



Steven E. Aschheim, Vivian Liska, eds. *The German-Jewish Experience: Contested Interpretations and Conflicting Perceptions*. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2015. 300 pp. ISBN 978-3-11-037293-9.



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The German Jewish Experience Revisited

This collection of essays, based on a workshop held at the Leo Baeck Institute Jerusalem (in July 2013) plus additional papers, offers new perspectives on German Jewish history and culture, wrapped with a fresh set of European, North American, and Israeli scholarly insights. These essays offer a glimpse of the constant tensions comprising the “German-Jewish experience” from the era of the Jewish Enlightenment (*Aufklärung*) in the mid-eighteenth century through the very recent revival of an Israeli Jewish cultural, artistic, and literary scene in Berlin, and touch upon different applications of identity (national, political, and personal) both directly and to some extent obliquely, integration and the emancipation process, innovation and economic achievements of German Jews, and religion and culture.

While not as dominant as in almost any other previous publication under this framework of scholarship, the dark shadow of the Holocaust does not occupy the book’s entire scope, but rather only touches on the intellectual legacy of German Jewry prior to and following the war. Distanced from dealing with trauma in itself,

political radicalism, or elite intellectual Jews, this volume wishes to echo a change: “At this transitional moment, the field reflects unsettled epistemological and generational differences,” as the editors stress (p. 274). The Weimar era and its unique German Jewish experience, both in terms of its happening as well as its vivid contribution in historical retrospective, plays a major role in this collection.

Theology, or a change in a theological perception, and its implication regarding the “universal mission of the Jews” and their shifting role in modern European society is presented by Ofri Ilany (“The Jews as Educators of Humanity—A Christian-Philosemitic Grand Narrative of Jewish Modernity?”) as well as in Moshe Idel’s essay tracing Jewish elite thinkers and their shifting language, ideas, methods, and historical conception. Through the lens of modern research on Kabbalah, the greater impact of the German cultural tradition is further concretely explained, with a focus on its significant ambassador Gershom Scholem (“Transfers of Categories: The German-Jewish Experience and Beyond”). Bernd Witte

describes European literature, and particularly its German classicism sphere (of the eighteenth century and beyond) with figures like Goethe, Homer, and Schiller, as an arena where “fundamental existential issues are decided” (p. 46) and vis-à-vis the heritage of Moses Mendelssohn, a pioneering intellectual German Jewish scholar, and his contribution to Western cultural memory through the introduction of Jewish tradition into daily modern life (“German Classicism and Judaism”). Sander L. Gilman discusses two opposite yet complementary aspects of the mobility discourse, where “Jews were the litmus test” (p. 59) as either cosmopolitan or nomadic people, by presenting varied images of Jews in a diverse collage of works from literature, philosophy, history, and psychology, whose authors include Christoph Martin Wieland, Johann Gottfried Herder, Leon Pinsker, Werner Sombart, Max Weber, Carl Gustav Jung, and others (“Aliens vs. Predators: Cosmopolitan Jews vs. Jewish Nomads”).

The popular use of the *Untergang* (decay) concept by German nationalists in a variety of fields (at the turn of the nineteenth century and the following decades) served the Zionist movement’s mission, as Stefan Vogt argues. Zionism was viewed “as the cure for the degeneration of the Jewish *Volk* and thus its salvation from decay” (p. 80) in the writing of Max Nordau and later Jewish thinkers (“Between Decay and Doom: Zionist Discourses of “*Untergang*” in Germany 1890-1933”).

Peter Jelavich explores ways in which Jews quite successfully used popular culture, mainly through films, in imperial Germany and the Weimar Republic as a mean to express their Jewish identity, and to interact with the German Gentile lower and middle classes (“Popular Entertainment and Mass Media: The Central Arenas of German-Jewish Cultural Engagement”). Ofer Ashkenazi describes the role played by Jewish immigrants to Germany in the Weimar film industry during the 1920s and their contribution in constructing Jewish urbanite identity as it developed in post-World War I cities (“The Jewish Places of Weimar Cinema: Reconsidering Karl Grune’s *The Street*”). Shelly Zer-Zion portrays the theater scene of “Habimah” in Tel Aviv and its artistic reaction to the rise of Nazism, through the staging of three plays: *Jew Süss* (*Jud Süss*), *Professor Mannheim*, and *The Merchant of Venice* (“The Anti-Nazi Plays of Habimah during the 1930s and the Making of Eretz-Israel *Bildung*”).

In “Aby Warburg and Weimar Jewish Culture: Navigating Normative Narratives, Counternarratives, and Historical Context,” Emily J. Levine follows how, and

more likely why, the 60,000-volume library project of Aby Warburg (originally housed in Hamburg and moved in 1933 to London), which he called *Nachleben der Antike* (the afterlife of antiquity), became a symbol and an inspiration for cultural and visual studies, offering a special look into German Jewish history.

Jewish influence on political liberalism in the Weimar Republic, through three lesser-known figures and the theories associated with them, is presented by Jens Hacke in “Jewish Liberalism in the Weimar Republic? Reconsidering a Key Element of Political Culture In the Interwar Era,” while Matthias Morgenstern describes the image of nineteenth-century Orthodox rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, his life and work as chief rabbi of Moravia and Austrian Silesia and Frankfurt am Main; his *Torah im Derekh Eretz* ideology; and his perception of *Bildung*, Judaism, Christianity and the historical mission of German Jews (“Rabbi S. Hirsch and His Perception of Germany and German Jewry”). A unique literary memoir is introduced by Shulamit S. Magnus: the story of Pauline Wengeroff, who wrote a micro-history of traditional Jewish society in nineteenth-century Russia. An extraordinary document because it was penned by a woman, it offers a unique focus on women’s religious practices and piety and argues for the cultural power of women, not from a feminist point of view but rather for the preservation of Jewish tradition.

The postwar development of German Jewish historiography is presented in two essays by Till van Rahden (“History in the House of the Hangman: How Postwar Germany became a Key Site for the Study of Jewish History”) and Stefanie Schäfer-Springorum (“Non-Jewish Perspectives on German-Jewish History: A Generational Project?”), respectively. This is joined by a new subfield of investigation, under the framework of German Jewish studies, envisioned by Amir Eshel and Na’ama Rokem (“Berlin and Jerusalem: Toward German-Hebrew Studies”), which provides readers with a sweet taste of dessert and leaves them eager to learn more.

As indicated by the editors’ note pointing to a “generational predilection” (p. 274) reflected in some of the contributions to this book, this volume is a notable collection of the work of some young(er) scholars who are “coming out” with their own personal reflections on Jewish identity—its components, core, and location.

Their main contribution comes through the conflictual questions they raise and the often winding paths they choose to follow in search of some complicated answers. Moreover, the book offers a transformation of the ho-

mogenous Jewish identity narrative, usually described within the framework of German Jewish historiography as either a success story or a tragic exclusion of deprived victims. It sheds light on hybridity and complicity as integral components of this hyphenated experience and its strong emotional baggage.

The declared task of the editors, to revisit various interesting aspects of the German Jewish experience and present a new evaluation of the field's present state, is successfully achieved indeed in this volume. However, it

may leave some issues open to further discussion, such as, for example, the future role of Israelis or Israeli Jews in shaping Berlin's cultural-artistic scene these days; their interaction with Turkish German and other Muslim residents (including Israeli Palestinian immigrants in Germany); Reform-pluralistic Jewish education and its growing influence; the changing role of the "Ä©migrÄ©," and how the new reality—in which Germany is not solely a political asylum but rather home to thousands of non-Jewish refugees—may be considered in relation to current trends of the German Jewish experience.

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