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Jews in the Late Ottoman Bureaucracy

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ABSTRACT: This study analyzes the social and educational backgrounds and the career paths of Jews employed in the late Ottoman central and provincial administration. The personnel records (*sicill-i ahvâl defterleri*) of the late Ottoman state consists of hundreds of files of Jewish officials. These files contain a range of information for each official, including their date and place of birth, their father's occupation, their language skills, the schools they attended, their dates of first appointment to state service, and the highest ranks they achieved during their careers. Where existing scholarship on the Jews in the late Ottoman bureaucracy has been based largely on piecemeal information and anecdotal evidence, a statistical analysis of the data held in these records enables to develop a better-grounded picture of Jewish civil servants in the Ottoman state, one that challenges numerous preconceptions in the scholarly literature. The study discusses the milestones of change in the recruitment patterns of Jews in the Ottoman Empire and questions prevailing claims about their overrepresentation in the state bureaucracy. It presents findings on Jewish civil servants' denominational identities, familial and educational backgrounds, language skills, and career patterns.

KEYWORDS: Jews, Ottoman Empire, Bureaucracy, Education, Non-Muslims.

An important facet of the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II (1876–1909) was the increasing recruitment of Jews into the flourishing civil service of the Ottoman state. But, to date, our knowledge of their position in the late Ottoman bureaucracy is largely anecdotal. How many Jews climbed the ranks of the bureaucracy, and how representative were they of their brethren in general? In the absence of a comprehensive statistical survey, it is impossible to know.

Fortunately, one essential primary source can serve as the basis for such a survey: the Ottoman personnel registers (*sicill-i ahvâl defterleri*). These records, commencing in 1879, contain the files of approximately 50,000 individuals, including state officials of Jewish origin. In order to develop a better-grounded picture of Jewish civil servants in the Ottoman state, this study presents a statistical analysis of the data contained in these records.