

ABSTRACT

From the early years of the Ottoman empire, land censuses were carried out in selected parts of the empire. During the rule of Sultan Suleyman in the 16th century, it was legislated that censuses should be regularly done once in every one hundred years. However, land censuses alone were not comprehensive enough for accurate record of population flow and a system to conduct population censuses gradually developed. Since the urban centers needed to be watched carefully and immigration regulated as much as possible, the methods of carrying out this difficult task had to be improved. The process of “modernizing” the population censuses took place during the first decades of the 19th century, and can be seen in censuses of a number of selected provinces and districts, including Palestine.

Several population censuses were carried out in Palestine during a period of half a century from 1875 until the end of World War I. They included all the inhabited settlements - agrarian and municipal, central and rural. The information was written on a customized set of forms, that were bound together to “Nufus” books (meaning the “books of the souls”). Nufus is today a general term describing all forms of Ottoman population registration - formal or informal, in standard books or personal notebooks, in Turkish or in other languages.

Palestine gradually developed from an unimportant and neglected province at the beginning of the 19th century, to a religious, cultural and political center towards the end of Ottoman rule in the second decade of the 20th century. The growing interest in this area was not only Ottoman, and not restricted to Muslims. On the contrary - European countries forced their way into Palestine, and a new complex reality developed as a result of the religious and cultural interactions between Jews, Muslims and Christians, old residents and new-comers. This reality is reflected in the Nufus books that contain detailed information about the inhabitants of the country: date and place of birth, address, occupation, religion and sect, physical appearance, marital status, service in the army, and many other details.