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Albert Lindemann. *Anti-Semitism before the Holocaust.* Harlow, England: Longman, 2000. xx + 144 pp. $ 12.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-36964-1.

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The Perils of Plausibility

Albert Lindemann's new work, *Anti-Semitism before the Holocaust*, offers a popularly written survey of Jew-hatred through the ages. With a text of just over one hundred pages, a short selection of primary documents, time lines, and glossary, the book has been designed to meet a variety of undergraduate teaching needs. Surely the author's robust exposition and provocative arguments will generate plenty of classroom controversy.

For the most part, this new book is a popularized version of the author's 1997 study, *Esau's Tears*. As in that work, Lindemann issues sharp challenge to current academic fashion, which he sees as having embraced a simplistic notion of antisemitism, as "a single entity with constant traits," in which Jews are viewed as "passive and thus wholly innocent victims." (pp. 4,7) In opposition, he offers a history of antisemitism full of variety and paradoxes, in which Jews are neither passive nor innocent.

Indeed, Lindemann's exposition seems guided by a kind of inverted Newtonian principle: for nearly every anti-Jewish reaction in history, he posits a prior Jewish action. Whether the setting is Hellenistic Alexandria or nineteenth-century Berlin, the author sees recurring patterns of Jewish behavior – separation, wealth, arrogance – that usually invited a disproportionate and prejudicial response. And while he acknowledges that fantasy, stereotyping, and bigotry played a role in the traditions of Jew-hatred, his greater interest lies in demonstrating the ways in which real experiences replenished and reinforced these traditions. In his view, this approach is crucial in order properly to "understand" the antisemites. Such understanding, he says, is quite different from the "uncompromising moral condemnation" characteristic of the field. And such understanding, he suggests, is essential if we are to "remedy" antisemitism effectively (pp. 3-4).

Unfortunately, Lindemann's survey, far from offering remedy, seems destined mainly to compound the problem. This is one seriously imbalanced book. Its treatment of other scholarly approaches relies upon caricature and straw men.[1] Its overview of Jewish-gentile relations is selective and tendentious. While Lindemann carefully qualifies, softens, and contextualizes the history of anti-Jewish prejudice, he shows little hesitation in making defamatory generalizations about Jews, especially when voices such as the "noted Jewish author" Arthur Koestler and "celebrated Jewish philosopher" Baruch Spinoza are on hand to deliver them. In his tour d'horizon of history's leading antisemitic figures, the author all too often substitutes shallow polemic (e.g. Treitschke, Stoecker, and Marr were no Nazis) for historical insight (but what then was their significance?). Even his bid to understand the antisemites yields no real illumination; indeed, given the importance Lindemann attaches to this concern, it is striking how little attention he devotes to the internal workings of antisemitic belief systems, or to the rhetorical conceits and imagery that drove them. Instead, he fixates upon the alleged plausibility of anti-Jewish perceptions. Readers should not be blamed if they find his arguments uncomfortably akin to rationalization.

Lindemann's notion of "plausibility" is crucial to his interpretation of antisemitism, and to his empathetic reconstructions of anti-Jewish perceptions throughout history. The argument that some antisemitic cliches enjoyed a limited plausibility is in itself neither wrong nor malicious, and historians have long recognized that certain of the antisemites' lurid= generalizations overlapped with a far more mundane social reality. It should be news to no one that Jews tended to be more urban, middle class, and commercial than their gentile counterparts, and that they figured prominently in the great social and cultural transformations of nineteenth and twentieth-century Europe. That Jews were thus to some degree "over-represented" in the arts and professions, in journalism and finance, and in liberal and leftist politics is inarguable. For many Europeans, especially those already disposed to anti-Jewish

prejudice and scapegoating, this alone was often enough to render plausible the malicious mythologies of Jewish control and conspiracy.

But this notion of plausibility is easily abused; at most it refers to the subjective realm of appearances, and is hardly to be confused with truth or veracity. Surely what passed for plausible in the antisemitic imagination was privileged by exceptionally low standards of proof, fed by a selective and capricious curiosity, and sustained by a chronic suspension of critical thinking. None of this is acknowledged by Lindemann's book, which is far more interested in ratifying the plausibility of antisemitic perceptions than in critically examining them. The result is a consistent indifference to the ways in which prejudice and ideology – and increasingly the organized activities of the antisemites themselves – framed and informed public perceptions.

When economic hardships mounted during the Great Depression of the latter nineteenth century, for example, "it was hardly surprising that those who were unhappy about these developments were inclined to denounce them as the fault of Jews" (p. 52). Wilhelm Marr's *The Victory of Jewry over Germandom* "struck a chord because of the economic difficulties and other tensions in German society, some of which were related to the rise of the Jews" (p. 60). We are given to understand the success of Karl Lueger's antisemitic politics in turn-of-the-century Vienna in supposedly self-evident terms: in this city, "where Jewish numbers had increased about thirty times since the early part of the century, and where the Rothschilds were a large, much-discussed presence, attacks on Jews were an irresistible political temptation" (p. 70).

Much the same approach disfigures the author's discussion of World War I and its aftermath. Lindemann rightly stresses the importance of this period in intensifying and radicalizing European antisemitism, pointing especially to the role of the Bolshevik revolution, and the failed revolutions in Central Europe during 1918/19, in setting the stage for the more hysterical and violent antisemitic ideas and movements that followed. All the more upsetting, then, that his account of these episodes is so misleading, speculative, and strangely apologetic.

In his discussion of the Russian revolution, for example, Lindemann claims that, although most Bolsheviks were not Jewish," the perception of a "peculiar connection" between Bolshevism and Jewishness gained credence due to the large numbers of "jewified non-Jews" – Lenin, Dzerzhinksy, and Kalinin are identified as such – in the Bolshevik government (pp. 80-2). Indeed, Lindemann maintains that "most Jewish revolutionaries themselves" believed in such a connection, though he does not tell us how he arrived at this remarkable conclusion; he certainly cannot be talking about Russia's Bundists or Zionists, who were heavily suppressed during the revolution's early years.

The point of this distorted interpretation, it seems, is somehow to render more plausible the fantasies and lies about "Jewish communism" that fueled so much rightist reaction in Europe after 1917. Indeed, Lindemann puts the brightest possible spin on this reaction, so that even the assassination of Walter Rathenau in 1922 is given an oddly sympathetic hearing. It was not so much "utter irrationality" that drove the German Right to its murderous hatred of Rathenau, but rather "his great wealth and many financial connections." Most of all, it was Rathenau's role in directing Germany's wartime economy that had gained him so many enemies: as Lindemann dutifully explains, among the large firms favored by his policies "were a disproportionate number led by Jews." Thus Rathenau and his high-placed Jewish friends came to be hated by "those Germans whose lives were ruined by the conflict" (p. 78).

There is so much wrong here one hardly knows where to begin. Suffice to say that, in passages such as these, Lindemann's professed aim, to examine "the interplay of fantasy and reality in antisemitism," collapses. Rathenau's killers were no garden variety populists, as Lindemann's bland interpolations imply. Their beliefs – and they do seem to have been true believers – embraced a wide range of fantasy and fabrication. As one of them declared at trial, Rathenau was "one of the three hundred Elders of Zion," and his policy of fulfilling the terms of the Versailles Treaty was dictated by international Jewry's predatory designs against the German nation.[2]

The killers also believed, among other things, that Rathenau's sister had married the Soviet agent Karl Radek –the kind of far-fetched, esoteric, and wholly spurious detail that was far from incidental to the teeming antisemitic milieu of the time. The manic absorption of Germany's outraged nationalists and rightists in piling on such dubious facts, their relentless "exposure" of the diabolical connections between Jews, Freemasons, Bolsheviks, and financiers, was in direct proportion to their furious denial that Germany had lost the war. This fateful connection, of antisemitic scapegoating and nationalist indignation, had not happened spontaneously. It was actively promoted by powerful antisemitic voices in and around Germany's elite – by the Pan-German League, for example, whose vice-president declared, in October

1918, that Jews would henceforth be made to serve as the "lightning rod for all the discontent of the masses." But none of this, running contrary as it does to Lindemann's thesis, seems to have attracted his interest.

Lindemann closes out his survey with a discussion of Adolf Hitler. He rightly stresses Hitler's historical singularity, and endorses the couplet, "No Hitler, no Holocaust." Yet he stretches this creditable proposition to excessive length, so that the wider angles of history are replaced with the narrow focus of biography. The net effect, especially given Lindemann's absorption in the mysteries of Hitler's pre-1919 career, is one of exaggerated ambiguity and uncertainty, by which the connections and continuities between Nazism and its antisemitic predecessors dissolve into clouds of vaporous speculation.

As to when and how Hitler developed his antisemitic world view, Lindemann holds that "much evidence points to the year 1919 itself, when Hitler, in despair over Germany's defeat, personally observed Communist revolutionaries in Bavaria, predominantly led by Jews" (89f.). The reference, of course, is to the short-lived Bavarian Soviet Republic of April 1919. Leaving aside the fact that the Republic's communist leaders were by no means "predominantly" Jewish, this assertion, if true, would seem to support Lindemann"s point that behind most antisemitic reactions – even Hitler's –lurked real events and plausible causes.[3] But in fact no evidence whatsoever links Hitler's antisemitic "conversion" to this episode.[4]

Lindemann is on more solid footing when he suggests that Hitler's early Munich career as beer hall firebrand impelled him onto a spiraling path of antisemitic extremism. But this explanation, entailing a reciprocal radicalization of speaker and audience, begs a number of questions, not least that of the audience itself. How is it that Bavaria, which before 1914 was in some respects less overtly antisemitic than many other German regions, became the vessel for such rabid and widespread anti-Jewish sentiment? The question is worth brief examination, if only because it points to sources and ends of antisemitic politics which have been given no place in Lindemann's conceptualization.[5]

It should be born in mind that, in November 1918, Bavaria had had a revolution, and that, in its initial phases, the revolutionary government, headed by the Independent Socialist Kurt Eisner, enjoyed considerable assent from a war-weary Bavarian populace, and sections of Bavaria's political class as well. Bavarian support for Eisner's experiment largely hinged upon his diplomatic bid to break away from the Prussian north in suing for a separate peace. This, it was widely believed, would gain Bavaria lenient treatment from the Allies. Even political leaders opposed to Eisner, such as the prominent Catholic politician Georg Heim, pursued a separatist diplomacy of their own, hoping thereby to gain special Allied consideration for Bavarian interests.

By late 1918, Bavaria's bid for a separate peace was in tatters, as the Allied stance against Germany hardened. The result was a progressive envenoming of Bavarian politics – and a sudden public interest in tracing the genealogy of the revolution's leaders. Already at the end of November, Heim was publicly rebuking Eisner for his foreign policy, speaking pointedly of the "corrosive Jewish spirit" behind Marxism, and exaggerating the Jewish character of Eisner's provisional regime.

By January, Heim and other right-of-center figures had begun shifting the blame for Bavaria's woes away from the war, and onto the revolution itself. The substitution was a crucial one, and would gain force through ceaseless repetition in political meetings and newspaper articles across Bavaria over the following year. The meaning of this substitution was lost on no one: if the war had been the fault of Germany's established elites, the revolution was the fault – as it became increasingly fashionable to claim – of "the Jews." For politicians such as Heim, who had long used anti-Jewish language in appealing to their constituents' sense of social victimization, placing Jews at the center of a new language of national victimization was an easy and natural step.

To construe Bavaria's escalating antisemitism over 1919 merely as an "interplay between fact and fantasy" a la Lindemann is to miss a critical point. Jewish participation in Bavaria's revolving revolutionary regimes may have enhanced the plausibility of some antisemitic perceptions. But the basic impulse, the overriding need, to vilify and blame the Jews came from somewhere else: the necessity of political leaders to abruptly disown an orphaned revolution, the desire of many of the revolution's initial supporters to break with the ambiguous legacy of their own actions, the need for Bavarians to quickly reinvent themselves – in the face of criticism over their failed separatist ventures – as unblemished German patriots. Whatever the dubious plausibility of their claims to have been victimized by Jewish revolutionary outsiders, the sharp rise in Bavarian antisemitism, and the headlong flight into anti-Jewish fantasy, was at its core deeply and self-servingly dishonest.

And it is this dishonesty, presenting itself through outright fabrications like the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* or the more subtle dynamics of collective denial and se-

lective amnesia, that so conspicuously runs through the history of antisemitism, and is so conspicuously lacking in Lindemann's book. But then the whole thrust of his argument, stressing as it does the eternal plausibility of antisemitic perception, has been to banish dishonesty and fabrication from the discussion. They should be brought back in.

What then of Lindemann's "remedies" for antisemitism? In his view, the only reason for non-Jews to oppose Jew-hatred is that they might consider the presence of Jews beneficial (pp. 11, 102). This attempt to reduce the argument against antisemitism to a sliding cost-benefit scale seems both mechanistic and uncharitable. Might it also be that people, Jewish and gentile alike, find antisemitism repugnant precisely because it is a vicious lie? And that people oppose antisemites because they try to play the majority for fools even as they subject a minority to persecution?

Pace Lindemann, antisemitism is not just about the Jews, and neither is the opposition to it.

Notes

[1]. Lindemann's injudicious evaluation of the historiography of antisemitism is well handled in Alan Steinweis's H-Antisemitism review of *Esau's Tears* from October 1997.

[2]. Martin Sabrow, *Der Rathenaumord: Rekonstruktion einer Verschwoerung gegen die Republik von Weimar* (Munich, 1994), here p. 114.

[3]. A few revolutionists of Jewish descent played a role in the affairs of the Soviet, or Council, Republic between April 13 and May 3, 1919: Eugen Levine, Towia Axelrod, and (less directly) the anarchist Ernst Toller. The charge that the Communist leader Max Levien was Jewish – widely circulated within Bavaria and in some scholarly literature for decades afterward – is in fact entirely without foundation. Nor was the commander of the "Red Army," Rudolf Egelhofer, whose force of several thousand desperate workers and soldiers was the Republic's main support, Jewish. To hold that this ragtag group be seen as "predominantly" Jewish is largely to recycle, however unwittingly, the mythology of the German right. On Levien, see Dirk Walter, *Antisemitische Kriminalitaet und Gewalt* (Bonn, 1999), p. 269, n. 10; on the role of Jews in the Munich events, see Werner Angress, "Juden im politischen Leben der Revolutionszeit," in Werner E. Mosse (ed.), *Deutsches Judentum in Krieg und Revolution 1916-1923* (Tuebingen, 1971), pp. 137-316, esp. 162, 242.

[4]. Lindemann's position appears based upon John Lukacs' ill-informed and wholly speculative arguments in *The Hitler of History* (New York, 1998), esp. p. 60. Cf. the more authoritative account of Hitler's activities during this period by Ian Kershaw, *Hitler. 1889-1936: Hubris* (New York, 1999), esp. pp. 109-125. In assessing the impact of anti-Bolshevism on Hitler's early antisemitism, it is worth noting that his first public speeches skirted that issue, focusing instead on the chimera of "Jewish capitalism" – the Jews as war profiteers, speculators, and racketeers, and so forth. See Eberhard Jaeckel and Axel Kuhn (eds.), *Hitler. Saemtliche Aufzeichnungen 1905-1924* (Stuttgart, 1980), p. 88ff.

[5]. The following draws upon Allan Mitchell, *Revolution in Bavaria 1918-1919. The Eisner Regime and the Soviet Republic* (Princeton, N.J., 1965), and Martin Geyer, _Verkehrte Welt. Revolution, Inflation und Moderne, Muenchen 1914-1924 (Goettingen, 1998).

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