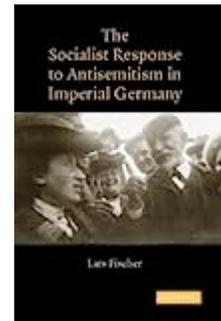




Lars Fischer. *The Socialist Response to Antisemitism in Imperial Germany.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. xix + 252 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-87552-3.



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A Flawed Legacy

It has long been acknowledged by historians that antisemitism, at least in its mildest forms, was present to some extent in almost every social and political stratum of the German *Kaiserreich*. The old orthodox view that large swaths of German society had been largely immune to anti-Jewish prejudice because of ideological or confessional orientation has been repeatedly and successfully challenged over the past several decades. As early as 1949, Paul Massing rejected the notion that German Catholics were immune to antisemitism and instead argued that leaders and supporters of the German Center Party held much more complex and problematic attitudes toward the “Jewish Question” than previously acknowledged.[1] In recent years, several scholars have sought to push the critique of various formerly “immune” populations even farther. Olaf Blaschke’s recent work on German Catholicism in the *Kaiserreich*, for example, made the controversial argument that anti-Jewish prejudices were so deeply embedded in the worldview of Catholic laypeople, priests, and political leaders that we should be careful not to draw too sharp a distinction between the attitudes of German Catholics and their Protestant countrymen.[2]

What about antisemitism within the Imperial German Social Democratic Party? Like the work of Blaschke, the present book by Lars Fischer seems intent on painting an even darker picture of anti-Jewish prejudices within German socialism than previous revisionist scholars such as Rosemarie Leuschen-Seppel, Robert Wistrich, Jack Jacobs, and Schlomo Na’aman have done.[3] According to Fischer, not only did socialist leaders fail to take a stand in defense of German Jews, they often made explicit use of antisemitic rhetoric and anti-Jewish stereotypes in their own speeches and writings. As Fischer states in his introduction, “we must fundamentally reconsider our approach to the anti-antisemitism of Imperial German Social Democracy. We need to determine on a case-to-case basis whether any given instance of Social Democratic opposition to antisemitism hinged on genuine opposition specifically to the antisemites’ stance *vis-À-vis* ‘the Jews’ and how effectively (if at all) it did so. Once we do so, Imperial German Social Democracy’s publicly articulated anti-antisemitism very quickly dries up to little more than a barely discernable trickle” (p. 17).

Although shorter and less theoretical than Blaschke’s

book on Catholicism, Fischer's work is an ambitious undertaking nonetheless. The core of his work comes from a dissertation on the antisemitism of Franz Mehring, one of the most controversial, enigmatic characters in German Socialism. Fischer broadens his focus beyond Mehring to include several additional case studies: an analysis of Karl Marx's "Zur Judenfrage" (1844), an examination of the frequent misinterpretation and misuse of that text by later socialist leaders, a controversy within the party over the conversion of a former antisemitic agitator to socialism, and a careful investigation of Eduard Bernstein's public comments about the Jewish Question before World War I. Woven throughout these individual case studies are Fischer's analyses of public comments about the "Jewish Question" by additional prominent socialist leaders such as August Bebel, Karl Kautsky, Wilhelm Liebknecht, and Rosa Luxemburg.

In large part, Fischer finds socialist leaders relatively indifferent to the "Jewish Question" and generally reluctant to fight openly on behalf of German Jews in the face of antisemitic attacks. Although they did not approve of the small but vociferous antisemitic political parties that developed after 1880, many socialist leaders hoped those in the middle and lower classes who had embraced this "socialism of fools" would gradually become enlightened to the real sources of their suffering and thus be drawn to socialism. Socialist discussions of antisemitism were often brief and tangential, and while party leaders sometimes gleefully attacked their political opponents as antisemites, they were much less interested in quashing anti-Jewish opinions that appeared in the statements and writings of their own party members.

When prominent socialist leaders did feel compelled to speak at length on the "Jewish Question," they often exhibited what Fischer calls an "embarrassment of anti-antisemitism"—or a general fear of being portrayed as too closely associated with Jewish interests. Socialist articles and speeches frequently attacked "philosemitism" as a force potentially more dangerous than even the most radical of antisemitic agitators. For example, in his essay "Das Schlagwort und der Antisemitismus" (1893), moderate revisionist Eduard Bernstein differentiated between two kinds of philosemitism. According to Fischer, Bernstein first identified an acceptable philosemitism that maintained a sense of sympathy towards Jews without overlooking occasional abuses and crimes committed by some; on the other hand, he described another form of philosemitism that always condoned the worst of Jewish characteristics, including greediness and chauvinism. Apparently, even for Bernstein, a man of Jewish her-

itage who later in life displayed sincere concern about the growth of radical antisemitism, the allegations of antisemites against German Jews seemed to contain a kernel of truth. Although Bernstein's comments here fall far short of support for anti-Jewish campaigns or for a reversal of emancipation, they nonetheless exhibit a surprising degree of acceptance of traditional antisemitic stereotypes. For Fischer, these critiques of philosemitism had no basis in reality and were instead subtle attempts by socialists to rationalize their own anti-Jewish prejudices.

Fischer finds evidence of the socialist adoption of anti-Jewish stereotypes both in overt and in less obvious forms. At times, antisemitic rhetoric was rather brazenly employed as a weapon against liberals, who were portrayed as too sympathetic to capitalism and "Jewish" huckstering. In the heated political atmosphere of the *Kaiserreich*, of course, the employment of anti-Jewish stereotypes to malign liberals was a common, well-established tactic across the political spectrum. Fischer, however, is also quite adept at deconstructing the rhetoric within various other articles, speeches, and correspondences that might at first seem innocuous. For example, he finds clear antisemitic tropes and stereotypes in a rather disturbing critique of the Dreyfusards by Wilhelm Liebknecht, an attack by August Bebel on Maximilian Harden that focused on his name change, and several purported defenses against antisemitism that backhandedly claimed Jews were surprisingly less clannish and greedy than commonly thought.

Fischer's analysis is built, for the most part, on perceptive and persuasive close readings of various socialist texts. Occasionally, however, Fischer seems to reject relatively innocent readings of questionable passages to put forward instead alternate interpretations that are much less flattering. Also, although Fischer recognizes that socialist leaders were as much political animals as ideologues, he makes little attempt to distinguish between remarks made in the heat of political squabbles and those that stem from political calculation. For example, Fischer reacts with shock to the decision by party leaders in 1893 to support antisemitic Reichstag deputy Hermann Ahlwardt in his call for an investigation into alleged Jewish manipulation of the Invalidenfonds. Bebel supported this investigation even though he clearly found Ahlwardt ignorant and undoubtedly viewed his charges as ridiculous, especially his suggestion that Prussian State Secretary Johannes Miquel was secretly Jewish and part of a larger Jewish conspiracy to defraud the government. Why, then, would Bebel support Ahlwardt's call for an investigation? This was undoubtedly a calculated politi-

cal move. An investigation into the Invalidenfonds could have only two outcomes: an embarrassment of government officials (including the liberal Miquel) or the public disgrace of Ahlwardt, whose antisemitic rants had drawn considerable sympathy even within socialist ranks. As distasteful as this tactical support for Ahlwardt may seem from our perspective, we must be careful not to conflate it with genuine sympathy for the antisemitic cause.

Fischer believes that more should be expected from men such as Bernstein, Kautsky, Bebel, and Mehring, and that socialist leaders who adhered to historical materialism should have known better than to buy into contemporary religious and racial anti-Jewish stereotypes. He asserts that any socialist intellectuals obsessed with discerning social conditions from ideological myths should have concluded that the “Jewish Question” had no basis in reality, and he cites an unwavering critique of antisemitism by Rosa Luxemburg to suggest that more enlightened views were possible at the time. Fischer is, in the end, quite emphatic about the legacy of this socialist failure to openly confront antisemitism: “To the extent that Social Democrats shared this dream [of a world without Jews] they also share the responsibility for rendering German society susceptible to Nazi antisemitism and preparing the ideological seedbed from which the Shoah could grow” (p. 228).

This bleak conclusion notwithstanding, Fischer does acknowledge that it would be a mistake to use case studies like these to label individual socialist leaders as antisemites. Most socialists in Imperial Germany did believe in a Jewish Question that would inevitably be solved by a social revolution. This is, of course, very different from public calls for discrimination, exclusion, or annihilation, just as occasional references to anti-Jewish stereotypes are a long way from a formal antisemitic program. Ironically, these men often seemed to cast themselves as occupying a reasonable middle ground in debates on the Jewish Question between two “hysterical” extremes.[4] In their eyes, those who attempted to whitewash a seemingly obvious Jewish role in capitalist exploitation were as guilty of distortion as those who sought to blame all of society’s ills on a Jewish conspiracy. Such an attitude did not preclude socialist leaders from challenging antisemitic propaganda, from welcoming German Jews into their ranks, or from building alliances and friendships with individual Jews. However, it did help to preserve the illusion that a real “Jewish Question” existed whose successful resolution was essential to the health and welfare of the German nation. Although socialist leaders may

have wanted to assert a kind of “neutrality” on the “Jewish Question,” it is certainly clear in retrospect that there can be no honorable neutrality between persecutors and their victims.

In focusing his study exclusively on the attitudes of socialist leaders, Fischer consciously eschews any attempt to gauge the effects of their rhetoric on the socialist rank-and-file. Regrettably, the book provides little sense either about how deeply their statements affected public opinion or, on the other hand, how these leaders may themselves have been reacting to, rather than driving, sentiment about the “Jewish Question” within the party. Fischer himself acknowledges the need for a more comprehensive study, but his narrow focus on intellectual exchanges between party leaders occasionally leads him to treat public statements, treatises, and internal party conflicts as if they took place in a relative vacuum. For all its analytical skill and unique insights, this book still leaves room for a more thorough and comprehensive account of the socialist response to antisemitism.

Notes

[1]. Paul Massing, *Rehearsal for Destruction* (New York: Harper, 1949), 216-217.

[2]. Olaf Blaschke, *Katholizismus und Antisemitismus im Deutschen Kaiserreich* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997).

[3]. Rosemarie Leuschen-Seppel, *Sozialdemokratie und Antisemitismus im Kaiserreich* (Bonn: Neue Gesellschaft, 1978); Robert Wistrich, *Socialism and the Jews* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1982); Jack Jacobs, *On Socialists and the “Jewish Question” after Marx* (New York: NYU Press, 1992); and Schlomo Na’aman, *Marxismus und Zionismus* (Gerlingen: Bleicher, 1997).

[4]. This worldview was shared by many Germans who were still commonly hailed as leaders in the fight against antisemitism. The biblical scholar Hermann Strack, for example, risked his professorial career and reputation by publicly challenging the credibility and honor of antisemites such as August Rohling and Adolf Stöcker. He also developed close friendships with several prominent Orthodox Jews, including Hirsch Hildesheimer. Yet, like many religious Protestants, Strack also vigorously rejected any notion that he was a philosemite and argued that a satisfactory solution to the “Jewish Question” would only be found when all Jews accepted the Christian faith.

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