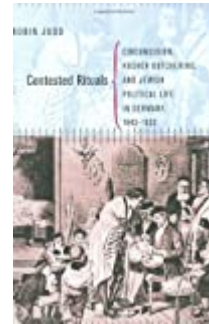


Robin Judd. *Contested Rituals: Circumcision, Kosher Butchering, and Jewish Political Life in Germany, 1843-1933.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007. xii + 283 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-4545-3.



Reviewed by Benjamin Maria Baader (Department of History, University of Manitoba)

Published on H-German (July, 2009)

Commissioned by Susan R. Boettcher

Jews and Other Germans on Jewish Difference and German Politics

This study on the debates that surrounded two important rites of rabbinic Judaism in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Germany belongs to a new generation of German-Jewish historical scholarship that has begun to break down the boundaries between German history and Jewish history. In her thoroughly researched work, Robin Judd examines how both Jews and non-Jews discussed the Jewish practices of male circumcision (*brit milah*) and of kosher butchering (*shehitah*). These two rites belong to the ritual practices with the help of which Jews have established and maintained distinctiveness and separateness throughout their history, and they have been markers that non-Jews used in order to recognize and give meaning to Jewish difference. Thus, Judd's investigation is situated at the intersection between the self-definition of Jews as Jews and non-Jewish German perceptions of what is Other about their Jewish contemporaries. Moreover, Judd's study brings into focus the fact that German Jews were not only objects of policies of emancipation, integration, and discrimination by various German states, but that they also actively shaped Ger-

man political culture along with non-Jewish or Christian Germans. As Judd documents in detail, between 1843 and 1933 a wide range of Jewish and gentile Germans engaged in overlapping discussions about the nature of German citizenship, Jewish difference, and religious toleration. Some of these debates were conducted among Jews, some among non-Jews, and many others by participants from both groups.

In the first of six chapters, Judd focuses on debates on the rite of circumcision from 1843 to 1857. In this period, German state authorities began to intervene into matters that had previously fallen under the jurisdiction of the Jewish communities, such as the licensing and medical oversight of *mohelim* (men who perform ritual circumcisions). Likewise, states sought to set standards for establishing which criteria should define membership in the Jewish community. Judd has explored how individual communities responded to government intrusion, yet most interestingly, she has also traced an inner-Jewish discussion about the character and role of circumcision that focused on the question of whether boys whose Jew-

ish fathers refused to have their sons circumcised qualified for community membership. In these debates, German Jews advanced a variety of positions. Radical reformers claimed that irrespective of circumcision and similarly to German citizenship, Jewishness was a matter of birth and descent; others argued that even though an uncircumcised boy might be a Jew in his relationship to God, he could not be a member of the modern Jewish community; and a third group categorically rejected the idea that an uncircumcised man could be a Jew. It is fascinating that in these discussions, German Jews disregarded practice—well established in Jewish law (*halakhah*)—of considering uncircumcised Jewish men Jews, though limiting their religious rights and obligations. Thus, on one hand, Jews involved in this discussion left behind some of the norms of rabbinic Judaism that had governed Jewish collective existence for centuries. On the other, however, it seems that in the middle of the nineteenth century the religious rite of circumcision as rooted in *halakhah* gained rather than lost in importance as a marker that defined Jewishness and determined the boundaries of communal belonging.

The second chapter, covering the period from 1857 to 1880, shifts the focus to discussions about Jewish ritual slaughter and examines controversies initiated by animal protectionists who branded kosher butchering a barbaric and cruel practice. In contrast to ongoing inner-Jewish discussions on circumcision and community membership, these debates were not specific to Germany but—in this era of nation-building—occurred throughout Europe. In the coalescing German empire, a middle-class public explored the nature of German culture and inquired whether it was compatible with Jewish culture. Judd's third and fourth chapters explore how these debates intensified and radicalized in the period between 1880 and 1916, when the range of participants in them broadened. Interest groups such as feminists, hiking clubs, and a variety of professional organizations joined the discussion, while the character of the debates changed with the rise of political antisemitism and the new role that science and biology came to play in public discourse. In these modernized, medicalized, and increasingly pervasive campaigns against ritual slaughter, participants used and often reworked century-old anti-Jewish stereotypes and allegations, such as the conception that Jews were driven by greed, cruelty, and a thirst for blood. Many highly controversial discussions took place when municipal governments considered prohibiting ritual slaughter, but—remarkably—few such bans or restrictions on kosher butchering were issued in the 1880s. Only one state (Sax-

ony) effectively outlawed *shehitah* by mandating in 1892 that animals be stunned before being slain; however, in 1910, this state again exempted Jewish ritual slaughter from this regulation.

Judd argues that while an anti-Jewish animus certainly fueled and framed debates on ritual slaughter, this antisemitism was opposed by a perhaps equally powerful “cultural code” of toleration. She shows that Jews as well as gentiles came to promote a new definition of toleration, and at times, even animal protectionists defended the right of Jewish Germans to be different. Moreover, as the German press that carried the public controversies on kosher butchering widely reported on technical details of various butchering methods and thus educated Germans about Jewish ritual law, the practice of kosher butchering became highly visible. At a time when an increasingly small number of German Jews were ritually observant and consumed kosher meat, Jewish and non-Jewish Germans engaged in debates about the nature of modern German society and about the Jews' place in it by discussing *shehitah*.

In the fifth chapter, Judd examines the Jewish defense of ritual slaughter in the same period, and her inquiry goes significantly beyond exploring the already relatively well-established activities of the Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens. Notably, Judd shows the leading role of Esriel Hildesheimer and the orthodox-led defense agency, *Bund für Schächterschutz* (*Schächt* is the German term for *shehitah*) within the network of German-Jewish defense organizations. Even though German-Jewish groups were divided on a variety of issues and at times tried to downplay rather than emphasize Jewish difference, their politics expressed a new Jewish self-confidence. They developed modern techniques of campaigning; cooperated with non-Jewish scientists, slaughterhouse directors, veterinarians, and other sympathetic gentiles; and became active players in the larger German political arena of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

As Judd shows in the last chapter of her book, the two previously established competing cultural reference systems—antisemitism and endorsement of the Jewish minority's right to be different—continued to frame and structure public debates on kosher slaughtering in the Weimar Republic. The rising NSDAP supported antisemitic animal protectionists, and even Thomas Mann portrayed a practitioner of ritual slaughter (*shohet*) in his renowned novel, *The Magic Mountain* (1924), as blood-thirsty and cruel. However, despite extensive atten-

tion to kosher butchering and widespread campaigning against it, dominant political consensus persistently rejected the antisemitic assault on religious freedom and, as in imperial Germany, few bans against ritual slaughtering were issued. Yet, according to Judd, the debates on ritual slaughtering were also a laboratory for antisemitic rhetoric and power that the National Socialists successfully manipulated. In 1930 the balance shifted, and authorities increasingly outlawed kosher butchering. At around the same time, explicit opposition to the Nazi movement and efforts to protect the republic moved to the center of Jewish defense politics.

Soon after the Nazi seizure of power in 1933, the German government mandated the stunning of all animals in the abattoir, thus effectively outlawing kosher butchering. As Judd notes in her epilogue, the debates on circumcision and *shehitah*, in which both Jews and non-Jewish Germans had participated, came to an end at that point. In their place, two strictly separate conversations took place in Nazi Germany, one of them in the Nazi-controlled German public sphere and among Nazi legislators and officials, and the other among Jews, for whom measures against ritual slaughter were only one of the multiple restrictions and hardships that characterized the overall deteriorating situation.

With this extremely rich and dense study, which is based on extensive archival research, Judd has charted new terrain, as she has traced in great detail the public debates on circumcision and ritual slaughter over nine decades of German and German-Jewish history. Yet, while Judd informs us of the positions that liberals, conservatives, and the leadership of the Center Party took at various turns, it would have been interesting to know more about the approach of the SPD and the German labor movement to issues of religious tolerance. Likewise, Judd's focus on public debates and the nature of her sources rarely allows us to glimpse the ways in which individuals experienced the political controversies that are the subject of the study. The case of Dr. Feibel, who, upon being handed an anonymous leaflet on a Hamburg street, immediately contacted Jewish community officials and urged them to defend forcefully the practice of rit-

ual slaughter, is one exception to the general pattern of the book. Similarly, the book's readers will remain curious about patterns of kosher meat consumption among German Jews in the century under consideration, about how pervasive the practice of circumcision remained, and what the rite might have meant to parents who had their sons circumcised. Rather than pointing to inherent shortcomings in Judd's study, however, these questions suggest that her work invites further research.

In fact, Judd's insight that—in the decades covered by this study, during which German Jewry fully entered modernity—Jewish ritual law remained an important marker of Jewish difference is immensely productive. She shows that rather than falling prey to what contemporaries and historians have called “assimilation,” German Jews in this period developed and cultivated a modern politics of Jewish distinctiveness. At the same time, Judd's work demonstrates that these Jews' discussions and campaigns also formed part of “the maelstrom of German culture and politics” (p. 10). *Contested Rituals* also deepens our understanding of the fabric of German society and of the ways in which this society built and maintained Germanness. In this study, German cultural and political history and the history of German-Jewish culture and politics are two interconnected, mutually contingent sites. Judd has succeeded in realizing what Steven Aschheim a decade ago called the “mischievous possibility” of reconceptualizing German history by writing German-Jewish history as the history of a group that did not assimilate into an existing majority culture, but rather shaped and reshaped its Jewishness while playing a role in defining German society.[1] The work is thus an important contribution to current efforts toward decentering German history, breaking away from one-dimensional German-Jewish history narratives of looming assimilation and destruction, and fully overcoming long-standing isolationist tendencies in Jewish studies and Jewish historiography.

Note

[1]. Steven E. Aschheim, “German History and German Jewry: Boundaries, Junctions, and Interdependence,” *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 43 (1998): 316.

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Citation: Benjamin Maria Baader. Review of Judd, Robin, *Contested Rituals: Circumcision, Kosher Butchering, and Jewish Political Life in Germany, 1843-1933*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. July, 2009.

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