



Werner Bergmann, Ulrich Sieg, eds. *Antisemitische Geschichtsbilder*. Essen: Klartext Verlag, 2009. 264 pp. EUR 24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-3-8375-0114-8.

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Antisemitic Interpretations of History in Germany

As part of a series on the history and structure of antisemitism issued by the Center for Research on Antisemitism at the Technical University in Berlin, *Antisemitische Geschichtsbilder* is a volume of twelve essays that covers familiar ground on one of the most heavily researched topics in history.[1] The specific focus of this book is on nine leading nineteenth- and twentieth-century German publicists, whose antisemitism was based primarily on their interpretation of history. The editors deliberately excluded figures such as Arthur Schopenhauer, Richard Wagner, or Eugen Dühring, who based their arguments primarily on philosophy rather than history. Although historical works were among the best-selling antisemitic works in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the scholarly investigation of this particular genre has been neglected, according to the editors. This volume seeks to remedy that omission. All nine protagonists of this book sought to justify their antisemitism by positing a historical struggle between “Semites” and “Aryans” (or “Jewry” and “Germandom”) that modern Germans were bound to lose unless they changed their policies to meet the alleged threat. While all the publicists treated here agreed that the influence of “the Jews” on German society was pernicious, they arrived at their conclusions by sometimes quite divergent and even contradictory arguments.

It is not altogether clear, however, that this volume offers anything that is significantly new. What it does offer is a crisp, clear, succinct, easy-to-follow, carefully crafted summary of each of these publicists’ careers, the

forces and influences that formed them, and their motivations, purposes, and reception. The book therefore represents a very useful digest of the most recent biographical scholarship on these notorious antisemites, while incorporating some of the older research and occasionally revising earlier conclusions. It also usefully addresses the question of how antisemitic stereotypes were mediated and transmitted to the public in imperial Germany through the popular press, family newspapers, humor magazines, comic strips, caricatures, increasing numbers of books and bookstores, and, in the late nineteenth century, the growing use of picture postcards, which could for the first time be sent legally through the mails in 1885. Much popular antisemitism spread through visual stereotypes disseminated on beer mats and mugs, in calendars, on ceramic figures, and in other seemingly innocuous ways.

For all their differences in detail, the one ideological commitment that these antisemitic publicists seemed to share was their hostility toward modern liberalism, in both its political and economic forms. This book corroborates the classic study by Peter Pulzer, which attributed the rise of political antisemitism in Germany and Austria in the nineteenth century primarily to the opposition to the emancipatory liberal and democratic forces generated by the Enlightenment, and the revolutionary movements of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.[2] For the early generation of antisemites, represented here by Constantin Frantz (1817-91) in an essay by Michael Dreyer, this meant opposition to nationalism as

well, particularly in its National Liberal version. Frantz differed markedly from later antisemites in his detestation of Bismarck, Prussia, and the centralized German Reich. Paradoxically he rejected the nationalism of the newly united Reich because it was too liberal for his taste.

The key role played by Wilhelm Marr (1819-1904) in the origins of organized antisemitism in the *Kaiserreich* in the late 1870s has long been known and is here revisited by Werner Bergmann, who rightly stresses the importance of frustrated revolutionary idealism in Marr's 180-degree turn from ardent radical in 1848 to fatalistic counterrevolutionary in the period of political retrenchment that followed. To him, as to Frantz, the united German Reich was a "Jewish creation" designed to create the conditions for Jewish economic and cultural dominance. Marr, however, did not call for a reversal of Jewish emancipation, but instead for the full absorption of Jews on the model of the United States, preferably through mixed marriages. His insistence that Jewishness was a matter of race, not religion, was mainly intended to deflect accusations of religious bigotry.

Ulrich Wyrwa traces the surprisingly sudden appearance of antisemitism in the historical work of Heinrich von Treitschke (1834-96) as he transmuted from a Prussian liberal in the 1860s to a conservative and authoritarian nationalist in the 1880s. Treitschke expressed no antisemitism at all in the first volume of his five-volume *German History in the Nineteenth Century* (1879-94), covering the period up to 1815. Instead, he praised the Prussian Emancipation Decree of 1812 and criticized the reversal of Jewish emancipation in some German states after 1815. His change of attitude came in volume 2, published in 1882, beginning with the period after 1815. He then defended the antisemitism of the German *Burschenschaften* in the Napoleonic era. The Berlin *Antisemitismusstreit*, initiated in 1880 by Treitschke's pronouncement, "Die Juden sind unser Unglück," marked the crucial turning point. In volume 3, published in 1885 and ending with the July Revolution, Treitschke attacked Jewish writers and journalists for "Besudelung deutschen Wesens." In volume 4, published in 1889, he excoriated "das Eindringen des französischen Liberalismus," and unleashed a flood of invective against "das vaterlandslose Judentum." In the last volume, published in 1894, he described the German press as dominated by Jews and spoke of the seditious influence of the "Jewish golden and red international."

For Paul de Lagarde (1827-91), too, treated here in an essay by Ulrich Sieg, Jewish-borne liberalism ("the gray international") represented the greatest danger to the

newly united Reich, its monarchical institutions, and its religion. In one important respect Sieg revises the familiar portrait drawn by Fritz Stern: Lagarde was never the self-styled maverick and outsider that he himself claimed to be.[3] Far from being "totgeschwiegen," he had numerous followers and was widely read. Like Frantz, Marr, and Treitschke, Lagarde demanded the surrender of a Jewish collective identity in Germany, proposing as early as 1885 that Jews form their own state in Palestine or Madagascar. He was critical of the organized Christian churches as well for supposedly blocking the formation of a fundamentalist Christian German national religion.

According to Johannes Heinszen, there was nothing innovative at all about Julius Langbehn's (1851-1907) best-selling *Rembrandt als Erzieher* (1890), except for what Heinszen describes as the typically modern "charismatic" form of the book, renouncing conventional syntax and linear arguments in favor of free associations and analogies that made readers feel as if the author were addressing them personally with deeply intuitive truths. Langbehn was commercially astute, apparently adding antisemitic passages only to later editions to expand its appeal to a right-wing readership. His ideological premises remained well within the conventional parameters of the growing backlash against liberalism.

Houston Stewart Chamberlain's (1855-1927) blockbuster *Foundations of the Nineteenth Century* (1899-1900), subjected to critical analysis here by Anja Lobenstein-Reichwein, also added a new dimension of virulence to the racialist interpretation of history. In none of the other antisemitic books discussed in this volume is the instrumentalization of history for racist purposes so clearly demonstrated. Yet Chamberlain's shoddy pseudo-scholarly methods in no way diminished his appeal to Germany's conservative *Bildungsbürgertum*, to whose prejudices his book was expressly tailored. Today it is very difficult to understand how Chamberlain's far-fetched and long-winded construction of Jesus as "Aryan" could ever have been taken seriously. Chamberlain never wrote the third volume he had projected on the detested nineteenth century itself. Perhaps he came to realize that his distaste for the "century of progress" was too obvious to sustain his credibility as impartial historian.

Theodor Fritsch (1852-1933), discussed here by Elisabeth Albanis, was more a marketer of antisemitism than the author of original ideas. He deliberately set out to spread antisemitic information as widely as he could among the German public. He is the main representa-

tive in this volume of what its editors call “practical antisemitism,” whose main concern was not the generation of antisemitic ideas, but their dissemination through organizations, publications, meetings, and lectures. At the same time his career marked another stage in the escalation of antisemitism from counterrevolutionary conservatism to the future-oriented radicalism of the Nazis: unlike his predecessors, he feared Jews less for their threat to the traditional order than for their alleged function as opponents of German national renewal in the twentieth century.

A similar process of radicalization marked the career of Heinrich Class (1868-1953), head of the Pan-German League, author of *Deutsche Geschichte* under the pseudonym Einhart, and the subject of Rainer Hering’s essay. For this later generation of antisemites it was no longer the state but the *Volk* that was central to their concerns. Unlike the earlier protagonists of this volume, neither Fritsch nor Class wanted to go back to pre-emancipatory times. Instead, they wished to wrest control of modernity from what they increasingly saw as a conscious Jewish conspiracy to exercise dominance over European culture, economy, and politics. Class’s biography, in particular, throws into relief the crucial transition marked by the First World War. While the *Alldeutsche Blätter* were still censored by the military command for the sake of unity at the beginning of the war, by the end of the war, Class was openly blaming the “Jewish press” for the German defeat.

This chronicle of escalating radicalization is appropriately capped off with a mini-biography by Miroslav Szabó of the Nazi ideological czar Alfred Rosenberg (1893-1946). In Rosenberg’s ideology, the symbiotic relationship between the long-running counterrevolutionary backlash against political movements of the Left and the growth of modern antisemitism is perhaps most dramatically clear. Rosenberg virtually identified Bolshevism with Jewishness and fantasized that Jewish capitalists financed the Bolshevik revolution to enhance Jewish power. Szabó also shows how wrong it is to label Rosenberg a “neo-pagan,” as so many Christian apologetic studies have done in the past.[4] Rosenberg was a radical Protestant very much in the tradition of Johann Gottlob Fichte’s hyper-nationalist conception of the *Gott-Menschentum* of individual German Christians and the German people. His opposition to any internationalism or humanitarianism in religion was the source of his fierce anti-Catholicism and anti-clericalism. To Rosenberg the “orientalization” (read Judaization) of the Catholic Church had introduced the debilitating el-

ement of sacrificial humility into Christianity and rendered it useless as a nationalist fighting creed. Only consciousness of the *Gottgleichheit* and *Gottähnlichkeit* of the human soul—manifested by the Christian belief in immortality—could foster the heroic traits needed for national deliverance and regeneration.

These essays are all based on the assumption of antisemitic agency: these publicists did not just reflect antisemitism, they helped to create it. By the nature of things, such intellectual causation is difficult to demonstrate, but the authors make a persuasive case. In other ways the conclusions of this volume reinforce certain staples of the present historical consensus. Modern antisemitism, while perpetuating stereotypes inherited from the Christian era, was crucially a product of the clashing political perspectives that arose from the French Revolutionary era. Emancipated Jews were everywhere perceived as the agents (and beneficiaries) of modernization, and the intensity of antisemitism usually depended directly on whether the commentator in question judged the effects of modernization (especially liberalization, democratization, industrialization, and commercialization) to be benign or harmful. The enemy to combat was not the Orthodox religious Jew of the ghetto or the Jewish religious community, but modern secular Jews who no longer practiced their religion and ventured to make places for themselves in German society. The authors of this volume also agree on the crucial importance of the late 1870s for the genesis of organized antisemitism in Germany, the equal importance of the “New Right” of the Wilhelminian 1890s for its organizational spread, and the absolutely decisive role played by the *Kriegsjugendgeneration* of the First World War in its culmination in fanatical National Socialism. While the authors of this volume certainly view antisemitism as a necessary condition of the Holocaust, they are, on balance, quite skeptical of Daniel Goldhagen’s thesis that it was a sufficient condition. The political context in which antisemitism developed was ultimately the major factor in determining the virulence of its effects.

Notes

[1]. See Reinhard Rürup, “Der modern Antisemitismus und die Entwicklung der historischen Antisemitismusforschung,” in Werner Bergmann and Mona Körte, eds., *Antisemitismusforschung in den Wissenschaften* (Berlin: Metropol, 2004), 117-135.

[2]. Peter Pulzer, *The Rise of Political Anti-Semitism in Germany and Austria* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

- [3]. Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of Germanic Ideology* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1965). Richard Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), and "Rethinking Nazism and Religion: How Anti-Christian were the 'Pagans'?" *Central European History* 36 (2003): 75-105.
- [4]. For an excellent discussion of this issue, see

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