Anti-Jewish Riots as Part of Modern Antisemitism in Germany

Scholars of German-Jewish history have long thought of anti-Jewish pogroms as being characteristic of, and mostly confined to, medieval Germany or Imperial Russia. Yet, this view marginalizes the significance of anti-Jewish violence in Germany in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which occurred with surprising regularity and involved different degrees of violence. Historians, who have so far mainly focused on the development of antisemitic theories and politics, have neglected to analyze how antisemitic ideas and violence against Jews were connected during the formative years of modern antisemitism in Germany. The editors of this collection of essays set themselves the task of closing the gap between the theory of antisemitism and actual antisemitic violence. Inspired by a session of the 1997 annual conference of the German Studies Association, it brings together several case studies. These range from the “Hep Hep” riots of 1819 to the November Pogroms in 1938, thus spanning a cross section of the different periods of modern German history. The first two studies, by Stefan Rohrbach and Manfred Gailus, focus on anti-Jewish violence before the establishment of a German nation state. Christhard Hoffmann and Helmut Walser Smith examine the series of anti-Jewish riots in West Prussia and Pomerania in Wilhelmine Germany, events that have often been ignored in the narrative of antisemitism in Germany. David Clay Large’s essay on the 1923 Scheunenviertel riots in Berlin provides an example from the Weimar Republic, while Wolfgang Benz looks at the Reichskristallnacht from the perspective of exclusionary violence. This collection of essays suggests convincingly that pogroms and anti-Jewish riots were part of modern antisemitism in Germany and not confined geographically to Russia or temporally to the Middle Ages.

The introduction to the volume, edited by Christhard Hoffmann, Werner Bergmann, and Helmut Walser Smith, points out similarities between pogroms in Russia and those in modern Germany. The different outbreaks of exclusionary violence in Germany were part of the wider phenomena of modern antisemitism. Anti-Jewish riots occurred all over modern Germany, in rural and urban areas, in Protestant regions as well as in Catholic ones. Anti-Jewish violence thus transcended the fragmented social and political landscape of Germany. Although the authors of the essays stress similarities between these anti-Jewish riots, they manage to avoid generalization. As the volume demonstrates, form and meaning of antisemitic violence varied and thus each event was unique. What becomes clear throughout the volume is that if scholars want to study the cause and nature of anti-Jewish violence, they have to examine, closely, the local context of each event. Contextualization is essential in understanding the different forms of antisemitism and how and to what extent it became acceptable as a political force in Germany.
The first case study, by Stefan Rohrbach, examines the first large-scale anti-Jewish riots in Germany after the Middle Ages, the "Hep Hep" riots of 1819. By noting the extent to which this violence was directed against local symbols of Jewish emancipation, Rohrbach highlights the exclusionary nature of the outbreak of violence and counters the argument, established by Eleonore Sterling, that the violence of 1819 was a result of social and economic crises. Instead, he agrees with Jacob Katz that the riots responded to a deeper Christian-Jewish conflict. Although Rohrbach describes the riots as heterogeneous, in his opinion they were first and foremost local manifestations of "violent politics" to counter Jewish emancipation and acculturation (p. 38). In contrast to Rohrbach, who dismisses the idea of any connection between a crisis and anti-Jewish riots, Manfred Gailus emphasizes the role of an unstable social and economic situation in his essay on the anti-Jewish riots surrounding the revolution of 1848. He shows how Christian Judeophobia and the breaking up of traditional identities influenced the outbreak of violence on a local level. Yet socioeconomic and political factors, such as economic competition for limited resources and the fear of civil equality for Jews, still dominate his interpretation of events. While Gailus stresses the "multidimensionality" of the riots, he also regards the outbreak of violence, first of all, as a result of the general crisis of the time (p. 64).

Christhard Hoffmann and Helmut Walser Smith focus on antisemitic riots at a time when Jews had already acquired legal equality (at least on paper) after the establishment of the German Empire in 1871. In 1881 and 1900, respectively, the Prussian East witnessed two of the most significant outbreaks of violence against Jews. First, Hoffmann looks at antisemitic violence that spilt over West Prussia and Pomerania in 1881. He sees multiple causes for these outbreaks of violence. Underlying social and economic tension was spurred on by inflammatory antisemitic propaganda, which was spread by quickly appearing agitators. This dangerous mixture of a perceived Jewish threat to German majority society was reinforced by misunderstood signals from a conservative government that accepted and cynically played with antisemitic notions. The riots initially started in Pomeranian Neustettin, but soon spread through the region in "concentric circles," resulting in extensive attacks on Jewish properties and isolated assaults on individuals (p. 82). To this event, which was described by contemporaries as the "Pomeranian Civil War," authorities reacted late. Only after calling in the military could it pacify the situation. However, relations between German Jews and their non-Jewish fellow citizens deteriorated significantly and tension in the region remained high. The riots of 1881 not only disturbed Jewish feelings of security in the newly-founded empire, they also made a deep effect on the antisemitic movement itself. As a result of the law-and-order defying violence, the movement split between moderate, politically conservative antisemites and radicals. In the long run this split helped to "domesticate" antisemitism in Germany (p. 91).

The fragility of Jewish/non-Jewish relations in the Prussian East is shown by the case of a blood libel and the resulting violence in the West Prussian town of Konitz. Helmut Walser Smith analyses how, in 1900, antisemitic ideology spread and violence developed in the wake of the brutal and unsolved murder of Ernst Winter. Similarities to the previous outbreak of violence in the region are obvious. Newspapers and antisemitic agitators fueled and spread the riots and the situation nearly turned revolutionary when rioters accused authorities of acting in the interest of Jews. Violence involved shouting of death threats against Jews, rock throwing, and isolated cases of physical abuse that culminated in the ransacking and attempted arson of the Konitz synagogue. Smith finds it significant that antisemitic violence transcended lines of religion and ethnicity, class and gender. Polish Catholics as well as German Protestants supported the riots. Educated Germans were prone to antisemitic rumors and denunciation, while local women stood by as young thugs assaulted the Jewish population. Smith convincingly applies the concept of exclusionary violence and shows how neighbors became strangers. He concludes "the violence of Konitz was an event that sharpened differences that shored up the line dividing 'we' from 'they' " (p. 122).

In his essay on the riots in Berlin’s Scheunenviertel during the 1923 hyperinflation, David Clay Large describes the events and their contemporary interpretation in the media. On November 5, 1923, a mob brutally attacked Jews, killing at least one and severely wounding others, and assaulted Jewish shops (or shops regarded as Jewish) in an area of Berlin where a visibly large population of eastern Jewish migrants were living. As in the previous cases, authorities reacted slowly, which contributed to the spread of violence. Unlike other scholars who see inevitable connections between the violence in the Scheunenviertel riots and Nazi violence after 1933, Large presents the riots in the broader context of the extreme political, economic, and social tension of Weimar Germany. Neither a simple expression of socioeconomic frustration nor just an orchestrated völkisch attack, the ri-
ots were caused by multiple factors. The extreme hyper-inflation combined with widespread antisemitism among authorities and the population, as well as a growing hysteria about eastern Jewish migration, fueled the attacks. While no direct line can be drawn to outbreaks of violence under the Nazi regime, Large highlights the readiness of many Germans (including the Left working class) to hold Jews responsible for the economic misery in Germany.

The contribution by Wolfgang Benz explores the participation of ordinary Germans in Reichskristallnacht, which differed essentially from all preceding riots. Initiated by the authorities, they marked the end of the constitutional state in Germany. In general, Benz does not see any connection with the exclusionary riots in the other case studies. He concludes that the majority of Germans silently disapproved of open violence against Jews or destruction of synagogues. Yet, he fails to prove convincingly why that should imply a general rejection by the population of the antisemitic measures implemented by the Nazi party. Even if ordinary Germans rejected the means of the November Pogrom, this does not mean that they did not harbor antisemitic views. Richard S. Levy’s summary of the case studies and Werner Bergmann’s theoretical essay close the volume. Levy stresses that anti-Jewish mass violence was common in modern Germany. While violence did not necessarily lead directly to the Holocaust, it did affect and ultimately change the relationship between the Christian majority and the Jewish minority.

The volume offers an excellent overview of exclusionary violence and its developments from the early nineteenth century through to the rise of Nazi Germany. While trying to examine similarities between various anti-Jewish riots in modern Germany, the contributors are very careful to stress the uniqueness of each event. Instead of forcing different events into an overly rigid theoretical framework, the volume demonstrates the varied forms and meanings of antisemitic violence. Yet some questions remain open. While the authors point out the different levels of violence, another question about violence arises: at what point did symbolic violence against objects change to actual violence against individuals? Did particular factors restrain or facilitate the implementation of threats against life in physical assault or even murder? The quality of the articles differs considerably. In particular, the essays on antisemitic riots in imperial Germany follow a convincing narrative and offer new approaches for the study of emerging antisemitism in Germany. Other articles continue to use older interpretations of antisemitism, seeing it as a cultural code or sign of a general crisis.

Nonetheless, this volume makes a significant contribution to our understanding of antisemitism in modern Germany and will certainly appeal to students of the subject. The case studies expose a persistence of antisemitic beliefs in the population and a certain readiness to blame Jews for social, political, and economic problems. Moreover, the volume shows that exclusionary violence was part of modern antisemitism in Germany and that anti-Jewish riots were more common to pre-Nazi modern Germany than usually assumed. Antisemitic violence not only affected Jewish/non-Jewish relations but also influenced the development of the antisemitic movement in Germany.

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