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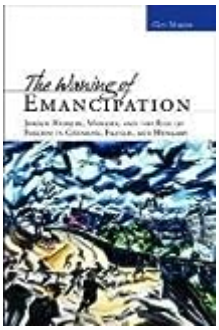

Guy Miron. *The Waning of Emancipation: Jewish History, Memory, and the Rise of Fascism in Germany, France, and Hungary.* Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011. 308 pp. $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8143-3470-6.

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G. Miron: The Waning of Emancipation

âThe Waning of Emancipationâ attempts to reconstruct the ways in which self-consciously Jewish intellectuals reexamined the past in light of the growing challenges they had to face in Germany, France and Hungary in the 1930s and the early 1940s. The central question of the book is what usable images of their past did self-consciously Jewish intellectuals (whom Miron calls âspokespeopleâ) create during these years of worsening crisis? Secondly and more particularly, how did they renegotiate the optimism and hopes of the emancipation period when the rising threat of fascism could no longer be ignored?

Miron shows that there were significant differences in the context of Jewish emancipation in Germany, France and Hungary and, more broadly, in the three nationsâ political cultures. The internal composition of Jewries was also rather diverse in terms of their leading institutions, religious orientations as well as relations between indigenous and immigrant Jews. He also explains that the main problems these three Jewish communities had to face in the 1930s were far from identical. In Germany, Jews had to deal with the complete revocation of their legal emancipation in the years following 1933. In Hungary, the newly dominant âChristian nationalistsâ gradually reversed Jewish emancipation. In France, by contrast, only the future of emancipation appeared to be uncertain due to the polarized political climate of the 1930s. On âChristian nationalismâ, see Paul A. Hanebrink, In Defense of Christian Hungary. Religion, Nationalism, and Antisemitism, 1890â1944, Ithaca 2006.

Miron convincingly explains why the three countries are comparable: not only was the longue durÃ©e development of emancipation accompanied by the rise of liberal predispositions and progressivist-teleological narratives in each country, but all three Jewish communities experienced the inter-war years as years of crises. The book can thus reconstruct largely parallel Jewish debates on crucial questions such as the advantages and disadvantages of âemancipationâ and âassimilationâ â two key analytical concepts of the book that unfortunately remain undefined. Miron also analyzes how the Jews dealt with politically charged symbolic events in their respective national settings, such as the 150th an-

niversary celebration of the French Revolution in France or the commemorations of Saint Stephen in Hungary in 1938. To explore such discussions in a comparative frame, âThe Waning of Emancipationâ draws on ample primary sources, above all Jewish journals and (mostly popular) historical literature in the three relevant national languages as well as Yiddish.

While comparative studies of German and French Jewries already exist, the inclusion of Hungary constitutes a real novelty. See, more recently, Michael Brenner / Vicki Caron / Uri R. Kaufmann (Hrsg.), Jewish Emancipation Reconsidered. The French and German Models, TÃ¼bingen 2003. Miron justifies his choice by pointing out that âthe internal development of Hungarian Jewry and the forms of Jewish identification in its public discourseâ ought to be conceptualized âmore in the context of the west and Central European emancipated Jewriesâ (p. 5). Notwithstanding his openness to expand comparative Jewish historiography in an innovative direction, his method of comparison remains rather traditional. Miron explores each of his national cases separately and devotes relatively little attention to transnational discursive phenomena, in spite of underlining at one point that the analyzed discourses may be seen as part of a âsingle Jewish historical discourse, even though it was conducted in a variety of countries, languages, and settingsâ (p. 15). The overall ambition of the author seems to be to study individual Jewish communities at the time of the rise of fascism in greater depth and to thus contribute to the more general discussion of Jewish self-consciousness and cultural memory.

The two basic assertions of the book are that Jewish intellectuals dealt with the momentous challenges by turning to Jewish history and memory and pursued historical debates over them while, especially in France and Hungary, they continued to relate to their respective local national history even during the years immediately before the Shoah (p. 219). Secondly, he claims that interpretations of the past were highly dependent on the ideological backgrounds of the authors â be it a liberal-integrationist, a Jewish national and sometimes Zionist or a religiously Orthodox affiliation. Miron offers precise distinctions between such authors through the presentation of their differences, similarities and interconnections. He also tends to complicate this trifold picture. For example, in the case of Hungary he analyzes the modern Orthodox positions that continued to emphasize the uniqueness of Hungary and thus had much in common with the mainstream Neolog ones as well as the âcritical Neologâ perspective, which in turn shared the negative assessment of the consequences of emancipation with Zionist positions. In my view, Miron does not always sufficiently emphasize the different standings these diverging ideological positions had in the studied countries. For instance, Zionist authors posed a much more serious challenge to the mainstream liberals in Germany than they did in Hungary, while the explicitly Jewish communists (who wrote in Yiddish) played an important role in France and had no parallel in Germany or Hungary.

His comparisons lead Miron to argue that the sheer intensity and undeniable nature of the collapse of emancipation in Germany most brutally forced Jews to confront the meaning of Jewish modernity at large. As a consequence, there was a remarkable âturn to Jewish historyâ shortly after 1933. Even liberal intellectuals expressed criticism of the previously dominant Jewish path in modern Europe. While Miron maintains that ârebelliousâ younger rabbis, above all Joachim Prinz and Simon Schwab, pursued âharshâ polemics, he also narrates how the gap between liberal, Orthodox and Zionist positions gradually narrowed (p. 80).

In chapters three to six, Miron then goes on to show that in contrast to Germany, leading French and Hungarian Jewish spokespeople tended to continue to portray the political heritage of their homelands in âmonolithically positive termsâ and âchose not to confront its darker sideâ in substantial ways (p. 229). In France, the modern republican tradition was based on a particular interpretation of the French Revolution and also on the so called âsacred unionâ of the First World War. They provided Jews with French historical myths that they would continue to identify with throughout the 1930s. The externalization of anti-Semitism, i.e. its depiction as an essentially German phenomenon, remained an important discursive option here. Miron claims that âintegrationistâ Jews in fact abandoned their optimistic views only when âthe circumstances left them no other optionsâ (p. 224). He suggests that even the cyclical version of Jewish history they then adopted supposed that present developments were merely analogous to previous Jewish tribulations â not something radically worse. Their historical narratives would thus continue to âevoke hopes for the rehabilitation of the position of the Jews in the long runâ (p. 224). At the same time, the Jews of France tended to relate to European-wide problems and leading intellectuals of the recent immigrant community participated in transnational Yiddish debates and discourses such as, for example, the ârеturn to the ghettoâ polemic.

Hungarian intellectuals are described as more âself-centeredâ in the book. Miron convincingly shows that their attachment to tenets of Hungarian nationalism continued even in the early 1940s, in spite of the ever worsening anti-Semitic discrimination in their country. By presenting Hungarian discussions as largely detached from external developments, Miron overlooks the manifold historical entanglements of the Jews of Hungary and German (and German Jewish) culture. Furthermore, he tends to ignore the level of transnational knowledge and awareness of contemporary European developments in the Hungarian Jewish intellectual milieu in the early 1940s.

In spite of such minor conceptual problems and the lack of a truly transnational thesis about the Jewish sense of the past at the time of the decline of emancipation, âThe Waning of Emancipationâ remains a well-focused and well-researched monograph that innovatively broadens the scope of European Jewish comparisons. It is to be hoped that this book shall be followed by more, and perhaps more transnationally oriented, researches into similarly impressive ranges of primary sources.

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