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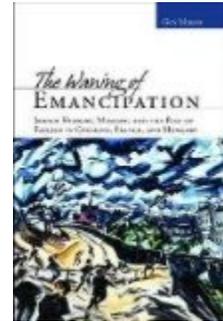
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Guy Miron. *The Waning of Emancipation: Jewish History, Memory, and the Rise of Fascism in Germany, France, and Hungary*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011. 308 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8143-3470-6.

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Fashioning Usable Pasts and Collective Memories in the Face of Destruction: Central and Western European Jewish Communities and their Spokesmen during the Interwar Period and Shoah

Confronted with the increasing collapse of Jewish emancipation and the intensifying fascist assaults of the 1920s and 1930s, the leaders and opinion-formers of European Jewish communities struggled to develop an array of responses that would sustain their members in increasingly desperate times. Guy Miron has added an insightful work to the study of these phenomena that centers on how “Jewish spokespeople,” ranging from journalists and historians to communal activists and rabbis, turned to Jewish history in their reevaluation of the emancipation experience and reshaped “Jewish public memory.” They created, the associate professor and former dean of the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies Jerusalem argues, “usable pasts” to “invest the present with meaning,” provide guidance, and comfort Jewish community members (pp. 7, 54). The book contrasts Jewish liberal, Orthodox, and Zionist narratives, examines local and immigrant perspectives, and links the rereading of the past to shifts in mainstream Gentile nationalisms and historiographical discourses. Miron’s work singles out Jewish representatives in Germany, where Jews only slowly won civic equality and first had to cope with the anti-Semitic onslaughts by a fascist regime. The study also turns to France, the site of the earliest emancipation of continental European Jewish populations that unfolded in the course of the French Revolution. The author, finally, centers on Jewish spokespersons in Hungary, where the emancipation of the Jewish communities lasted for a comparatively short period and was only

accomplished by the end of the nineteenth century.

Miron’s inclusion of Hungarian Jewish practices of memory making—which ranks among the study’s most intriguing parts—constitutes a deliberate attempt to shift the Hungarian Jewish case from its reading as “marginal” or “exceptional” in much of the conventional historiography to a vital part of western and central European Jewish emancipation histories (p. 5). The author, consequently, stipulates that for all the national specificities, the “vast majority” of Hungarian, French, and German Jewish spokespeople recrafted overlapping versions of the “homemaking myth” of the emancipation period without rejecting the myth’s essential symbols. Based, among others, on centuries-old settlements, these symbols implied close ties to the respective European homeland. Most Jewish community leaders and intellectuals in these three countries also maintained a staunch belief in notions of progress and portrayed the local Jewish populations as “integral part” of the respective nation’s history, readily connecting them to key historical events and a “national-liberal pantheon of heroes” (pp. 219, 223). French Jewish representatives, for instance, readily evoked memories of the French Revolution in a spirit of Jewish republicanism. Hungarian Jewish authors turned to the medieval period and King Stephen. The nine-hundredth anniversary of this saint’s death in 1938, for example, provided them with an opportunity to reshape collective memories and depict Hungarian na-

tionalism as allegedly tolerant towards Jews (p. 174). German Jewish spokespeople presented figures such as Moses Mendelssohn as models for Jewish integration into German society during difficult times without giving up on Jewish traditions. Even in the mid-1930s, a “new emancipation” seemed altogether possible in what these authors sketched as a “cyclical historical movement” (pp. 61, 80).

In more nuanced discussions, Miron teases out conflicting recreations of usable pasts by spokespeople of German, French, and Hungarian Jewry and turns to rifts in these practices within the Jewish populations of the three countries. Even with the collapse of the Popular Front governments and a sharp increase in anti-Semitic outbursts in the late 1930s, integrationist French Jewish representatives never gave up memories of the French Revolution and clung to emancipation as the key component of their collective identities. Even spokespeople of the Jewish immigrant communities in Paris and elsewhere shared in the creation of past traditions of the French Revolution and tolerance toward refugees. By contrast, increasingly traumatized liberal, Orthodox, and Zionist German Jewish representatives alike came to accept the collapse of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century emancipation in the course of the 1930s. Hungarian Jewish representatives, on the other hand, conceptualized anti-Jewish legislation as temporary setbacks. Still, they, too, moved away from liberal legacies and instead stunningly endorsed their country’s Christian and conservative traditions which they recast as devoid of race (pp. 229, 183). Ultimately, competing voices, especially from Zionists, in these three countries appear as strikingly inconsequential for the broader Jewish memory cultures. Even in Germany, where Zionist authors like Joachim Prinz gained tremendous ground and spokespeople of all camps acknowledged the end of the traditional emancipation project, public Jewish discourses by and large did not proceed to a total rejection of liberal notions of progress and prospects for integration. All in all, Miron argues, there persisted a “single Jewish historical discourse” in 1930s Germany, France, and Hungary (p. 15).

Reflecting the ongoing calls for integrative and integrated histories that examine the interaction of Gentile and European Jewish actors and communities, Miron further relates the remaking of the past by Jewish representatives to shifts in national historiographical traditions.[1] In close readings of the works of individual Jewish publicists and communal activists, he demonstrates how their reassessments of the Jewish past mirrored the

broader crisis of historicism and the increasing impact of “archaic-mythic forms” in mainstream historical narratives. Many liberal assimilationists like Bruno Weil or Orthodox German Jewish writers such as Markus Elias placed Jewish fate or sin and religious commitment at the center of their narratives. Others, like the publicist Fritz Friedländer, explicitly endorsed German Gentile historians like Friedrich Meinecke in their defense of “scientific” history and notions of progress and integrated these scholars’ insights into the remaking of Jewish memory (pp. 45-46).

The study largely relies on an impressive array of German-, French-, Hungarian-, and Yiddish-language newspapers, journals, books, and pamphlets from Jewish publishing houses in the three countries under investigation. The modern European Jewish press has been at the center of numerous studies. Yet, Miron’s focus on the newspapers’ remaking of Jewish pasts adds an important dimension that has only played a marginal role in these studies’ explorations of contribution narratives, ideological struggles between Jewish nationalists and “assimilationists,” or the role of periodicals as tools of survival in times of anti-Semitic onslaughts.[2] The archival source base of Miron’s work, by contrast, is rather thin. The author does not draw on any records by the examined representatives in the fragmented records of the destroyed Jewish communities or organizations (such as the archives of the Central Association of German Citizens of the Jewish Faith that resurfaced in the Osoby Archive in Moscow in 1990 and is available in the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People in Jerusalem). While Miron deliberately focuses on public discourses, these sources would have shed more light on the actual practices of Jewish memory makers, including the narratives circulated at public commemorations such as the one hundredth anniversary of the death of Berlin Jewish community leader and banker David Friedländer (p. 66).

In organizational and methodological terms, the study presents its analysis of the remaking of Jewish memory in the form of three case studies, devoting two chapters to each of the three national settings. The examination begins with Weimar Germany in the late 1920s, moves on to France in the 1930s, and draws to a close with Hungary on the eve of the local Jewish communities’ destruction in 1944. The study attributes the evaluated writings of individual Jewish representatives to a typology of different narratives that emphasize liberal, critical liberal, Zionist, and Orthodox perspectives. On occasion, Miron expands this typology to include “Jewish Commu-

nist” and “Jewish immigrant” voices (pp. 107, 103). The overall approach is comparative, even if the most sustained comparisons are limited to the book’s conclusion. By offering more nuanced case studies, Miron’s work escapes an overgeneralized image of Jewish pasts in different diaspora settings that remained prominent in traditional Jewish historiography associated, for example, with the “Jerusalem school.”[3]

Much of the study revolves around the key concepts of history and memory. The author taps into the enormous literature on national memory, places of memory, and collective memory by often-referenced scholars like Pierre Nora, Jan Assmann, and Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi.[4] His approach works well in those sections of the work that apply distinct concepts such as Nora’s places of memory to specific sites like the medieval synagogue in Worms (pp. 55-60). Throughout the study, Miron, however, operates with a strikingly broad array of concepts that refer to related, but still different phenomena such as “cultural memory,” “Jewish culture of memory,” “public memory,” and “communal memory” (pp. 8, 230). Since the author often does so without drawing clear distinctions, he unnecessarily weakens the strength of his approach.

Responding to the “transnational turn” of the last fifteen years, Miron also draws on notions of transnationalism and skillfully goes beyond his work’s predominantly national foci. As Shulamit Volkov has recently argued, Jewish history in particular can be seen as “inherently transnational.”[5] While Miron mainly restricts this analysis to “transnational tendencies” in Yiddish-language immigrant discourses in France, the approach enables him to demonstrate that the emergence of a return-to-the-ghetto rhetoric in immigrant circles in late 1930s France, for instance, can hardly be traced solely to developments in the country. Instead, this phenomenon needs to be explained by the negotiation of this rhetoric in publications of the global Yiddish literary world from New York City to Vilna and beyond (p. 140). In fact, a more pronounced turn to transnational networks and forms of communication even among liberal Jewish representatives could have further strengthened the author’s findings. It would have enabled an analysis that did not merely reveal differences and similarities in Jewish memory and discourses in the three countries, but also begins to explain them, including the predominance of certain tropes, narratives, and symbols—for instance, the home-making myth.

Miron deliberately limits his expertly conducted

study to spokespeople of the German, French, and Hungarian Jewish communities. These authors and community leaders, undoubtedly, functioned as opinion-formers whose voices figured prominently in Jewish public discourses. Miron confirms the crucial point that the circulation and significance of Jewish periodicals only increased with the growing discrimination and eventually persecution of these periodicals’ main audiences (p. 16). It is striking then that his account ignores key figures, like Robert Weltsch in Berlin, who played a vital role in this expansion of the German Jewish Zionist press. More importantly, by suggesting time and again that the practices of these spokespeople expressed the ways in which the “vast majority of Jews” remade the past, the author asserts more than he can prove in the confines of his work (pp. 151, 60). Scholars have rightfully warned that an overemphasis on Jewish press sources is in danger of distorting local representatives’ wide range of practices by playing up stark ideological differences between the competing narratives. As several studies have shown, the differences in everyday local public practices were often much more subdued and convoluted.[6]

The question of local practice and reception is even more pertinent in light of the author’s decision to write his analysis gender-blind. Miron’s otherwise fine work pays almost no attention to the tremendous contributions by historians of Jewish women’s and gender history such as Paula Hyman or Marion A. Kaplan. This literature has long demonstrated that “gender was of critical significance” and that middle-class Jewish women, including those organized in prominent organizations such as the League of Jewish Women (JFB), often interpreted the past and present quite differently than the more publicly recognized male community leaders. These female activists also did so in widely circulated publications such as the monthly *Blätter des JFB* that helped to shape the Jewish communities’ broader public discourses.[7] While the book occasionally references female authors such as Elfride Bergel-Gronemann or Eva Reichmann, it neither explores gender differences in the work of memory makers nor does it reveal the rendering of usable pasts as a largely male-centered practice steeped in public performances of Jewish masculinities (pp. 35, 73). Additional research would need to explore, among other things, the ways in which spokeswomen of the analyzed communities also constructed historical memory differently and tease out the gendered nature of these memory practices and discourses.

This said, Miron has added an insightful study to the extensive literature on Jewish emancipation and its final

demise during the rise of European fascisms. His case for the inclusion of Hungarian Jewish experiences and creations of usable pasts akin to practices of the much-better-studied French and German Jewish populations will especially trigger more research and debate. Moreover, he eloquently makes the case for the importance of the continued examination of the European Jewish press and related publications by Jewish publishing houses, especially from the angle of memory studies, while the communicative memories of the broad readerships still await systematic analysis.

Notes

[1]. Saul Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939-1945* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2007), xiv, and “Eine integrierte Geschichte des Holocausts,” *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 14-15 (2007): 7-14.

[2]. See, for instance, Susanne Marten-Finnis and Markus Winkler, eds., *Die jüdische Presse im europäischen Kontext 1686-1990* (Bremen: Edition Lumière, 2006); and Herbert Freeden, *The Jewish Press in the Third Reich* (Providence: Berg Publishers, 1993).

[3]. David N. Myers, *Re-Inventing the Jewish Past: European Jewish Intellectuals and the Zionist Return to History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). For an earlier challenge to the use of one model to describe the multiple paths of modern European Jewry see, for exam-

ple, Jacob Katz, ed., *Toward Modernity: The European Jewish Model* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1987).

[4]. Pierre Nora, *Rethinking France: Les lieux de mémoire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writings, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996).

[5]. Shulamit Volkov, “Jewish History. The Nationalism of Transnationalism,” in *Transnationale Geschichte: Themen, Tendenzen und Theorien*, ed. Gunilla-Friederike Budde, Sebastian Conrad, and Oliver Janz (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006), 190, 196.

[6]. See, for instance, Jacob Borut, “‘Verjudung des Judentums.’ Was There a Zionist Subculture in Weimar Germany?” in *In Search of Jewish Community: Jewish Identities in Germany and Austria, 1918-1933*, ed. Michael Brenner and Derek Jonathan Penslar (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 108.

[7]. Marion A. Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 7; Paula Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History: The Roles and Representation of Women* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995).

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