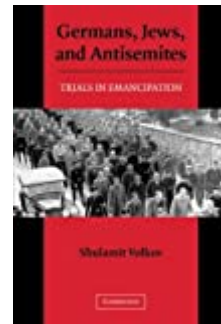


**Shulamit Volkov.** *Germans, Jews, and Antisemites: Trials in Emancipation.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. xiii + 311 pp. \$24.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-60959-3.



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## Success and Vulnerability

Shulamit Volkov's essay collection, divided into three sections, ties together three decades of research on the status and accomplishments of German Jews and the social and cultural underpinnings of antisemitism in Germany during the nineteenth century. Volkov begins with the moving story of her father, whose letters, discovered after his death in the mid-1980s, revealed his pained ambivalence about emigrating to Palestine from Germany after the Nazi takeover. She then addresses a commonly asked question: why did Jews in Germany and abroad appear not to grasp the "approaching disaster" of the Shoah (p. x)? She answers this question by examining the perceptions of Jewish intellectuals inside and outside Germany in part 1, reassessing the history of antisemitism in German history in part 2 and analyzing the social, economic and cultural history of German Jews in part 3. In addition to reiterating what is arguably her best-known contribution to scholarship, that antisemitism became by the late nineteenth century a "cultural code" that articulated the fissures in German society, this volume demonstrates the author's range as a historian and her comfort working in both intellectual and social history. In the effort to make her case that the coming "disaster" was not

so easy to discern, Volkov also achieves one of her other goals by integrating Jewish and German history.

Volkov's thesis can be clearly discerned in her discussions of the lives and outlooks of Jews and alternatively, the competing visions of non-Jewish Germans. Although the surge of antisemitism after the onset of the 1873 depression worried German Jews and kept them from the most prestigious positions in the military and state service, their primary concern, according to Volkov, was moving up the socioeconomic ladder into the *Besitz-* and *Bildungs*Ärgertum. In the process, they adapted their religious commitments to modernity, opting for an ethical Judaism over the ritualistic and legalistic practices of their fathers and grandfathers. Operating in a complicated context, a society that simultaneously appreciated and resented their contributions, German Jews made extraordinary achievements, especially in the professions and the sciences. Nevertheless, they retained their identity as Jews in a "private culture" of intra-ethnic friendships and a rate of intra-marriage that belies previous scholarly emphasis on the high instance of intermarriage between Jewish and non-Jewish Germans. As Volkov

points out, the antisemitism of the surrounding culture was potentially dangerous, precisely because it moved well beyond the short-lived antisemitic political parties of the 1870s and 1880s, supplementing Christian-based prejudices with the conflicts of an emerging mass politics. As a “cultural code,” antisemitism signified the deep subcultural divide between those who identified with liberalism, “Manchester” capitalism, socialism and democracy on the one hand and those on the other, who advocated imperialist expansion, authoritarianism and explicit racism. To be sure, some Jewish intellectuals inside and outside Germany, most notably but not exclusively Zionists, feared the worst because the rise of antisemitism in Germany called into question the promise of emancipation. German Jews remained deeply invested in German society because they had become bourgeois, indeed because they pioneered the “bourgeoisification” and modernization of German society. This characterization was true even of Zionists, who despite their advocacy of a Jewish homeland in Palestine could not intellectually break free of German culture. Jews who saw the danger could not properly conceptualize it, even after the National Socialists took power. The radicalism of the Third Reich, the novelty of which lay in its abandonment of the literary antisemitism of the *Kaiserreich* and its adoption an oral variant in which speech became the precondition for action, left most grasping for inadequate precedents. This tendency included Zionists in the *Yishuv*, David Ben-Gurion among them, who conceived of Nazi antisemitic violence as continuous with the pogroms of the past.

Volkov deftly illuminates the paradoxical social, demographic and cultural position of German Jews, in which social and occupational distinction blended with distinctiveness. Acquiring standard German, society manners and increasing prosperity, many Jewish families moved beyond the impoverished Yiddish-speaking culture of their eighteenth-century forebears to pioneer in the creation of a post-unification bourgeois society. Their lower birth rates and declining rates of infant mortality, which resulted from higher standards of personal hygiene, a strong sense of duty and moderation and intense concern with their children’s education and life chances, placed German Jews a full generation ahead of the demographic revolution that transformed German society. Yet rather than testifying to Jewish assimilation, which many Jews had expected to be the antidote to widespread stereotypes of Jewish separateness, the accomplishments of Jews made evident their deviation from this goal. Better educated, more urban, more concentrated in trade and the professions than the non-Jewish German population,

indeed more bourgeois in lifestyle, German Jews stood out. That distinctiveness carried over to Jewish scientists, inasmuch as discrimination confined them to peripheral institutions of higher education for most of their careers, which ironically may have benefited their research by freeing them from the conformity that the major universities imposed. Moreover, wealthy Jews refused to abandon the popular culture of lower middle-class Jews, which was culturally distinct from that of non-Jewish Germans. Yet as Volkov concludes, German Jews were neither “marginal” nor “outsiders.” Rather, they exemplified “the general tension embedded in modernity in general” (p. 169), which she suggests characterized Germany most acutely.

Although rich in detail and acutely sensitive to the paradoxes of German-Jewish life, this volume is not without its problems. First, with the exception of brief, if insightful, discussions of the post-World War I period, most of the book is anchored in the nineteenth century, a chronological focus that seems out of alignment in a field that currently stresses the impact of war in elevating the genocidal potential of *völkisch* nationalism. Volkov’s rebuttal of the claim that German Jews ignored the impending “disaster” would have been strengthened with greater chronological balance. Thus, an extended discussion as to how war, revolution and economic crisis deepened and radicalized the “cultural code” of antisemitism, which she briefly mentions in her concluding thoughts on the murder of Walther Rathenau, would have helped us to better understand its place after World War I. Second, if Volkov’s underscoring of Jewish achievement is central to her argument, it also narrows her focus to those German Jews who had advanced into the upper-middle classes, even as she acknowledges that most remained in small-scale commerce and trade. She thus limits her ability to expose another weakness of the charge against Jews: that they supposedly had options, presumably emigration, which they should have exercised. In fact, the barriers against emigration were not simply psychic, as in the case of Volkov’s father. The scion of a wealthy and accomplished German-Jewish family, who despite his passionate Zionism (he helped draft Israel’s Charter of Independence and the Law of Return), he remained sufficiently anchored in German culture to feel the pain of exclusion after Hitler took power. Nevertheless, economic issues were vital as well, inasmuch as escaping the Shoah depended on financial wherewithal and contacts abroad unavailable to most Jews, not just in Germany but especially in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Despite these limitations, this volume provides a

rewarding summary statement of Volkov's contributions to German-Jewish history and especially to German history.

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