



Deborah Hertz. *How Jews Became Germans: The History of Conversion and Assimilation in Berlin.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007. 276 pp. \$38.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-11094-4.



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The Conversion Debate and Berlin's Jewish Community

How Jews Became Germans is an intriguing book. Deborah Hertz blends detailed personal accounts and biographical sketches into a broader narrative that describes an important issue of Central European Jewish identity: namely, the challenge of Jewish conversion to Christianity and its impact on assimilation and social status. Hertz offers insights into both the response of non-Jews to Jewish conversion at the time (i.e., 1645-1833), as well as a nuanced analysis of how the conversion debate affected Berlin's Jewish community. Hertz's book deserves highest praise for its ability to weave individuals' painful personal decisions into the broader fabric of the history of Berlin, the German states, and Central Europe. Because of this approach, this book will interest scholars not only in Jewish studies but also in other fields, including German and Central European history.

The statistical base for Hertz's study comes largely from the files of the *Judenkartei*, or *Jewish File*, compiled by the Nazis to trace exhaustively Jewish conversion in Berlin from 1645 until 1933. While the Nazis hoped to use the file for the sinister purpose of enforcing racial legislation, Hertz was, instead, able to mine

these records to establish a detailed pattern of conversion rates. This statistical basis is supplemented by a rich collection of sources featuring personal accounts, published articles and records, and other pertinent archival holdings. Armed with this impressive array of source material, Hertz seeks to address several essential issues. First, why did Berlin's Jews choose to convert or not to convert? Second, to what extent did conversion lead to assimilation? Third, what impact did this difficult decision have on individual Jews, their extended families, the Jewish community, and Berlin society as a whole?

Hertz deftly covers these issues in her history of Berlin's Jewish community. She uses both case studies (e.g., Rahel Levin Varnhagen and the Mendelssohn family) and important historical moments (e.g., the 1812 Emancipation Edict and the *Hep-Hep* riots) to show how larger events helped shape local identities. In the course of her analysis, these case studies help us better understand the varied motivations for conversion and the complicated relationship between conversion and assimilation. Hertz ably demonstrates that even for those Jews who believed that conversion offered a path toward so-

cial advancement the price was often very high. In many cases, converts still faced intolerance and were often not embraced by the non-Jewish Berlin establishment. Certainly, as Hertz demonstrates, conversion was no panacea for Jews seeking advancement in a society that all too frequently opposed them.

While this book offers a wealth of important new insights into Berlin's Jewish life from the seventeenth through the mid-nineteenth century, it incorporates some questionable stylistic choices. Hertz is obviously passionate about her topic and sees a clear parallel between the past and the present. She states in her acknowledgment: "I have written this book because I cannot decide whether a passionate ethnic identity is necessary for personal happiness.... History is at once an objective scholarly project and a huge therapeutic space. The past is buried in obscure books in libraries and yet ever present, ready to serve as a mirror to very personal quests" (p. ix). In fact, this commitment to her topic leads her, at one point, to refer to Varnhagen, one of the central case studies in the book, as a "heroine" (p. 215). Moreover, in the second paragraph of the book's epilogue, Hertz discloses her attitude toward the Jewish converts she has studied so carefully in her book, describing her

personal struggles with the idea of assimilation. Scholars could legitimately question the notion that history can be at once *objective* and personally *therapeutic*. Because of this concern, some readers may question Hertz's decision to include these intensely personal statements, and some may even find that they distract from an otherwise well-developed scholarly apparatus.

Finally, Hertz ends her narrative in the mid-1830s but does not clearly explain why. As she points out, the *Judenkartei* contains data through 1933. Many of the charts and tables in her appendix track statistics through 1880. In fact, the book's subtitle (*The History of Conversion and Assimilation in Berlin*) seems to imply a comprehensive treatment of the subject in question. Perhaps the addition of specific dates in the subtitle (e.g., 1645-1833) would have helped potential readers better understand the book's chronological focus.

In spite of these criticisms, Hertz has produced a valuable examination of Berlin's vibrant Jewish life and presents readers with another contribution to the ongoing debate about the complicated issues of Jewish conversion and assimilation. Certainly, this study will continue to attract scholarly attention for many years to come.

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