Late Ottoman Palestinians:
Social and Cultural Dynamics in an Eastern Mediterranean Society
during the Age of Empire,
1880-1920
LOOP
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60 Months

State-of-the-art and objectives

Towards a social history from a global perspective
LOOP analyses social and cultural dynamics in late Ottoman Palestine as a case study of a crucial part of the Eastern Mediterranean in the age of empire (Laurens 2004; Kozma, Schayegh, and Wishnitzer 2015). It is only a few years since the census registers of the three Ottoman districts that cover the present-day territories of Israel and Palestine have become available in digitised form. This body of sources is of huge value since it opens a new window through which we can look to understand the dynamics of a regional society in the late Ottoman Eastern Mediterranean in a novel way, including many actors who have till now been largely invisible in historical scholarship.

In the Eastern Mediterranean, the four decades between 1880 and 1920 were a time not only of imperialism, globalisation and Ottoman policies of “defensive developmentalism” (Gelvin 2008), but also of profound social differentiation, which was fuelled by, among other factors, the first modern globalisation and an unprecedented degree of human mobility and migration (Blumi 2013; Kozma, Schayegh, and Wishnitzer 2015). Thus, we find in this period the roots of many social formations that are still relevant today. Despite the growing literature on the history and culture of the modern Middle East, our knowledge is still very patchy when it comes to fundamental questions such as migration, changing patterns of education and the emergence of new collective identities. LOOP is especially interested in individual and collective practices for coping with various challenges and on censustaking as a social process (Özok-Gündoğan 2020). Models of social practices and strategies that will be developed in this project will help us, on the one hand, to gain novel perspectives on Palestinian society and the nature of late Ottoman rule and, on the other, to develop yardsticks by which to compare social practices across the region and beyond, and thus to contribute to ongoing efforts to write a global social history (Conrad, Eckert, and Freitag, eds. 2007; Osterhammel 2016).

Research questions

Late Ottoman Palestine, with its social diversity and broad variety of ethno-religious groups is a particularly interesting region of the Eastern Mediterranean. A unique density of documentation makes it a very rich case for studying social and cultural dynamics (e.g. Campos 2011; Jacobson 2011; Ben-Bassat 2013; Doumani 2017; Tamari 2017; Wishnitzer 2020, Dierauff 2020, and, including subsequent periods, Khalidi and Tamari 2020). New historical sources that have become available in recent years, including autobiographical sources, private papers and the archives of local institutions, such as churches and municipalities, provide additional exciting possibilities in this research field (Sakakini 2003, 2004; Avci, Lemire, and Naili 2014; Dalachanis and Lemire 2018).

This proposed project will analyse another particularly rich, but as yet, largely unexplored documentary corpus: slightly more than 1,000 census registers (compiled between the 1880s and the First World War) from the three Ottoman districts of Jerusalem, Nablus and Acre that, with some territorial additions, were later combined to become Mandate Palestine. My hypothesis is that the censuses, when approached with questions of social and cultural history and contextualised through complementary sources, will provide us with detailed information on sections of the population that
have been invisible in historical studies to date, especially women, children, the rural population, the middle classes and the urban poor. Although the census data were, of course, collected in the interest of the state, they cover parts of the population that are not represented in most other types of sources.

In a research project on the city of Gaza, which I co-directed with Yuval Ben-Bassat in 2016-2018, our team developed a database that made it possible for us to analyse a sample of the Ottoman population records (Ben-Bassat and Buessow, “Gaza Historical Database”). Our research has provided me with a considerable amount of preliminary data as well as many conceptual and practical insights (Ben-Bassat and Buessow 2020).

Encouraged by promising outcomes, I am now planning the next step: a study of the entire corpus with a novel focus on social practices and strategies. I intend to address the following three clusters of research questions:

What practices and strategies did late Ottoman Palestinians employ, across ethnic, religious and class divides, to confront challenges on the individual and collective levels, e.g., fostering social advancement of one’s household or coping with economic stress? How did this translate into social formations?

To what extent did the population counts in late Ottoman Palestine – unprecedented in their speed, depth and universality – influence the identities and conduct of the actors involved?

How did social practices and social formations relate to political and economic factors, such as specific economic opportunities, and state or private investment? How did they compare across the region and beyond?

This project is timely because several researchers have recently started to analyse similar data from other parts of the late Ottoman world (Saleh 2013; Ohanian, Başkurt, and Kabadayi 2020). Building on these studies and complementing them with a substantial amount of data and fresh questions inspired by historical anthropology, LOOP can be expected to contribute to a substantial change in our image of societies in the Ottoman Mediterranean.

State of the art and the potential of the Ottoman census registers

LOOP will be a pioneering undertaking with potentially paradigmatic implications for Middle Eastern history, because it will enable us to study more deeply sectors of society that are hard to find in other types of sources, such as women, children, the rural population, the middle classes and the urban poor.

The field of Middle Eastern history has matured over recent decades, but much remains to be done. Since the publication of Edward Said’s Orientalism (1978), earlier research on the Middle East has been intensely criticised (Abou-El-Haj 2000; Krais 2016). Indeed, scholarship until the 1970s mostly had to rely on literary texts and European archives, which implied a strong elite bias, as it was the cultural and political elites who created the bulk of these texts and who received most attention from European observers. This went along with conceptions of collective identities and ideologies such as nationalism based mainly on intellectual history, which often took proponents’ claims at face value, thereby neglecting other relevant factors such as material interests and political imperatives (Gelvin 1998). A major reason for these deficits was the inaccessibility and/or lack of systematic use of alternative sources. This situation changed considerably from the 1970s onwards, with new historical paradigms and the exploitation of new sources (Ma’oz 1975; Schöhch 1986). In particular, the discovery of Shariʿa court registers as a local archival source has thoroughly transformed the field (Rafeq 1980; Doumani 1995, 2017; Yazbak 1998; Agmon 2006; Reilly 2012). Additional impulses have resulted, inter alia, from the increasing accessibility of Ottoman archival material (Abu Manneh 1990; Gerber 1985; Avci 2004; Avci, Lemire, and Naili 2014) and from the analysis of “ego documents” such as biographical and autobiographical works (Manna’ 1995; Tamari 2011; Jacobson 2001; Mazza 2009;! Rioli 2018), petitions (Ben-Bassat 2013; Avci, Lemire, and Ozdemir 2018; Sievert 2014, 2020), the local press (Ayalon 1995; Beška 2017; Gribetz 2018; Dierauff 2020), Ottoman country surveys (Tamari 2017), maps (Arnaud 2001; Ben-Bassat and Ben-Artzi 2018) and material culture (Kark 1990; Sharon 1997–; Meier 2016). Numerous recent studies have shed light on subaltern experiences in the late Ottoman world, including the Palestinian districts. Examples include studies on women, class and gender (Agmon 1998, 2006), social protest (Cronin 2008), historical anthropologies of the rural societies of ’Ajlun and Artas (Mundy and Saumarez Smith 2007; Naïli 2007). Also highly relevant for our concerns are social histories of
space-making in Cairo, Beirut and Damascus (Hanssen 2005; Arnaud 2008; Grallert 2014), and of the careers of Ottoman administrators (Kırmızı 2007, 2014). Despite these advances, most of these studies remain fairly “insular”, insofar as they focus on only one location or category of persons at a time – mainly because sources were lacking that would make it possible to look at wider cross sections of the population.

The detailed late Ottoman population registers could be another “game changer” in this regard. However, due to the political sensitivity of demography in the Middle East, censuses for most parts of the late Ottoman world are not currently available. The main exceptions are the 1849 and 1868 censuses of Egypt (Cuno and Reimer 1997; Alleaume and Fargues 1998a; Saleh 2013, 2015), select census registers of the Muslim and Armenian populations of Istanbul (Duben and Behar 1991; Ohanian, Başkurt, and Kabadayi 2020). Rough demographic information has been culled from numerous foreign reports and from Ottoman provincial yearbooks (salnames), which, however, stopped covering the region of Palestine in detail after 1872, when the District of Jerusalem became an “independent” district detached from the Province of Syria (McCarthy 1990; Grossmann 2011).

Fortunately, complete or near-complete series of census registers are available for most locations in what later became Mandate Palestine, but their analysis has barely begun (Arnon 1978; Pagis 1997; Buessow 2011a; Campos 2018). Since 2016, the registers have been available online through the website of the Israel State Archives (ISA). I have already downloaded and indexed electronic copies of all available registers. The analysis of the census in LOOP will make possible a decisive step further, as it enables historians not only to study social actors who are hard to find in other types of sources, but also to study them with a representative view of the entire society. It will also help to rectify another bias in the literature on late Ottoman Palestine, namely the prevailing focus on famous cities, especially Jerusalem, Jaffa, Nablus and Haifa. We still lack an adequate understanding of the whole range of diversity in the various social landscapes of the relevant three Ottoman districts (Doumani 2017; Buessow 2011a). For this reason, the project will foreground localities that have so far received little attention in academic scholarship, such as the cities and regions of Acre, Afula, Hebron, Khan Yunis, Lydda and Nazareth.

To provide a brief overview of the project’s main source: From the 1880s onwards, the Ottoman administration systematically compiled population registers (Ottoman Turkish sicill-i nüfus defterleri) on an empire-wide scale, particularly during two waves after 1881 and 1902 (Karpat 1978, 1985; Shaw 1978). Although these counts did not fully conform to today’s standard definition of a census – the entire population was not counted at the same time and registers were constantly amended and updated – the forms conformed to the period’s state-of-the-art (McCarthy 1984; on the Russian census of 1897, Schwartz 1986) and they promoted the basic dynamics of modern censuses, especially the quantification of ethnic and religious classifications (Anderson 2006; Göderle 2016a, 2016b; Dirks 2001; Cohn 1988, 1996).

Ottoman population counts up to the 1880s recorded households (hanes), with detailed information on the household head and some information on the male household members, but only summary information on women and children. After 1902, all household members – including women, children and domestic workers – were registered with many details (although still fewer for women than for men). Mobile population groups, such as pastoral nomads and itinerant labourers, were not counted (Behar 1998a, 1998b). The census sheets were uniformly completed in Ottoman Turkish. For example, the categories of inquiry in the post-1902 “basic registers” (esas defterleri, 379 in the sample) include:

1. spatial data (name of neighbourhood or village, street, number of household);
2. data for identification of the individual, such as date and place of birth, names of mother and father, physical characteristics (for adult men only) such as height, skin and eye colour, and visible physical disabilities;
3. data on individuals within the household and family and their affiliation to an ethnic or religious community (millet);
4. data on the individual’s occupation and (occasionally) education.

In addition, special registers (more than 100 in the sample) contain additional information on marriages, deaths, the military draft, and other decisive events in individuals’ lives. Muhtar registers (compiled by
village/neighbourhood headmen, 17 in our sample), as well as several registers containing corrections and updates, promise insight into the processes of data collection and compilation. A conspicuous feature, for example, is that the Jewish muhtar registers, which make up the vast majority in the ISA collection, are in Hebrew. This is an interesting parallel to the Armenian-language census registers in Istanbul that have recently been studied (Ohanian, Başkurt, and Kabadayi 2020).

Preliminary studies have shown that the available population registers are mostly not suitable for making precise claims about the numbers of inhabitants in specific locations, but that they are very profitably analysed through questions regarding patterns of social, cultural or spatial phenomena (Buessow 2011a; Campos 2018). This raises questions as to which sections of the Palestinian population are actually covered in the available registers, how accurate these registers are and what is missing from them. Three points are of note here: (1) The inventory by Pagis (1997) shows that the registers for several locations are missing from the ISA collection. Regrettably, for example, for late Ottoman Palestine’s second largest city, Jaffa, only a fraction of the registers is currently available (copies may exist in Turkey, but they are not accessible at present). (2) As in every census in the world, we have to expect that there was some measure of undercount in the population registers. (3) With regard to the census-taking process and coverage, it is important to note here that, as in other parts of the Ottoman Empire, important sections of the population were not registered, namely the (semi-)nomadic Bedouins (Arabic, ‘arab or ‘urban) and probably also the itinerant Nawar community (Ottoman Turkish Kibt, in European languages mostly translated as “Gypsies” or Dom). Although art. 63 of the Ottoman census ordinance of 1902 prescribed the registration of nomads, in an update to the Jerusalem District census of 1913, the officials responsible note that the numbers for the Beersheba district were only an estimate, because the population “living in tents” had not been enumerated (gayr muharrer; BOA. DH.EUM.THR/88/35, 1 Ca. 1331 / 8 April 1913). However, we do in fact find people of Bedouin origin in the census registers, mostly women who had married into households in rural villages, but there are also cases of Bedouins registered in cities. Taking all these factors together, we estimate that the registers in the ISA collection cover about 85 per cent of the total population, or c. 500,000 individuals.

These various lacunae and “silences” in the population registers will be specifically addressed in Research Area 2 on census-taking as a social process (see part 1.3, below). Despite these drawbacks, I can state with confidence that the available population registers offer sufficient material for the analyses that we propose. We have reassuring evidence from samples from Gaza and Jerusalem that, whenever we compared the records with other available documentation (e.g. from biographical or genealogical works), the information matched to a large extent. We can also safely state that in the extant registers, there is no underrepresentation of women, such as is found in censuses of other world regions (McCarthy 1984); in our Gaza sample, for example, the gender ratio within households was quite balanced, with a slight majority of women (on average 4.0:3.89). The representation of age groups also follows the standard distribution (despite “age heaping”, on which see below). The information given in the population counts appears to have been filled in accurately for most fields, including biographical information, skin colour and health status, so we shall have a representative picture for most of Ottoman Palestinian society.

In sum, previous research on the late Ottoman censuses has demonstrated the potential of the population registers as a historical source, and they include case studies that can serve as models for further investigation. LOOP seeks to take a decisive step further and connect the evidence from the material on Palestine with scholarship on a global level. This discussion will mainly take place in weekly reading group meetings, working visits by targeted experts for specific questions, two workshops and an international conference. This is further explained in the methodology section below (2.2).

LOOP’s three research areas

I plan to publish my synthesis of the project in a book arranged in three parts that correspond to the project’s three research areas: social differentiation, census-taking as a social process, and economic and comparative perspectives (Fig. 1). The following sections outline the major objectives of these research areas.
RAI - Social differentiation

This first research area is concerned with the visions and divisions in local society and the social strategies of individuals and collectives. Its aim is to produce contributions to a historical anthropology of late Ottoman Palestine. It is especially here that we shall explore the census registers from a variety of perspectives, carefully trying to contextualise the statistical data and to tease out meaning from it. Sarah Büssow (PD1) will add her expertise in the analysis of household and family structures (cf. S. Buessow 2021; Buessow and Buessow 2020) and will oversee the enhancement of the project database.

From numerous possible topics, we have chosen to include those we judged most essential in light of the current state of research. Since we cannot be exhaustive, LOOP’s ambition is to produce exemplary studies that will make optimal use of the source material to map out the social space of late Ottoman Palestinian actors. I have adopted the process-oriented notion of social differentiation (Schwinn, Groneberg, and Greve 2011; Hirschauer 2014; Bachmann 2016), because my concern lies less with the models of stratification than with social practices and strategies that late Ottoman Palestinians employed to confront challenges on the individual and collective levels, e.g. to foster the social advancement of one’s household or cope with economic stress. We assume that the accumulation of individual actions led to the constant emergence and re-emergence of social formations. Once social boundaries were established, mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion became central topics and shaped individual lives.

Our analysis draws on Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of capital (Bourdieu 1986) and Anthony Giddens’s structuration theory (Giddens 1984), which geographer Jörg Gertel has combined into a model of resources (Gertel 2007). Gertel’s resource model distinguishes between allocative, monetary, incorporated and institutional resources. It was developed for and tested in household surveys in communities of agriculturalists and transhumant pastoralists (Gertel and Breuer 2007), and thus it is especially suited for the study of households in late Ottoman Palestine, which was primarily an agrarian society. In particular, it was desirable for every household to maintain a broad portfolio of resources. This helped them to minimise risks and made it possible for them to seize opportunities as they arose.

While the census offers substantial clues regarding incorporated and institutional resources, it contains less information on the crucial allocative and monetary resources that derived from land ownership, property and income. Therefore, these topics will be explored more deeply in an associated PhD project. The researcher in this case study (1.9) will enrich LOOP by looking into a complementary and rarely used set of sources, namely land and tax registers, that can provide us with information about property rights and land ownership (Kark and Gerber 1984; Kamel 2014; on land conflicts in colonial West Africa, cf. Eckert 1999).

Women and gender, household and family will be cross-cutting topics of analysis in all case studies on social differentiation, which will thus further refine recent research on women’s history (Agmon 2006; Köksal and Falierou 2013) and family history (Doumani 2003, 2017; Freitag and Lafi 2011) and help to dispel the widespread stereotypes concerning “the Arab extended family”, polygamy and child marriage. Examples for strategies on the family level include birth spacing (cf. van Bavel 2003), and coping with a divorce, both of which can be documented with precision through the census data.

By linking the census data to an Historical Geographic Information System (HGIS, more on which in section 2, below), we shall uncover the spatial dynamics of social phenomena over the 1880-1920 period, including the clustering of certain social categories (Alleaume and Fargues 1998a; Arnaud 2008; Krämer 2008; Ben-Bassat and Buessow 2018), migration (Norris 2016, 2017; Buessow 2011a), and the geographical extent of social networks and identities (Heacock 2008; Buessow 2010).

We shall start the exploration of the population registers by making inroads in the least-studied sectors of Palestinian society. The first case study (1.1) will be devoted to mapping out rural communities. This will mean exploring a new field of research, following a grounded theory approach (see section 2, below). As a first step, we shall examine variations in village organisation across the main regions of late Ottoman Palestine (e.g. demographic features, institutions, terminology for occupations). Using cases where documentation is more extensive than usual (e.g. through ethnographic studies such as Granqvist 1931), we shall then test the extent to which complementary material can help us to write “thick descriptions” of village life. In general, the rich early ethnographic literature (e.g. Lees 1911; Dalman 1928-41) and photographic evidence (e.g. Dalman 1925), as well as recent Palestinian “village studies” (Davis 2011), will be of great importance for creating context for the census data.
As part of the historical anthropology of late Ottoman Palestine, we shall look into the respective positions of age groups in society (case study 1.2). Our source offers insights into the reality of childhood and youth, (cf. Maksudyan 2014), as well as of maturity and old age (which remains virtually a blank spot in Middle Eastern history, except for studies in literary discourse, e.g. Shuraydi 2014). Using the census material, we shall attempt to reconstruct typical life trajectories of individuals of varying backgrounds (cf. Fargues 2000) and we will compare our results with the discourse of narrative and literary sources (Buessow 2011; Zachs and Geva-Kleinberger 2018). One aspect that also has to be borne in mind is the natural environment. Concerning marriage and reproduction, for example, we shall try to identify marriage patterns that are distinctive for the various geographical regions in conjunction with specific work activities. Our hypothesis is that life cycles were conditioned by the local environment, e.g. the seasonality of agricultural work, transhumance, and the availability of surplus food for marriage celebrations. Studies on Christian European communities show that these concerns would often override cultural or religious norms (Danubio and Amicone 2001).

In keeping with LOOP’s aim to rectify the elite bias in Middle Eastern history, the study of the urban poor (case study 1.3) will be a major focus in this research area. With this, we shall contribute to a better understanding of the resources and strategies of marginalised population groups (Moon 1996; Rogan 2002; Cronin 2019). In the population registers of Palestinian cities, frequently at the end of a listing for a specific neighbourhood, we find people who in all likelihood were poor and marginalised. We shall try to identify patterns in the way this information was registered. For example, it needs to be investigated whether people registered one after another were living together in the immediate vicinity or whether they were registered as a collective, despite residing in dispersed locations across the neighbourhood. Most of these persons were men, but the entries also include cases of divorced women living alone, as well as childless couples with a migrant or Bedouin background. Most of them were apparently without family. The question is the extent to which they could rely on charity or other solidarity structures, perhaps similar to those that historians have been able to document for manumitted slaves in Cairo and Istanbul (Erdem 1996; Toledano 2007). This research will be exploratory and risky, since we do not yet know how far we shall be able to connect such cases to each other. However, understanding these sections of the urban population is of crucial importance for other topics such as urban development, political agency and upward and downward mobility. Other sources such as the local press, consular archives, petitions, travel literature and memoirs can help to complement the sketchy information from census data and flesh out the emerging picture of the living conditions and livelihoods of the urban poor. For example, German consular reports from Jaffa repeatedly highlight the urban “riff-raff” as an active force in local politics after 1911, and the Arabic newspaper Filastin (“Palestine”) campaigns against migrant workers, who are depicted as a danger to public security (Dierauff 2020). As for their everyday strategies for survival, James C. Scott’s concept of the “weapons of the weak” (Scott 1985) promises to hold much explanatory value. Photographs and maps will help to localise shantytowns, only known so far from scattered anecdotal evidence. In contrast to Alexandria and Cairo, where thousands of people lived in shantytowns (Walz 2010), we assume that the urban poor in Palestinian cities lived either in suburbs, such as the so-called saknat of Jaffa (Grossmann 2011) or in small pockets in inner-city locations.

Migration patterns will be a research focus in the project’s third year (case study 1.4). Social mobility is often inextricably linked to geographic mobility (Lamberti 2002), so migration will represent a major focus within this research area. This includes migration by marriage, as in the case, for example, of Bedouin women who married into villages in the Gaza region, but also marriage migration between cities. Other reasons for migration were employment and rural flight. Forced migration can be traced in the register entries for slaves or manumitted slaves. We observe strategies of gaining a social and economic foothold among the first and second generation of new arrivals in Palestinian cities and villages. Cases of successful, or failed, integration into local society can be traced in the census registers through indications such as occupation, education, marriage and residential area.

The category of “millet”, or ethno-religious community, in the census registers emphasises the enduring importance of religion as a category of social order. We expect that ethno-religious community structures had strong correlations with occupation and migration patterns (Kabadayı 2009). We shall devote one in-depth study each to Christian communities (case study 1.5; al-Qudah 2007; Norris 2013, 2016; Mack, Dalachanis, and Lemire 2018) and Jewish communities (case study 1.6; Ben-Bassat 2009, 2020; Grossman 2011; Abramovich and Epstein-Pliouchtch 2016). The design of both studies is to be
discussed jointly at the workshop “Social differentiation” in year 2 of the project (see section 2.1, below). We expect innovative impulses from comparative discussion of two types of communities that are rarely considered together in the research literature. In both cases, it will be of particular interest to gauge the internal variety between confessional categories (e.g. well-established Sephardic Jews vs. recent Ashkenazi immigrants or local Greek Orthodox vs. Protestant immigrants) and to observe how far registration practices differed across communities.

In year 4, a case study will be dedicated to the question of the middle classes (case study 1.7). Building on a rapidly growing literature (Dejung, Motadel, and Osterhammel 2020), we shall explore resources and strategies of what was called in England before the industrial revolution “the middle sort of people” (French 2007; for the Middle East, see Abou-Hodeib 2017; Ryzova 2014; Watenpaugh 2006). Contemporary writings in Arabic and Hebrew tend to produce a dualistic picture of a society split into elites and commoners, which obscures the fact that there were certainly also considerable differences in wealth and lifestyle among the commoners. The most conspicuous examples of what we shall call “the middle sort of people” in local society are the many entries for artisans that we find in urban neighbourhoods. On the scales of economic and incorporated resources, artisans and shopkeepers, such as a sieve maker (kalburcu) or a grocer (bakkal), were certainly to be counted as neither elite nor poor. They are found as signatories of petitions (Ben-Bassat and Buessow 2020) and their work occasionally received respectful mention from literati (al-Qasimi 1988). Indications of upward mobility can be gleaned from the careers of their relatives or descendants, if, for example, some of them made the pilgrimage to Mecca (noted in the census by the title hajj), studied in school or found employment in government offices. Despite such common traits, we assume that, similar to findings on early modern England, the social identity of these people remained fragmented. Our search for the “middle sort of people” also includes the countryside. On the one hand, many contemporary sources deplore the growing indebtedness and insecurity of rural producers, while on the other, one should not overlook the fact that, from the 1850s on, successive waves of export booms in cotton and grain enriched numerous peasants, and increasing numbers of their sons and daughters were able to attend newly-built schools in the countryside. This middle peasantry is almost silent in invisible narrative sources. However, it is evident that rural consumption experienced an upswing (Reilly 1981; Doumani 1995). We shall identify more traces of them in the census records, in addition to evidence collected in the PhD project on land, property and income. The results will be linked to the general discussion on middle strata and middle classes in non-industrial societies. Given the high relevance of the topic for Middle Eastern history, the findings are to be published in a separate research article.

The last field we shall explore is race and skin colour as categories of social ordering (case study 1.8). A preliminary study has established that entries in the population register show a correlation between skin colour and social status: light skin was more frequently associated with education and high social status than brown and dark skin. Moreover, local Arabic writings display social and racial prejudice against people with an African migration and/or slave background (Buessow and Buessow 2020). When writing this case study, in year 4 of the project, we shall be able to draw upon extensive data in our database (see section 2, below) and thus explore the largely uncharted correlation of social status and ethno-racial attributions in a nuanced and empirically grounded way (cf. Stoler 1989).

RA2 - Census-taking as a social process

The second research area involves a change of perspective. Here, we study the Ottoman census registers not only as a historical source but also as an object of inquiry in themselves. We reflect on its own inherent biases, aiming to understand these through careful “ethnographic” examination of the registers’ genesis and internal logic (cf. Stoler 2008). The census was an extraordinary undertaking as it brought the Ottoman state virtually to the doorsteps of most inhabitants. A study by Beshara Doumani on an earlier count in the Nablus region around 1850, provides evidence that census figures were to some extent modified according to local political interests. He thus speaks of “the political economy of population counts” to describe the contested nature of the process (Doumani 1994). Given our knowledge of the registers, we assume that skewing the data to this extent was almost impossible in the period under study. However, there were more subtle strategies of evasion as well as long-lasting effects that need to be studied in order to understand the census as an agent, or catalyst, of social change in its own right. Jakob Krais (PD2) will add his expertise in colonial history and discourse analysis (e.g., Krais 2019, 2020) to this research area and will use it to broaden his research portfolio by working on
an Ottoman topic.

Comprehensive censuses, new taxonomies and the concomitant science of statistics, which all developed over the course of the 19th century, were important foundations for modern states that sought to control the population on their territory and render it “governable” (Hacking 1991; Alleaume and Fargues 1998b; Louckx 2017). In line with recent historical studies on statistics and state building in the 19th century, we understand the act of surveying the population as a process of knowledge production (Brückweh 2015; Randeraad 2010; Crook and O’Hara 2011). The ways statistical knowledge was developed and used after the count differed widely (Schweber, Adams, and Steinmetz 2006). While census data in the Habsburg Empire, for example, were accessible only on aggregate levels (Göderle 2016a), the Ottoman administration also used them as local registers from which data were culled to issue individual documents such as identity papers (nüfus tezkeresi) (Wallach 2020). In the Ottoman Empire, religious community leaders actively participated in the counts, kept copies of those that concerned their own community and sometimes even translated them into its lingua franca (Ohanian, Bašturt, and Kabadayı 2020).

In this research area, we shall study the census registers (defters) as such, focusing not on the data filled in, but rather on the pre-set forms, their categories and how they were filled in. Further sources will include the population registry ordinance (sicill-i nüfus nizamnamesi), which also contains practical instructions for census-takers, as well as other legal documents regulating the census. Case studies will focus on the classifications in the census as social construction and their genesis in negotiations between state officials and members of the local population (cf. Göderle 2016a). This perspective requires thorough archival research on the taking of the Ottoman census and its actors.

The starting point of research will be a thorough investigation into the taking of the census (case study 2.1) (Özok-Gündoğan, Nilay. 2020; Levitan 2011; Anderson 2015; Estrada Orrego 2017). It will be imperative to find out who the actors were who actually collected the data, how much time they had to do so, and how they were trained and equipped. As has been shown for some Arab provinces, Ottoman officials, even in the early 20th century, were often supposed to acquaint themselves with local social realities on the spot without much preparation (Minawi 2016; Kühn 2018). This leads to the question of how strictly or flexibly the registers were completed in practice. In this context, we should finally look for the gaps as well as points of attention in our sources. Who is not counted (beyond the cases of Bedouins and Nawar)? Which type of information received particular attention for which category of persons?

Another cluster of questions revolves around the classifications employed in the census (case study 2.2). By investigating the population registers, their terminology and their classification scheme, it is possible to complement studies on Ottoman political discourse in the reform era (Reinkowski 2005; Doganalp-Votzi and Römer 2008) with the analysis of a new source. We have to keep in mind that, in contrast to places where classification systems were introduced by colonial powers (e.g., Dirks 2001), the Ottomans were building on established administrative discourses and bureaucratic practices, which had helped them to order diverse populations for centuries (Ferguson 2018). This interest in the historical semantics of social categories connects the project with the conceptual and even intellectual history of the late Ottoman Empire, and thus contributes to the emerging global history of concepts more broadly (Pernau and Sachsenmeier 2016).

Censuses have often been studied with regard to the classification systems they employ and their consequences for identity politics (Kertzer and Arel 2002). With regard to the 19th-century Ottoman state, Karen Barkey has argued that a premodern “empire of difference” evolved into a modern, i.e. homogenising, nation state (Barkey 2009). Still, categories of ethno-religious classification actually remained in flux until the end of the Ottoman period (Schull 2009; Dündar 2015; Lonergan 2018). In Palestine, common confessional categories, such as “Muslim” (without differentiation) or “Greek Orthodox” (Rum), coexisted with categories like “Sufi” (Muslim mystic) or “Maghribi” (of North African origin), which are much harder to fit into the ostensibly millet-based framework of the population count. This practice suggests a very pragmatic approach and implies the existence of negotiation processes between centrally predetermined classification principles and local people’s identification (Yosmaoğlu 2006). On the other hand, census categories based on allegedly scientific and self-evident criteria such as language or religion have contributed to a reification of national or sectarian identifications and thereby replaced previous ambiguities, as has been shown for various contexts (e.g.
for the Habsburg Empire, Stergar and Scheer 2018), the prime example being caste enumeration in India (Dirks 2001; Bhagat 2006; Samarendra 2014).

Next, we shall study local responses to census-taking (case study 2.3). Beyond perspectives that privilege the agency of state officials, we shall try to look into the responses of the local population enumerated in the census. This perspective can elucidate the practical process of compiling the data. We shall also search for possible scepticism towards or even resistance to the endeavour, which can tell us something about local views on the centralising and “modernising” state. We also assume that some people tried to avoid being counted, for fear of taxation, conscription, or the like, so we shall take a closer look at processes of negotiation of social categories and identities, and thus counterbalance the focus on the official discourse (Scott 1990). At the same time, state yearbooks (salnames) popularised census statistics (Grossmann 2011) and the local Arabic press offers ample evidence for the fact that the availability of official numbers encouraged statistical thinking, as has been observed as a consequence of other populations counts. Similar to what Crook and O’Hara state for Britain, public life in the major cities of the region, especially Jaffa, Jerusalem and Haifa, became almost unthinkable without the use of statistics and statistical reasoning (Crook and O’Hara 2011). Numbers and rations came to dominate political discussion, and were used for making political demands, for example for proportional representation of religious groups in local councils (e.g. in Jaffa, cf. Buessow 2011a).

Military conscription is a field that has been studied to determine the reach of the “modernising” state during the late Ottoman period (Hartmann 2016). In the fourth year of the project, a case study (2.4) will shed new light on this issue. Military registers (results of the military lottery, kur’a meclisi) and the census’s “military status” section will allow us to determine which sections of the male population were actually conscripted, which avoided it – whether as part of an official policy or as result of informal arrangements – and how the burden of the draft was generally distributed across regions and social categories. In other words: who bore the brunt of Ottoman military service?

The nexus between power and knowledge production has often been studied for colonial states of the 19th and early 20th centuries (Mitchell 1991; Cohn 1996). And, at least since Benedict Anderson’s introduction of the topic into the revised edition of his seminal work Imagined Communities, the census and the classification of populations it produced has figured as a central feature of colonial techniques of domination (Anderson 2006; Ahmed, Riley, and Emigh 2004). In the project’s final year, we shall thus take up the question of colonialism (case study 2.5). In addressing this nexus for the Ottoman Empire, the investigation will contribute to the debate on the character of Ottoman rule, particularly in the Arab provinces (Herzog and Motika 2000; Makdisi 2002; Deringil 2003).

RA3 - Economic and comparative perspectives

The third research area will link our findings to contemporary economic trends and develop yardsticks against which to measure local phenomena. The postdoc in this research area (PD3) will add the crucial perspective of economic history, which is essential for the success of the entire project. He or she will join LOOP in year 3, when there will be enough data for statistical analyses. PD3 will formalise the models of social practices developed in RA1 and pursue comparative quantitative analysis of the census data with a special focus on education and health. Another objective of RA3 is to systematically bring our material to bear with major questions of the “age of empire” that are not, or not at first glance, reflected in the census. Examples are the expansion of European capitalism, which led to massive investment in Palestine that in turn attracted immigration from Syria, Egypt and beyond. Another is the massive emigration of people from the region, especially to the Americas (cf. Blumi 2013), and the forces that compelled them to leave. It also need to be asked to what extent do we find the dramatic effects of the Great War reflected in our material (cf. Jacobson 2011; Tamari 2011; Tamari 2017). For a researcher in economic history in the early stages of an international career, this can be an excellent opportunity to profit from the material collected in the project and add a Middle Eastern case to his/her research portfolio.

A PhD project will complement our analysis of social differentiation in RA1 by a study on landownership, property and income in select regions of late Ottoman Palestine (case study 3.1). Despite the central importance of these resources for politics and society in the region and despite a wealth of specialised studies, we still lack a monograph that would discusses landownership, property and income in late Ottoman Palestine as interrelated questions. The tasks of the PhD project include: a survey and critique of the available primary sources (e.g. laws and regulations, tapu registers, individual
land titles) and studies (e.g. by contemporary academics and by the British Mandate authorities after 1920), exemplary case studies establishing profiles of ownership, and the application of general insights from research on Ottoman economic and legal history (e.g. Mundy 2007; İslamoğlu 2004; Schaebler 2001). The resulting study will be an exceptional opportunity for a gifted candidate to launch an international academic career in Middle Eastern history.

The case studies conducted by PD3 will examine the data in both quantitative and qualitative ways and will help to set the observations on social differentiation in a global comparative context. They will focus on education and health, two topics on which we have much data in the census registers. The level of education of the local population has thus far been mainly dealt with through studies on the school system (Somel 2001; Fortna 2002) and reading culture (Ayalon 2004; Fortna 2011). Recently, economic historians have developed a new tool to trace populations’ standard of numeracy (A’Hearn, Baten, and Crayen 2009; Crayen and Baten 2010; see section 2, below). This approach will be applied in a study on numeracy as proxy for education (case study 3.2).

Health, the topic of case study 3.3, has mostly been studied in the context of the development of modern medical facilities and the emergence of state policies on public hygiene (Perry and Lev 2007; Demirici and Somel 2008). By using indications of illnesses in the census registers’ physical characteristics section (with all necessary caution about, e.g., undercount), we shall be able to map the regional prevalence of certain diseases and their distribution across social categories (Stegl and Baten 2008). Indications of height for the males adult population will be analysed, tentatively, as to whether they might provide leads towards nutritional status (Baten and Blum 2014).

Qualitative studies on education and health will seek to contextualise our findings. When studying health, for example, we will enquire about the presence of doctors and medical facilities in different regions of the three Palestinian districts. (In so doing, we can draw on studies conducted by Liat Kozma and her collaborators from 2017 in the framework of the ERC project MID EAST MED). Similarly, with regard to education, we shall look at the ratio of teachers to general population, which can provide some clues as to the availability of schooling in urban and rural settings. We shall also be able to detect the respective impacts of state and missionary schools, with their uneven geographical distribution, including schools in model villages financed by Sultan Abdülhamid II (Fischel and Kark 2008). In addition, we want to examine further documentary evidence to refine our picture. For example, the section on “language proficiency” in the registers used in Jerusalem (a special feature that was
apparently included only in this city, listing languages such as Turkish and Yiddish) will allow us to learn more about people’s knowledge of language (Özkan 2010; Boyacioğlu 2017). We also expect that we shall be able to help bridge the gap between cultural historical research on reading practices, on the one hand, and works of economic history with an interest in human capital formation, on the other, which have often been much broader in scope, in both spatial and temporal terms (Pamuk 2018). Finally, I shall situate the findings from this research area in a comparative transregional framework to enable us to draw lessons for a global social history (case study 3.4). That is, I shall compare the findings with those of other relevant studies on the period with a systematic preference for non-European examples over European ones (Chaudhary 2010; Obikili 2013; Saleh 2015; Shiue 2017; Padilla Calderón 2019). Finally, we shall formulate from the findings a first contribution to a global social history and also discuss and question established social science concepts in this light (Osterhammel 2016). This last objective will also be presented and debated at the project’s final conference.