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Review by Jaclyn Granick, Graduate Institute, Geneva, and Center for Jewish History

Abigail Green sets out to cast new light on the purpose of humanitarian intervention within the nineteenth-century international system through a comparative exploration of two cases. By exploring the international responses to questions of Jewish minority rights in Romania and Morocco at the 1878 Congress of Berlin and the 1880 Conference of Madrid, respectively, Green comes to a surprising conclusion. Davide Rodogno and Gary Bass, among others, have posited that the Great Powers cynically used the emerging practice of nineteenth-century humanitarian intervention (and its concomitant language of ‘civilization’ and ‘humanity’) on behalf of oppressed Christians in the Muslim Ottoman Empire. 1 Such recent literature has assumed that humanitarian intervention served as a means to create or reinforce European zones of influence in the weaker Ottoman Empire and as a pretext to force-feed Western political and civil norms to a ‘backward’ Islamic polity. Green, on the other hand, argues that humanitarian intervention in Ottoman lands rather indicated acceptance of the Ottoman Empire and adjacent Balkan states as limited members of the emerging international system. She advances this thesis through a comparison between the assumptions underpinning the very different treatment, focus, and attention by both Western governments and their politically active Jewish elites towards the Jewish Question in Morocco and Romania. By looking at international humanitarian responses to Jewish rights in the late nineteenth-century, then, Green is able to offer this more complicated dynamic of humanitarian intervention, demonstrating that humanitarian intervention historically occurred not in places where Westerners wished to assist specific minority peoples because they held some shared cultural values with the West, but in places that Westerners believed to be redeemable overall because of their proximity to Europe.

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“The Limits of Intervention” should be read in the context of Green’s own growing body of work on the Jewish Question, religious internationalism, nineteenth-century international history, the British Empire, and humanitarian intervention, the capstone of which was her award-winning biography of Moses Montefiore, the Anglo-Jewish activist for Jewish rights. Tracing Montefiore’s steps throughout the Jewish world along the Mediterranean and through Europe, and considering various international and imperial considerations of the Jewish Question that Montefiore’s travels provoked, Green offers a coherent pathway that transcends typical borders and defies easy categorizations. She has come to a number of critical insights along the way, at once contributing to an emerging foundational literature on the history of humanitarian intervention and questioning its core assumptions. This article, in other words, is a much-needed counterweight in the blossoming histories of humanitarian intervention, humanitarian relief, and human rights. As Green writes, “the Jewish question remains an illuminating case study because it crossed key boundaries between Western and Eastern Europe, and between Europe and the Muslim world” (5). Green’s work also is methodologically in line with the historical production coming out of the field of Jewish Studies, in the sense that it views Jews as both agents in their own history and objects in others’ history, as both insiders and outsiders.

First, Green makes a methodological contribution, pointing out that humanitarian intervention need not be seen as synonymous with militarized action, but can also include coercive diplomacy, especially those humanitarian concerns that were integrated into international agreements in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Coercive diplomacy, she explains, reflected a similar humanitarian agenda to that of the active deployment of military resources in another state ‘in the name of humanity,’ but rested on the reality of greater military power rather than the actual use of that power. That fact that there were never militarized interventions on behalf of Jews makes it necessary to expand the definition of humanitarian intervention, but, she continues, the story cannot then be explained simply in terms of a Western Christian religious affinity for Ottoman Christians. Neither the scale of the Jewish death toll, the systemic, rather than episodic, nature of the oppression of Jews, nor its primary locus in a Great Power (Russia) suggest that militarized humanitarian intervention on behalf of Jewish rights should have occurred in the nineteenth century. Green argues that European powers actually did act on behalf of Jews, even though they were not fellow Christians, and they did so even within Christian Europe, suggesting that humanitarian intervention acquired universal implications as early as 1840, in response to the emergence of blood libel allegations in the Middle East, most notably the Damascus Affair.

Having set the context and typology of humanitarian intervention and the Jewish Question, Green moves on to her two examples of coercive diplomacy: the international response to the question of Jewish minority rights at both the Congress of Berlin (1878) and the Conference of Madrid (1880). Green has to work hard to make the case for the Conference of Madrid on consular protection in Morocco as a reasonable comparison.

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for the Congress of Berlin and its discussion of Ottoman lands. While it is far from a perfect comparison, Green compellingly notes that both Morocco and the Ottoman Empire were crucial to British imperial ambitions and both were formally accepted as players in international diplomacy on questions that concerned them, unlike their colonized African neighbors. Although both were important examples of collective intervention in the Jewish Question at the highest diplomatic level, these gatherings of the European Powers and the United States produced different outcomes. Seeking to redraw the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire and its successor states in the Balkans, the Congress of Berlin produced a treaty endorsing the principle of religious equality. On the other hand, the Conference of Madrid, seeking to regulate the problem of foreign protection in Morocco, merely resulted in a non-binding declaration in favor of religious freedom. While both gatherings thus addressed the question of citizenship rights and discrimination against religious minorities on the periphery of Europe in the historically Muslim zones of empire, the international system in this comparison favored diplomatic intervention on behalf of religious minorities in the Christian Balkans, but not Muslim Morocco.

It is clear that Green has a mastery of the vast and disparate scholarship in several languages that is connected to her work. The article relies mainly on published primary sources, including British and U.S. diplomatic correspondence, with some unpublished archival material from the British Foreign Office. The evidence is strong enough given the innovative connectivity Green brings to secondary literature; the extensive analyses she has undertaken elsewhere of the British, French, German, and Hebrew-language press and makes some reference to here; and the article’s overall limited focus on diplomatic responses. Green is especially in conversation with Rodogno’s groundbreaking work on the history of humanitarian intervention in the Ottoman Empire, especially Against Massacre. Green uses the Jewish Question and her expanded definition of humanitarian intervention that actively includes coercive diplomacy to unravel and complicate some of Rodogno’s most basic assertions on this nineteenth-century history. Besides her clear contributions to this conversation on humanitarianism in the international system, Green is also speaking from the vantage point of a growing field of scholarship on nineteenth and twentieth century Jewish diplomacy and international philanthropy and its engagement with the emerging international system in Europe, a field which she has similarly both helped create and complicate.

3 Rodogno, Against Massacre, as well as his “The ‘principles of humanity’ and the European powers’ intervention in Ottoman Lebanon and Syria in 1860-61” and “The European powers’ intervention in Macedonia, 1903-1908: an instance of humanitarian intervention?” in Humanitarian Intervention, eds. Brendan Simms and D. J. B. Trim.


For all that Green’s article is expansive in scope and conclusion, and important for all those interested in the history of humanitarian intervention to read, Jewish international history remains a small specialty with nuances that are known to few. For that majority of readers she wishes to reach who are not intimately familiar with Jewish history, then, Green may assume too much knowledge. Her copious footnotes to whole fields of inquiry do not in themselves provide the necessary background, and she relies heavily on her related scholarship to provide the context for her discussion of Jewish activism and the Jewish Question. In particular, Green does not explain what she means by the ‘Jewish Question’ in her title. The ‘Jewish Question’ might be better thought of as ‘Jewish questions,’ a series of inter-related, hard-to-resolve issues revolving around emancipation, anti-semitism, Zionism, citizenship, labor, capitalism, and anti-Jewish violence, all of which fall under a greater question having to do with how Jews were to fit into modern society. Fortunately, she does give her readers the tools to understand how it was that Jews, as non-state actors, everywhere a minority without a government to call their own, carried out an international politics through alliances with other groups in society and with imperial states that wielded true political power. This decentered, international Jewish effort existed mainly to improve the condition of Jews, dovetailing increasingly with particular imperial interests over time and coalescing in moments of crisis, though the various organizations and individuals involved were unsuccessful at coordinating international action. Green is concerned with the way in which the ability of Jewish activists to influence diplomatic outcomes was dependent on their ability to make their concerns consonant with state interests and to make their case in the court of public opinion by building horizontal alliances with other humanitarian associations, justifying their politics in what Green terms, “the culturally coded language of ‘humanity and ‘civilization’” (480).

And here, in Green’s two case studies, we see a broad characterization of how Jewish activism played out and how Western states responded at the conferences in Berlin and Madrid. In Berlin, the preoccupation of the Great Powers was defending the rights of Christian minorities. Yet, Jewish diplomats were able to attract a significant amount of international attention to the cause of Jews suffering under the emerging states of Romania and Serbia, pushing the Jewish question at the Congress of Berlin. At the Conference of Madrid, which was intended to limit the number of Moroccan citizens claiming the consular protection of foreign powers, Jewish lobbyists were able to place the whole question of the Jewish condition in Morocco on the agenda by referring to the prominence of Jews among foreign protégés in Morocco. Overall, however, the question of Jewish rights in Morocco received far less attention in the West, though Jewish vulnerability there could have been considered equal to that in Romania, and Morocco’s centuries-old community should have had a far stronger claim to full rights than did the recent immigrants making up much of Romania’s Jewish population. Green takes her readers on what at first seems to be a tangent when she mentions that Western (mostly French and British, later German and American) Jews encouraged Jews in Europe and North America to integrate into their surroundings, whereas they pushed for Jews in Muslim lands to adopt Western standards of ‘civilization.’ Thus, somewhat ironically, in Berlin, Western Jewish organizations lobbied for full

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civil rights for Romanian Jews, while in Madrid, they lobbied for the privilege of special consular protection of Moroccan Jews. But this different Western Jewish approach to Romania versus Morocco turns out to have foreshadowed the reaction of Western governments.

Green makes the important point that there are longer-term diplomatic patterns that suggest that a ‘humanitarian’ preoccupation with civil and religious equality for religious minorities was a central plank of the modernization plan evinced by the emerging international system. Britain regularly put humanitarian concerns on its foreign-policy agenda, sometimes ahead of strategic concerns. Humanitarian concerns included Jews, and had for decades. But in Madrid, no state was willing to put sympathy for the Jewish cause above state interests. Why then, asks Green, did less momentum build up around the oppression of Moroccan Jews than Romanian Jews, and why did the Conference of Madrid issue a non-binding declaration on religious freedom rather than a treaty on religious equality like the Congress of Berlin? Green answers that this was because Morocco was considered an exception to that emerging international system, whereas the Ottoman lands were firmly within it. The Ottomans’ subjection to unwanted interference, proclaims Green, was actually an offhanded “compliment” (489). Western governments saw possibility in intervening in the Ottoman case in order to bring it into the international system. In contrast, they took caution in getting involved with Morocco, which they deemed unworthy of tutelage.

And here, then, is Green’s historiographical contribution, arguing against Rodogno’s assertions that humanitarian intervention served as a pretext for imperial expansionism through its cooperative nature, that it was built on the supposed religious affinity of Western and Eastern Christians, and that the Ottoman Empire was viewed as residing outside the pale of Western civilization. Simply put, says Green, humanitarian intervention did not have to do with Western religious affinity for the minorities in question, but instead with the affinity of Western states for promising political developments in current and former Ottoman lands and a predisposition towards thinking that the Moroccan case was unredeemably below their standards of political sophistication. There was a synergy between intervening in the Ottoman lands and liberal imperialism, but religious affinity was not its proxy—it was rather the perception that some, but not all, Easterners would be able to adopt the West’s liberal constitutional modernizing agenda and join the international system, including religious and civil equality.

Green’s conclusion questions the assumptions of previous scholarship, without providing a categorical answer; in so doing, it opens the history of humanitarian intervention for others to consider alternative comparisons. First, it provides a demonstration of how coercive diplomacy alone can actually be analyzed as part of humanitarian intervention. It also provokes new questions about whether Morocco stood in a category of its own in the imperial mindset between the Ottoman Empire and colonized Africa, or how these nineteenth-century humanitarian responses with their implicit imperial hierarchies related to later Interwar mandate categories. A more extended study of Green’s particular cases, peering into the archival collections of more of the Great Powers, writing a more nuanced account of the related Jewish activism, and exploring the situation on the ground in both Morocco and Romania and the impact of these actions on the lives of local Jews, would certainly provide fodder for a much longer and more detailed project.

Green’s article is compact, with a multi-faceted argument, and contributes novel sub-arguments and comparisons. By holding up mirrors between Berlin and Madrid, Romania and Morocco, East and West, Jews and Christians, she convincingly shows events and decisions that seemingly happened in distant worlds to be profoundly connected. The article sits at the nexus of literature on humanitarian intervention, nineteenth-century European Great-Power diplomatic and imperial history, and Jewish international history,
H-Diplo Article Review

and is an absolutely necessary read for scholars in these fields. It singlehandedly moves this conversation to consider alternative explanations for humanitarian intervention. For those who have read her other foundational work in these areas, it is a delight to follow her continued probing of its depths as she demonstrates that this history is far from settled. Its dense prose and wide scope combined with its utter specificity might be intimidating, but Green’s novel approach to this history makes it a worthwhile read for those willing to jump with her into a complex and unfamiliar landscape.

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