

JEWES AND MODERNITY: BEYOND THE NATION

Conference at the Centrum Judaicum (Stiftung Neue Synagoge Berlin) and the Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften, May 2–3, 2006. Jointly organized by the GHI, the University of Toronto, the Simon Dubnow Institute (University of Leipzig), and the University of Southampton. Conveners: Tobias Brinkmann (University of Southampton), Dan Diner (Simon Dubnow Institute, Leipzig and Hebrew University, Jerusalem), Simone Lässig (GHI), and Derek Penslar (University of Toronto).

Participants: Nicholas Berg (Simon Dubnow Institute, Leipzig), Michal Bodemann (University of Toronto), Abigail Green (Brasenose College, Oxford University), Katharina Hoba (University of Potsdam), Rebecca Kobrin (New York University), Anna Lipphardt (University of Potsdam), Michael Miller (Central European University, Budapest), David Rechter (St. Anthony's College, Oxford University), Nils Roemer (University of Southampton), Reinhard Rürup (Technical University, Berlin), Joachim Schloer (University of Potsdam), Jonathan Skolnik (GHI), Adam Sutcliffe (King's College, University of London), Scott Ury (University of Toronto and Hebrew University, Jerusalem), Stephan Wendehorst (Simon Dubnow Institute, Leipzig).

Calls for papers often announce that a given conference intends to inspire new paradigms for research in a field, but rarely do they measure up to these grand claims. This two-day conference in Berlin was a wonderful exception. The conference conveners issued a hefty challenge to participants: to approach modern Jewish history outside of the confines of the "national history model" (British-Jewish, French-Jewish, German-Jewish, etc.), which has structured most scholarship on Jews in the modern era. Naturally, there are compelling reasons for the national history paradigm in modern Jewish history; the fact that the political history of Jewish emancipation and the cultural/linguistic integration of Jews largely proceeded within the boundaries of emerging nation-states will continue to influence even those historians whose work is informed by transnational or diasporic approaches. Nonetheless, it was refreshing to see how the scholars of modern Jewish history who assembled in Berlin, all of whom are rooted in one or another national tradition (though some are seasoned comparatists), tried to respond to the questions suggested by the conveners.

The conference opened in the meeting room of Berlin's Neue Synagoge in the Oranienburgerstrasse, at a round table under the Moorish-style temple's famous gilded cupola. The suggestive ambiance of the historic conference site prompted many speakers to reflect upon the omnipresence of the German-Jewish model of modernization in Jewish historiography, and the present question of its continued value as a point of reference for scholars seeking to look beyond the national paradigm. Derek Penslar's paper plunged the conference directly into the heart of the matter, as he outlined his plans for a sweeping transnational investigation of the Jewish experience of warfare in modern Europe. Penslar hypothesized about what patterns may be revealed by a cross-border study of both the embrace and the avoidance of military service by modern Jews, and he detailed the complex difficulties of contextualizing his material. Jonathan Skolnik's paper serendipitously discussed a concrete example of this problematic. Focusing on a historical novel set in Alsace-Lorraine during the Napoleonic Wars, but written on the eve of the Franco-Prussian war of 1870–71, Skolnik examined how this French-language novel by the non-Jewish writers Erckmann-Chatrian came to be translated into German by a German-Jewish publisher with an integrationist/German-patriotic ideology. Skolnik illustrated how such a novel highlights both the intersections and disjunctures of national, regional, and minority historical narratives.

The next panel demonstrated the wide temporal, geographic, and cultural possibilities of a historiography of Jews in modernity uncoupled from national history. With reference to Paul Gilroy's groundbreaking work on the "Black Atlantic," Adam Sutcliffe focused on Sephardic Jews in the early modern "Jewish Atlantic" to show the intricate and fluid identities formed at the intersection of commerce, race, religion, language, power, and persecution. Abigail Green used the case of a biographical study of a central figure in nineteenth-century Jewish politics, Sir Moses Montefiore, to illustrate the simultaneity of the non-contemporaneous (as Ernst Bloch called it): a modern international politics that negotiated minority interests within national and imperial structures and conflicts; "pre-modern" family and commercial networks; and diverse Jewish communities whose local interests combined and clashed in complex ways with national and transnational affiliations.

The first day's afternoon panel focused on migration in different historical periods. Tobias Brinkmann provided rich perspectives on Jewish migrants from Eastern Europe in Berlin after 1918. Although, as Brinkmann reminded the conference, there was much truth in Joseph Roth's characterization of Berlin as a "gloomy waiting room" for migrants who "came to go" (mainly to North America or South Africa), Eastern Jews who settled in Berlin were not face-to-face with a monolithic "old estab-

lished" Jewish milieu, but instead took their place in a very dynamic and rapidly changing Jewish community that was itself composed largely of migrants. Brinkmann demonstrated that in this context, "East" and "West" were as much temporal as geographic terms. The joint presentation by Katharina Hoba and Joachim Schloer expanded upon this dynamism, flux, and instability; as they sought to register images of Berlin among Israelis of German-Jewish origin, Hoba and Schloer found "Jewish Berlin" to be more of a relation than an actual space. Michal Bodemann rounded out this theme with a close examination of transnationalism in the context of the German-Jewish community since 1989, a community of Holocaust survivors, refugees, remigrants, and migrants that has more than tripled over the last seventeen years due to an influx of Jews from the former Soviet Union.

Dan Diner's keynote lecture addressed some of the fundamental concepts of political theory that form the basis for a deeper understanding of Jews, the nation, and modernity. Centering his reflections on the thought of Hannah Arendt, Diner argued that it would be wrong to apply traditional political categories to the Jews. Drawing on examples such as Ben-Gurion's reaction to the persecution of the Jews in Europe in the late 1930s, Diner showed clearly that neither the integration of Jews into the various European nation-states nor Zionism's creation of a Jewish state completely secularized Judaism. Diner thus implied that modern Jewish politics can never be fully explained within the "national paradigm."

The second day's panels continued the productive alternation between the local and the transnational. Stephan Wendehorst addressed the "blank" in Jewish historiography represented by the Holy Roman Empire, exploring the local foundations of imperial interventions and how the uneven distribution of "imperial macrospace" shaped the Jewish world right up to the doorstep of the nineteenth century. Michael Miller's study of Bohemian Jewry before and after 1918 emphasized the role of the state as opposed to the nation, illustrating Jewish relations to the supranational state amidst political turmoil. David Rechter, by contrast, focused on the newer Habsburg province of the Bukovina to show the emergence of a three-dimensional Jewish identity, at once regional, imperial, and ethnic-national.

The meaning of urban centers for complex diaspora cultures was explored from a number of angles. Simone Lässig pointed to the strong Jewish role in nineteenth-century German municipal politics as the fruit of successful embourgeoisement. Scott Ury, on the other hand, concentrated on letters and memoirs to demonstrate the alienation and sense of dislocation that accompanied the dramatic "internal" migration that fueled the growth of Jewish Warsaw. Rebecca Kobrin and Anna Lipphardt explored the compounded diasporic identities of dispersed Jews from

Eastern European cities: Bialystok Jews in New York before the Holocaust and the remnants of Vilna Jewry in the four corners of the earth after their community's near-total annihilation.

Finally, Nils Roemer and Nicolas Berg presented complementary analyses of semantic registers of identity shifts. Berg offered a very literary exploration of the image of the *Luftmensch* and fin-de-siècle notions of *Heimat* and deracination. Roemer, on the other hand, explored national and local historiography by nineteenth-century Jewish historians in order to investigate if (and if so, when) "Germany" displaced "Ashkenaz" as a unifying reference. The various meanings that historians such as Jost, Geiger, and Lazarus invested in terms like *Volk* or *Nation* was another important focus of his paper.

Conferences organized around such far-reaching themes cannot expect to reach neat conclusions after only two days. Yet the concluding discussion brought several points into focus. On the one hand, it was clear to Derek Penslar that modern Jewish history has moved beyond the point of merely rejecting Zionist historiography. As Dan Diner noted, the tendency of many of the conference papers to expand outward from a local or regional focus is promising, and he singled out Jonathan Frankel's recent study of 1840 in the Jewish world as an example: a focus on a specific local event (the Damascus blood libel) that had international resonance, yet was also "beyond time" in its mythological pre-history and its anticipation of modern propaganda.

Jonathan Skolnik