

Two Nations: British and German Jews in Comparative Perspective

Edited by
MICHAEL BRENNER,
RAINER LIEDTKE and
DAVID RECHTER.

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des Leo Baeck Instituts*

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Preface

A comparison between the historical experiences of British and German Jews from the eighteenth century to the 1930s was first suggested in the Spring of 1995 by Professor Werner E. Mosse, then Chairman of the London Leo Baeck Institute. Under the auspices of the Institute, a broad range of internationally renowned scholars was invited to participate in a conference entitled "Two Nations: The Historical Experience of British and German Jews in Comparison". Contributors were requested to compare the British and German cases in their specific area of historical expertise. Happily, a formidable cast of historians proved willing to be involved in this venture, and we are grateful for their commitment to the project.

Given that the Jewish presence was so widespread in the modern era, it is perhaps surprising that comparative studies in modern Jewish history are relatively rare. Resident in a multitude of different states and societies, the Jewish minority would seem to offer an ideal case study for comparative history. The range and quality of essays in this volume suggest that there is much to be gained from employing comparative perspectives and methodology. In a pioneering undertaking of this sort, some lacunae are inevitable. We very much regret, in particular, the omission of essays wholly devoted to Jewish Orthodoxy and to Jewish communal structures.

The editors wish to thank a number of people who have helped to make this volume possible. Werner Mosse was responsible not only for initiating the "Two Nations" project but also for guiding and overseeing a highly successful conference. A source of invaluable advice throughout, he kindly agreed to contribute the introductory chapter to this volume. Arnold Paucker, the Academic Director of the Leo Baeck Institute in London, was an indispensable source of support and encouragement. Thanks are also due to Ulla Weinberg, Anna Carrdus and Gabi Rahaman of the Leo Baeck Institute. At a "test run" pre-conference held at Yarnton Manor in July 1996, we enjoyed the hospitality of the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies. At the conference itself, held in September 1997 at Clare College, Cambridge, Ann Waldman and her able staff created a comfortable and productive environment.

We are very grateful for the copy editing skills of Janet Langmaid and Shayla Walmsley. Lionel de Rothschild saved us from numerous errors by his meticulous proofreading of the text, as did Gabi Rahaman, who proof-read the German footnotes. Thanks also to Friedrich Dannwolff of Mohr Siebeck for supervising the book's production.

Finally, we wish to thank the following institutions who provided financial support: AJR Charitable Trust, Conference on Jewish Material Claims against Germany, Fritz Thyssen Stiftung, Leo Baeck Institute, London, and the Rothschild Trust.

M.B.
R.L.
D.R.

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April 1999

Contents

| | |
|---|-----|
| Preface | v |
| WERNER E. MOSSE | |
| Introduction | 1 |
| DAVID RUDERMAN | |
| Was There an English Parallel to the German Haskalah? | 15 |
| Comment by ANDREAS GOTZMANN | 45 |
| REINHARD RÜRUP | |
| Jewish Emancipation in Britain and Germany | 49 |
| Comment by DAVID CESARANI | 63 |
| MICHAEL A. MEYER | |
| Jewish Religious Reform in Germany and Britain | 67 |
| Comment by HUGH MCLEOD | 85 |
| TONY KUSHNER | |
| Comparing Antisemitisms: A Useful Exercise? | 91 |
| Comment by TILL VAN RAHDEN | 111 |
| LLOYD P. GARTNER | |
| East European Jewish Migration: Germany and Britain | 117 |
| Comment by TRUDE MAURER | 135 |
| DAVID FELDMAN | |
| Jews and the State in Britain | 141 |

CHRISTOPHER CLARK

- The Jews and the German State in the Wilhelmine Era 163
 Combined Comment by CHRISTHARD HOFFMANN 185

STEPHAN WENDEHORST

- Zionism in Britain and Germany: A Comparison 193
 Comment by DAVID RECHTER 219

EDGAR FEUCHTWANGER

- The Jewishness of Conservative Politicians:
 Disraeli and Stahl 223
 Comment by JOHN BREULLY 241

RAINER LIEDTKE

- Integration and Separation: Jewish Welfare in Hamburg
 and Manchester in the Nineteenth Century..... 247
 Comment by GUNNAR SVANTE PAULSSON 273

YOUSSEF CASSIS

- Aspects of the Jewish Business Elite in Britain
 and Germany 279
 Comment by AVRAHAM BARKAI..... 291

NIALL FERGUSON

- “The Caucasian Royal Family”: The Rothschilds in
 National Contexts 295
 Comment by WOLFGANG J. MOMMSEN 327

TODD M. ENDELMAN

- Jewish Self-Hatred in Britain and Germany 331
 Comment by PAUL MENDES-FLOHR 365

SUSAN L. TANANBAUM

- Jewish Feminist Organisations in Britain and Germany at the
 Turn of the Century 371

PAUL WEINDLING

- Jews in the Medical Profession in Britain and Germany:
Problems of Comparison 393
Comment by PETER ALTER 407

RITCHIE ROBERTSON

- The Representation of Jews in British and German Literature:
A Comparison 411
Comment by EDWARD TIMMS 443

HELGA KROHN

- Jewish Culture in the Show Case: Preserving Jewish Culture
and History in Germany 451

BILL WILLIAMS

- Rescuing the Anglo-Jewish Heritage:
The Manchester Experience 467
Combined Comment by GERHARD HIRSCHFELD 479

BERND WEISBROD

- British Jews, German Jews: Civic Culture vs.
Civil Service Culture 485

- List of Contributors 497

- Index 499

WERNER E. MOSSE

Introduction

Symposia, by their very nature, are fragmentary, a mosaic lacking in underlying unity. In the present collection of essays, there is at any rate one unifying feature: the Anglo-German comparison. Comparisons, however, present problems of their own. What can usefully be compared and what conclusions, if any, can be drawn? The experience of an earlier project of this kind (also sponsored by the Leo Baeck Institute)¹ suggests that wherever possible the same author should deal with both countries. Since this would require some knowledge of the languages and Jewish histories of both countries, this imposed severe limitations on the choice of author and hence of topics. Some subjects, for example Orthodox Judaism, have perforce been omitted, while others are treated separately. Many of the contributions can, however, be linked through the shared experiences of the Jewish Diaspora in the modern period: acculturation, emancipation and assimilation; partial integration, antisemitism and the search for a “post-traditional” Jewish identity. While each of these showed many common features in both Britain and Germany, there were also significant differences, the most important being the eventual Jewish fate.

Traditional historiography has drawn a sharp contrast between a liberal and tolerant British society and Britain as a haven for the persecuted on the one hand, and German illiberalism and all-pervading anti-Jewish prejudice on the other. More recently revisionist historians have been trying to qualify this picture, especially as it depicts Britain. Others have argued that the German case is not unique, and that Germany was not uniformly as malevolent as it has been painted in retrospect, partly under the impact of the Holocaust. Several of the contributions to the present volume support the view that the conventional contrast between the two countries and the experiences of their Jewish communities—valid overall, if slightly overdrawn—requires some modification in light of the details.

¹ Published in Mario Toscano (ed.), *Integrazione e Identità. L'esperienza ebraica in Germania e Italia dall'Illuminismo al Fascismo*, Milan 1998.

I.

The first relevant comparison, both in logic and chronology, involves the sequential relationship between Jewish acculturation (with its inseparable concomitant of assimilation) and the emancipation process. The conventional model sees legal emancipation as the essential starting point of Jewish "modernisation", with acculturation and partial assimilation among its necessary consequences. In fact, in both Britain and Germany, limited acculturation and assimilation preceded general civic and political emancipation—the definitive removal of formal anti-Jewish discrimination—by over a century.

Jacob Katz has described the activities, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, of Court-Jews (*Hof-Faktoren*), who had a status occasionally akin to that of the court nobility. Jacob Toury noted the emergence, notably in Prussia from the seventeenth century, of what he calls "*Adelsbürger*", Jews who had acquired wealth and consequent exemption from the restrictions to which the great majority of their co-religionists remained subject. Nor was wealth always a necessary prerequisite. Under the influence of Enlightenment rationalism, acculturated Jews were admitted to learned societies and intellectual circles. Katz described the participation of precursors of Moses Mendelssohn and of some members of his circle in the learned discussions in Berlin in the 1770s and 1780s. Thanks to successful self-education and an interest in ideas, early *maskilim* gained admission to what Katz has called a "semi-neutral" society.² Again, if the regulatory state compelled Jews to use the German language in their book-keeping, it at the same time laid the foundation for their cultural assimilation.³ As David Ruderman, following David Sorkin, shows in his contribution to this volume, comparable developments had already occurred in Britain, where several Jews had been admitted to Masonic lodges and where a Jew had been elected to the prestigious Royal Society. Britain, in early acculturation and selective acceptance, had indeed preceded Germany by the best part of a century. Moses Mendelssohn and others of his circle were still denied admission to Masonic Lodges well after some of their British co-religionists had been granted membership.

² Jacob Katz, *Out of the Ghetto*, Cambridge, Mass. 1973, pp 42ff.

³ Selma Stern, *Der preussische Staat und die Juden*, Tübingen 1962 (Schriftenreihe wissenschaftlicher Abhandlungen des Leo Baeck Instituts 24), vol. II/I, pp. 148-9, quoted in Katz, p. 32.

Significantly, in both Britain and Germany some Jewish acculturation and a form of “proto-emancipation” of initially small Jewish groups occurred well before the first official measures of emancipation. The striking career of Moses Mendelssohn unfolded, like those of other early *maskilim*, in a pre-emancipation society. Nor were acculturation and political emancipation confined to intellectuals. Economic success could also, in some cases, secure access to Gentile society. Wealthy Jews, Court Jews and their families, and Toury’s *Adelsbürger* could secure exemption from oppressive anti-Jewish laws and even obtain extensive privileges. A nascent Jewish bourgeoisie, partially acculturated and assimilated, developed in both countries well before the beginnings of the long process of formal emancipation.

The later concept of an emancipation bargain or contract in which, in exchange for *Verbesserung*, Jews would progressively be granted equal rights of citizenship, is something of a historical fiction, suggesting a much closer and more direct connection between emancipation and assimilation than in fact existed. The link between the two is both looser and less direct than either “bargain” or “contract” suggests. Who, it may be asked, were the parties to the alleged contract and what were their motives? On the Jewish side in both countries it would, if anyone, be lay rather than religious notables and, to some extent, Jewish organisations which emerged during the prolonged emancipation campaigns. It must be questioned whether the great majority of Jews in either country saw assimilation as part of a bargain or indeed a conscious process. It was highly unlikely to have been perceived either as a reward for favours received or an advance payment for favours to come. To the extent that Jewish assimilation advanced *pari passu* with the progress of emancipation, it came essentially from the Jewish side. It was largely voluntary, the result of Jewish choice. Governments did indeed seek at times to promote it with greater or lesser effect, just as, on the other side, Jewish traditionalists tried to impede, arrest, and even reverse it. There is, however, little evidence that Jewish opposition, whether intellectual or from the early inertia of the mass of the Jewish population, had any decisive effect. In so far as assimilation was part of a deliberate policy, it was, if anything, modernisation by choice.

Who, then, were the contracting partners on the Gentile side? On the one hand, but unimportantly, it was a small group of (sometimes philo-Semitic) Gentile protagonists, with their expectations of Jewish *Verbesserung*. They were few in number, and though their writings figure large in the history books their influence may have been limited. The great

mass of the population, on the other hand, particularly in rural areas, had (for them) weightier concerns than Jewish assimilation or *Verbesserung*. Likewise, the urban petty bourgeoisie with its tradition of anti-Jewish prejudice—whether on religious or commercial grounds—could not have cared less whether the—to them—objectionable Jews were assimilated or not. Often, especially in Catholic areas, observant Jews enjoyed greater respect than their more assimilated brethren. It was, moreover, a sentiment widely shared by conservatives of the ruling and middle classes and the majority of their elected representatives. Overall, while widespread antipathy to Jewish emancipation and concurrent assimilation was more pronounced in Germany, it was by no means absent in Britain. In short, in neither country was the bulk of the population a willing partner to the “contract”. It is more than doubtful whether many were familiar with the “emancipation project”, nor, if they had been, that they would have approved it.

How far then were governments guided in their Jewish policies by something like an emancipation contract? In both countries, the concept of the Christian State held sway in official circles and influenced administrative practice throughout the nineteenth century. To the chagrin of many Jews, effective equality in the public arena was never, at least in Germany, part of the official agenda. In Britain, it was realised in the late nineteenth century. There is no evidence to suggest that it was anywhere considered part of a bargain. It was in effect the state, represented by rulers and hereditary and elected legislators, which alone had the power to emancipate. In fact, both in Britain and Germany, governments and chambers, with greater or lesser reluctance, implemented policies of incremental emancipation. There is little to suggest in this any idea of a “deal”. Rather, such policies were often a grudging concession to the *Zeitgeist*, composed of the spread of rationalist views of polity inherited from the Enlightenment, secularisation and liberal ideologies. A correspondence quoted in Reinhard Rürup’s study of emancipation in Baden⁴ throws a revealing light on the ambivalent motives of less than enthusiastic “liberal” emancipators.

In August 1860 the recently appointed Liberal prime minister August Lamey wrote to the grand-duke that the time had come to “tackle the Jewish Question”. Although Jewish emancipation would not be popular, Lamey wrote, this was both a necessary demand of justice and a political necessity. The structure of the state no longer permitted the exclusion of a

⁴ Reinhard Rürup, ‘Die Judenemanzipation in Baden’, in *Zeitschrift für die Geschichte des Oberrheins*, vol. 114, 1966, pp. 293-4.

class of subjects from a number of legal competencies on the grounds of a characteristic so irrelevant as their formal religious allegiance. Even if Jews stood morally below the Christian population, their exclusion from the operation of the common law would be an injustice. Partial solutions were no longer possible. The end result of new legislation could only be complete emancipation. Withal, Lamey added, one had to overcome a certain repugnance in having to accept Jews as equals. There was about them "for we Germans" something "alien and of a disagreeable nature". Jews were, however, citizens and acknowledged as such, and from this conclusions had to be drawn. In the previous decade the courage to oppose Jewish emancipation on grounds of principle had disappeared. However, what opponents no longer dared to deny from the legal side had since been called into question on grounds of *Zweckmässigkeit*.⁵

Early in 1862, government ministers in Baden argued that political ferment had abated and had now given way to calmer and more considered views about the reciprocal rights of estates and individuals living within the state. It was increasingly felt that only the freest development of individual forces could achieve the greatest perfection of the whole, while the average living standard of the population had reached a point where possible economic misgivings need no longer carry decisive weight. Freedom of movement in commerce and crafts must include the Jews, as it would pave the way for their assimilation to Christian customs and ways of life, thereby contributing mightily to the removal of "remaining violent prejudices and passions".⁶ Such were the arguments which eventually carried the day. They were a good deal more varied and sophisticated than the concept of an alleged bargain. At most, one among these arguments in this sense was that emancipation would, in due course, promote Jewish assimilation and the removal of anti-Jewish prejudice. The spate of acts of Jewish emancipation in German states in the early 1860s was almost certainly inspired by similar considerations dictated by the *Zeitgeist*. For Jewish emancipation in Germany, in spite of residual opposition and reservations, the time had come. The expectations, in accordance with earlier emancipationist arguments, about the likely beneficial effects of emancipation, were little more than the expression of a pious hope and something of an afterthought.

⁵ Lamey to Grand-Duke of Baden, n.d. [3rd August 1860]. Translations from the German are mine.

⁶ Rürup, p. 295.

The almost contemporaneous removal in Britain of remaining religious tests and procedures in Parliament and the ancient universities designed to exclude non-Anglicans was equally an expression of the spirit of the age, part of the secularisation of public life. In the acceptance of Jews in the public arena, when a baptised Jew who proudly proclaimed his ethnic origins could become leader of the Conservative Party and an acclaimed Prime Minister, there was no question of an emancipation "contract". Rather, what prevailed was a slow and partial modernisation of British public life expressed, *inter alia*, in the Reform Acts of 1867 and 1884.

There is, however, so far as Jews are concerned, a significant difference between the two countries. Whereas in Germany emancipation was both specific to Jews and the product of state legislation, in Britain matters affecting Jewish interests were often, as Christopher Clark shows in this volume, subsumed under arrangements relating to non-Anglican minorities in general. Moreover, matters of concern to Jews were often dealt with through negotiations between relevant government departments and the statutory representative body of the Jewish community, the Board of Deputies of British Jews, which had no counterpart in Germany. On the one hand, while German Jews, as represented by the *Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens* (C.V.), claimed to be a purely religious community—a claim contested by their exclusionist opponents—British Jews benefited, with others, from their religious status as non-Anglicans. At the same time, through the Board of Deputies, British Jews could make formal representations and involve themselves in negotiations—often successfully—with state authorities in matters of concern to the Jewish community. In short, the question of Jewish grievances and their possible resolution took very different forms in the two countries. What readily became in Germany semi-political issues, decided on largely political grounds by bureaucrats and elected assemblies—both, as a rule, unsympathetic to Jewish claims—were in Britain settled more quietly and often in a fashion acceptable to the Jewish community. Indeed, it might be legitimate to speak of major differences of political culture in the treatment of their Jewish communities.

II.

While the concept of an "emancipation contract" is largely an *ex post facto* construct—indeed something of a fiction—there was, of course, a connection between acculturation and assimilation on the one hand and emanci-

pation on the other. These were closely connected but distinct processes, to some extent interdependent and developing in tandem. Even early protagonists of emancipation had not made "Jewish betterment" a precondition. Rather, they had seen it as a desirable—hopefully inevitable—consequence. In fact, such expectations would be in large measure fulfilled. Within one or two generations, Jews in both countries, even the Orthodox, had become acculturated and, to a greater or lesser extent, assimilated.

Beginning with small educated and/or wealthy groups, acculturation and assimilation had filtered down to wider strata of Jewish society. One potent instrument had been the adoption by Jews from the ghetto, and by recent immigrants, of the majority language in place of Yiddish. This was essentially a voluntary process even if at times encouraged by government measures. Among its instruments were non-traditional Jewish schools—or secular schools with provision for Jewish religious instruction. With language and secular education had come increasing access to the majority culture. This was indeed eagerly sought by growing numbers of young Jews inspired by the idea of *Bildung*. *Bildung* was pursued both for its much-appreciated cultural values and as a road to respectability—both respect in the outside world and self-respect. Through *Bildung*, the values of the surrounding society would automatically be absorbed. Moreover, command of the majority language was also an economic asset, opening up professional opportunities. Knowledge of German (or English) was in fact a necessary concomitant of upward social mobility. It could also facilitate dialogue with Gentiles, however limited.

Next to language as an agent of assimilation, and partly in association with it, came the religious Reform movement. Its development in the two countries is described here by Michael Meyer. The movement was basically a two-stage process, similar in both countries. In each case—as indeed in the Christian Reformation—a conservative phase of limited innovation was followed by a more radical one. In Jewish terms, Reform Judaism was followed by Liberal Judaism. While the same pattern appears in both Britain and Germany the two phases were not chronologically synchronised. More importantly, the outcome in the two cases differed significantly. Whereas in Britain the bulk of the community opted for a moderate, middle-of-the-road Orthodoxy,⁷ in Germany the great majority

⁷ For an evaluation of Jewish Orthodoxy in Britain and its limited relations with its German counterpart see Julius Carlebach, 'The Impact of German Jews on Anglo-Jewry. Orthodoxy 1850–1950', in W.E. Mosse *et al.*, *Second Chance. Two Centuries of German-Speaking Jews in the United Kingdom*, Tübingen 1991 (Schriftenreihe wissenschaftlicher Abhandlungen des Leo Baeck Instituts 48), pp. 405–23.

passed on to Liberal Judaism. Interestingly, whereas the emerging British Judaism bore a rough similarity to the Church of England (or perhaps to German Lutheranism), German Liberal Judaism recalls rather British Non-conformism. In both Britain and Germany, whether in ritual or theology, the Christian churches served as a model for the Jewish Reformation.⁸ In Britain, trends within Christianity played a large role in shaping the ideology of Jewish religious reform, distinguishing it from its counterpart in Germany. In Germany, the churches “provided examples of decorum, music, religious construction and homiletics that greatly influenced the early Reform movement there”.⁹

By the end of the 1870s, economic and political emancipation had in both countries run their course. So had Jewish acculturation for the majority, with the replacement of Yiddish by the national language and the spread of secularised education. The majority cultures and many of their values had been largely absorbed. Far-reaching assimilation expressed itself in the form, among others, of extreme German or British patriotism. Only social integration had lagged behind, impeded on the one hand by Jewish endogamy and continued, if diminishing, observation of the dietary laws, and on the other by the centuries old (and probably ineradicable) anti-Judaism of the Christian (later Gentile) bulk of the population. Overall, Jews had reached a stable post-emancipatory situation, largely under the impact of liberal ideas.

The outcome of Jewish emancipation and assimilation, as Gentile proponents hopefully anticipated and Jewish opponents feared, might in the end have been the absorption of Jews into the rest of the population through intermarriage and (increasingly less important) conversion to Christianity. Long-term demographic trends also appeared to favour such a *dénouement*. Indeed, this is what might have occurred but for three concurrent phenomena: the antisemitic wave sweeping Europe from the 1880s onwards, the accompanying flight of Eastern Jews to the West, and the Jewish reaction to these developments.

III.

Though an intensification of anti-Jewish feeling was common to both countries, there were significant differences. While widespread visceral

⁸ See Michael Meyer's contribution to this volume.

⁹ *Ibid.*

dislike of Jews was common to, and endemic in, both countries, its acute manifestations in the rising antisemitic tide differed. Exclusivism, its first active phase, while by no means unknown in Britain, was almost certainly more rigid and widespread in Germany, with its more hierarchical society and feudal survivals. While integrated in Britain by the earlier emergence of a more open capitalist society that respected wealth and commercial acumen, in mainly agricultural Germany this came later. As far as Jews were concerned, British society in general was by far the more porous of the two. Moreover, the racist doctrinaire exclusionism of German antisemites had no counterpart among the more pragmatic Britons.

The next phase, militant political antisemitism shading into violence, was entirely a German phenomenon, lacking a British counterpart. In Britain, antisemitism at this stage was deflected into nationalist xenophobia with strong anti-German overtones which did not include political violence on any considerable scale. "Exterminationist antisemitism", the German "Final Solution", was never on the cards. Internment, it need hardly be pointed out, however disagreeable, was not extermination. Despite the pleas of contemporary revisionists and the persistence of the original anti-Jewish sentiment common to both countries, the eventual outcome was, of course, dramatically different.

An analogy to the course of antisemitism in both countries can perhaps be found in the field of human pathology. While in the human body there exists a well-known predisposition to a variety of diseases, in a healthy body these are contained by the immune system. However, where the system is damaged and ceases to operate disease can develop unhindered. If the predisposition towards anti-Jewish prejudice was similar, the degree of effectiveness of the two immune systems was widely different. Herein lies, possibly, the fundamental difference in the historical experiences of British and German Jews. Whereas the British system was robust, the German one was always fragile, liable to damage in every stressful situation.

The growth of the new and, particularly in Germany, increasingly social antisemitism, brought to an end the age of emancipation and assimilation, but it nonetheless left emancipation in both countries legally intact. In neither would it be formally infringed until the advent of National Socialism in Germany. At the same time, the process of assimilation assumed a new character. While it was far advanced in the old-established Jewish communities in both countries, it would be restarted from scratch in the case of the Eastern and later Central European immigrants. The arrival of large bodies of immigrants or refugees had profound effects on the established Jewish communities in both Britain and Germany. Beyond the need

to provide immediate assistance, they also felt the need to defend the "unacculturated" aliens against antisemitic or anti-foreign attack. In fact, although many in both communities viewed the influx of Jews from the East with misgivings feelings of solidarity prevailed. The immigrants were assisted not only materially but also in dealings with the authorities. Occasional proposals for repatriation were firmly resisted, while no effort was spared to encourage the speediest possible acculturation of the newcomers. The Eastern European immigration became a continuing target of antisemitic attack, and the issues of Eastern European immigration and Gentile antisemitism were linked in both countries.

Antisemitism and the influx of Eastern Jews strongly affected what might be called the "self-awareness" of established Jews in relation to their Gentile environment. Two different responses emerged. On the one hand was the desire to attract as little attention as possible to themselves and their Jewishness, indeed, on occasion to conceal it. At the other end of the spectrum was an assertion of Jewish pride in the face of Gentile exclusionism. Jews set up their own cultural institutions, sports clubs and youth movements, often modelled on their Gentile counterparts. As Rainer Liedtke describes, they successfully supported their own separate welfare institutions and sought to retain them in the face of pressure to merge them in the existing non-Jewish systems. One expression of Jewish national self-assertion was ironically an expression of assimilation, with consciously Jewish organisations following Gentile models. Pre-1914 Jewish youth groups shared many features of the *Wandervogel*, while the Jewish Lads' Brigade recalled the Boy Scout movement. Jewish student corporations at German universities adopted many practices of their Gentile counterparts, in some cases even the practice of duelling. Jewish Masonic Lodges adopted—or adapted—the rituals of those with mixed or Gentile memberships.

Zionism spread to both Britain and Germany, though chronology and impact in the two countries were somewhat different. Until 1918 Zionism made greater headway in Germany than it did in Britain. Among the explanations for this are the greater virulence of German antisemitism and the earlier emergence of the German movement. British Zionism, while receiving some impetus from the Balfour Declaration of 1917, did not, as Stephan Wendehorst shows, gain wider support until the late 1940s. Curiously, among the more recent Eastern European immigrants Zionism gained greater support in Britain than it did in Germany. Immigrants to Britain may have been more influenced by the impact of the Balfour Declaration than their German counterparts, while a greater proportion may

Index

- Abenatar Pimentel, David, 34
Aboab, Mordechai, 34
Abraham, Eliakim ben, 28, 47
Abrahams, Abraham, *see* Tang, Abraham
Abrahams, Israel, 77, 80
Abrahams, Lionel, 145
Acton, John, 317
Adler, Hermann, 130, 148n
Adler, Nathan Marcus, 74
Aguilar, Grace, 339
Ahlwardt, Hermann, 179
Alberti, Conrad, 349–350
Alexander II., Tsar of Russia, 117
Alexander, David, 155
Almon, John, 20
Althoff, Friedrich, 397–398, 408
American, Sadie, 380
Apta, Nathan, 18
Arendt, Hannah, 495
Arnim, Achim von, 422
Arnold, Matthew, 427
Aron, Wellesly, 210
Aronsfeld, Caesar, 106
Asquith, H.H., 354, 356–357, 359–362
Auerbach, Berthold, 432
- Badt, Hermann, 216
Baeck, Leo, 81, 206
Bagehot, Walter, 282
Bahr, Hermann, 440
Balfour, Arthur James, 155–157
Ballin, Albert, 119, 286, 288, 330, 436, 495
Bamberger, Ludwig, 328
Barent Cohen, Levi, 47
Barham, R.H., 423
Baring, Edward, 318
Baron, Bernhard, 286
Bartsch, Rudolf Hans, 440
Barukh, Raphael, 29, 43
- Bauer, Otto, 220
Belloc, Hilaire, 424, 436, 439–440, 443
Bendix, Reinhard, 343
Benisch, Abraham, 72, 76
Bennett, Salomon, 48
Bentinck, George, 56, 229, 234
Berliner, Alfred, 286
Bernal, J.D., 402
Bernard, John Stephen, 35
Bernays, Isaac, 74
Bernhardt, Sarah, 321
Bethmann–Hollweg, Theobald von, 174, 183, 356
Birch, Thomas, 34
Bismarck, Otto von, 223, 230, 232, 238–239, 243, 315
Blaschko, Alfred, 400
Bleichröder, Gerson, 329
Bloch, Marc, 279, 485
Blum, Leon, 97
Blumenbach, Johann Friedrich, 324n.
Blumenfeld, Kurt, 203, 215
Bonaparte, Jerome, 70
Bondy, Louis, 106
Booth, Charles, 265
Börne, Ludwig, 341, 419
Brand, Robert, 283
Brenner, Yosef Hayim, 332
Brodetsky, Selig, 208
Brown, John, 324
Browne, Thomas, 414
Bruce, Henry, 150
Buber, Martin, 342–343
Buchan, John, 436–437, 443
Büchner, Georg, 424
Bülow, Bernhard von, 356, 358
Bunsen, Christian von, 230
Burke, Edmund, 20
Butler, Josephine, 379n
- Carlyle, Thomas, 66

- Cassel, Ernest, 283, 288, 489
 Chamberlain, Houston Stewart, 276, 439–440, 447
 Chaucer, Geoffrey, 412
 Chesterton, G.K., 439
 Churchill, Winston, 446
 Cobbett, William, 66
 Cohen, Arthur, 312
 Cohen, Hannah, 380
 Cohen, Henry, 405
 Cohen, Julia, 375, 384, 386
 Cohn, Ferdinand, 397
 Cohn, Willy, 458
 Colquhoun, Patrick, 64
 Conrad, Joseph, 436
 Corry, Monty, 229
 Coughlin, Father, 93
 Croker, John Wilson, 57n
 Crzellitzer, Arthur, 403
 Cumberland, Richard, 418
- Dairnvaell, Georges, 295, 322
 Dalberg, Karl Theodor Anton von, 301, 303
 Dale, Henry, 404
 Davis, Eliza, 424
 Dermott, Lawrence, 27
 Dernburg, Bernhard, 356
 Desart, Ellen, 388
 Dessauer, Adolf, 434
 Deutsch, Felix, 285
 Dickens, Charles, 66, 422–424, 430
 Dinter, Arthur, 440, 445
 Disraeli, Benjamin, 223–239, 241–245, 274n, 317–318, 320, 337, 341n, 431, 433, 490
 d'Israeli, Isaac, 54
 Disraeli, Sarah, 337–338
 Döblin, Alfred, 432
 Dohm, Christian Wilhelm, 169, 264, 366
 Droste-Hülshoff, Annette von, 424
 Drumont, Eduard, 440
 Dubnow, Simon, 220
 Ducarel, James, 32, 35
 Dühring, Eugen, 179
- Easterman, Max, 94
 Eban, Abba, 208
 Eder, M.D., 403
 Edgeworth, Maria, 419–420
 Edward VII, King of England, Scotland and Ireland, 288, 319–320, 323–324, 436
 Ehrlich, Paul, 397–398, 404
 Eichholz, Alfred, 403
 Eichholz, Ruth, 385, 388–389
 Einstein, Albert, 355
 Eliot, George, 274n, 428–429, 436, 439
 Eliot, T.S., 436
 Erdinger, Dora, 386
 Eulenburg, Botho von, 178
 Eytan, Walter, 210
 Ezra, Abraham ibn, 36
- Falk, Samuel, 28
 Faßbinder, Rainer Werner, 462
 Fassel, Hirsch, 73
 Faudel-Phillips, George, 282
 Felix, Arthur, 402
 Feuchtwanger, Heinrich, 460
 Feuchwanger, Lion, 432
 Fichte, Johann Gottlieb, 276, 366
 Fitzroy, Henry, 298
 Folkes, Martin, 33
 Fontane, Theodor, 409, 430–431, 436
 Frankau, Gilbert, 348, 352
 Frankau, Julia, 347–349, 352, 433, 435
 Frankau, Pamela, 352–353
 Frankel, Zacharias, 69, 72n, 77
 Frankenthal, Käthe, 402, 409
 Franz Joseph, Emperor, 315, 322
 Franzos, Karl Emil, 368, 423, 433
 Frauberger, Heinrich, 453
 Freud, Anna, 401
 Freud, Siegmund, 332, 447
 Freund, J.C.H., 396
 Freytag, Gustav, 424, 445
 Friedländer, David, 68
 Friedrich Wilhelm IV, King of Prussia, 227, 230, 242–243, 490
 Fromer, Jacob, 344
 Fürstenberg, Carl, 284, 330
- Galton, Francis, 403–404
 Geiger, Abraham, 68–69, 71, 79
 Geiger, Berthold, 165
 Gellert, Christian Fürchtegott, 417
 Gerlach, Ernst Ludwig von, 238–239
 Geldzinski, Lesser, 456, 460
 Giertych, Jendrzej, 274

- Gladstone, William Ewart, 153, 227, 237, 316–318, 323
 Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, 428
 Goldsmid, Francis Henry, 56
 Goldsmid, Isaac Lyon, 308
 Gompertz, Aron S., 36–37
 Gompertz, Benjamin, 399
 Gompertz, Leon, 414
 Goodman, Paul, 208
 Gordon, Yehuda Leib, 334
 Goslar, Hans, 216
 Granville, Earl of, 316–317
 Green, A.A., 384
 Grimm, Jacob, 421
 Groß, Freiherr von, 176
 Grüneberg, Hans, 404
 Grunwald, Max, 453, 455
 Gundersheimer, Hermann, 460
 Gutmann, Eugen, 284
 Guttmann, Ludwig, 404
- Haas, Ludwig, 171
 Haldane, J.B.S., 402
 Hallgarten, Charles, 456
 Hallo, Rudolf, 458
 Hamburger, Sidney, 108
 Hamilton, Edward, 318–319
 Hands, Lizzie, 382–383
 Harden, Maximilian, 344
 Hardenberg, Karl August von, 169
 Harmsworth, Alfred, 287
 Hart, John, *see* Abraham, Eliakim ben
 Hasted, Edward, 34
 Heckel, Johannes, 231
 Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, 366–367, 492
 Heine, Heinrich, 341, 346, 430
 Henderson, Arthur, 157
 Herder, Johann Gottfried von, 412
 Herxheimer, Herbert, 400
 Herzl, Theodor, 215, 433–434
 Hill, A.V., 404
 Hirsch, Max, 403
 Hirschel, Salomon, 48
 Hirschfeld, Magnus, 403
 Hirst, Hugo, 285
 Hitler, Adolf, 445–449
 Hogarth, William, 417
 Holdheim, Samuel, 78
 Huber, Victor Aimé, 230
 Humboldt, Wilhelm von, 59
- Hunter, John, 39
 Hyam, Hannah, 388
- Iffland, August Wilhelm, 414
 Irving, Henry, 414
 Isaacs, Godfrey, 286
 Isaacs, Rufus, 145, 358
- Jacobowski, Ludwig, 349, 351, 435
 Jacobs, Joseph, 403
 Jacobson, Israel, 70
 Jacoby, Joel, 339
 James, Henry, 428–429
 Janner, Barnett, 216
 Jassoy, Ludwig, 299
 Jessel, Albert, 388
 Jessel, George, 145
 Joseph II., Emperor, 60
 Jowett, Benjamin, 77
 Joyce, James, 412, 438–439, 445
 Joynson–Hicks, William, 157
- Kafka, Franz, 332
 Kaiser, Conrad, 216
 Kant, Immanuel, 366–367
 Kareski, Georg, 215
 Karstadt, Rudolph, 286–287
 Kaznelson, Sigmund, 220
 Kemble, John, 421
 Kerr, Alfred, 361
 Kessler, Harry, 356
 Kindersley, Robert, 283
 King, John, 23
 Kipling, Rudyard, 436
 Kircher, Athanasius, 415
 Knorr von Rosenroth, Christian, 415
 Knowlton, Thomas, 34
 Knox, Robert, 426
 Koch, Robert, 397–398
 Koestler, Arthur, 199, 213
 Kohler, Kaufmann, 76n
 Kollenschner, Max, 215
 Kraus, Karl, 247, 332, 432
 Krebs, Hans, 404–405
 Kirschstein, Salli, 455
- Lagarde, Paul de, 489
 Lamey, August, 4
 Landsberger, Franz, 460
 Langbehn, Julius, 430
 Laski, Harold, 210, 403

- Lassalle, Ferdinand, 340–341
 Lassar, Oscar, 400
 Latowski, Paul, 274
 Lavington, George, 34
 Lazarus, Moritz, 333, 368
 Leff, Samuel, 403
 Lehmann, Herbert, 404
 Leo, Heinrich, 230
 Leon, Jacob Judah, 27
 Leopold, King of the Belgians, 322
 Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim, 25, 411, 417–418, 439
 Lessing, Theoder, 331, 343–345, 368
 Levi, David 23–24, 28, 43n., 47
 Levison, Mordechai Schnaber, 28, 38–44, 46
 Levy, Amy, 347, 351–352, 433
 Levy, Hyman, 403
 Levy, Joseph Moses, 340
 Levy, Matthias, 339
 Lewald, Fanny, 341
 Lewes, G.H., 439
 Lewis, Wyndham, 436, 443
 Lichtheim, Richard, 217
 Liebreich, Oscar, 402
 Lightfoot, Joseph, 312
 Lipton, Thomas, 286
 Lloyd George, David, 295
 Lubarsch, Otto, 398, 400
 Ludendorff, Erich, 361
 Lueger, Karl, 448
 Luther, Martin, 411–412
- Macaulay, Catherine, 20
 Macklin, Charles, 414
 Maimon, Salomon, 45
 Mammroth, Paul, 285
 Mankiewitz, Paul, 284
 Mann, Thomas, 431, 439
 Marks, David Woolf, 69, 71
 Marks, family, 213
 Marks, Simon, 211
 Marlowe, Christopher, 413
 Marx, Karl, 237, 340–341, 367
 Maugham, Somerset, 437
 Maurier, George du, 428
 Mauthner, Fritz, 349–350
 Mayer Wise, Isaac, 69–70
 Mayer, David Hugo, 171
 McCaul, Alexander, 69
 Meldola, David, 70
- Mendelssohn, Moses, 2, 17, 25, 31, 38–46, 68, 73, 78, 226, 332, 334
 Mendes Belisario, Isaac, 32, 34
 Mendes da Costa, Emanuel, 29–37, 44
 Merrick, Leonard, 347
 Metternich, Klemens Wenzel von, 305–306
 Meyerhoff, Otto, 404
 Miller, Emmanuel, 401
 Miller, Henry, 365
 Milton, John, 415
 Model, Alice, 384
 Mokher Sefarim, Mendele, 334
 Mond, Alfred, 285
 Mond, Eva, 210
 Mond, Henry, 210
 Montagu, Edwin, 145, 292, 354–359, 361–362
 Montagu, Lily, 80–81, 359
 Montagu, Samuel, 319
 Montefiore, Charlotte, 339
 Montefiore, Claude, 77, 148n
 Montefiore, Leonard, 218
 Montefiore, Moses, 55, 87, 146, 312
 Mordecai, Rachel, 419
 Moritz, Karl Philipp, 416
 Moro, Arthur, 382
 Moses, Julius, 402, 409
 Mosley, Oswald, 97
 Moss, Celia, 339
 Moss, Marion, 339
 Mosse, Rudolph, 287
 Müller, Friedrich, 416
- Namier, Louis, 199, 213, 274
 Naphtali, Fritz Perez, 216
 Needham, Joseph, 402
 Neugreschel, Abraham ben Moses Taussig, 18
 Neville-Rolfe, Mrs., 401
 Nieto, David, 28
 Nieto, Isaac, 31
 Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm, 492
 Nordau, Max, 336n
 Nunes Carvalho, Emanuel, 23
 Nunn, Thomas Hancock, 384
- Pappenheim, Bertha, 377–383, 386, 392
 Parkes, James, 92
 Patti, Adeline, 321
 Pedder, John, 155, 157, 158n

- Peel, Alice, 323
 Peel, Robert, 57n, 235, 308–309, 424
 Percy, Thomas, 412
 Perlzweig, Maurice, 80
 Perutz, Max, 405
 Phillips, Samuel, 339
 Pinto, Isaac da, 34
 Polenz, Wilhelm von, 430
 Pound, Ezra, 436, 439
 Puttkamer, Robert von, 124
- Raabe, Wilhelm, 422, 424–425, 430, 445
 Railing, Harry, 285
 Railing, Max John, 285
 Raphael, Edward, 395–396
 Raphael, Louis, 395–396
 Rathenau, Emil, 285–286
 Rathenau, Walther, 330, 354–359, 368–369, 436
 Rebello, Ives, 34
 Remak, Robert, 397
 Renan, Ernest, 212
 Renner, Karl, 220
 Ringer, Charles, 328
 Ritter, Immanuel H., 78n
 Robert, Ludwig, 338
 Robertson Smith, W., 77
 Romily, Isaac, 33
 Rosenfeld, Max, 220
 Rosenheim, Max, 405
 Rosenstock, Werner, 108
 Roth, Cecil, 15, 17, 82n, 98, 443, 472
 Roth, Joseph, 432
 Rothenham, Hermann von, 230
 Rothschild, Alfred de, 282–283
 Rothschild, Anselm von, 395
 Rothschild, Anthony de, 218n
 Rothschild, Constance de, 380–381
 Rothschild, family, 232, 282, 291, 421
 Rothschild, Lionel de, 56, 226
 Rothschild, Nathaniel de, 57
 Rothschild, Salomon von, 395
 Rubinstein, Anton, 428
 Russell, John, 146, 153, 309–310, 315
- Saar, Ferdinand von, 431
 Sacher, Harry, 206
 Salaman, Redcliffe, 401–402
 Salomon, David, 56, 493
 Salomons, David, 308–310
 Salomons, Henry, 151
 Salvador, Joseph, 29, 34
 Samuel, Herbert, 145, 210–11, 358–359
 Samuel, Ida, 388
 Samuel, Marcus, 286
 Samuel, Samuel, 282
 Scheler, Max, 492
 Schloss, David, 145
 Schnitzler, Arthur, 335, 432, 434–435
 Scholem, Gerschom, 368
 Schomberg, Isaac, 29, 35–36
 Schomberg, Meyer Löw, 29, 34–35, 48
 Schomberg, Ralph, 29, 34, 36
 Schönberger, Guido, 460
 Schönerer, Georg von, 448
 Schönstedt, Karl Heinrich von, 175
 Schreiber, Emanuel, 333
 Schröder, Friedrich Ludwig, 414
 Schuster, Felix, 282
 Schwaner, Wilhelm, 361
 Scott, Walter, 420
 Segall, Sally, 286
 Seligmann, Charles, 402
 Seton-Watson, Hugh, 199
 Shaftesbury, Anthony Ashley Cooper, 487
 Shakespeare, William, 411–413
 Siemens, Carl von, 286
 Simmons, L.M., 79n
 Singer, Charles, 401–402
 Smollett, Tobias, 417, 420
 Sombart, Werner, 349–350
 Sorsby, Arnold, 403
 Sorsby, Maurice, 402
 Speyer, Edgar, 282
 Speyer, Georg, 398
 Stahl, Friedrich Julius, 223–228, 230–231, 237–239, 241–245, 340–341, 490
 Stanley, Lord, 227, 232
 Stanley, Venetia, 357, 359
 Stein, Gerhard, 174
 Steinthal, Max, 284
 Stern, Edward, 282
 Stern, Sydney James, 319
 Stoecker, Adolf, 88, 276
 Strauss, Friedrich David, 68
 Stukeley, William, 31
- Tang, Abraham ben Naphtali, 18–23, 28, 45

- Thackeray, William Makepeace, 339, 423–424
 Tietz, Leonard, 286
 Tietze, Christopher, 404
 Tilsington, Anthony, 33
 Tönnies, Ferdinand, 492
 Treitschke, Heinrich von, 176
 Trollope, Anthony, 66, 427–428, 445

 Uhlfelder, Abraham, 224
 Ullmann Sidgwick, Cecily, 347
 Ullmann, Philippine, 425
 Ullstein, Leopold, 287

 Van Oven, Joshua, 29, 47, 64
 Varnhagen, Rahel, 337–338
 Victoria, Queen of England, 315–317, 319, 321
 Villiers, Charles, 315
 Virchow, Rudolf, 396, 408
 Voltaire, 18, 23

 Wagenseil, Johann Christian, 415
 Wagner, Richard, 276, 429
 Wallich, Hermann, 284
 Wassermann, Jakob, 345–348, 432
 Wassermann, Oscar, 213, 284
 Waugh, Evelyn, 439

 Webb, Beatrice, 295
 Weinberg, Wilhelm, 403
 Weininger, Otto, 332–333
 Weissenberg, Samuel, 451
 Weissler, Adolf, 344
 Weizmann, Chaim, 274
 Wells, H.G., 438
 Weltsch, Robert, 106
 Whewell, William, 313
 Wiener, Alfred, 106
 Wilhelm II., German Emperor, 288, 356, 436
 Wilkes, John, 19–20, 22–24, 26
 Williams, Brydges, 229
 Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 448
 Wolf, Albert, 456
 Wolf, Lucien, 141, 431
 Wolfe, Humbert, 93, 103, 335
 Wolff, Berto, 104
 Worms, Henry de, 319
 Wright, Samson, 402

 Zangwill, Israel, 78–79, 268, 432
 Zedlitz-Trütschler, Count, 165
 Zola, Emile, 439
 Zweig, Arnold, 432
 Zweig, Stefan, 432
 Zylberberg, Perec, 106