



Matthias Hambrock. *Die Etablierung der Außenseiter: Der Verband der Nationaldeutschen Juden 1921-1935.* Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2003. ix + 787 pp. EUR 89.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-412-18902-0.



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“The Most Loyal Opposition” to Nazism Reevaluated

In recent years, new studies in the field of German-Jewish history have benefited from sources from previously inaccessible Eastern European archives and engaged in an ongoing challenge to the enshrined dualism of “Jewish nationalist” and “liberal-cultural” master narratives. A sub-set of these studies specifically centers on one of the many associations that helped shape German-Jewish organizational cultures and identities after the First World War. Drawing on files of the Central Organization of German Citizens of the Jewish Faith (CV) in the Obsobyi Archive in Moscow, Avraham Barkai has written a largely intellectual history of the CV. His study traces the organization’s development from a defensive organization against anti-Semitism to an “association of conviction” (*Gesinnungsverein*) and the largest Jewish movement of the Weimar years. In his unpublished dissertation, Greg Caplan has reexamined the history of the National Union of Jewish War Veterans (RjF), which clashes with key segments of the liberal-cultural narrative. Caplan argues that the veterans’s model of “military masculinity” attracted growing support especially among German-Jewish youth estranged from the CV. Yet the RjF also alienated potential supporters by

its adherence to values such as extreme nationalism and anti-bolshevism. Based on the prevalence of these values, the author provocatively characterizes the RjF as an expression of “Jewish fascism.”[1]

In his recent study *Die Etablierung der Außenseiter*, German historian Matthias Hambrock has reevaluated the development and role of yet another organization, the Association of National-German Jews (Verband nationaldeutscher Juden, VNJ). In contrast to the CV and RjF, this association, as Hambrock stresses, never moved beyond the status of a “marginal group” and was not representative of German Jewry (pp. 1, 7). Due to its prolific publishing activities and provocative positions, however, the VNJ received considerable attention in the public debates in German-Jewish and mainstream German-Gentile political cultures. The association stood out based on its fierce verbal attacks on Eastern European Jews (*Ostjuden*) and its 1933 electoral support for the German National People’s Party (DNVP), the Nazi party’s coalition partner. The VNJ’s subsequent self-description as the new regime’s “most loyal opposition” also caught the attention of its opponents (p. 642). Contemporary crit-

ics, therefore, referred to the VNJ as “Jewish fascists” and “Jewish anti-Semites” (pp. 4, 520). In conjunction with the dominant master narratives of German-Jewish history, these characterizations have shaped much of the historiographic treatment of the organization after 1945.[2]

In his massive 700-page work, Hambrock deliberately avoids these highly charged contemporary labels. He also seeks to escape the conventional narrative prefigurations of his topic. Hambrock presents a careful and well-balanced analysis of the VNJ, its practices and language. He places the VNJ in the context of the complex social interactions and discourses in the fragmented mainstream society and German-Jewish community of the Weimar and early Nazi periods. The author sets out to explain why VNJ activists behaved the way they did and why the majority of German Jews did not follow their lead (p. 13). The study is a slightly abridged version of Hambrock’s Ph.D. thesis (Münster, 2001). Hambrock argues that the VNJ embodied “the Jewish contingent of the radicalized German bourgeoisie.” Especially the educated middle class (*Bildungsbürgertum*) lost much of its standing in the political and socio-economic changes following the First World War and entered a state of alarm and resentment. In this setting, VNJ members struggled and ultimately failed to harmonize their belief in the “priority to identify with the nation state” and their expectation to gain full “integration and recognition” (p. 721). To explain this failure, Hambrock points to the ongoing conflict between the “factual integration” of German Jews and the “unbroken continuity of the figurative difference between Jews and non-Jews” which was only intensified by the process of “establishing the [Jewish] outsiders” in the national life of the Weimar Republic (p. 10).

This argument reveals the author’s thought-provoking engagement with theoretical approaches that increase the innovative character of his work. Hambrock draws on the “established-outsider figuration” conceptualized by Norbert Elias.[3] In his analysis, Elias tied the emergence of these figurations to practices of interdependent people and the exercise of power. This approach enables Hambrock to examine the complex interactions between “established” and “outsiders” and shed light on the many paradoxes of the VNJ’s work. Most strikingly, association activists stepped up their efforts to appease the established yet struggling bourgeoisie and embrace its normative-cultural imagery. The established, however, increased their “emotional barriers” against the perceived “outsiders” and intensified their adherence to homogenizing discourses that evolved

around a German-Jewish dichotomy. On this basis, they displayed passivity in light of the growing anti-Jewish discrimination by the *völkisch* right (pp. 451, 352). In addition to the established-outsider model, Hambrock integrates the concept of emotions into his study of the VNJ and anti-Semitism. Pointing to the field’s emphasis on structures and intentions, Hambrock claims that historians of Nazism have largely marginalized the use of this concept as an analytical tool. Drawing on advances in the study of nationalism,[4] the author understands emotions as critical “steering devices” that motivate and also prohibit action (pp. 11-12).

Hambrock organizes his book in twelve chapters that largely unfold along chronological lines. After the introduction, the author uses chapter 2 to sketch the development of German-Jewish emancipation from the late eighteenth century until the Weimar Republic, paying specific attention to changing social structures and modernization. Chapter 3 analyzes the VNJ’s ideological foundations. Hambrock demonstrates that the organization’s self-perception was rooted in a “three-path model” propagated by VNJ chairman and ideologue Max Naumann (1875-1939). The model differentiated between the Zionists with their “strong national Jewish feelings,” an indecisive “layer in-between” (*Zwischenschicht*) and the “national German Jews” (p. 45). In the VNJ rhetoric, these national German Jews were part of the “Jewish tribe” and belonged to the German *Volk* on the basis of their feeling and will. Hambrock shows how the organization rejected racist constructs of the *völkisch* right that portrayed German and Jewish descent as mutually exclusive. Yet VNJ members struggled to downplay their own biological thinking and to maintain a strong emotional component that did not contradict one of the contemporary large-scale constructs of *Volk* (p. 54).

Chapter 4 examines the social and economic profile of VNJ members. The association’s average membership did not exceed 3,500 (pp. 101-102), testifying to its status as a marginal group. Hambrock focuses on 310 VNJ activists whose biographies he was able to reconstruct on the basis of the association’s publications, contemporary reference works, and fragmented archival records. The author reveals that more than 80 percent of the analyzed activists were self-employed. Physicians and lawyers constituted the dominant professions (pp. 110-111). Forty percent were born prior to 1875 and almost half of the surveyed members lived in Berlin alone (pp. 104, 161-162). The social composition of the entire VNJ membership thus strikingly resembled the background of the leadership circles of other German-Jewish organizations such as the

CV (p. 113). VNJ activists had seemingly been established among the urbanized *Bildungsbürgerertum*.

The following chapters illuminate the VNJ's exchanges and conflicts with rival German-Jewish organizations and groups. Continuing and radicalizing older prejudices in the acculturated German-Jewish community, the VNJ was particularly adamant in its opposition to the *Ostjuden*. The organization argued that their presence and noticeably "Jewish way of life" had a negative impact on all Jews in the country. In their efforts to appease the resentments of the Gentile bourgeoisie, the VNJ activists blamed, for example, the Jewish victims of the 1923 Berlin Scheunenviertel riot for their plight and advocated immigration restrictions for Eastern European Jews (pp. 196, 177). The national German Jews also harshly criticized German Zionists for their "dual loyalty" to Palestine and Germany. In their eyes, this stance only reinforced Bismarck-era accusations of the Jews as "enemies of the Reich" (p. 200). The author, finally, investigates the complex relationship of the national German Jews with the CV, the quintessential expression of the VNJ ideology's "layer in between." Hambrock characterizes later VNJ members as a "group of dissatisfied activists at the grass roots of the Central Organization" whom CV leaders could not accommodate in 1920-21. As a result, they formed the VNJ as an "organized corrective to the large defensive organization" (p. 229). The VNJ especially rejected the CV's emphasis on Germanness as an expression of rational citizenship combined with emotional bonds to a religious Jewishness. While CV leaders regarded the VNJ as "superfluous," they felt threatened by Naumann's criticism, which accused them of being nationally unreliable (pp. 233). Hambrock skillfully depicts the gulf between the VNJ and other Jewish groups which kept the VNJ membership at a low level. Throughout his study, the author is also careful not to overemphasize this gulf. He shows, for instance, that VNJ activists belonged to the CV and occupied some leadership positions. Hambrock also points out that the VNJ shared German Zionists's opposition to intellectualism, their skepticism towards liberalism, and their "fixation on the highly emotional components of nationalism" (pp. 529, 428).

In chapter 8, Hambrock shifts his attention to the VNJ's relations with the main political parties of the Weimar Republic. He highlights the organization's declared belief in nonpartisanship and produces evidence that dignitaries and politicians from the SPD to the DNVP attended the VNJ's inaugural meeting in Berlin in 1921 (p. 334). Yet the association's social composition, its "national German" values, and close personal ties to the

national-liberal and conservative press worked against any broad alliances. Instead, these factors underpinned a "mutual closeness" with the right-liberal DVP and, towards the end of the Republic, even the DNVP. As Hambrock reasoned, VNJ activists read an "inclusive potential to integrate" into statements of right-liberal leaders and downplayed various manifestations of anti-Semitism in the party's ranks (p. 340).

The remaining chapters examine the VNJ's confrontation with anti-Semitism and the association's struggle and demise during the Nazi period. Hambrock shows that anti-Semitism played a key role in the self-perception of the organization whose members had "no illusions" about the "tenacity of the[se] prejudices" (p. 477). VNJ leaders called on the membership to work against the spread of anti-Semitism. They advocated "exemplary" Jewish behavior in everyday life and efforts to win the trust of non-Jews. In the eyes of the VNJ, these actions took the "sensitivities of the established" into consideration. These practices also paid attention to the emotional side of prejudices which the CV in its legalistic approach completely missed (pp. 469, 481). Yet the VNJ, as Hambrock convincingly argues, misconstrued the causalities in its analysis of anti-Semitism. The association did not primarily focus on the non-Jewish community, but the actions of other Jewish groups (p. 468). This thinking even prompted VNJ leaders to declare some anti-Jewish arguments "justifiable in principle." In so doing, they hoped to avoid their exclusion from the "discursive community" at the end of the Weimar Republic (p. 476).

During the onset of the Nazi regime in 1933-34, the VNJ continued its overtures to the "national movement" and its "work for understanding" (*Verständigungsarbeit*) in the mistaken belief in the eventual impact of the normative-cultural guidelines of its bourgeois milieu (p. 582). Hambrock presents an organization that initially benefited from its ties to conservative centers of the new government. The VNJ proved its self-declared status as "the most loyal opposition" by allowing itself to be instrumentalized in the regime's foreign policy initiatives. In interviews with foreign journalists, Max Naumann, for example, played down the Nazis's anti-Semitic measures and terror. Under the new leadership of Reinhard Heydrich, the Gestapo began to survey the VNJ and curtail its activities in 1934. In November, 1935, the VNJ became one of the first German-Jewish organizations that the Secret State Police disbanded. Gestapo officials had concluded that the VNJ's "assimilationist" positions were diametrically opposed to the regime's policy of racial sep-

aration and “extremely hostile to the state.” In his final reevaluation of the VNJ’s striking post-1933 accommodations, Hambrock reminds his readers of the general powerlessness of Jewish organizations as a basic condition of Nazi rule. Neither the Zionists nor the CV nor the VNJ had much room to maneuver. VNJ leaders, however, still had the misguided belief that there was a distinct room for them to influence political developments in favor of the “German Jews” (*Deutschjuden*). Hambrock urges us to see the VNJ’s ongoing attacks on other Jewish organizations as an integral component of the national German Jews’s conviction that these groups’s “incriminating” behavior increased the Nazis’s anti-Jewish pressure. Finally, he faults the VNJ for not honoring its own promises to join the Jewish community at a time of great danger for all of its members (pp. 697, 699).

Hambrock’s study relies on a broad array of sources. The author worked through an impressive number of journals and newspapers with conservative and right-liberal affiliations and of German-Jewish organizational life. In addition to the archival collections on the VNJ, Hambrock examined key holdings of the main German-Jewish organizations and communities, memoirs and personal papers, and ministerial bureaucracy and Nazi party files in Israeli, American and German archives. He was also able to interview former activists, particularly Kurt Rosenow, a member of the VNJ’s leadership council and Naumann confidant.

Hambrock has not produced a narrow organizational history of a small German-Jewish group, but rather a complex study that integrates cultural, intellectual, and political history to shed light on German-Jewish public life, the Weimar Republic’s cultural landscapes and the role of anti-Jewish prejudices. His book advances an often fruitful interaction between theoretical models and the rich historical evidence. It is, nonetheless, in this field that Hambrock’s study would perhaps most benefit from additional work. In its reading of the press and Weimar culture, the study operates with a model of dis-

course that it only briefly links to Jean-François Lyotard’s work on *The Differend* [5]. Lyotard’s theorizations, however, privilege the notion of “phrases” and do not advance an empirically open concept of discourse. Given the widespread and often contradictory use of various terms of “discourse” in academic writing, it would be helpful to illuminate the concepts at work in Hambrock’s study in order to further strengthen its analysis.

Matthias Hambrock’s work represents the first full-scale study of the VNJ and its multi-layered cultural and socio-political contexts. It offers many impulses for the study of anti-Semitism and political culture and truly deserves a broad and ongoing reception.

Notes

[1]. See Avraham Barkai, “Wehr Dich!” *Der Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens 1893-1938* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2002)—see H-German review at <<http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=172421123089621>>; and Greg Caplan, “Wicked Sons, German Heroes: Jewish Soldiers, Veterans, and Memories of World War I” (Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University, 2002).

[2]. Donald L. Niewyk, *The Jews in Weimar Germany* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2001), pp. 165-177, and Carl C. Rheins, “The Verband nationaldeutscher Juden 1921-1933,” *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 25 (1980): pp. 243-268.

[3]. Norbert Elias and John L. Scotson, *The Established and the Outsiders. A Sociological Enquiry into Community Problems* (London: F. Cass, 1965).

[4]. Hannes Siegrist et al., eds., *Nation und Emotion. Deutschland und Frankreich im Vergleich. 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995).

[5]. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend. Phrases in Dispute* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

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