Two Nations: British and German Jews in Comparative Perspective

Edited by
MICHAEL BRENNER,
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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 proofread the German footnotes. Thanks also to Friedrich Dannwolff of Mohr Siebeck for supervising the book's production.

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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.

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[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.

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[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 philosemitic) 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 Baden[4] 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.

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[5] Lamay 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 Nonconformism. 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

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