OF THE JEWS OF TURKEY

A Document-Based Question Unit for World History

developed by

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## Notes for teachers

**Historical background:** The first Jews may have arrived on the Iberian Peninsula as early as the time of King Solomon (c.965-930 B.C.E.) or as a result of the Jewish Diaspora following the destruction of the First Temple by Nebuchadnezzar (586 B.C.E.). Little is known about these early Iberian Jews except that in 305 C.E., the Council of Toledo passed an edict forbidding Jews from blessing the crops of non-Jews and prohibiting Jews and non-Jews from eating together. In

In 711 Muslims from northern Africa known as Moors conquered the Iberian Peninsula. Almost immediately, the re-conquest or *reconquista* began. The era of Muslim rule in Spain (8th-11th century) was considered the "Golden Age" for Spain when Muslims, Christians and Jews built a civilization that was the most advanced in Europe. By the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century, Christians controlled most of Spain and were increasingly forcing Jews to convert to Christianity.

Muslims believe that like Jews, they began with the Prophet Abraham. Muslims refer to Christians and Jews as "People of the Book" because they also received God's word in Holy Scripture. God's revelation to the Muslims can be found in the *Holy Qur'an*.

Sultan Bayezid II was the oldest son and successor of Mehmed II. Like his father, Bayezid II was a patron of western and eastern culture and worked hard to ensure a smooth running of domestic politics, which earned him the epithet of "the Just". Bayezid II also sent out the Ottoman navy to save the Arabs and Sephardic Jews who were expelled by the Spanish Inquisition. He sent out proclamations throughout the empire regarding the treatment of Jewish refugees and furthermore criticized Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabella I of Castile for expelling a class of people so useful to their subjects.

When the Ottomans captured Bursa in 1324 and made it their capital, they found a Jewish community oppressed under Byzantine rule. The Jews welcomed the Ottomans as saviors. Early in the 14th century, when the Ottomans had established their capital at Edirne, Jews from Europe migrated there. Ottoman rule was much kinder than Byzantine rule had been. In fact, from the early 15th century on, the Ottomans actively encouraged Jewish immigration.

## History of the Jews of Turkey

**Document-based question:** A document-based question (DBQ) is one that relies on both prior knowledge and information available in historical documents.

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**Task:** Using your knowledge of history and information from the documents, answer the questions that follow each document. Consider not only what the document said but also its context (who, where, when and why). As you do so, keep in mind the following question.

**Guiding Question:** Describe the nature of the historic relationship between Jews and Turks?

**Document 1: Excerpt from the *Edict of Expulsion of the Jews, 1492.***

You know well or ought to know... there were some wicked Christians who Judaized and apostatized from our holy Catholic faith, the great cause of which was interaction between the Jews and these Christians,

... [I]n the past year of one thousand, four hundred and eighty, we ordered the separation of the said Jews in all the cities, towns and villages of our kingdoms and lordships and [commanded] that they be given Jewish quarters and separated places where they should live, hoping that by their separation the situation would remedy itself. ...

every day it is found and appears that the said Jews increase in continuing their evil and wicked purpose wherever they live and congregate ...

Therefore, we, resolve to order the said Jews and Jewesses of our kingdoms to depart and never to return ... by the end of the month of July next of the present year ... under pain that if they do not perform and comply with this command and should be found in our said kingdom ... they incur the penalty of death and the confiscation of all their possessions.

Given in our city of Granada, the XXXI day of the month of March, the year of the birth of our lord Jesus Christ one thousand, four hundred and ninety-two years.

I, the King [Ferdinand]    I, the Queen [Isabela]

**Questions:**

What were the Jews accused of doing?

How did the Spanish government plan to deal with the Jews?

When was the Edict issued?

What is the significance of that year?

**Document #2: Qur'an, 29:45–49, Surah Al-Ankabut (Surah of The Spider)**

*A Surah is the Qur'anic equivalent of a book in the Bible. "Allah" is the Arabic word for "God"—Arabic speaking Christians and Jews use the word "Allah" in their prayers.*

“And dispute ye not with the People of the Book...but say "We believe in the Revelation which has come down to us and in that which came down to you; Our Allah and your Allah is one; and it is to Him we bow (in Islam)."

**Questions:**

To whom does the phrase "People of the Book" refer?

What does the Qur'an say about how Muslims should act towards People of the Book?

**Document #3: A proclamation by Sultan Bayezid II, ruler of the Ottoman Empire, 1481–1512**

“...the Jews of Spain should not be refused but rather welcomed with warm feelings and those who move against his decree and treat immigrants bad or cause any damage, however small it may be, shall be punished with a death sentence.”

"You venture to call Ferdinand a wise ruler," he said to his courtiers, "he who has impoverished his own country and enriched mine!"

**Questions:**

What is Bayezid's opinion of King Ferdinand?

What do you think he means when he says that Ferdinand has “impoverished his own country and enriched mine”?

**Document #4: Excerpt from the Edirne Letter, 15<sup>th</sup> century**

*Early in the 14th century, when the Ottomans had established their capital at Edirne, Jews from all over Europe migrated there. The famous Edirne letter was written in the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century by Isaac Sarfati, Chief Rabbi of Edirne, to a colleague in what is now Germany.*

I have heard of the afflictions, more bitter than death, that have befallen our brethren in Germany—of the tyrannical laws, the compulsory baptisms and the banishments, which are of daily occurrence. . . .Brothers and teachers, friends and acquaintances!

I, Isaac Zarfati, thought I spring from a French stock, yet I was born in Germany. . . .proclaim to you that Turkey is a land wherein nothing is lacking, and where, if you will, all shall yet be well with you.

The way to the Holy Land lies open to you through Turkey. Is it not better for you to live under Muslims than under Christians? Here every man may dwell at peace under his own vine and fig tree. Here you are allowed to wear the most precious garments.

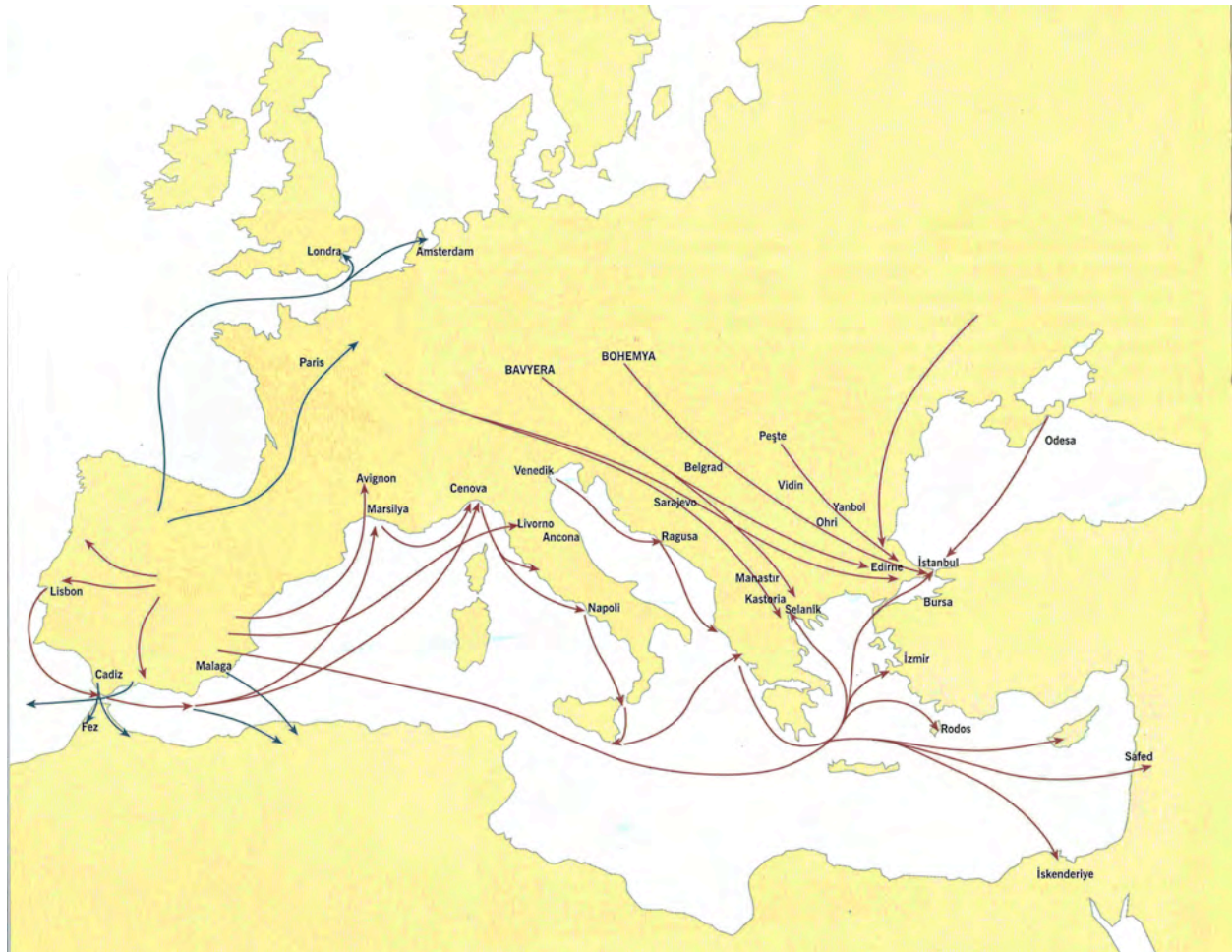
**Question:**

According to the document to the document, how are Jews treated in Turkey?

How are Jews treated in Turkey?

Why do you think this is the case? [hint: refer to the previous document]

## Document #5: Map of Jewish Migration, 15th century



### **Questions:**

Where did many of the Jews come from?

Where did they go? Trace the paths the many of them took to get there.

What inferences can you make about where Jews felt safe, given the political climate of the time?

**Document #6: Ferman (imperial edict) issued by Sultan Abdülmecit I, October 27, 1840**

*In February, 1840 a Capuchin friar named Thomas disappeared from Damascus with his Muslim servant, Ibrahim. Their whereabouts were never discovered. Local Christians said that the Jews committed the alleged murders in order to obtain blood to make their matzot for Passover. Such a false allegation is called a "blood libel"*

*Several prominent Jews of Damascus were rounded up and tortured. Several died, one converted to Islam, and a confession of guilt was extracted. In response to concerns of the Jews of Istanbul, Sultan Abdülmecit I issued a ferman or Imperial edict, October 27, 1840.*

...[F]or the love we bear to our subjects, we cannot permit the Jewish nation, whose innocence for the crime alleged against them is evident, to be worried and tormented as a consequence of accusations which have not the least foundation in truth... [and that] the Jewish nation shall possess the same advantages and enjoy the same privileges as are granted to the numerous other nations who submit to our authority. The Jewish nation shall be protected and defended.

**Questions:**

What is the Sultan's reaction to the events in Damascus?

Why do you think he has reacted this way?

**Document 7: Excerpt from a public address by Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk),  
February 2, 1923**

*Mustafa Kemal—who later took the name Atatürk, “father of the Turks”—was the founder and first leader of the Republic of Turkey following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War I.*

Some of our faithful elements who have joined their fate to that of the Turks who are the dominant element. In particular the Jews, having proved their faithfulness to this nation and to this country have, up to now, lived in comfort and in future will continue to live in comfort and happiness.

**Questions:**

What role does Atatürk say that Jews have played in Turkey’s past?

Based on Atatürk’s comments what role will Jews play in the future of Turkey?

Given that this address was about Atatürk’s vision for the new Republic of Turkey, why do you think he included this comment?

**Document 8: Excerpt from a speech by Turgut Özal, President of Turkey, at commemorations of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain, held in Istanbul, July 16, 1992**

“The Jews, who act in solidarity with the Turkish people have been great contributors to our society and have been distinguished citizens... Apart from their contributions our [Jewish] compatriots have acted as a bridge helping to develop friendly ties between our nation and the countries where their coreligionists have settled.”

**Questions:**

What value does Özal attach to the Jewish presence in Turkey?

What contributions does he specifically mention?

**Guiding Question:** Describe the nature of the historic relationship between Jews and Turks. How has it changed over time? Has the relationship been consistent across classes, regions, and historic periods? Cite evidence from the documents to help you formulate your answer.