German Jewish History in Modern Times
1600 - 1945
Cover photos (left to right clockwise).


Portrait of Albert Einstein by Boris Giorgiev, Berlin, 1928.

Jewish beggar. Etching, handcolored, probably 19th century.

Portrait of Bertha Pappenheim by D. Edinger, oil on canvas, ca. 1880s.


Drawing of Leo Baeck (1873-1956), by Ludwig Meidner, 1953.
This brochure is adapted from the four-volume series on German-speaking Jewry, a project of the Leo Baeck Institute.

In this comprehensive historical survey of the Jewish presence in Central Europe, eminent scholars under the editorship of Professor Michael A. Meyer consider a broad range of topics: religious and cultural life, demographics, political, legal and socioeconomic status, relations between Jews and non-Jews, and Jewish participation in the larger context of European history.

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German Jewish History in Modern Times

What historians call the “modern history” of Jews in German-speaking lands dates from around 1600 and essentially ends in 1945. The relationship of Jews to their homeland has gone through many phases over those three and a half centuries, but at no time was the relationship easy. In the beginning, the Jews were not connected to their non-Jewish environment and their history is largely contained within their own tradition. Beginning in the 18th century, they slowly became integrated into the secular culture of their neighbors and from then on, their history becomes as much an account of their relations with the world around them as with each other.

Tradition and Enlightenment: 1600-1780

For German-speaking Jews, the Middle Ages that brought about the Reformation for Christians also brought them a degree of tolerance that was eventually guaranteed by the Peace of Westphalia (1648). While the treaty officially extended tolerance only to Christian minorities (Lutherism, Calvinism, Catholicism), its wider effect was to separate politics from religion, a development that was ultimately also beneficial to the Jews.

Greater toleration had its downside, however, especially for Jewish merchants with their newly chartered privileges. Fearing competition, local interests forced them out; in the summer of 1670 the city of Vienna expelled its Jews, a migration that had occurred in other German-speaking areas as well. Switzerland already banned Jews in the 15th century, Fulda in 1641, Worms in 1689.
At the same time that these geographical dislocations were affecting Jewish communities, another phenomenon was developing that increased both the status and power of at least a small minority of the Jewish population. These privileged few were the “Court Jews”, or Hofjuden. Court Jews emerged in the 17th century as a byproduct of the rise of the absolutist state, which sought to weaken the power of estates and churches and strengthen the economy through mercantilism. Activities and skills that could bolster state revenues (and help finance the Thirty Years War) were very much in demand - Jews served as purveyors of supplies for entire armies, but mostly they served as bankers to finance military confrontations. The Viennese court Jew Samuel Oppenheimer (1630-1703) was the imperial army provisioner during the war against the European designs of Louis XIV, especially the advance of the Ottoman troops. Oppenheimer not only procured the funds to pay the imperial soldiers, he also supplied their uniforms and rations, their horses and fodder, and the rafts for sending war materials down the river. When the war was over, he financed the peace conferences.

Portrait of Abraham Abramson (1754-1811), royal minter of Frederick the Great. Engraving and mezzotint by J. Rosenberg, 1802.

Silver coins minted during the 18th century by Jacob Abraham (1723-1800) and his son Abraham Abramson (1754-1811), both royal medalists in Berlin.
What made Jews so attractive as financiers to the court was their essentially powerless status in society. Kings and Princes did not have to fear that Jews would try to usurp their authority because, lacking connection with rival powers, they had no leverage. Their status derived from the powers conferred on them - including jobs no one else wanted. For example, the right to mint coins belonged to the territorial princes who could select the coinmaker; a Christian minter had the right to refuse a royal request to cheapen the currency (by taking silver out of coins). When a Jew was asked, he had no choice but to comply. Thus, Jews could be used as minters to debase the coinage and permit the rulers to escape the ire of the population.

Another factor in the special suitability of Jews as financiers was their often extensive network of personal and family ties. Court Jews tended to marry among themselves, meaning that credit could be arranged from Vienna to Berlin to Worms to Prague by contacting relatives throughout Europe.

The most obvious disadvantage of the total dependence of Court Jews on nobility was their constant vulnerability. Should they fall out of favor with the sovereign, or should the sovereign lose his power, their privileged position (which was in any case resented by the masses), would be completely undermined. One of the most famous examples was the case of Joseph Süss Oppenheimer (1698-1738), better known as "Jud Süss". He was the court factor of Duke Charles Alexander of Württemberg, advising him on financial matters and affairs of state, including reforms that were detrimental to established interests and therefore widely resented. He was also resented by his co-religionists, who objected to his ostentatious, secular lifestyle.

The Duke of Württemberg's sudden death in 1737 provided the opportunity for Jud Süss's detractors to trump up charges of treason against him and to arrange for his public execution. While in prison, Oppenheimer reconnected to his Jewish tradition and refused baptism as a condition for his release. Ironically, he became a Jewish martyr. The reality was that while Oppenheimer could, he took full
advantage of his protected status just as his enemies took full advantage of his vulnerability when he lost it.

The case of Jud Süß is not typical of most Court Jews, however, because he was so little interested in Jewish concerns. Others understood that their activities indirectly benefited the Jewish community whose welfare was bound up with their own. Some Court Jews began their careers when the sovereign appointed them to collect the special levy on Jews in their territory. But most were more than tax collectors; they were also advocates for their community. They fostered the growth of Jewish settlements by hiring Jewish workers; they obtained special royal permission for Jews who visited trade fairs in Saxony, for example, to take up permanent residence there. But unlike the majority of Jews who were subject to the rabbinical judiciary, the Hofjuden answered to their sovereign.

Court Jews were not, therefore, either emancipated or liberated. Their activities were primarily limited to the requirements of the royal court.

The usefulness of Jews in the age of mercantilism was apparent in other ways as well. Their participation in commercial trade was heavily regulated by the state, including periods when it was beneficial to lift restrictions on them. The ambivalence of the state toward its Jewish merchants was reflected in the often contradictory tendencies of a single ruler. King Frederick I (1688-1713), for example, decreed that Jews were not permitted to open retail shops or engage in free trade in Berlin, but they were encouraged to do so in East Prussia. Jews compensated for the restrictions imposed on them by filling niches where they sensed a void. They became door-to-door peddlers in the countryside where they could be of great service to rural communities;

Jewish beggar. Etching, hand-colored, probably 19th century.
they established businesses in areas not controlled by guilds (e.g. horse and cattle trade); they continued in the lucrative business of moneylenders; they actively participated in trade fairs, especially the principal one held in Leipzig twice a year, where they were taxed much more heavily than their Christian counterparts but nonetheless prospered from the economic activity.

Nowhere, however, were Jews accorded full rights of citizenship. Rather, Christian society reminded them constantly of their outsider status as "Schutzjuden", individuals who were permitted to do business only by dint of a protective relation provided by a patron. Letters of protection (Schutzbriege) were generally issued for a lifetime, to engage in commerce and reside in a given territorial area, but the patron could cancel the protection at any time. Unprotected Jews had no right of residence and were relegated to the ranks of dependant laborers.

The so-called Age of Enlightenment did little to change societal attitudes toward the Jews. By the end of the 18th century there was still little tolerance and much prejudice, and the general living conditions of the Jews deteriorated as their population increased and their influx into cities grew. As they began to be in competition with a rising Christian middle class, restrictions on their economic activities increased accordingly. Again and again they faced new levies, stricter regulations and special legislation.

The measures instituted by Frederick II (1740-1786) were particularly regressive, although some had unintended positive conse-

Edict by Frederick the Great against Jewish beggars, Berlin, December 12, 1780.
quences. His decision to dissolve the “Jewry Commission” and assign all Jewish matters to various departments within the general government bureaucracy brought Jews somewhat closer to normalcy. Officials now had to take a greater interest in Jewish affairs, which occasionally led to a greater concern for their welfare.

The Jewish population of the German territories grew from about 25,000 in 1700 to approximately 65,000 in 1750. In 1700, Prague had the largest Ashkenazi community in Europe, with an estimated 11,000, or one quarter of the city’s inhabitants. In 1745 Empress Maria Theresa (1717-1780), under the influence of the church, chose to expel them. The expulsion of the Prague Jews forced a new solidarity among the Jews of England, Italy, Denmark, and the Ottoman Empire, who interceded with Maria Theresa to revoke the order. By the time she agreed to postpone their expulsion, most had left and were not permitted to return to Prague until 1748. But for the first time, the European Jewish communities had collectively spoken out.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, 90 percent of the Jewish population of German lands lived in small towns and villages. At the beginning of the 19th century the proportion still exceeded 80 percent. Most of these rural villages had no formal Jewish institutions or communal organizations of their own but banded together in Landjudenschaften - autonomous, self-governing bodies set up to administer Jewish affairs and preserve the Jewish identity of those scattered in remote locations.

The Landjudenschaft was a comprehensive organization encompassing all Jews with a right of residence in a sovereign territory. The Jews belonged to the Landjudenschaft directly, not through the community but as individuals. Eventually it became compulsory for Jews to join, thereby enabling the sovereign to regulate them more easily for taxation and other commercial purposes. In other non-governmental matters, the lay leaders of the Landjudenschaft (elected by its general assembly) had virtually unlimited power. That ended in 1687, when Hannover became the first city to have the sovereign appoint territorial rabbis. These chief rabbis had the right
of approval over all the resolutions of the Landjudenschaft.

In the course of the 18th century some Jews who would have been involved in trade started to enter the few universities which granted them admission. The small university in Frankfurt an der Oder was the first where Jews matriculated and were allowed to take degrees; the largest number of Jewish students were at the Prussian University of Halle, which between 1724-1800 had close to 200 Jewish students (most of them in medicine).

But the overwhelming majority of German Jews in the 18th century belonged to the poorer economic classes, what Christian society regarded as Betteljuden, or beggar Jews. This widespread social distress was addressed partly by private initiative and partly by community administration, almost all of it by Jews for Jews. Increasingly, the state attempted to dissolve Jewish self-governance, an example of state centralization that became so important during the Enlightenment.

The Jewish enlightenment, the intellectual movement known as Haskalah, considers the philosopher Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786) to be its founder. The purpose was to create a secular social domain in which Jews could engage in critical thought and work. It began in Berlin, a city
which Frederick II had turned into the residential capital of the Prussian monarchy as well as a magnet for the intellectual elite of Europe. It became a hub for fine arts, publishing, science and education.

Although political equality for Jews was not yet official policy in most German states, a few Enlightenment intellectuals, guided by reason and respect, exercised tolerance toward them and permitted social integration.

The closest friend of Mendelssohn was Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781), a Christian playwright with whom he could discuss all the philosophical issues that occupied his own thoughts. Mendelssohn wanted Jews to learn German as well as they knew Yiddish, and he eventually translated the Bible into German.

Mendelssohn’s Enlightenment ideas did not mark a turning away from Judaism, but rather constituted a shift toward its universal elements. He believed that salvation was possible for the virtuous of every religious tradition.

Mendelssohn’s activities sometimes provoked intense conflict with the Jewish community of Berlin, but never a break in relations because he did not turn away from his faith. Mendelssohn’s search for a reconciliation between reason and religion was based on his belief that belonging to the Jewish faith must be justified by principles that are universally valid. There cannot be one yardstick for Jews and another for the religion of the dominant majority. He argued that only a universal rationality can provide the guarantee that human rights will be protected.

The non-Jewish adherents of Enlightenment who were prepared to judge the Jews in the light of reason and ready to cast aside traditional biases were very few. Two men stand out as exceptions - Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and Christian Wilhelm Dohm - a playwright and a Prussian civil servant. Their pleas for greater acceptance of Jews into society gave the question of the civil status
of Jews much greater urgency than before, so that in the post-Mendelssohn generation of Enlightenment, Jewish intellectuals could continue their work on the formation of a Jewish sphere that brought them into closer relation with the world around them. With the advent of the Berlin Haskalah, a new intellectual elite emerged whose claim to leadership within the Jewish community was not intended to challenge the old rabbis and Talmud scholars, but rather to show that traditional Judaism and secular philosophical and scientific learning could coexist. Because Haskalah was primarily an intellectual and cultural phenomenon, it had little impact on the daily life of the Jewish masses. But by the end of the 18th century, even the masses were becoming more receptive to the outside world, thereby becoming eager to attain the civil equality that would be granted to them in the next century.

**Emancipation and Acculturation: 1780-1871**

When Joseph II took over the Hapsburg Empire from his mother, Maria Theresa, he instituted practical reforms that resulted in greater tolerance for the Jews. In 1781 Joseph II issued his toleration edict (Toleranzpatent) for Christian minorities, in particular Protestants and Greek Orthodox, to make them a more integral part of the state. Later that year he issued a similar decree for Jews in Bohemia, and a year later for the Jews of Vienna and Lower Austria. These policies marked the beginning of the emancipation of Jews in Central Europe.

France under Napoleon became the first state to grant Jews full rights as citizens, including those Jews living along the Rhine in regions annexed by France. (At least until 1808, when Napoleon issued the “infamous decree” that tightened restrictions on Jews living under French jurisdiction.) Soon Jews in German lands not under French rule also began to agitate for civil equality. Prussia, a formerly large state that had lost most of its territory and therefore sought urgently to institute reforms necessary for its survival, passed an edict in 1812 that gave Jews the status of “native residents and Prussian citizens”. It was the only German state to chart such legislation during the Napoleonic era.
With or without government edicts to integrate Jews into German society, most of the Jewish population remained very traditional. Observance of the Sabbath, of dietary laws, and of holidays and festivals continued to animate their lives. Social integration had not progressed far enough for most Jews to abandon their ritual commandments. Indeed, Orthodox Jews as late as the 1840s believed that emancipation would bury Judaism since it would become increasingly difficult to maintain an all-encompassing Jewish life.

Rabbis and traditionalists therefore resisted efforts to expand the education of Jewish children to include secular studies. But the states intervened on the side of enlightened Jews to shift the curriculum from solely Jewish subjects to include other disciplines in order to produce more useful citizens. Larger numbers of children began to attend non-Jewish schools and therefore acculturated earlier, which tended to limit the role that Judaism played in their lives. Many, especially in cities, easily gave up practices that clearly set them apart from non-Jews, such as strict observance of the Sabbath and adherence to dietary laws. The celebration of Jewish holidays in the privacy of the home had the most staying power.

Educational reforms led to religious reforms, specifically to efforts at the beginning of the 19th century to modernize religious services. One of these reforms was to introduce German as the language of the sermon, which implied giving German a sanctity almost akin to Hebrew. In addition, German prayers and hymns were used, which meant, according to some opponents, that Hebrew would soon become irrelevant. With the introduction of a musical instrument to accompany the worship service (usually an organ as in the church) traditionalists were outraged. The organ came to mark one of the most significant differences between Liberal synagogues on one side, and Conservative and Orthodox on the other.

The use of vernacular German in the prayers was in part intended to bring women into the synagogue, but essentially all of
the changes reflected a desire to make Judaism more indigenous to the German religious context.

To place Judaism within a still broader historical and intellectual context a group of young men in Berlin founded the Verein für Cultur und Wissenschaft der Juden (Association for Scholarly Study of the Jews) in 1819. Its purpose was to examine the Jewish past in order to “bring Judaism.... to self-awareness, to make the Jewish world known to itself.” They issued a periodical, edited by Leopold Zunz, entitled Zeitschrift für die Wissenschaft des Judentums, or Journal for the Scientific Study of Judaism.

Neither the Verein nor the Journal lasted very long, but the concept of Wissenschaft lived on in the development of Jewish scholarship. The purpose of critical historical study was to reshape the relationship of modern German Jews to their past.

The progress of acculturation had its consequences for Jewish leadership. Controversial discussions focused on whether or not it was a religious violation for a rabbi to apply modern historical scholarship to the beliefs and practices of Judaism. How relevant were ritual laws such as brit mila, or wearing a head covering during worship services? By the middle of the 19th century, German Jews were divided with regard to their spiritual and religious obligations and practices.

Between 1800 and 1848 it is estimated that close to 5000 Jews, mostly in Berlin, converted to Christianity. After that time, the rate of conversion dropped dramatically as hopes improved for more complete acceptance into society.

The discrimination that Jews continued to suffer in Germany was the principal factor in most conversions. The primary objective of conversion was professional and economic improvement, to take advantage of opportunities not otherwise available. Jewish women, on the other hand, had a purely Romantic attraction to Christianity. As Henriette Herz said, Christianity is a “religion of the heart”, which was in stark contrast to Rachel Varnhagen’s assertion that
being a Jew meant having to suffer, having to constantly legitimize oneself, and having to be burdened with emotionally unsatisfying rituals and traditions.

The more common Jewish response to societal prejudice was not, however, baptism. It was self-assertion and communal cohesiveness, even as the effort continued to be accepted into Christian organizations where Jews and Non-Jews could share a social milieu.

While the philosophers of the Jewish Enlightenment applied reason to civil and religious virtue in their attempt to liberate the mind from superstition and prejudice, the next phase of acculturation depended on cultural attainment. Bildung implied knowledge and appreciation of literature, art, music and social skills; especially, it required fluency in the German language. Its most appealing aspect was that it was not a function of family or social status but of individual accomplishment. Indeed, for many German Jews who no longer found personal meaning in the Jewish religion, becoming “cultured” was almost a spiritual quest. The Jewish middle classes were the most fervent supporters of the arts, the theatre, museums and orchestras.

But the progression from Yiddish-speaking households to sophisticated German literati was not always smooth. Critics focused on inappropriate mannerisms that Jews displayed in conversation and mimicked their pretensions. Even the great poet Heinrich Heine, a German Jew who eventually converted (but could never sever his ties to, or his interest in, Judaism) made it clear that he preferred the poor traditional Jewish peddlers to the Jew who tries to take on a new identity. As he says of his bedraggled character Moses Lump in Die Bäder von Lucca (1829), “at least he doesn’t have to sweat away at acquiring Bildung”.

Heine himself can be characterized as a Jew who lived outside of Judaism. Germans attacked him as un-German and banned his works as politically and morally dangerous. Jews labeled him as an apostate. It was only after the great historian Heinrich Graetz claimed in his classic Geschichte der Juden (History of the Jews, 1870)
that Heine was a serious Jew with a wonderful irreverence, as well as an exceptional writer who possessed great aesthetic sensibility, that both Germans and Jews welcomed him as one of their own.

A similar fate of non-acceptance by Germans as well as Jews befell the German Jewish political writer Ludwig Börne (1786-1837), who came into the world as Löb Baruch and whose conversion to Christianity also did not seem to free him from his Jewish origins. "For eighteen years I have been baptized and it doesn't help at all", he wrote. "One group holds it against me that I am a Jew, a second forgives me for it, a third even praises me for it, but all think about it. It is as if they are caught up in this magic Jewish circle and no one can get out of it."

Some didn’t even try. German Jewish artist Moritz Oppenheim is considered the only significant artist in the early 19th century to remain a Jew; the composer Giacomo Meyerbeer is the only serious musical composer who falls into the same category. His international acclaim was immense; his opera Les Huguenots (1836) was one of the most performed operas in Europe. And yet, as he confessed to Heine, he believed that
criticism of his work was motivated by the anti-semitic bias shared by all non-Jews.

Richard Wagner, in his infamous essay “Judaism in Music” which first appeared anonymously in 1850, condemned the success of Meyerbeer as proof of the degeneration of the public’s taste in music. He further attributed the decay of German culture to “Verjudung” - too much Jewish influence. His conclusion was that Bildung must ultimately fail, because no degree of acculturation would enable Jews to address the emotional life of Germans except as outsiders.

In political life Jews were also outsiders, at least until the Prussian Emancipation Edict of Frederick William III in 1812, when Jews began to redefine their relationship to the state. The shift was from being subjects, whose loyalty to the ruler was based on utilitarian considerations, to becoming citizens, who viewed themselves as part of a German state.

The loyalty of Jews to their rulers was not a new phenomenon, nor was the notion that Jews are obligated to obey non-Jewish state laws to the same extent as they obey Jewish religious laws. But to facilitate the acceptance of Jews into society some of the more liberal
rabbis in the age of emancipation actually modified religious laws; hence, Jewish schoolchildren were permitted to write on the Sabbath.

The reconciliation of religious law with civic duty became especially noticeable when compulsory military service was extended to Jews for the first time. Austrian Emperor Joseph II mandated Jewish military service in 1787; in Germany, most states made Jewish enlistment compulsory in the 19th century. For Jews, patriotism was never an issue; indeed, rabbis tended to hold the obligations to the state above strict adherence to religious laws and permitted soldiers dispensation from the latter in case of conflict. By the end of the Napoleonic Wars, over 80 Jewish soldiers in Prussian uniforms had been decorated and over 40 had been promoted to officers. When the hostilities were over, however, their careers as officers also came to an end. Until World War I Jewish soldiers were allowed to become officers in the Prussian army only if they converted.

Political activity of non-converted Jews was limited. Beyond service at the local level, it was only possible to belong to the assemblies of the German states if one were baptized. Friedrich Julius Stahl (1802-1861) was a very prominent baptized Jew who served in the upper house of the Prussian parliament after 1848.

Denied full access to political office, Jews became journalists and publishers in order to be able to exert their influence on public opinion, if not on public policy. They also became doctors, lawyers and bankers, and they became active in some professional organizations. Universities, however, retained their exclusionary policies as long as they could. Not a single Jew was hired as a full professor in Germany prior to 1848.

The Jewish minority was the most adversely affected by the revolution that changed the political landscape of Germany in 1848. Popular discontent was rampant, and Jews in particular felt the resentment of the masses against their increasing social acceptance and civic equality. They were blamed for inciting the revolution;
they were accused of behaving as cowards during the riots; they were regarded as beneficiaries after the uprising.

The reality is that it was not possible to continue to grant Jews greater economic and cultural mobility while legally continuing to relegate them to second-class citizenship. In the years between 1848 and 1871 individual German states enacted varying degrees of emancipation legislation for their Jewish citizens. The Hapsburg monarchy granted all Jews equal rights in 1867; Prussia in 1871.

That year, 1871, when Germany at last achieved unification, was a watershed for German Jews. Full emancipation, which had been the dream for nearly a century, became a reality. During that century, the configuration of German Jewry had changed dramatically - growing from about 200,000 to more than half a million; going from small-town village dwellers to urban residents; moving from largely poor to solidly middle-class. Acculturation was nearly a complete success. Jews became the primary consumers of, and major contributors to, German culture. But there was also a growing Jewish popular culture - literary journals, magazines, and multivolume histories - which laid the basis for a new collective memory.

The Jewish community in Germany had gone from being one organic entity to being a diversified people, complete with rivalries and factionalism among them. At the same time, the internal contradictions of modern anti-Semitism, as it was developing during this era, became more and more apparent. On the one hand Jews were asked to abandon their Jewishness and become fully assimilated as Germans. On the other hand, they were attacked as undesirable intruders who supposedly dominated German culture and business.

The ongoing resistance to full societal acceptance of Jews in Germany was real, but so were the tremendous economic and social advances. Optimism, therefore, prevailed. One tangible expression of this new prosperity was the synagogue. Dozens of new, opulent, modern structures were built on the principal streets of major cities where they could proudly compete with Christian churches. As one
writer noted, the earlier synagogues in the era of unemancipated Jewry reflected the conditions of the time "...everything in them, even the gables of the roof, bowed deeply, everything was cramped and constrained - just like the people who prayed in them." These, in contrast, were great monuments to a proud new era.

In 1848 there were Jews and Jewish communities in Germany, but there were not yet German Jews. By 1871, there were.

**Integration in Dispute: 1871-1918**

The period leading to the First World War was characterized by a declining rural Jewish population, growing economic activity, and increasing prosperity of Jews in Germany. Particular economic patterns had developed over centuries of living under restrictive conditions. Their considerable participation in grain and cattle trading resulted from their having been scattered in rural areas; their concentration in the iron trade emerged from earlier involvement in scrap iron operations; their strong presence in the food and textile industries came from dealing in agricultural products and practicing the trades of butcher, baker and tailor; their involvement
with monetary transactions and banking came from the prohibition against Jews owning land, forcing them to become proficient in capital enterprises, especially in converting money gained from commercial ventures into finance capital.

Once the Jews were granted economic freedom, their entrepreneurial orientation and flexibility gave them a head start on applying modern methods of commercial capitalism. They were the first to use advertising, to initiate new forms of business such as direct mail, to adopt the concept of the department store, and to travel to international trade fairs to learn about new developments in their field.

Since the transport of goods had originally been part of the service rendered by commercial entrepreneurs, many Jews were involved in transportation. They were ship owners; they maintained fleets of coal barges; they became transatlantic movers for the transport of emigrants.

Many Jews were engaged in trades and industry - tailoring, ready-to-wear clothing, butchering, leatherworkers, milliners. Berlin was the center for scientists, chemists, and engineers. The engineer Emil Rathenau converted Germany to the use of electricity by obtaining the rights to the Edison patents and then obtaining the enormous credit necessary for developing electric power.

Jewish achievements in commerce and industry reached their pinnacle in the early 20th century, and soon after began their descent. Increasingly, the ability of Jews to acquire a university education drew them away from commerce to occupations that required higher education. But since anti-Semitism was still a factor in civil
service and government positions, in university appointments, and in judgeships, many Jewish students chose their studies accordingly and decided on careers where they could be self-employed. The result is that many gave preference to the study of medicine.

The attainment of middle class status became a reality for almost two-thirds of the Jewish population of Imperial Germany. The rapid economic and social changes were accompanied by religious changes as well, and clear differences emerged between the lifestyles of older and younger generations, and between the gender roles of husbands and wives. After the first institution devoted to women’s higher educational studies opened in Berlin in 1869, the idea that knowledge could lead to the self-emancipation of women gained importance, even among traditional wives. But every Jewish family, however secular, was connected to Jewish tradition, and every Jewish family represented the one sphere where anti-Semitism had no place, and where defensive strategies against it were worked out.

Middle-class Jewish women who worked outside the home devoted themselves primarily to charitable work. Bertha Pappenheim founded the Jüdische Frauenbund (League of Jewish Women) in 1904, an association of women who engaged in social work to improve the status of Jewish women. The feminist approach was evident throughout the Jewish women’s movement, probably best exemplified by Henriette Fürth. In more than two dozen books she argued for the right of every woman to have a job with her own income, since only with these would she possess independence.
By the end of the 19th century the cumulative changes of the last hundred years were felt throughout Jewish life, including the religious sphere where orthodoxy had gone from being the only option to a point where Orthodox Jews were the minority in large Jewish communities. Orthodox and Liberal factions were often in contention, later complicated by the introduction of Zionism. Sometimes the issue shifted from religious Jewish identity to national Jewish identity, but the Orthodox and Liberal rabbinites continued to be involved in disputes over the degree of synthesis between Torah and Western culture.

As this debate was going on, the radical publicist and journalist Wilhelm Marr (1818-1904), co-founder of the Anti-Semites League, gave new prominence to the until-then little used word. He chose the word anti-Semitism to contrast Jews with Germans, rather than with Christians, and therefore to imply an antagonism that was ethnic - indeed racial - and unbridgeable.

Anti-Semitism in this modern political form emerged after the revolution of 1848 and was directly connected to the increasing emancipation of Jews. The legislative changes of the 1860s and 70s that favored unrestricted enterprise and gave Jews a greater presence in commercial activity meant that the stock market crash of 1873 (that began in Vienna and quickly spread to Germany) could be blamed on them. In fact, all attacks against the prevailing Liberal order could focus on the Jewish dimension.

While attacks on Jews were not new, the modern component was that they were attacked as wielders of power. They were no longer merely contemptible unbelievers; they were a menace and an enemy, in control of money, commerce and newspapers.

In 1879 Adolf Stoecker founded the first anti-Semitic political party, at the same time the historian Heinrich von Treitschke, in his intellectual journal *Preussische Jahrbücher*, attributed Germany’s unease to the “German-Jewish question”. Treitschke thus added respectability to political anti-Semitism and became the hero of student nationalist movements while Stoecker was elected to the
As anti-Semitism in Germany was taking on a new political dimension, citizens of the Hapsburg monarchy were experiencing their own disillusionment with Austrian Liberalism and developed their own kind of popular anti-Semitism. The parliamentary spokesman for peasant grievances was Georg von Schönerer (1842-1921), who became the intellectual patron of National Socialism in post-1918 Austria and Czechoslovakia. Austrian student corporations were outspoken in defense of racial exclusiveness and radical priests spread their anti-Liberal gospel through sermons and public lectures, but it was the nation’s rising artisan movement that provided the mass base for the anti-Liberal anti-Semitic counterrevolution. What these diverse groups were lacking was a national political leader until the emergence of Karl Lueger (1844-1910). By the 1890s anti-Semitism had become an integral part of the political attitude of a large section, probably the majority, of German-Austrians.

Few Jews in Germany or Austria believed that emancipation laws would put an immediate end to prejudice and discrimination, but many believed that Bismarck’s turn to the right and the anti-Semitic agitations of the 1870s were temporary. Temporary or not, some Jews advocated a high-profile response to these developments while others advocated a low-profile reaction — in the end, indifference prevailed. And yet, anti-Semitism was resurfacing in changing ways — some based on religion, which argued that the Jew had no place in a Christian state; some on economic anti-Semitism, which argued that Jewish activities in the commercial sphere inevitably had harmful effects; or the anti-Semitism of nationalism, which argued that Jews were not true Germans (or Hungarians or Czechs or Poles); and racial anti-Semitism, which argued that only strict segregation could save one’s own tribe from degeneration and destruction. A skillful anti-Semitic agitator combined elements of all these aspects, depicting the Jew as an alien exploiter, religious renegade, and conspirator.

Organized anti-Semitism peaked in the 1890s, and by the turn of
the century had lost much of its popular political appeal, but its influence grew as an ideology and gained increasingly greater intellectual acceptance.

To compete effectively in the politics of influence it became evident that a well-funded mass membership organization with an effective press operation would be needed. In 1893 the *Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens* (CV), Central Association of German Citizens of the Jewish Faith, made its first public appearance.

By World War I the CV had 40,000 members, and a monthly journal - the most ambitious and most successful attempt at a political union of Germany’s Jews. Prejudice, discrimination, and hostile propaganda were to be fought on the basis of total loyalty to the German Empire and nation. It was the combination of religious and national identity that the CV was intended to convey. Most Orthodox and most Zionists rejected this approach, but on the whole, the very existence of the CV raised the morale of the Jewish community.

In fact, the *Centralverein* marked a turning point in Jewish attitudes toward championing their own interests. Previously, the Jewish establishment had tried to avoid controversy, deal with problems behind the scenes, and abstain from speaking in terms of specific Jewish needs. Now, pride, self-respect, and “manly honor” motivated them to speak up in defense of their own interests. But their self-definition continued to stress that they were “Germans of the Jewish faith” - putting the German aspect first, and the CV declared its neutrality in all internal debates on the nature of religion.

At the same time there was a Zionist revival of Jewish national consciousness, especially as espoused by Theodor Herzl in his 1896 book *Der Judenstaat* (The State of the Jews). His book created a sensation, both for and against his proposals, and it led to the emergence of a full-fledged international Zionist movement at the Congress of Basel in 1897.
Many of the prominent Jews of *fin-de-siècle* Berlin, Vienna and Prague possessed only the most marginal Jewish identities and had little involvement in the pro-or-anti-Zionist debates. Especially in Berlin and Vienna where the level of cultural experimentation and innovation was particularly pronounced, it was the highly assimilated and largely secular Jews who were their primary advocates. The most illustrious supporter of Zionism was Albert Einstein.

The first decade of the 20th century, then, saw the emergence of a new debate on the "essence of Judaism". The philosopher Hermann Cohen argued that Jews were a "nationality" but not a (Zionist) "nation". The nation to which they belong is that in which they are citizens. Others argued against the tide of assimilation into the majority culture by advocating "dissimilation", a return to Jewish cultural and spiritual distinctiveness.
Rabbi Leo Baeck identified the "essence of Judaism" as ethical monotheism. According to this concept, the radical innovation of Biblical faith was that the belief in one God entailed an inescapable responsibility to serve as God's coworker in the establishment of a just and compassionate world order.

Not all Jews eager to reaffirm their Jewishness were receptive to Baeck's ideas, finding them lacking in the more existential and personal aspects of religion. Zionism and mysticism were quite appealing, however, and Martin Buber seemed able to assimilate these new vistas into a framework for a cultural renewal of Judaism.

Hermann Cohen was still writing on the compatibility and complimentarity of Judaism and German culture when a young Jewish student of German literature, Moritz Goldstein (1880-1977) began a great debate with an article published in 1912. "We Jews are administering the spiritual possessions of a people that denies us the right and capacity to do so." He wrote that Jewish artists and writers believe they are German, but Germans identify them as Jewish. His plea was that Jews acknowledge that this dichotomy exists. Indeed, the prominence of Jews in the cultural and political life of the German Empire and the Hapsburg monarchy was a new phenomenon, and much of the larger society was not prepared to accept Jews as shapers of German culture. Instead they became the "corrupters" of that culture.

In 1914, almost all Jews greeted the First World War, and the so-called civic truce that accompanied it, with patriotic enthusiasm. They hoped it would bring about the final realization of their long-sought social integration.
“I know no parties anymore, I know only Germans” said the Emperor in 1914, at the onset of World War I, a statement that enabled Jews to believe that the unity of the German nation would at last embrace them too. The subsequent surge of patriotic fervor among Jews in Germany and Austria was heightened by the fact that the war was being waged against the archenemy of all Jews, Czarist Russia. But the patriotic embrace rapidly began to loosen as the war dragged on, and relations between Jews, especially Jews in the army, and Germans began to deteriorate. In 1916 the army ordered a census to be taken on the positions held by Jews in the army, ostensibly to “examine complaints that Jews were evading active service and if necessary refute them.” No single wartime act of the regime did more to alienate Jews or remind them of their outsider status.

If the census was the first indication that the war had done nothing to foster real acceptance of Jews into German society, the final act of policy reversal was the ban on Jewish immigration from the East. In April 1918 the Prussian Ministry of the Interior unilaterally closed the Eastern-European frontier to Jewish migrants. The newly formed Union of German-Jewish Organizations for Protecting the Rights of Jews from the East lodged a formal protest with the Chancellor, Count Hertling, who responded three and a half months later that the border closing “had to do with medical controls”.

In the last days of the war the new attitude of the government toward Jews was quite plain. After a brief moment of being participants in policy, Jews were once more its objects. And once the principle of discrimination was conceded, it could easily be extended to all Jews, not just those from the East.

By the time of the armistice and the proclamation of the German Republic in November 1918 it was clear that the Germans would invoke the “collective guilt” of the Jews. This despite the fact that 96,000 Jews had served in the Kaiser’s armies, of whom 12,000 died in action and 35,000 were decorated.

Renewal and Destruction: 1918-1945

The most definitive forces that shaped the Weimar Republic
were the result of the *Kriegserlebnis*, the personal or national experiences of World War I. As the war began to go badly, Jews found themselves increasingly excluded from the myths and symbols generated by the *Kriegserlebnis*, particularly the experience of battle.

The war exacerbated the difficult situation of the Jews and led many of them to a profound self-examination, this time not so much about the "essence of Judaism" but of their relation to other peoples. Martin Buber led this new endeavor by founding a journal in April 1916, called *Der Jude* (The Jew). "We are giving our journal [this name]" Buber wrote "but we do not refer to the individual, rather to the Jew as bearer of nationhood and its task." For ten years the journal flourished, with articles by the most prominent German-speaking Jews of the day offering their thoughts on Jewish identity, Jewish affairs, and culture.

Buber's friend Franz Rosenzweig, on the other hand, called upon Jews to withdraw from secular history. Since their exile, Rosenzweig observed, Jews no longer live in history but beyond it in a spiritual reality grounded in Israel's liturgical calendar. These fixed and elaborate patterns of prayer and celebration mean that the Jewish experience of time is cyclical; it does not grow, it does not include or notice current events, Jews focus their imagination on eternity in which all the contradictions of history are resolved.
These ideas were presented against the backdrop of revolutionary outbursts and assassinations that involved many prominent Jews - Rosa Luxemburg, Kurt Eisner, Gustav Landauer - who sought to establish a liberal constitutional democracy in the aftermath of the war.

The infant Weimar Republic was not born out of a national consensus and therefore had no broad commitment to sustain it. But symbolically, it was the best hope for Jews who continued to dream of a just and compassionate world order. The organized Jewish community thrived under the Weimar Republic due to the contradictory forces of increasing anti-Semitism and an expansion of Jewish cultural and social life.

Jewish accomplishments within the urban culture of Weimar were evident throughout the society. The historian Peter Gay noted that it was a time when "outsiders" became "insiders", and Jews, who were the preeminent outsiders, came to play a prominent role in all spheres of the Republic's cultural and public life. Among the widely read authors were Max Brod, Alfred Döblin, Franz Kafka, Arthur Schnitzler, Franz Werfel, Vicky Baum, Lion Feuchtwanger, Emil Ludwig, and Stefan Zweig. Else Lasker-Schüler was widely acclaimed as the most gifted representative of Expressionism in poetry and was awarded the prestigious Kleist Prize in 1932 for German verse. In music, Kurt Weill, Arnold Schönberg, and Anton Webern were very active. The conductors Otto Klemperer and Bruno Walter were among the most widely respected in Europe; premier soloists included Fritz Kreisler and Arthur Schnabel. In literature, Jewish publishers were among the first to bring out avant-garde novels; newspapers and journals owned by Jews were
in the forefront of publishing works by modern German authors. The influence of Jews in the theater was especially pronounced. Max Reinhardt was considered the master of the German stage; John Heartfield was an outstanding set designer. The film industry included Josef Sternberg (director of "Blue Angel" which starred his wife Marlene Dietrich), Fritz Lang, Billy Wilder.

The long tradition of eminent German Jewish mathematicians continued in the Weimar years, and other professionals developed new fields of study - iconography in art history, by Aby Warburg, and psychoanalysis, by Sigmund Freud.

With the publication of The Interpretation of Dreams in 1900, Freud gave psychoanalysis intellectual respectability. Its impact on psychology, as well as on literature, history and the arts, was later recognized when the City of Frankfurt granted Freud its prestigious Goethe Prize in 1930. "Following strictly scientific method," the citation noted, Freud was able to enrich "not only medicine but also the imagination of artists and clergy, historians and educators."

The Centralverein intensified its postwar activities by asserting Jewish claims to "German sentiments" as well as to full social (in addition to legal and civil) emancipation. The CV was the largest group of its kind but other Jewish associations were also active in the postwar years, especially the Zionists, and the National Union of Jewish War Veterans. According to various estimates, more than half of all Jews in Germany at the end of the 1920s were members of some Jewish organization, social or philanthropic society, or youth or sports association.

But aside from the CV, which was specifically established in 1893 to combat anti-Semitism, almost none of the other organizations were prepared to mount the kind of initiatives for active political defense that were justified by the staggering increase in anti-Jewish propaganda and violence after 1929. They attempted to refute the hate-mongering with rational arguments, well-reasoned articles in a variety of publications, and thoughtful speeches. Almost all of these missed the target of those coming under the spell of
mesmerizing anti-Semitic agitation. As a result, the CV shifted its emphasis to the political arena, campaigning against National Socialism.

Other prominent Jewish leaders displayed a new interest in Jewish education, for children as well as for adults. One of the most important of these initiatives (1920) was the newly founded Jewish adult education center in Frankfurt, the Freies Jüdisches Lehrhaus (Free Jewish House of Learning). Under the direction of Franz Rosenzweig, it became the focus of a spiritual and intellectual renaissance of German Jewry. The learning that took place at the Lehrhaus proceeded in the reverse direction from traditional Jewish learning. For the modern Jew the path did not lead from the Torah to life “but rather the reverse: from life, from a world that knows nothing of the law or wants to know nothing of it, back to the Torah”. Rosenzweig argued that the best qualified to teach this method are those who are not the “Jewish experts” but assimilated and acculturated Jews. Thus, rather than stigmatize those who had been alienated from Judaism he granted assimilation a dialectical dignity.

The Rosenzweig-Buber collaboration in the Lehrhaus led to a project that became the hallmark of the German-Jewish renaissance during the Weimar years - a German translation of the Hebrew Bible, translated to maintain the “voice” of the original, to capture the spoken quality of the underlying text. What Mendelssohn did a century earlier - to bring the German language to the Jews via the Bible, Buber and Rosenzweig did in reverse: they “Hebraized” German, introducing grammatical innovations to approximate the acoustical texture of the original language.
As the Jewish attachment to their own culture strengthened, the connection to Germany and German culture was also maintained. The year 1925 marked the 1000-year anniversary of German settlements along the Rhine, and Jewish organizations actively took part in the celebrations, especially to emphasize the fact that Jews had settled in the Rhineland at least 500 years before the German tribes. As Alfred Wiener, the secretary general of the Centralverein put it, “if there were a Nobel Prize for German sentiments, German Jews would win it.”

Yet even the CV became increasingly aware of the fragility of the synthesis that it advocated. The paradox of Weimar for German Jewry was that while the Jews had finally become full participants in German culture and public life, their right to do so was questioned with ever greater intensity.

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1 In fact, five of the nine Nobel Prizes awarded to German natural scientists in the years of the Weimar Republic were given to Jews: Albert Einstein for his theory of relativity (1921); to the physicists James Franck and Gustav Hertz for their discovery of the laws governing the impact of electrons on atoms (1925); to the biochemist Otto Meyerhof for his work in the metabolism of energy in human muscles (1922); and to the physiologist Otto Heinrich Warburg for determining the nature and mode of action of respiratory enzymes (1931).
On January 30, 1933 President von Hindenburg appointed Adolf Hitler Chancellor, and it was clear that from then on, anti-Semitism would be official government policy. It was a central component of Volksgemeinschaft, the Nazi Party ideology of “folk community”, whereby “only a person who is a fellow German (Volksgenosse) shall be a citizen of our state. Only that person who is of German blood can be considered as our fellow German, regardless of religion. Hence, no Jew can be regarded as a fellow German.”

The first systematic attempt after the Nazis seized power in 1933 was to oust Jews from the German economy. On April 1, 1933 a one-day organized boycott of Jewish retail stores, doctors and lawyers took place; department stores were forced to shut down because of “large, threatening crowds”, even small shops were ordered “vacated” by the Nazi police when angry crowds stood before them and chanted anti-Semitic slogans.

One week later, the Civil Service Law was enacted which ordered the immediate retirement of all “non-Aryan” government employees (which didn’t include many Jews), but the law extended also to self-employed professionals, especially doctors and lawyers, whose freedom to practice was thus seriously circumscribed.

After the promulgation of the Civil Service Law, Jews who were active in the cultural life of Germany quickly found themselves
unemployed. The Jewish organizational response was the Kulturbund, which sponsored a theatre, an orchestra, an opera company, lectures, children's workshops, audio recordings and book publishing. The Nazis permitted the Kulturbund to flourish on the perverse logic that it was an instrument to further disengage Jews from German culture.

But even with access to diversions such as theatre and the arts, life for Jews in Germany was becoming increasingly untenable. Jewish organizations made every effort to facilitate emigration despite the limited willingness of countries abroad to accept Jewish immigrants. German as well as foreign shipping companies organized special voyages for the transport of emigrants, often sailing from port to port until permitted to dock somewhere. The best-known instance is the ship St. Louis, rejected by Cuba and the United States before being forced to turn back toward Hamburg, and finally diverted to four European countries which were persuaded to accept the refugees.

In September 1933 a new organization came into being, the so-called Reichsvertretung, to forge cooperation among the many Jewish factions, and to be the officially recognized partner in negotiations with the government. Rabbi Leo Baeck became its head, thus becoming the universally recognized and respected leader of German Jewry in the final years of its existence.

National legislation was compounded by various local laws and regulations, many of which were not limited to restricting economic activity. Most state governments banned Jewish ritual slaughter even before the national law proscribing it went into effect on April 25, 1933. Similarly, quotas for Jewish students, cessation of welfare support, and restrictions on marriage between Jews and non-Jews, were some of the areas where new statutes made life for Jews increasingly difficult. The excesses of the early years of the Nazi rule were followed by a period of deceptive calm, so that from 1934 until 1937 Jews could believe things would get better.

This, despite the "spontaneous" outbursts of violence that
characterized implementation of the *Judenpolitik*, and the promulgation of the Nuremberg Laws in 1935. Under these laws, "non-Aryans" were categorized as full Jews, half-Jews, or quarter-Jews, depending on parents and grandparents, and only those in the last category had any rights as citizens.

The 1936 Winter Olympics brought a temporary alleviation of overt anti-Semitic behavior in order not to alienate foreign visitors. For Hitler, it was a good opportunity to reap a propaganda dividend by permitting Jewish athletes to participate in the events, an offer that most refused. But once German troops marched into the demilitarized Rhineland in March 1936 without encountering any resistance from the Western powers, all constraints on the further radicalization of *Judenpolitik* were off.

On March 12, 1938 German troops marched into Austria to a jubilant reception, a move which very quickly brought out even more radical anti-Semitism. On the heels of the *Anschluss* all Jewish civil servants and professors at the University of Vienna were dismissed from their posts, Jewish assets were "aryanized", Jewish businesses liquidated. In August Adolf Eichmann opened the Central Office for Jewish Emigration in the Rothschild mansion in Vienna, a "conveyor belt" operation for expropriation and expulsion. Eichmann did his job so well that he rose quickly in the SS hierarchy.

By July 1938 all Jews in Germany had to carry a special identity card; by October they had to have a "J" stamped in their passports; by August they were forced to adopt the name Israel or Sarah and include it in their signatures.

The assassination of Ernst vom Rath, the German delegation secretary in Paris, by a young and vengeful German Jew, gave Nazi Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels the pretext for the November 9 pogrom, the so-called *Kristallnacht*. This well-organized operation was ordered from Munich by telephone and over police radio; units of the SA and SS were charged with its implementation throughout Germany and Austria. Synagogues were desecrated and set ablaze, display windows and stocks of Jewish businesses were destroyed,
cemeteries were demolished, fire brigades were instructed not to put out fires and to watch as this nationwide sacrilege took its course.

After Kristallnacht Jews were effectively removed from economic life as well as from society. A series of ordinances closed streets to them, closed parks, and imposed curfews. Plans were drawn for the forced deployment of jobless Jews into work gangs in labor camps.

The radicalization of anti-Jewish policies required a shift in the consciousness of "ordinary" Germans to enable them to treat Jews without the slightest pretense of civility. Several years of insistent propaganda had accomplished this. In particular, Nazi propaganda featured disgusting caricatures of East-European Jews since the image of acculturated German Jews would hardly arouse contempt - but the implication was that the latter were simply the former in disguise. The controlled press played an important role, especially the vulgar popular newspaper Der Stürmer, and its printing house which published anti-Semitic books and board games even for children. None of the verbal and visual stereotypes in Der Stürmer were invented by the Nazis, they simply borrowed the imagery of the Jew as enemy that was used in the anti-Jewish Christian mythology of earlier centuries.

In fact, the German population came to benefit economically from the anti-Jewish measures. The self-interest of buyers profiting
from the liquidation or Aryanization of Jewish assets overcame any lingering scruples, having already been convinced that Jews had no legitimate claims to assets that in fact belonged to the German Volk.

The pressure of persecution was such that between 1933 and 1939 the Jewish population of Germany shrank by almost 60%. A massive exodus took place 1938-1939, after Kristallnacht.

The formal organizations that represented German Jewry were allowed to continue to exist until the end of 1938. There were internal disputes and political power struggles within these groups, as well as a gulf between the Jewish leadership and the masses. However, the crucial fact is that despite ideological and other differences, the leaders were able to build up a system of organizations that was able to provide emigration assistance, occupational counseling, vocational retraining, and above all, moral support to all Jews still in Germany.

The Jews who remained in Germany at the outbreak of the war were mainly the elderly and the indigent. One of the last public orders was issued in September 1941, ordering all Jews over the age of six to wear a yellow “star of David”, the Judenstern.

The defiance with which some Jews wore this humiliating “badge” was reflected in other areas of self-assertion as well. Rabbi Leo Baeck continued to give daily classes at the Lehranstalt für die Wissenschaft des Judentums in Berlin until July 1942, despite the very small number of students. By June 1942 all instruction for Jewish children was prohibited.

The Reichsvertretung after 1938 was reenacted as the Reichsvereinigung, whose primary purpose soon became to provide welfare to impoverished Jews, as well as to arrange for funerals and burials.

On October 1, 1941, Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, the director of the Gestapo’s Berlin Jewish Section announced that all Jews would be “resettled” to the East. This marked the beginning of the final expulsion and murder of the Jews remaining in Germany.
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To preserve the historical memory of the German-Jewish community, the Leo Baeck Institute was founded in 1955, with Rabbi Baeck as its first president. The Institute continues to keep the German-Jewish heritage alive through the publication of scholarly studies, a library and archival collection, an art collection, symposia and public lectures.