Trends in the Study of Antisemitism in United States History

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State of the Field: Trends in the Study of Antisemitism in United States History¹

Britt P. Tevis

Identifying trends in the study of antisemitism in American history is a complicated task because historians have mostly focused their attention on other aspects of the American Jewish experience.² Further, by and large, those works that examine antisemitism in the United States posit that anti-Jewish animus has been relatively fleeting and generally marginal to United States history and the American Jewish experience. Indeed, antisemitism in the United States has most often been framed as an outlier and premodern relic. According to this argument, America’s

¹. This article illuminates trends in the study of antisemitism in US history as they have appeared in English language academic publications between 1951 and January 2021. During this time, historians have employed a capacious definition of antisemitism. To highlight this range of scholarship, I, too, have used a broad conceptualization of antisemitism. On defining antisemitism, see Jonathan Judaken “Introduction,” American Historical Review 123, no. 4 (2018): 1122–38. For the history of the term “anti-Semitism,” see, David Feldman, “Toward a History of the Term ‘Anti-Semitism,’” American Historical Review 123, no. 4 (2018): 1139–50. Thank you to Tony Michels, Libby Garland, Christine Lamberson, Debbie Sharnak, Rachel Gross, and Stanislav Budnitsky for their feedback and assistance with this piece. Thank you as well to the two anonymous reviewers and the editors and staff of American Jewish History for their helpful suggestions.

commitment to religious freedom, democracy, and pluralism has deterred the state from perpetuating anti-Jewish discrimination or bigotry. Thus, understanding antisemitism in America requires studying social spaces and parsing personal interactions between Jews and non-Jews. Systemic forms of discrimination such as university quotas, violent incidents such as the lynching of Leo Frank, and the dissemination of anti-Jewish propaganda by influential Americans such as Henry Ford appear as outliers. Simply stated, to the extent that American Jewish historians have examined antisemitism, it has been largely to dismiss it as a serious, lasting problem woven into the fabric of US history. The tendency to present antisemitism in the United States as atypical, momentary, and confined to private realms is especially noteworthy in several important surveys of American Jewish history. Trends in scholarship on antisemitism in the United States must be understood in the context of how American Jewish historians have promoted the idea that antisemitism in the United States has been a relatively insignificant aberration.

As this article shows, conceptualizations of antisemitism as irregular, relatively harmless, and primarily social originated in the 1950s, when academic historians first took an interest in studying American antisemitism in the context of a larger debate about populism, exceptionalism, and objectivity. The essential voices to emerge from this discussion were those of immigration historians Oscar Handlin (1915–2011) and John Higham (1920–2003). Their conceptualizations of anti-Jewish animus became touchstones for discussion of antisemitism in subsequent decades. Though Handlin and Higham disagreed on certain details, they agreed on antisemitism’s limited significance and short-lived nature, seeing in it a vestige rather than a manifestation of modernity. Since the 1970s, some historians have advanced an understanding of anti-Jewish animus

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3. This is one reason why American Jewish historians have used opinion polls as evidence of the supposed dearth of antisemitism. See, for example, Edward Shapiro, *A Time for Healing: American Jewry since World War II* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 38–9, 43.


5. For an argument that scholars’ interest in antisemitism reflects their experiences living through historical moments of increased anti-Jewish discrimination and violence, see Sarna in Koffman, “Roundtable on Anti-Semitism in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era,” 7.
that recognizes it as both a persistent force, which existed beyond social realms. Still, Handlin and Higham’s ideas (especially Higham’s) remain influential, and many American Jewish historians continue to present antisemitism as largely insignificant, momentary, primarily social.

Recognizing the weight of Handlin and Higham’s claims in American Jewish historical scholarship from the past seventy years renders the state of the field and its attendant trends understandable. Because most historians who have published on the history of antisemitism in American history have done so either as dissenters within the field of American Jewish history or as historians from other fields interested in examining anti-Jewish animus in passing, collectively, existing scholarship presents antisemitism as episodic. Periodic surges in interest have proved short-lived and thus pertinent research has appeared haphazardly. Research exploring given incidents or themes have materialized here and there yet the dynamics and nature of antisemitism in the United States have yet to be sufficiently theorized or explained. At the same time, despite the diffuse nature of relevant scholarship, collectively it suggests that anti-Jewish animus constitutes an integral feature of American history, rather than a momentary and relatively innocuous phenomenon that is unrelated to the state. Accordingly, this article concludes by offering some suggestions for future researchers.

FORMATIVE SCHOLARSHIP ON ANTISEMITISM IN THE UNITED STATES

Academic historians first took interest in antisemitism in the United States in the 1950s just as American Jewry came to the discipline’s attention. American historians considered anti-Jewish animus in the United States as they engaged in contemporaneous debates about populism, the late nineteenth-century political movement of farmers and laborers, and reassessed 1930s scholarship. As they developed their narratives of American history, scholars such as Richard Hofstadter, Daniel Boorstin, and


others articulated divergent views on the history of anti-Jewish bigotry. Oscar Handlin’s and John Higham’s contributions to this debate proved seminal, shaping much of the subsequent scholarship on the subject. Recognizing how trends in the field developed necessitates reviewing how they conceptualized antisemitism.

In the early twentieth century, Jewish organizations such as the American Jewish Committee (AJC) and Anti-Defamation League (ADL) began studying anti-Jewish discrimination. Drawing on conceptualizations of antisemitism that originated in late nineteenth-century Germany, these organizations presented anti-Jewish animus as theoretically operating along tracks such as “social,” “religious,” and “political,” etc. In the 1940s, university-based psychologists, sociologists, and political theorists adopted this segmented conceptualization. In the 1950s, when historians turned their attention to the subject, they embraced these same framing devices for thinking about anti-Jewish animus.

Handlin, the son of Jewish immigrants, was among these scholars. Handlin graduated from Brooklyn College in 1935 and then attended Harvard University, from which he earned his PhD in 1940. He then became the first Jewish member of Harvard’s history department. According to Lila Corwin Berman, he was at the forefront of “sculpting a sociological language of Jewishness that fit into post-war nationalistic aims and answered prevailing Jewish concerns.”

In 1948, on behalf of the Anti-Defamation League, he and Mary Handlin, his wife, authored *Danger in Discord: Origins of Anti-Semitism in the United States*. Echoing the orientation of the ADL and AJC, which, in the late 1940s and 1950s, understood antisemitism as indivisible from other prejudices, the Handlins argued, “The manifestations of intolerance and prejudice are everywhere the same.” Broadly, their work viewed

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9. For discussions of mid-century debates about exceptionalism and populism vis-à-vis antisemitism, see Michels, “‘Is America Different?,’” 206–8; Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 337–41.
American antisemitism as a periodic phenomenon, stressed differences between antisemitism in Europe and America, and positioned Americans’ emphasis on individualism as keeping expressions of prejudice in check. “To emphasize the dark aspects [of American history] would distort the view of the whole; for in the United States, social and economic circumstances have kept alive a tradition of liberty and equality, a tradition which has generally left little room for anti-Semitic prejudices,” they argued.15 Though this work acknowledged “the ideology of racism,” it nonetheless insisted that anti-Jewish undercurrents represented exceptions to the norm. “The first two centuries of American experience were almost completely free of expressions of hostility to the Jews,” the Handlins wrote.16

Oscar Handlin’s view that antisemitism emerged only in certain moments also appeared in a 1951 article analyzing Jewish stock characters in popular magazines, which he wrote at the behest of Lee Max Friedman, who was then the president of the American Jewish Historical Society.17 Here Handlin asserted that the last decade of the nineteenth century was free of antisemitism despite the ubiquity of negative stereotypes about Jews. Negative portrayals of Jews, Handlin wrote, only proved problematic between 1913 and 1920, when they served as justification for anti-Jewish discrimination.18 In addition to depicting antisemitism in the United States as incontiguous, he identified a number of well-known anti-Jewish episodes as outliers. Incidents such as the 1877 Seligman affair (in which a hotel manager denied Joseph Seligman accommodations on account of his Jewishness), and Grant’s Orders Number 11 (the December 1862 incident in which Ulysses S. Grant expelled Jews “as a class” from areas of Kentucky, Mississippi, and Tennessee) were “exceptional” in Handlin’s view. Articulating his historiographic contribution to understanding the origins of American antisemitism and studies of populism, Handlin explained that anti-Jewish animus in the United States could be traced to disgruntled populists who saw Jews as embodiments of urbanism and capitalism.19

Handlin’s *Adventure in Freedom* (1954) reiterated this analysis. Here, Handlin argued that stereotypes of Jews in America remained murky to the end of the nineteenth century, at which point the idea of Jews as greedy Shylocks crystalized in popular imaginings. Still, “the stereotype of the Jew was,” Handlin claimed, “only one among many” offensive stereotypes about immigrants, a sentiment that reflected his disposition to view disparate immigration histories similarly. Handlin’s analysis in *Adventure* located the origins of antisemitism in the United States in late nineteenth-century populism. His sanguine appraisal of antisemitism reflected his romanticized accounts of American history.

Higham, who completed his PhD at the University of Wisconsin–Madison in 1949, also theorized antisemitism in the 1950s. His most important works about antisemitism appeared in two 1957 articles. The first turned up in the March volume of the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, the journal known today as the *Journal of American History*. This work was an expanded version of a speech that he read before the American Jewish Historical Society in 1956. Here, Higham identified two streams of thought that he believed had shaped studies of anti-Jewish animus, both of which he saw as illogical. The first was that of Carey McWilliams, a leftist journalist who viewed episodes such as the Seligman affair as economically harmful to Jews. The second was Handlin’s, whose approach Higham labeled “neoliberal” because it criticized 1930s liberalism. The second was Handlin’s, whose approach Higham labeled “neoliberal” because it criticized 1930s liberalism. Offering his own analysis, Higham wrote


that the Gilded Age was the “formative era” of anti-Jewish bigotry in
the United States, because it saw the emergence of “social anti-Semitism—a pattern of discrimination—and the crystallization of political
anti-Semitism.” Antisemitism, in Higham’s view, must be understood
as it manifested in Jews’ lived experiences. Accordingly, Higham ar-
ticulated “guiding principles” for analyzing antisemitism, which would
enable historians to write “objective history.”26 First, Higham argued,
before the late nineteenth century, non-Jewish Americans held as many
positive associations with the idea of Jews as negative ones, a fact that
ought to discourage historians from “exaggerating or underrating the
phenomenon.” Second, historians needed to study the “role that the
minority group itself plays in the conflict situation.” Jews’ behaviors
must be scrutinized as much as antisemites’ misperceptions because the
former might stoke the latter. “A deeper historical understanding must
take account of the factors within Jewish history that have served to
magnetize external antagonisms,” he wrote. Higham identified Jews’
determination to mingle with elite society, their “assertive manners and
aggressive personalities,” and the “conspicuousness of Jewish wealth”
as examples of behaviors that prompted some to seek Jews’ exclusion
from certain spheres. “Instead of knuckling under . . . many Jews
struggled against the restrictions” at hotels and clubs, which made the
backlash they endured understandable. Third, Higham determined that
historians should use a “consistently comparative approach,” examining
antisemitism in the context of other group hatreds.27 Recognizing that
non-Jewish immigrant groups also faced discrimination should temper
historians’ identification of antisemitism in the past.

In September 1957, Higham further developed these ideas in an article
commissioned by the American Jewish Committee, which was published
in the *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, the jour-
nal known today as *American Jewish History*.28 Here Higham asserted
that, before the Civil War, Jews “enjoy[ed] almost complete social ac-
ceptance and freedom.” Eschewing studies that focused on “ideological
anti-Semitism,” which he thought exaggerated “the power of irrational
beliefs,” Higham argued that American antisemitism primarily existed
in the realm of the “social.” “Actual conflict,” such as the Seligman af-
fair, triggered anti-Jewish animus, not individuals’ beliefs.29 In Higham’s
view, social clashes, though momentarily embarrassing, were minimally

   the American Jewish Historical Society* 47 (1957): 1–33.
significant. Neither economic nor social discrimination prevented Jews from pursuing their goals; Jews’ capacity to operate their own hotels tempered the effects of episodes such as the Seligman affair.\(^{30}\) Reiterating his preference for studying antisemitism comparatively, Higham concluded that antisemitism in the United States echoed broader anti-immigrant sentiments and appeared in moments of economic hardship.

Handlin and Higham disagreed on populists’ relationship to antisemitism. Whereas Handlin thought antisemitism was central to their worldview, Higham did not. They also disagreed about the timing of antisemitic outbursts. Higham claimed anti-Jewish sentiments manifest according to a “cyclical rhythm” linked with economic shifts and nativism.\(^{31}\) Handlin disputed Higham’s temporal schema, calling it a “simplistic view” in a review of Higham’s *Strangers in the Land (1955).*\(^{32}\) Handlin and Higham also disagreed on the best method for studying antisemitism. Handlin preferred to explore non-Jews’ ideas about Jews whereas Higham favored examining on-the-ground circumstances. Yet both men identified the Gilded Age as the decade in which antisemitism emerged in the United States. Both thought that, in the nineteenth century, non-Jews had trouble distinguishing between Jews and Germans.\(^ {33}\) They agreed that Jews’ supposedly unique economic success in the United States made them targets for established elites.\(^ {34}\) They also agreed that antisemitism in America paled in comparison with antisemitism in Europe.\(^ {35}\) Most significantly, both determined that antisemitism in American history was relatively insignificant and temporary. Handlin, who made this claim more forcefully, argued that anti-Jewish animus was essentially harmless until the second decade of the twentieth century. Higham thought antisemitism predated 1913 but limited his analyses of anti-Jewish bigotry to the social realm. “No decisive event, no deep crisis, no powerful social movement, no great individual is associated primarily with, or

\(^{30}\) Higham, “Anti-Semitism in the Gilded Age,” 567.

\(^{31}\) Higham, “Anti-Semitism in the Gilded Age,” 571.


\(^{35}\) Handlin, *Danger in Discord,* 7; Higham, “Anti-Semitism in the Gilded Age,” 572, and “Social Discrimination Against Jews in America,” 3.
significant chiefly because of, anti-Semitism,” Higham wrote in 1966, reiterating this sentiment.36

Handlin and Higham’s theories about antisemitism in the United States complemented America’s postwar intellectual landscape. Their work appeared as scholars began to research and publish on the Holocaust, a process that made them especially likely to view America and Europe as distinct and American antisemitism as comparatively minor.37 Further, their analyses fit within existing paradigms generated by major Jewish advocacy organizations such as the ADL and AJC in that they also defined antisemitism as operating on distinct planes such as “social” and “political.”

Handlin and Higham’s analyses also reflected the political context of the Cold War and McCarthy era. Both Higham and Handlin engaged in polemics with leftists who proposed other understandings of antisemitism. While Higham rejected leftist Cary McWilliams’ views, Handlin took on prominent Jewish Communist writer Morris Schappes (1907–2004). In 1941, Schappes had been one of a few dozen faculty and staff members fired by New York City’s public colleges for their membership in the Communist Party. In 1950, Schappes published A Documentary History of the Jews in the United States, 1654–1875, a collection of primary sources. Schappes’s collection identified antisemitism as a constant phenomenon in US history. Schappes wrote that the selected documents “reveal for the first time that anti-Semitism in our country has a more ancient history, a more persistent continuity, and a wider dispersion than even liberal opponents of anti-Semitism have hitherto dreamed.”38 He acknowledged anti-Jewish animus in social and cultural spheres but in legal and political realms as well.

Handlin reviewed Schappes’s work in a 1951 volume of Commentary, asserting that Schappes’s assessment was “written from so biased a point of view that those who turn to this volume may draw from it altogether erroneous impressions.” Specifically, Schappes’s “judgment of

the frequency of anti-Semitism is unsound.” Handlin’s 1951 essay and 1954 book can thus be read as responses to Schappes’s work.

Both Handlin and Higham rejected leftist interpretations of antisemitism, which depicted it as a far more serious and long-lasting problem in the United States than they believed it was. Despite their disagreements with each other, in future decades, Higham and Handlin’s work functioned similarly to shape how historians understood antisemitism in the United States. Trends in the field reveal the influence of their work.

**HISTORIANS’ RESPONSES TO HANDLIN AND HIGHAM**

Historical debates about antisemitism in the United States mostly abated in the 1960s. Then, between the 1970s and the mid-1990s, a handful of scholars directed their attention to the subject again. They produced several articles and books about antisemitism. These works underscore the significant degree to which historians understood Handlin’s and, particularly, Higham’s ideas as central to the historiography on antisemitism, as well as the divergent views between specialists in American Jewish history and those in other subjects. For example, in 1979, examining the intersection of antisemitism and business history, Peter R. Decker, an economic historian, published an article about Jewish merchants in San Francisco before 1852. His work illuminates how the credit agency Dun & Bradstreet Co. (Dun) reporters’ views of Jews’ “character” harmed their chances of securing loans and compelled Jews to rely on ethnic credit networks. Decker concluded that Jews of German descent in antebellum San Francisco “attained economic success, in spite of ethnic and religious barriers placed before them . . .

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41. Some historians have attributed renewed interest in the subject in this moment to American historians’ concurrent repudiation of the paradigm of exceptionalism. See, for example, Till van Rahden, “Beyond Ambivalence: Variations of Catholic Anti-Semitism in Turn-of-the-Century Baltimore,” *American Jewish History* 82, no. 1 (1994), 8; Jonathan Sarna, “Anti-Semitism and American History,” *Commentary* March 1981, 42–8. It also signified the fact that, during this decade, American Jewish history as an academic field came of age and popular interest in Jewish immigrant culture peaked.

not [due] to the weakness of the institutional arrangements which confronted them.” Likewise, in 1982, David Gerber showed that Dun investigators’ perceptions of Jews’ business habits and cultural norms in nineteenth-century Buffalo, New York “carried grave consequences for Jewish-Gentile relations.” Gerber concluded his article by posing a series of questions, which he thought had to be answered before the full breadth of antisemitism and its impacts could be understood. Further, he questioned Higham’s understanding of antisemitism, calling his position “confusing” and noting that Higham’s evidence and conclusions were incongruous.

By contrast, Stephen Mostov, an American Jewish historian, published an article in 1983 examining Dun records in Cincinnati, Ohio, with the aim of complicating the “rags-to-riches” narrative of American Jewish history. Mostov did not deny antisemitism in his work. In fact, Mostov noted that the Dun reports contained more negative assessments of Jews than positive ones. (One particularly telling evaluation determined, “We should deem him safe but he is not a white man. He is a Jew, and that you can take into account.”) Yet, even as he cited such antisemitic rhetoric, Mostov sought mainly to explain the development and success of Jewish credit networks. Mostov’s work didn’t analyze antisemitism as a historical phenomenon in itself but saw it as something Jews overcame.

Similar differences in how scholars have framed antisemitism appeared in works that examined intersections between antisemitism and law in the 1970s and 1980s. For example, in 1976 the legal historian Jerold

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47. For another example of an American Jewish history that frames antisemitism as something Jews overcame on the road to success, see, Henry L. Feingold, A Time for Searching: Entering the Mainstream, 1920–1945 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).
Auerbach published *Unequal Justice*, which revealed that in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era white Anglo Saxon Protestant lawyers responded to the appearance of Jews in the American legal profession by creating new barriers to protect their elite status.\(^4^8\) Morton Borden (1925–2007), an early-Americanist, published *Jews, Turks, and Infidels* (1984), which highlighted evangelical Protestants’ ongoing desire to make the United States a Christian nation. Of the original thirteen states, eight included forms of religious discrimination in their first constitutions. Borden showed that these legal handicaps did not just fall away, but were the subject of protracted struggles over many decades.\(^4^9\) By contrast, though Jeffrey Gurock’s 1976 article about the passage of the 1913 New York State Civil Rights Act, a law that banned “offensive” advertising by hotels, focused on anti-Jewish discrimination in relationship to laws and legal norms, it nevertheless employed Higham’s conceptualization of “social anti-Semitism” and missed the role of the state in enabling such acts.\(^5^0\)

During these years, a number of studies considered American state policies during World War II as they concerned European Jewry. For example, in 1968, David Wyman (1929–2018) published *Paper Walls: America and the Refugee Crisis 1938–1941*, which illuminated America’s staunch refusal to grant refuge to Jews in the three years before the January 1942 Wannsee Conference.\(^5^1\) (That same year saw the publication of Henry Morse’s *While Six Million Died*, a bestseller that also addressed the inaction of the United States during the Second World War.\(^5^2\) Other historians examined anti-Jewish animus in the US State Department.\(^5^3\) By contrast, Leonard Dinnerstein’s (1934–2019) work on the US Army’s treatment of Jewish displaced people in Germany after World War II took a very different tone, contrasting common rank-and-file antisemitism


among US soldiers charged with running the DP camps, with efforts to counter those attitudes.44

Within the field of American Jewish history itself, no scholar wrote more about antisemitism than Dinnerstein. During his career, he shed new light on incidents of anti-Jewish animus. For example, in 1962, Dinnerstein published *The Leo Frank Case*, which was among the first in-depth explorations of the 1915 lynching in Atlanta, Georgia.55 Yet he never significantly changed how American Jewish historians understood antisemitism. This is largely because he framed his research through Handlin and Higham's theorizations. Like Handlin and Higham, Dinnerstein described anti-Jewish violence before the 1920s as “isolated,” declining to contextualize Frank’s murder in a longer history of anti-Jewish violence. He pinned Frank’s 1915 lynching in Atlanta, Georgia, on “Southern frustrations,” which had been triggered by “the ‘invasion’ of strangers,” i.e., immigrants.56

From the 1970s on, Dinnerstein produced a range of articles and collected volumes on antisemitism. In 1971, he published *Antisemitism in the United States*, a collection of essays, which included pieces by Handlin, Higham, and Hofstadter.57 In addition, the book spotlighted subjects that became touchstone issues for decades. Morton Rosenstock contributed a chapter about university quotas.58 David O’Brien wrote about Catholic antisemitism in the 1930s.59 The book also considered antisemitism among Black Americans in contributions from James Baldwin, the psychologist Kenneth Clark, and Rabbi Robert Gordis.60

56. Dinnerstein, *The Leo Frank Case*, xvi.
Dinnerstein was perhaps the most prolific scholar to research antisemitism in the United States. He was among the first to emphasize regional variations in American antisemitism, publishing articles in 1971 and 1973 that debunked the idea that antisemitism was absent from the American South. He also revealed how southern Jews’ fears about antisemitism compelled them to remain silent when confronted with anti-Black racism. In the 1980s, Dinnerstein published collected volumes of these essays, as well as a monograph on antisemitism, and inspired later researchers. Yet, even as he broke new ground, Dinnerstein never directly challenged Higham’s “guiding principles,” and often employed Handlin’s characterization of particular episodes as exceptions.

Notably, some American Jewish historians advanced more robust conceptualizations of anti-Jewish animus during these decades. For example, Naomi Cohen (1927–2018) dissented from both Handlin’s and Higham’s approaches. In 1979, she questioned Higham’s classification of the Seligman affair as “social discrimination” and his claim that anti-Jewish animus in the Gilded Age represented a new phenomenon. Reexamining Gilded Age antisemitic imagery, she expressly challenged Higham’s differentiation between “ideological antisemitism and overt or applied antisemitism.” Further, she called for a reexamination of antisemitism in the Gilded Age through a study of the voices of “the victims.” In 1984, she published *Encounter with Emancipation: The German Jews in the United States, 1830–1914*, in which she showed

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that Jews did not secure religious equality immediately upon arriving in the United States.\textsuperscript{67} The title alone implied that American Jews too needed to undergo an emancipation process. In 1992, Cohen published \textit{Jews in Christian America}, which demonstrated that Jews had worked actively to eliminate various forms of anti-Jewish discrimination that were inscribed in law.\textsuperscript{68}

In addition to Cohen, others departed from the paradigms laid down by Handlin and Higham. Michael Dobkowski rejected Higham’s claim that American antisemitism lacked a religious or ideological component. In his articles and book, \textit{The Tarnished Dream} (1979), Dobkowski asserted that Handlin and Higham’s “theories \[were\] misleading oversimplifications.”\textsuperscript{69} In 1976, Hyman Berman (1925–2015), a labor historian who often wrote about Jews, illuminated the Republican Party’s explicitly antisemitic political campaigns in 1930s Minnesota. He showed how local Republican Party candidates depicted Jews as communists in order to deter voters from supporting Farm-Labor candidates, illuminating how antisemitism operated in the political realm.\textsuperscript{70}

Nevertheless, Higham continued to shape the field’s perception of antisemitism into the 1990s.\textsuperscript{71} Several circumstances explain this continued influence. For one, Higham exhibited a sustained interest in antisemitism, returning to the subject more than once and reasserting slightly tweaked versions of his 1957 theories in later decades. In 1975, he published \textit{Send These to Me: Jews and Other Immigrants in Urban America}, a collection of eleven articles, nine of which had previously appeared in print. Here, he reiterated many of the same ideas expressed in his 1957 works as well as some new ones, which also shaped subsequent scholarship. In a chapter titled “Ideological Anti-Semitism in the Gilded Age,” Higham rearticulated his “principles of interpretation” for historicizing ideological anti-Jewish animus; the following chapter did the same for “social anti-

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\textsuperscript{70} Hyman Berman, “Political Anti-Semitism in Minnesota during the Great Depression,” \textit{Jewish Social Studies} 38, no. 3 & 4 (1976): 247–64.
\textsuperscript{71} See, for example, Jonathan D. Sarna, “The ‘Mythical Jew’ and the ‘Jew Next Door’ in Nineteenth Century America,” in \textit{Anti-Semitism in American History}, ed. Gerber, 57–78.
\end{flushright}
Semitism.”72 (Indicative of its reception among many American Jewish historians, in a review, Dinnerstein declared the book “the finest group of articles on immigration and ethnicity since the writings of Marcus L. Hansen and Oscar Handlin,” an ironic compliment given Higham’s earlier repudiation of Handlin’s work.)73 In 1984, Higham reissued his 1975 volume. Endorsing his own assessment, Higham wrote that, though he had tweaked some of the text, “its argument and point of view seem more persuasive today than they did a decade ago.”74

Handlin and Higham’s professional prestige may have also given their theorizations of American antisemitism added weight at a time when American Jewish history occupied a marginal position within the general field of American history.75 As much can be deduced when juxtaposing the career trajectories of Handlin and Higham and that of Cohen, an American Jewish historian and critic of Handlin and Higham. Handlin taught at Harvard, and in 1952 won a Pulitzer Prize for The Uprooted (1951).76 Meanwhile, Higham worked at UCLA, Rutgers, Columbia University, and the University of Michigan, before settling at Johns Hopkins in 1971. From 1973 to 1974, he served as the president of the Organization of American Historians.77 By the 1960s and certainly the 1970s, both Higham and Handlin sat at the top of the profession. By contrast, their critic Cohen joined Hunter College’s history department after earning her PhD from Columbia University in 1962. Cohen’s post at a public college affiliated with the City University of New York lacked the prestige of those of Handlin and Higham. The fact that Cohen was a woman may have also diminished her influence, especially when it clashed with that of two highly regarded American historians.78 Cohen’s marriage to Gerson Cohen (1924–91), the Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, and the fact that she published her books with Jewish publishers, such as the Jewish Publication Society of America.
also may have contributed to the devaluing of her conceptualizations of antisemitism, especially as the field strove to prove itself as a legitimate academic subject of research.\textsuperscript{79} In short, by the time Cohen and other American Jewish historians began challenging conceptualizations of antisemitism as minimal and short-lived in the 1970s, Handlin and Higham had already ascended to the height of the profession—though Higham’s reputation would eventually eclipse Handlin’s. Moreover, as immigration historians who wrote about Jews, Handlin and Higham could do something that Cohen, a specialist, likely could not: endow American Jewish history with legitimacy within the broader field. For some, Higham’s interest in antisemitism was especially meaningful, because he was not Jewish and this meant his ideas carried greater legitimacy.\textsuperscript{80} In short, it is conceivable that Handlin and Higham’s work (and especially the latter’s) gave American Jewish historians a long absent and much desired sense of validity and importance.

By the mid-1990s, many American Jewish historians used Handlin’s and Higham’s conceptualizations of antisemitism. The still relatively young field came to present anti-Jewish animus in the United States as minimally significant. Subsequent trends in the field developed and failed to develop accordingly.

**EMERGENT TRENDS**

Since the mid-1990s historians have published more research on antisemitism in the United States than they had in previous decades. As was true between the 1970s and 1990s, historians who specialize in fields other than American Jewish history have produced much of this research. And though many explored themes and phenomena first discussed by earlier scholars, they moved away from engagement with Handlin or Higham. Even some specialists in American Jewish history have, like Cohen and Dobkowski before them, challenged the view that antisemitism was exceptional and transitory.

Antisemitism at colleges and universities has been among the most popular subjects of study. These works build on those produced in the late 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s, which examined exclusionary admis-

\textsuperscript{79} Thank you to the anonymous reviewer who made this point.

\textsuperscript{80} For example, in a 1985 review of Higham’s *Send These to Me* published in *American Jewish History*, Steven Diner suggested that Higham’s status as a non-Jew might give him a special “critical distance” that enabled him to impartially study the subject of anti-Jewish discrimination, a sentiment that spoke to an enduring belief in objectivity among historians. See Steven Diner, Review of *Send These to Me: Immigrants in Urban America*, by John Higham, *American Jewish History* 75, no. 2 (1985): 227. On historians and objectivity, see Novick, *That Noble Dream*. 
sions policies at elite private colleges and universities. In addition to studies of quotas at Harvard, Princeton, Yale, and the Johns Hopkins Universities, historians have highlighted manifestations of antisemitism at Rutgers, Michigan State College, the University of Michigan, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Emory, Williams, New York University, Syracuse, and Columbia. Scholars also have focused on discriminatory admissions policies in medical, law, and dental schools. Some have


discussed the ways in which non-Jewish students perpetuated anti-Jewish discrimination. Others have documented personal encounters with antisemitism. Historians have examined academics whose anti-Jewish sentiments influenced their intellectual choices. University and colleges’ discriminatory employment policies have also been historicized.

Another popular subject of research examines anti-Jewish exclusion from places of public accommodation and professional spheres. The legal scholar Evan Friss, for example, discussed anti-Jewish exclusion in the context of Jewish and Black civil rights campaigns in Gilded Age New York. Library historian Wayne Weigand examined Melvil Dewey’s exclusion of Jews from the Lake Placid Club, spotlighting the library profession’s failure to repudiate Dewey’s overt, longstanding antisemitism. Peter Hopsicker, a sports historian, similarly analyzed anti-Jewish exclusion in the region of Lake Placid, New York, showing how Jews’ protests against the area’s bid to host the 1932 Winter Olympics hinged on the use of public funds to improve private properties that expressly excluded Jews.

Long, and Elizabeth Dilling have also been historicized. Works highlight how Ford disseminated the Protocols of the Elders of Zion in the Dearborn Independent from 1919–20; how Coughlin, a Catholic priest, spread antisemitic claims to an audience of over thirty million listeners throughout the 1930s; how anti-communist and antisemitic sentiments often overlapped; how Jews were targets of the KKK, among other things. For example, in Henry Ford’s War on Jews and the Legal Battle Against Hate Speech (2012) and related articles, Victoria Woeste revealed how Ford “deviously used corporate resources to hide from the legal process” and how “the American legal system gave wide latitude to hateful publications.” She also shows how Ford’s actions shaped the way major national Jewish organizations, such as the American Jewish Committee, responded to similar episodes. Scholars also have examined early- and mid-century pro-Nazi fascist organizations such as the Silver Legion, the German American Bund, the Christian Front, and the America First Party.

Like Woeste, a number of historians in the last thirty years have explored connections between law and antisemitism. Immigration historians have revealed how antisemitism and broader xenophobic sentiments drove

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immigration law and policy. Libby Garland’s *After They Closed the Gates* explores Jews who came to the United States illegally after the passage of the 1920s immigration laws, revealing how American nativism drove Jews to turn to smugglers and forgery to enter the country. Joseph Bendersky’s *The Jewish Threat* (2000) reveals the prevalence of antisemitism in the US Army. The Military Intelligence Division viewed Jews as a distinct, inferior race that was inclined to support communism, disposed to conspiracy, and intent on destroying American democracy. His work shows how this outlook shaped US immigration policy.

Some scholars have highlighted anti-Jewish discrimination in housing and employment in the postwar period. Stuart Meck (1947–2018), a historian of urban planning, revealed that some Jews, like African Americans, were subject to exclusionary zoning practices. Kirsten Fermaglich’s *A Rosenberg by Any Other Name* showed that some mid-century American Jews opted to change their names from self-evidently Jewish monikers to ostensibly less obviously Jewish ones as a tactic to


avoid employment discrimination. Others have looked at links between criminal courts, police, and Jews. Batya Miller uncovered how renewed zeal over the enforcement of Sunday closing laws in the 1880s and 1890s resulted in the prosecution of thousands of New York City Jews for working on Sunday. Likewise, Mia Brett explored dimensions of legally sanctioned antisemitism in her dissertation about the 1876 murder trial of Pesach Rubenstein. Her work illuminates “the implicit denial of criminal procedure rights to immigrant Jews.” Within a broader framework, David Sorkin has argued that American Jews underwent (and continue to undergo) an emancipation process, countering claims that Jews in the United States had equal civil and political rights from the start. Collectively, these studies show the state’s role in American antisemitism.

In addition to revealing the relationship between the state and antisemitism, historians have examined the role of non-Jewish faith communities in generating anti-Jewish sentiments. In Jews and Gentiles in Early America, 1654–1800 (2005), William Pencak highlighted Christian antisemitism in Newport, Savannah, New York, Charleston, and Philadelphia. Till van Rahden, a German Jewish historian, analyzed Catholic weeklies published in Baltimore between 1890 and 1924 and concluded that antisemitism operated differently among German and Irish Catholics, at least as it appeared in the press. Studies of antisemitism


among religious groups have focused their attention on intersections between religion and politics.\textsuperscript{111} Relatedly, a handful of studies have explored political antisemitism. In 2020, for example, David Austin Walsh, a political historian, revealed how 1950s conservatives overlooked the antisemitism of the far right in the name of political cohesion.\textsuperscript{112}

Finally, a handful of scholars have examined antisemitism in the context of women’s and gender history. In 1986, Elinor Lerner argued that early twentieth-century mainstream liberal feminists practiced “antisemitism by neglect.”\textsuperscript{113} Demands to treat everyone identically meant differences were obfuscated and Jewish particularity was ignored. Thus, the Woman Suffrage Party of New York held its annual convention on Friday night, even though many Jewish women (who were among the strongest supporters of suffrage) observed Shabbat on Friday evenings. In \textit{Fighting to Become Americans}, Riv-Ellen Prell identified how Jews generated negative gendered stereotypes as a way of policing members of the opposite sex—by articulating models of one ought not to be—to smooth Jews’ entry into the middle class. The production of stereotypes such as the early 1900s “Ghetto Girl,” a gaudy young Jewish woman, and the postwar “Jewish American Princess,” a spoiled young woman, evinced Jews’ anxieties “about being barred in one or another form from the nation because they were Jews.” Although generated by Jews, these stereotypes always “reflect[ed] the attitudes of the non-Jewish world.”\textsuperscript{114} In \textit{Ballots, Babies, and Banners of Peace}, Melissa Klapper examined Jewish women activists in the suffrage, birth control, and peace movements between 1890 and 1914. She found that “Jewish women in secular social movements, especially those who took on leadership roles, were always aware that their colleagues saw them as Jewish.”\textsuperscript{115} Even women who did not identify themselves as Jews publicly could not escape that identification.

Despite these works, many important surveys of American Jewish history continued to advance claims about antisemitism in the terms articulated by Handlin and Higham in the 1950s. The \textit{Jewish People

\textsuperscript{114} Riv-Ellen Prell, \textit{Fighting to Become Americans: Assimilation and the Trouble between Jewish Women and Jewish Men} (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 12, 24, 25.
in America, a five-volume set first published in 1992 in honor of the one-hundredth anniversary of the American Jewish Historical Society, included works by Eli Faber, Hasia Diner, Gerald Sorin, Henry Feingold (who was also the project’s general editor) and Edward Shapiro. In Faber’s volume presents the environment in colonial America and the early republic as unique in that “Jews were not the objects of debilitating hostility.” In the set’s fourth volume, Feingold argues that American Jews “entered the mainstream” between 1920 and 1945, unimpeded by a simultaneous intensification of antisemitism. The second chapter of Edward Shapiro’s contribution, A Time for Healing, which covers postwar American Jewry, is titled “The Decline of Anti-Semitism.” Here, Shapiro attributed American Jewry’s perception of postwar antisemitism to a collective “psychological insecurity” that led them to exaggerate “the extent and depth of postwar American anti-Semitism.” His chapter presents antisemitism’s postwar decline as inevitable and linear.


Monographs also have presented antisemitism as momentary and generally uncommon. For example, in When General Grant Expelled the Jews, Sarna describes Ulysses S. Grant’s General Orders No. 11 as a holdover from Europe, “a brief moment . . . when Old World prejudices displayed themselves.” Grant redeemed himself, Sarna further

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117. Farber, A Time for Planting, 142.

118. Feingold, A Time for Searching, xvi.


121. Diner, The Jews of the United States, 3. In contrast to Sarna, Diner has advanced the ideas of both Handlin and Higham. See, for example, Diner, “Oscar Handlin,” 59; Diner, How America Met the Jews, 8; Diner in David Koffman, “Roundtable on Anti-Semitism in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era,” 5.
contends, by expressing remorse and as president overseeing “a liberal epoch characterized by sensitivity to human rights and interreligious cooperation.” Likewise, in Roads Taken: The Great Jewish Migration to the New World and the Peddlers Who Forged the Way (2015), Diner denies that the violence that Jewish peddlers encountered was related to their identity as Jews. “Unfortunate peddlers got shot, axed, stabbed, and beaten to death, but not because of their Jewishness,” she argues.

In recent years, historians have also debated the role that “whiteness” has played in how Jews were regarded by other Americans and by the American state. Some have argued that Jews throughout American history enjoyed the privileges of whiteness without qualification, an excessively broad argument that functionally stymies consideration of antisemitism. By contrast, a few have argued that anti-Black and anti-Jewish ideologies have operated in tandem. And some, most notably Eric Goldstein, have examined the changing relationship between Jews and whiteness over time and space, illustrating that at different moments in American history, large swaths of Americans did not perceive Jews as white—phenotypically, legally, or otherwise—and how this fact has enabled antisemitism.

In roughly the past ten years, a few leading American Jewish historians have challenged conventional claims about antisemitism. Tony Michels’s 2010 article about American Jewish exceptionalism constitutes the first major recent contribution to this effort. Since the 1950s, Michels explained, most American Jewish historians have understood American

Jewish history as “exceptional,” unique in the context of modern Jewish history. The American Jewish exceptionalist framework, he shows, rests on two premises: the idea that American Jews did not need to undergo an emancipation process and the idea that American Jews did not face systemic or state-directed violence. Michels challenged scholars to probe the supposed dearth of antisemitism in American history through comparative analysis. Berman posited that Higham’s influence may have led historians astray, noting that Higham “turn[ed] antisemitism into a ‘present absence’ in American life, an ever-dying force that proved the virtue of American liberalism.”

Likewise, Beth Wenger and Eric Goldstein offered specific challenges to views that frame antisemitism as an aberration.

Still, scholarship that focuses on anti-Jewish animus in the United States remains rare. Likewise, the idea that antisemitism in the United States has been a relatively insignificant historical force remains common. Given that some scholars have challenged the view that antisemitism has been marginal in the United States, it is worth considering why Handlin and, especially, Higham have remained so influential.

First, historiographical trends within American Jewish history, which complement Handlin and Higham’s conceptualization of anti-Jewish animus in the United States, likely have contributed to the continued popularity of their ideas. As Tony Michels explained, the field’s continued embrace of an exceptionalist paradigm has promoted an understanding of antisemitism as short-lived and inconsequential. So, too, has the narrative that Jews in the United States never underwent emancipation. American Jewish historians’ seeming preference for studying how Jews successfully integrated into American society, redefined Jewish culture, and ascended the country’s economic ladder, among other subjects, also has skewed perceptions of antisemitism in the United States and likely

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130. See Sorkin, Jewish Emancipation.
extended Handlin and Higham’s intellectual influence. Though impossible to prove, American Jewish historians’ desire to avoid seeming like they are complaining may also be driving the historiography.

One might also point to American Jewish historians’ collective and individual relationships with Handlin and Higham to explain their widespread influence. It stands to reason that some American Jewish historians feel a sense of loyalty to Handlin and Higham on account of having enjoyed professional relationships with them. (Indeed, a handful of individuals have told me that Higham was exceptionally kind to them, especially early in their careers.) Some may feel a sense of deference to Handlin and Higham (and especially to Higham), because of their elevation of American Jewish history within the general field. These sentiments may have deterred contemporary scholars from critically probing Handlin and Higham’s works. Whatever the reasons, Handlin and Higham remain significant in so far as they continue to shape how many American Jewish historians and historians generally think about anti-Jewish animus in the United States.

CONCLUSION

Collectively, scholarship from the past seventy years suggests that anti-Jewish animus in the United States was both more common and more severe than typically acknowledged. Even works that frame episodes of antisemitism as exceptional serve as evidence that hostility toward Jews persisted throughout America’s history. Accordingly, American Jewish historians committed to researching antisemitism might consider adopting some new guidelines for thinking about the subject.

First and foremost, historians might consider retiring certain conceptual devices. Perhaps the most important idea to discard or, at the very least, probe is “social antisemitism,” a description that obfuscates the


132. Dinnerstein made a similar point. See Dinnerstein, Anti-Semitism in America, viii. For discussions of instances in which internal debate about how to respond to antisemitism were resolved by the organized Jewish community declining to instigate lawsuits as a means of minimizing public discussion of Jews, see Woeste, Henry Ford’s War on Jews and the Legal Battle Against Hate Speech; Oney, And the Dead Shall Rise, 347; Tevis, “Jews Not Admitted,” 855.
role of the state in many circumstances in which the state was involved and generally minimizes the severity of anti-Jewish incidents. The term has been used as a means of downplaying the causes and effects of antisemitism and has operated as something of a catchall. Likewise, scholars of antisemitism also ought to refrain from deploying simple Black-white binaries, which obscure the ways American law has been deployed to discriminate against Jews. Relatedly, American Jewish historians must treat law as a dynamic, living entity beyond the text of the US Constitution.

Historians interested in antisemitism might also consider the ways certain concepts are defined and how those definitions operate to illuminate or hide anti-Jewish violence. For example, though Leo Frank’s murder is commonly depicted as an instance of lynching, other episodes of anti-Jewish violence involving mobs remain unstudied, including, for example, the death of Samuel Bierfield, which one newspaper described at the time as “Retributive justice.” Likewise, in 1929, KKK members in Ohio kidnapped a Jewish chiropractor in Woodsfield, took him to a nearby cemetery, and whipped him. Another local Jewish resident suffered the same fate. It is unclear why such acts are not acknowledged as lynching episodes and it may be worth exploring the history of the term’s meaning to see why or why not anti-Jewish violence has been acknowledged as much.

Historians might also reconsider framing individual anti-Jewish episodes as “exceptional” and instead think about them as parts of a larger pattern. As noted, scholars have published on a range of violent episodes, most of which they identify as outliers. Though it is true that many of these episodes were singular in certain ways—for example, Needleman’s 1925 castration—they are not exceptional in so far as they each constitute anti-Jewish violence that resulted in death or serious bodily harm. One can imagine an analysis that collectively examines Surasky’s 1903 murder and the murder or assault of at least two-dozen other Jewish peddlers in the South; Frank’s 1915 lynching; Joseph Needleman’s 1925 castration; the 1928 blood libel accusation; the assault of children in Boston and New York in the 1940s; and synagogue and JCC bombings across the South in the late 1950s; the 1977 shooting at B’rith Sholom Kneseth Israeli synagogue in St. Louis, Missouri; the 1999 shooting at a Los Angeles JCC; the 2006 Seattle Federation Shooting; the 2009 shooting at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC;


the 2014 shootings at a JCC and a Jewish retirement community in Overland Park, Kansas; the 2018 shooting at Pittsburgh’s Tree of Life Synagogue; the 2019 shootings at Chabad of Poway in California—to name just a handful of similarly deadly incidents—in a historical analysis of anti-Jewish violence in the United States. Collectively, these incidents show that threats to Jews’ physical safety have remained a constant in the history of the United States.

Researching lesser-known antisemitic incidents is another way to expand on work in the field. For example, in September 1891, Whitall Tatem & Company glass factory employees went on strike after learning the company had hired some Jewish workers. The strikers rioted and drove the approximately one hundred Jewish residents of Millville, New Jersey, out of town, severely beating them along the way. The strike then spread to another factory, in Bridgeton, at which point the company agreed to fire its Jewish workers. Other than a brief mention, however, little research has been done about this episode.

Future trends in the field of the study of antisemitism in the United States will depend on whether scholars continue to subscribe to old ideas. Should American Jewish historians continue to adhere to a conceptualization of antisemitism in the United States as fleeting and relatively insignificant, subsequent episodes of antisemitism will continue to appear arbitrary, extraordinary, and confusing. If, alternatively, scholars recognize antisemitism as an ever-present if evolving phenomenon, historians may be able to better understand and historicize it.