



Cornelia Hecht. *Deutsche Juden und Antisemitismus in der Weimarer Republik.* Bonn: Verlag J.H.W. Dietz, 2003. 427 S. EUR 32.00 (broschiert), ISBN 978-3-8012-4137-7.



Reviewed by Pól Ó Dochartaigh (Humanities Research Institute, University of Ulster)

Published on H-German (October, 2005)

Weimar Janus and German Jews

The Weimar Republic was a contradictory phase of German history for Jews. On the one hand the constitution brought about the removal of all civil disabilities. On the other hand the Weimar era was characterized by physical attacks on Jews, synagogues and Jewish graves to a degree that had not been a feature of German life since before emancipation. Heinemann Stern, a member of the largest Jewish organization, the Centralverein formed in 1893, commented that Jews had never before been forced to resist antisemitism to the extent that it became necessary to do so in Weimar. In part, he argued, this state of affairs occurred because Jews were identified by others with the Weimar Republic, and Jews themselves also identified strongly with the Republic. The author of this study, Cornelia Hecht, sees four interlinking factors that contributed to what she calls the “qualitative change in antisemitism” after World War I: the radicalization of antisemitic propaganda towards the end of the War (cf. the “Judenzählung” of 1916); the scapegoating of Jews for Versailles and their association with the Republic and therefore hostility towards both; social disorder, chaos and poverty in the wake of World War I which led to scapegoating of the Jews; and finally, the brutalization of returned soldiers, which led, through the

Freikorps and other similar movements, to greater violence and greater tolerance of violence. This atmosphere set the scene for the greater levels of antisemitism that characterized Weimar even as Jews achieved equality before the law.

Hecht’s study derives from a Ph.D. dissertation completed at the University of Tübingen, and her approach to the subject is an original one. The core of this book is a chronological study of antisemitism in the everyday life of Jews as reported in the Weimar Jewish press. She freely admits that such a survey cannot claim to offer a comprehensive account of every region in Germany, not least because sections of the Jewish press tended to focus on different areas at different times. Aside from Berlin and other major cities, Bavaria and East Prussia seem to have been accorded particular attention. Partly this attention was the result, as she shows, of editorial decisions to highlight trends in certain areas. Such decisions were, of course, often influenced by the party politics of the newspaper in question.

For, as Hecht shows, neither German Jews themselves nor their press were monolithic in Weimar Germany. In this respect she takes issue with Gershom Scholem’s re-

jection of the “myth of German-Jewish dialogue.” Scholem’s Zionist perspective, far from being an empirical one, was just one of many diverse sets of views not merely amongst German Jews as a whole but even in his own immediate family: his father and brother Reinhold were *deutschnational*, another brother Werner was a radical socialist, and his mother Betty a member of the liberal DDP. Questions of identity provoked a wide range of answers among German Jews both before and during Weimar, but the dominant national identity was unambiguously German.

The Jewish press Hecht surveyed is similarly diverse. The *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums* was a liberal, pro-Republican paper that in 1922 amalgamated with *Im deutschen Reich*, the newspaper of the Centralverein, to become the *C.V.-Zeitung*, which had the highest circulation of all Jewish newspapers. This paper represented the strongly assimilationist tendencies of the Centralverein, and as such stood in contrast to the Zionist *JÃ¼dische Rundschau*. The *Israelitische Familienblatt* was a quality family newspaper that offered space to representatives of various political trends among German Jews as well as non-Jews. *Der Schild* was the organ of the Reichsbund jÃ¼discher Frontsoldaten and as such emphasized German patriotism among Jews as well as attempting to counter antisemitism. The *Mitteilungsblatt des Verbandes nationaldeutscher Juden* spoke for an organization that was ill-regarded in most Jewish circles for its overtures to the very right-wing circles that were responsible for much of the antisemitism that characterized Weimar life.

In considering this broad range of publications Hecht makes clear that Jewish perceptions of antisemitism were at least as important as actual experience. Antisemitism ebbed and flowed in Germany, it might be stronger in some regions than others, and at certain times rather than others. Most German Jews did not experience antisemitism on a daily basis, but if they read their (Jewish) newspapers they knew that it was all around them. Nevertheless, Hecht rightly claims that “German Jews did not merely feel German, they were German. Germany was their home, German was the language in which they thought, wrote, and dreamed, for Germany they sacrificed their lives in the First World War, and the future of Germany was their future” (p.12). It was in Weimar that this condition could be claimed unequivocally for German Jews for the first time, and it was the end of Weimar

that led to the end of this situation. Yet, crucially, until 1933 the future of Germany and German Jews was open. It is too easy (she quotes Michael A. Meyer) to sit on the massive mountain that is the Shoah and look down on all the signs and ask why German Jews in 1933 could not see what was coming. She expressly refutes Goldhagen’s theory that German antisemitism was eliminationist before 1933. The picture, she argues, is far more complex than that, both before and during Weimar.

The extent to which the Jewish press had to engage with the arguments of antisemites is one of the central issues in this book. It is a testament to the strength of antisemitic propaganda that the Jewish press not only carried extensive reports about it but also felt compelled to attempt to counteract such propaganda with articles about the “Germanness” of Jews, their rights in Germany, their contribution to culture, science, politics, and the economy and their sacrifices in the War. All of this agitation, though it was intended to reinforce the sense of Germanness among Jews, probably also contributed to a degree of unease among them, but there is little evidence that such propaganda *of itself* shook them in their sense of Germanness. Rather, it seems clear that the political instability of Weimar, the association of Jews with the Republic and of antisemites with anti-Republican politics, led to a degree of insecurity not only for German Jews, but for non-Jewish German democrats too. As Hecht argues, both Zionists and non-Zionists recognized that if the Republic was defeated, not only Jews would face the consequences, though the extent of what followed was beyond anyone’s powers of imagination.

Hecht offers an insightful study that is well structured and cogently written. She provides a clear introduction and background in the pre-1914 and World War I periods before engaging with the main analysis of “everyday antisemitism” in Weimar under the sub-headings “Vom Wort zur Tat: Pogromangst,” “Gesellschaftlicher Antisemitismus” and “Wirtschaftlicher Antisemitismus.” She then engages with Jewish behavioral norms and with what she calls a “Krisenbewusstsein,” before reaching her conclusions. The book is original, convincing, and thorough, even as the author freely acknowledges the limitations of her approach. It is an extremely good insight into Jewish reactions to, and senses of identity in the context of, antisemitism in Weimar.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Pól Ó Dochartaigh. Review of Hecht, Cornelia, *Deutsche Juden und Antisemitismus in der Weimarer Republik*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. October, 2005.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11207>

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.