

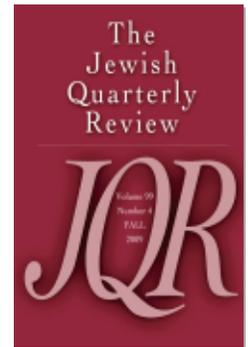


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Anti-Semitism in Imperial Germany: Cultural Code or Pervasive Prejudice?

PETER JELAVICH

SHULAMIT VOLKOV. *Germans, Jews, and Antisemites: Trials in Emancipation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Pp. xiii + 311.

LARS FISCHER. *The Socialist Response to Antisemitism in Imperial Germany*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Pp. xix + 252.

One of the most contentious issues in the historiography of the Holocaust is the question of origins: How far back does one look for causes? Answers range from the immediate context following the outbreak of World War II to the depths of the Middle Ages. But many, perhaps most, historians believe that one has to begin by examining the rise of “modern” anti-Semitism in Imperial Germany. Much has been written on this issue, but as we see by examining these two books from two different generations of scholars—a collection of essays, written over the course of thirty years, by Shulamith Volkov, one of the outstanding experts in the field; and the revised dissertation of Lars Fischer—interpretive consensus is still far off.

Another question that has been asked repeatedly is the one that personally drives Volkov’s scholarship: “Why was it so hard to see the approaching disaster?” Her essays are an attempt to evoke and analyze “the true complexity of the situation,” the fact that “matters were indeed so obscure and so multidimensional that it was practically impossible, even for many clear sighted men and women, to see through and extract the ominous signs” (p. x). In the first of the three parts that make up the volume, Volkov offers an international perspective by outlining the differences of perception and opinion among Jews in the late nineteenth century and in the late 1930s. In the former period, Russia’s Jews—obviously afflicted enough in their own country—looked anxiously at developments in West-

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ern and Central Europe, and what they saw pushed them even further toward Zionism. Conversely, German Jews did not believe that the conditions in the Tsarist Empire, however deplorable, could ever be replicated in their country. Forty years later, even after what we see in retrospect as the absolutely clear signal sent by *Kristallnacht*, blinders remained. Precisely because the events of November 1938 seemed so like a traditional pogrom, some observers actually believed that the Nazis represented nothing new after all: terrible and murderous, to be sure, but ultimately just one more old style enemy to be opposed and overcome. Moreover, many Zionists, however concerned about their brethren in the Third Reich, remained even more focused on fighting British restrictions on Jewish immigration to Palestine—an attitude encapsulated in Ben Gurion’s notorious remark: “Had I know that it were possible to save all the children of Germany by bringing them over to England, or save only half of them by transferring them to *Eretz Israel*, I would have chosen the latter” (p. 61).

Volkov’s honesty in dealing with the complexity of the issue extends even to her own family. In the remarkable prologue to the book, titled “My Father Leaves His German Homeland,” she recounts how her father had always portrayed himself as a committed Zionist who decided to emigrate to Palestine as soon as Hitler came to power. But after his death, the family discovered letters that he had written from Germany in the spring and summer of 1933 to his fiancée—a native of Tel Aviv who had gone to Berlin to study medicine but returned home already in March 1933. The letters revealed his deep attachment to Germany and his agonizing over the decision to leave. Indeed, in the letter of May 2, Volkov’s father (then twenty-five-years old) recounted hearing Hitler speak on the radio the day before and being swept up as by “a gigantic force of nature.” He then asked plaintively: “Is there really no possibility at all for a Jew to take part in this thing here?” (p. 7). Within the ensuing weeks he came to his senses and left for Palestine. Yet this troubling story sticks with the reader throughout the book and reminds us that there are no easy answers to the question: Why did people not see what was coming?

The remaining two parts of Volkov’s essay collection address the internal dynamics of two seemingly related groups that she takes pains to keep separate: Jews and anti-Semites. Needless to say, she does not deny that anti-Semitic agitation had an increasingly deleterious impact on Germany’s Jews; but she contends that in the Imperial era, neither the opinions of German gentiles nor the desire to assimilate were their primary concern—“Jews were busy doing many other things at that time” (p. xi). Likewise, she argues that the views of anti-Semites had little or nothing

to do with the ideas or behavior of actual Jews—in fact, in Wilhelmine Germany, hatred of Jews was often not even the central focus of groups that called themselves “anti-Semitic.”

The latter contention is encapsulated in what is perhaps Volkov’s best-known thesis, first put forth in 1978: that anti-Semitism was a “cultural code.” She takes issue with the conventional account that attributes the “new” anti-Semitism of the late nineteenth century primarily to the rise of “scientific” racism and the formation of self-proclaimed “anti-Semitic” parties. While she does not deny them a role, she believes that they were not important enough to generate “an entire corpus of social and political opinions, a cohesive worldview, an ideology” (p. 84). “Anti-Semitism” became a code word for an authoritarian, militaristic, virulently nationalistic, antiliberal, and antisocialist mindset that included “blind worship of power equated with manliness and virility; search for uniformity conceived as harmony; authority conceived as leadership; and anti-egalitarianism expressed in racism, misogyny, and hostility to democracy. Hatred of Jews fit only too neatly into this mix” (p. 113). But how did hostility to Jews fit in, and why did “anti-Semitism” become the code for a package that, in its totality, had little to do with Jews?

The social background to Volkov’s account is one that she explored in her first book, *The Rise of Popular Antimodernism in Germany: The Urban Master Artisans, 1875–1896* (1978). For the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century, nationalism had been tied to liberalism, and Germany’s *Mittelstand*—its lower middle class of independent producers and vendors, the traditional artisans and shopkeepers—supported the liberal-nationalist ideology. But increasing competition from industry, exacerbated by the lengthy depression that began in the 1870s, hurt them hard, and they did not know where to turn. Liberal capitalism supported the free markets where the *Mittelstand* could no longer compete successfully; the major ideology that challenged laissez-faire economics—namely, socialism—called into question private ownership of the means of production; and before the 1890s, the Conservative Party was an elitist group that defended the interests of large estate owners. The anti-Semitic ideology that arose in the 1870s, itself devised by former liberals, proved attractive to the *Mittelstand* because of its seemingly selective assault on capitalism and liberalism: “it was possible to attack not capitalism itself, but its Jewish version; not genuine Liberalism, but ‘Manchesterism,’ that is, its presumably distorted version; not the truly ‘national’ government, but its Jewish advisers” (p. 103).

Since Volkov believes that snappy phrases and metaphors are crucial to spreading ideas to the citizenry at large, she provides a streamlined

account of the rise of this ideology by highlighting three slogans. Even if Wilhelm Marr did not coin the word “anti-Semitism,” as is often contended, he certainly popularized it. In contrast to previous words like *Judenbass* or *Judenfeindlichkeit*, “anti-Semitism” did not directly refer to Jews: rather, it referred to “semitism,” a still undefined semantic category that certainly included Jews but whose contents had yet to be determined. Moreover, the term “had a scientific aura and had been placed on a par with such terms as ‘liberalism’ or ‘conservatism,’ thus entering respectable linguistic company” (p. 82). Otto Glogau began to add content to the term in the 1870s, when he blamed the crash of 1873 and the subsequent depression on devious Jewish speculators. By 1879, he contended that all of the mounting social and economic problems could be blamed on them, and he launched the phrase “Die soziale Frage ist die Judenfrage.” Volkov believes that he thus “supplied the ‘right’ phrase at the ‘right’ time and in the ‘right’ place,” and the slogan turned anti-Semitism “from a vague sentiment into a cornerstone of a new ideology” (p. 86). At the same time, the prestigious Prussian historian Heinrich von Treitschke coined a phrase that did not limit the “Jewish Question” to the “Social Question” but inflated it to encompass all of Germany’s ills: “Die Juden sind unser Unglück.” Jews thus became “the essence of all evil,” as they were “equated with every negative aspect of German life, everything that Treitschke and his readers detested . . . By using a simple rhetorical technique, an unsatisfactory situation was suddenly made comprehensible” (p. 99).

Marr, Glogau, and Treitschke are, of course, part of the standard lineup in the history of modern German anti-Semitism, and the role of the *Mittelstand* in its diffusion has been assayed by a number of other historians as well. Volkov’s exceedingly important contribution lies in her assertion that these developments evolved into a “cultural code” for radical right-wing ideas in general. True, the self-proclaimed anti-Semitic parties that grew in strength during the 1880s had fizzled at the polls by the mid-1890s. But their ideas and slogans were appropriated by the Conservative Party in the early 1890s, as it attempted to counter its elitist image and broaden its voter base. Politically and socially, the anti-Semitic parties of the 1880s served as “a bridge from left to right” (p. 103) for the *Mittelstand*, who severed their ties to liberalism in the 1870s and were absorbed by the Conservatives in the 1890s. But Volkov proceeds to argue that besides “its role in the social and political discourse of late-nineteenth-century Germany, anti-Semitism also played a unique role in the crystallization of its culture” (p. 107). “Anti-Semitism” became the buzzword for an “ideological and cultural ‘package deal’” (p. 118) con-

sisting of “militant nationalism, imperial expansion, racism, anti-Socialism, militarism, and support for an authoritarian government” (pp. 113–14). That being the case, those groups belonging to what Volkov calls “the camp of emancipation,” which supported “democracy, parliamentarianism, and an array of economic and cultural goods associated with modernization,” came to declare themselves explicitly anti–anti-Semitic (p. 115).

“The Jews” thus became a linguistic marker that distinguished the far right from the further reaches of the left (Volkov notes that the majority of Germans, presumably moderate monarchists and supporters of the political status quo, belonged to neither camp). What was ironic—and, of course, ultimately tragic—was the fact that actual Jews had no real roles to play in this fantasy scenario. Indeed, many professed “anti-Semites” were more interested in promoting imperialism, or destroying parliamentary authority, or fighting socialism than in attacking Jews. Even some people of Jewish background who subscribed to such radical right-wing goals, such as Maximilian Harden, fell for the “logic” of the “anti-Semitic” package (p. 116). This allows Volkov to explain a phenomenon, which at the time (and occasionally still today) was dubbed “Jewish self-hatred,” a concept that she understandably views skeptically. On the opposite end of the political spectrum, many professed anti–anti-Semites were more concerned with increasing parliamentary powers or defending civil and social rights and had little concern about how Jews actually fared; some of them even disliked Jews. This was particularly obvious among Social Democrats, where anti-Jewish slurs can be detected from “slips of the tongue and pen by many prominent Socialists” down through caricatures of Jews in popular socialist publications. There were many sources for such disparagement—traditional anti-Semitism for the working-class rank and file, or the writings of Lassalle, Proudhon, and the early Marx for the socialist intelligentsia—and Volkov concedes that the German left was never able to overcome it. Nevertheless, she contends that by the 1890s, the dynamic of the cultural codes turned the Social Democratic Party into an unequivocal and unwavering opponent of “anti-Semitism.” As we will see, her portrayal of the Social Democrats is more charitable than that of Lars Fischer.

In Volkov’s account, the *de facto* irrelevance of the behavior of actual Jews to the rhetoric of the anti-Semites was mirrored by a relative disinterest of Jews regarding the opinions of gentiles. That was not always the case, as Volkov suggests that assimilation into German society was indeed a major goal of German Jews for much of the nineteenth century; but by the end of the century, the importance of that objective had re-

ceded. To be sure, that was due in part to the rise of anti-Semitism, which put limits on complete Jewish assimilation. But it was also due to a dynamic within the Jewish community itself that led to “dissimilation”—a dynamic that was based not so much on a clinging to traditional Jewish culture but rather on pursuit of the “Jewish project of modernity” (p. 160), the subject of the book’s third set of essays. Volkov does not provide an explicit definition of what she means by that, and she does not suggest that it was clearly formulated and consciously pursued by Jews themselves. Yet insofar as they came to regard “economic, social and cultural mobility” as more important than assimilation (p. 223), they became the “leading edge of modernization” (p. 209). Some of these changes can be plotted statistically: Jews were ahead of the curve in terms of falling birth rates, declining infant and child mortality, and high rates of education for children, including girls. Due to developments such as these, Jews “grew less similar to the rest of the population. The differences, however, were no longer based on tradition; they were modern differences of a new kind” (p. 222). Many Jews embraced change, and despite the obstacles placed in their paths, “they never ceased to aspire to the top” (p. 244, referring here to Jewish scientists in particular). Indeed, that dynamic leads Volkov to question our definition of “assimilation.” If the word implies becoming like the majority of the population, then the Jews of Imperial Germany were becoming dissimilar; but if one takes into account that German gentiles of future generations would fit the statistical profile of Jews in 1900—that is, if one thinks teleologically—then it was the gentiles who eventually “assimilated” to the Jewish life pattern.

By calling this the “Jewish project of modernity,” Volkov implies that it was more modern than Jewish; yet she also contends that these processes of dissimilation allowed for a survival and redefinition of Jewish culture. Not just as a reaction to anti-Semitism but also as a product of their own “modern” dynamic that set them apart, Jews found a new “self-awareness,” which she dates to the period before 1914, in contrast to scholars who see the Great War as the watershed (p. 256). Volkov does not deal at any length with the cultural dimensions of this self-awareness, which is doubly unfortunate because she makes an extremely important point: whereas scholars commonly focus on the achievements of the Jewish *Bildungsbürgertum*—their accomplishments as authors, artists, thinkers, and scientists—most Jews (like most people in general) partook of middlebrow and commercialized mass culture. Even in Imperial Germany, more than half of Jews had no more than an elementary education, and they turned to an increasingly large corpus of Jewish-themed *Trivialliteratur*—what Volkov calls “popular Jewish culture of the ‘small tradi-

tion' type" (p. 283). This is certainly a subject worthy of much further discussion, which also should include Jewish contributions to the rise of cinema—a new medium in which Jewish themes were also important; think, for example, of Ernst Lubitsch's first comedies, set in the Berlin Jewish retail milieu, such as *The Pride of the Firm* (1914) and *Shoe Palace Pinkus* (1916).

Even though the collection of essays is focused on the Imperial era, it is also unfortunate that Volkov does not provide more discussion of the implications of her research for the Weimar and Nazi eras. It is clear that the rise of "anti-Semitism" as a "cultural code" was a crucial link to the Holocaust; it "helped to preserve" the "old, tenacious tradition of European antipathy toward the Jews" and to "adapt it to modernity and its social and political contexts." But she also insists that these cannot be read as the "beginnings" of the Holocaust: "the murderous acts of the Nazis were of a different category. The crime of extermination must be understood by the singular terms specific to the time and circumstances, not in terms of early and gradual preparation in a faraway past. The crime must be discussed through the elucidation of its own dynamism" (p. 155). We are left with no clear guidelines for the relation between the "cultural code" of anti-Semitism and the "murderous acts" of the Nazis.

Lars Fischer comes to the opposite conclusion, inasmuch as he believes that the Holocaust was made possible by Wilhemine society's "saturation" with anti-Semitic ideas: "It is surely fair to say that no government or regime will ever be able to mobilize sufficient popular support for genocidal policies unless these policies in fact represent the ultimate consequence of an exclusionary logic with which the society whose support is required is already saturated . . . [S]ustained anti-Jewish discourse makes increasingly radical suggestions moving further and further toward that logical consequence seem worthy of serious consideration because they are in keeping with well-established patterns of reflection upon 'the Jewish Question'" (p. xi). Fischer seeks to prove his point by showing that anti-Semitic views were prevalent in the place where one would least be likely to find them: namely, the Social Democratic Party. Several times he poses what he calls his "lead question": "assuming somebody socialized in Imperial Germany who had imbibed its prevalent pre-conceptions regarding 'the Jews' had become interested in Social Democracy, to what extent and in what ways (if any) would the encounter with Socialism most likely have challenged his (or her) preconceptions?" (p. 176). Answer: not at all. Fischer contends that socialists and anti-Semites shared similar opinions about Jews; they differed only in their notions of how to deal with the "Jewish Question." He even con-

tends that Franz Mehring and Eduard Bernstein—usually placed at opposite ends of the Social Democratic spectrum in terms of denigrating and defending Jews—are not that different; only Rosa Luxemburg, he contends, took Jewish issues seriously on their own terms.

There are several dimensions to Fischer's argument. At the most fundamental level, he contends that the leaders of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD)—and he deals exclusively with its upper ranks—shared the prejudice that Jews were both exploitative and clannish (i.e., ethnically self-interested). That is why, even when the Social Democrats lambasted anti-Semitism, they made clear that they did not support “philo-Semitism,” which they took to mean liberal capitalism; Fischer calls this “the embarrassment of anti-antisemitism,” a desire to appear not too sympathetic to Jews (p. 13). Fischer further goes to great lengths to show that the notorious essay of the young Marx “On the Jewish Question” was republished earlier and more often than is generally realized. Another facet of his indictment is that when socialists attacked the “anti-Semitic” parties, they did so not because such parties threatened Jewish citizens but because they represented other values that the SPD opposed, such as militarism, authoritarianism, and antisocialism. That argument segues into what is perhaps Fischer's major point: the Social Democrats did not care at all about the specific concerns of Germany's Jewish citizens, even insofar as they were targets of anti-Semitic vituperation. He deals at inordinate length with the case of Hans Leuß, a former anti-Semite who joined the SPD. That membership became controversial not because of his former—and indeed, Fischer argues, continuing—anti-Semitic beliefs, but because Leuß was publishing in nonsocialist journals. Fischer sees this as telltale example of Social Democratic “indifference” to Jews: “Casual, often almost unconscious, allusions to antisemitism and ‘the Jews’ spontaneously sprang to mind in virtually any situation—except when it really mattered” (p. 149). Social Democrats took many anti-Semites to task, but never explicitly because of their attacks on Jews. In sum: “The conventional Socialist response to modern political antisemitism was woefully inadequate” (p. 228).

Fischer's book brings to light new information and it is marked by very smart analysis—real detective work, at times—but its major problem is that it does not provide significantly novel insights. As we have seen, Volkov—based on her own and especially others' research—also acknowledged the persistence of anti-Jewish stereotypes among Social Democrats. Moreover, if they attacked “anti-Semitic” parties for reasons other than their hostility to Jews, then that was because such right-wing groups embodied a much larger “cultural code” that directly challenged

socialist ideology; obviously, that would be the focus of Social Democratic attacks. What Fischer provides is a deepening of our understanding of socialist opinions on Jews, and corrections of a number of errors or misconceptions about specific cases or statements. Indeed, rarely does one encounter such a close reading of evidence. He also presents his viewpoints forcefully and logically: for example, he has an exceptionally well-argued justification for rejecting the “kernel-of-truth approach to antisemitism,” that is, the notion that anti-Jewish attitudes are deplorable, but they are in part comprehensible because Jew X and Jew Y engaged in Z behavior (see pp. 6–12).

Volkov and Fischer might seem to share a number of fundamental viewpoints, such as complete rejection of the “kernel-of-truth approach,” and recognition of a disheartening degree of anti-Jewish sentiment among Imperial Germany’s Social Democrats. But ultimately they come to diametrically different conclusions. Volkov believes that for all their faults, the Social Democrats belonged to the “camp of emancipation” that took a firm stand on principle against the “camp of antisemitism,” which she places at opposite poles of Imperial Germany’s political spectrum. By contrast, Fischer says that it is important to examine the “shades of grey” in discourse about “the Jews,” and he sees those shades filtering all the way from the far right to the far left. It is interesting that he believes that he is building on Volkov’s argument that anti-Semitism was transmitted from the Wilhelmine to the Weimar era not through organized parties or explicitly anti-Jewish ideologies but through a cultural code that was not primarily anti-Semitic. But whereas Volkov nevertheless stresses the fundamental break between Wilhelmine and Nazi anti-Semitism, Fischer sees an unbroken causal and, ultimately, moral responsibility: “If we take this contention seriously, it immediately becomes evident that it is precisely the shades of grey that are of the utmost importance for our understanding of this process of transmission. It is they that ultimately formed the prevalent set of perceptions regarding ‘the Jews’ in Imperial German society, and this more general set of perceptions, in turn, clearly did more in the long run to render German society susceptible to National Socialist antisemitism than the ideological or organizational continuity of pre-war political antisemitism in its own right” (pp. xiii–xiv). Although Fischer concedes that in the early Weimar era, the Social Democrats finally began to take at least some concerns of the Jewish community seriously on their own terms (cf. p. 148), he nevertheless concludes that the Social Democrats “share the responsibility for rendering German society susceptible to Nazi antisemitism and preparing the ideological seedbed from which the Shoah could grow” (p. 228).

That is a harsh indictment indeed. But for all of the logical consistency of Fischer's analysis, he seems to overlook the possibility that the sense of justice can play a crucial role in human affairs. Due to socialization, personal psychology, or other factors, one might hold prejudices against certain groups of people; yet at the same time, one's sense of justice can lead one to stand up for their rights. Did every person who rescued Jews in occupied Europe, invariably at the risk of his or her own life, appreciate Jews? Probably not. Some may have disliked Jews, but they hated the German invaders much more; some may have disliked Jews, but they had been taught in their Christian churches that murder is a grievous sin; some may have disliked Jews, but they had the burning belief that at a fundamental level, every human life is so precious that one should imperil one's own life to save another one. A sense of justice was central to Germany's Social Democratic Party, the only party (since the Communists had been *de facto* expelled from the Reichstag) to vote against Hitler's dictatorial empowerment in March 1933. I suspect that is why Volkov, for all of her disappointment with the personal prejudices of the Social Democrats, ultimately places more emphasis on their role as bulwark of the "camp of emancipation" in Imperial Germany, as well as their fervent opposition to the Nazis—and, finally, their defense of Jews—in the Weimar era.

These two books, so intelligent and thoughtful in their very different ways, still leave us perplexed about the causal relationship between the anti-Semitism of Imperial Germany and that of the National Socialists. But inasmuch as they underscore—again, in their very different ways—the murkiness of attitudes toward Jews and the complex dynamic of the Jewish community itself, they help us understand a bit more why Germany's Jews could not foretell their future.

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