

The background features abstract geometric shapes in shades of blue and grey. A large, dark blue triangle points downwards from the top left. A lighter blue triangle points upwards from the bottom left. The remaining space is white.

**Forum:
Antisemitism
And
Sexualities**



Antisemitism and Sexualities: Introduction

Anna-Carolin Augustin, Sebastian Bischoff,
Kristoff Kerl

Antisemitism and sexualities have developed a bond. For centuries, fantasies about Jews as sexually abnormal, dangerous, or using sexuality as a weapon have been part of judeophobic and antisemitic discourses. This aspect of antisemitism is also referred to as “sexual antisemitism.” While elements of these antisemitic ideas and images can be traced back to medieval Christian Judeophobia, sexual antisemitism has reinvented itself time and again and is still very much alive today.¹

¹ See among others: Monica Cornejo-Valle and Jennifer Ramme, “‘We Don’t Want Rainbow Terror’: Religious and Far-Right Sexual Politics in Poland and Spain,” in *Paradoxical Right-Wing Sexual Politics in Europe*, ed. Cornelia Möser, Jennifer Ramme, and Judit Takács (Cham, 2022), 32; Kristoff Kerl, “Oppression by Orgasm: Pornography and Antisemitism in

Far-Right Discourses in the United States since the 1970s,” *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 39 (2020); Kristoff Kerl, Sebastian Bischoff, and Anna-Carolin Augustin, “Pornografie, Sexualität und Antisemitismus: Extrem rechte Traditionslinien des Sexualantisemitismus in den USA,” *Zeitschrift für Sexualforschung* 37 (2024), forthcoming. On the role that

Catholicism has played in the context of sexual antisemitism in Poland during the last years and decades, but also in other countries such as the United States and Germany see: Agnieszka Graff, “Jewish Perversion as Strategy of Domination: The anti-Semitic Subtext of Anti-Gender Discourse,” *Journal of Modern European History* 20 (2022): 423-439.

Bulletin of the German Historical Institute 73 (Spring 2024): 87–98
© Anna-Carolin Augustin et al. | ISSN 1048-9134
CC BY-SA 4.0

Illustrations included in this article are not covered by this license.

2 Susannah Heschel, "Antisemitism as Cultural Sadism: An Erotohistorical Approach," in: *Grasping Emotions: Approaches to Emotions in Interreligious and Interdisciplinary Discourse* (Religiöse Positionierungen in Judentum, Christentum und Islam), ed. Ute E. Eisen, Heidrun Mader, and Melanie Peetz (Berlin, 2024), 51–75, 56.

3 In Germany, a song played at several rallies against the measures to contain the corona pandemic, for instance, bluntly linked antisemitism and sexuality. RIAS Bayern: "das muss man auch mal ganz klar benennen dürfen". Verschwörungsdenken und Antisemitismus im Kontext von Corona, https://reportantisemitism.de/documents/RIAS_Bayern_Monitoring_Verschwoerungsdenken_und_Antisemitismus_im_Kontext_von_Corona.pdf (Accessed June 5, 2023). Well-known among QAnon anti-vaxxers in the U.S., this narrative was popularized in Germany by the famous soul and R&B singer Xavier Naidoo.

Current antisemitic conspiracy narratives blame Jews for promoting LGBTQI+ rights, pornography, interracial sexuality, and therefore allegedly "perverting" the "social fabric of gender and sexual norms."² Antisemitic ideas focusing on sexuality also flourished among coronavirus deniers and anti-vaccination activists during the pandemic, denigrating the vaccine as a Jewish-made means of sterilization to control the world population, and sometimes even randomly combining this with the antisemitic trope of sexually deviant Jews who prey on children by highlighting the Jewish sex offender Epstein as a representative of Jewry.³ Closely related to allegations of sexual abuse of children, this contemporary sexual-antisemitic fantasy is easily unmasked as an incarnation of the centuries-old Judeophobic blood libel.⁴

Today's antisemites do not only use historical images and tropes such as the blood libel to construct supposedly new antisemitic narratives, but they also deploy a certain kind of memory politics to keep alive historical debates that were framed in antisemitic terms. An example of this is the case of Leo Frank, a young Jew accused of sexual abuse and murder, who was put on trial in Atlanta, Georgia, between 1913 and 1915. During the trial, which resulted in the lynching of the accused, constructions of racialized sexualities were of major importance. While notions of racialized sexuality constructed African American men as "wild," "natural," and "uncivilized"—creating a fantasy of the "Black rapist" that fueled racist furor and caused thousands of lynchings of African American men in the United States in the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century—Jewish sexual morals, practices, and desires were imaged to be "perverted" and the

4 According to the blood libel, Jews kidnapped and killed Christian children for ritualistic purposes.

This Judeophobic fantasy can be traced back to the 12th century, at least. See Magda Teter, *Blood*

Libel: On the Trail of an Antisemitic Myth (Cambridge, MA, 2020).

result of “over-civilization.”⁵ Nowadays, Leo Frank, or rather the antisemitic construction of Frank as a “sex killer” is part of contemporary antisemitic memory politics. Antisemites in the United States but also in other countries such as Germany still draw on the case in order to show, firstly, Jews’ alleged social power and, secondly, their allegedly deviant and threatening sexuality.⁶

Sexuality, gender, and antisemitism are not only connected in the world of ideas, but also in sexualized violence inflicted on Jewish people. Conceptualizing antisemitism as “cultural sadism,” Susannah Heschel describes “the essence, goal, and purpose of antisemitic violence” as rape. According to Heschel, rape is “the climax of pogroms by combining sexuality, violence, and intimacy in a unique form of sadistic violence against the body and the soul. Moreover, mass-perpetrator rape is an attack against women, against Judaism as a religion, and against the Jewish future.”⁷ Even though Heschel’s article, as well as the following essays in this forum were written before the caesura of October 7, the “conflict-related sexual violence [that] occurred during the 7 October attacks in multiple locations”⁸ should give us cause for future reflection in

5 On antisemitism, gender, and sexuality in the Leo Frank case see among others: Sarah Imhoff, *Masculinity and the Making of American Judaism* (Bloomington, IN, 2017), 225–243; Kristoff Kerl, *Männlichkeit und moderner Antisemitismus: Eine Genealogie des Leo Frank-Cases, 1860er-1920er* (Köln, 2017); Nancy MacLean, “The Leo Frank Case Reconsidered: Gender and Sexual Politics in the Making of Reactionary Populism,” *Journal of American History* 78 (1991): 917–948; Jeffrey Melnick, *Black-Jewish Relations on Trial: Leo Frank and Jim Conley in the New South* (Jackson, MS, 2000), 47–87.

6 On antisemitic memory politics regarding the Leo Frank case, see e.g. Chris Rossetti, “Leo Frank Is Guilty, and More and More People Know It,” *National Vanguard*, April 26, 2022, <https://nationalvanguard.org/2022/04/leo-frank-is-guilty-and-more-and-more-people-know-it> (accessed June 5, 2023); Philip St. Raymond, “Mary Phagan’s Family Opposes Exoneration of Sex Killer Leo Frank,” *The American Mercury*, July 17, 2021, <https://theamericanmercury.org/2021/07/mary>

-phagans-family -opposes-exoneration -of-sex-killer-leo-frank (accessed June 5, 2023). On references to the Leo Frank case in Germany see, for instance, the comments related to the article “Golden Globes 2018: Es geht nichts über Titten, um gegen sexuelle Belästigung zu protestieren” (<https://morgenwacht.wordpress.com/2018/01/12/golden-globes-2018-es-geht-nichts-ueber-titten-um-gegen-sexuelle-belaestigung-zu-protestieren/>), last access on February 22, 2024).

7 Heschel, “Antisemitism as Cultural Sadism,” 66.

8 The extent and systematic nature of sexual violence in the context of October 7 is controversial, highly politicized and difficult to prove due to a lack of forensic and documentary evidence. However, the UN report from February 2024 sees reasonable grounds to believe that sexual violence occurred during the Hamas-led incursion into Israel, including rape and gang rape in at least three locations. See Office of the

Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, “Mission Report: Official Visit of the Office of the SRSG-SVC to Israel and the Occupied West Bank, 29 January – 14 February 2024,” <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/report/mission-report-official-visit-of-the-office-of-the-srsg-svc-to-israel-and-the-occupied-west-bank-29-january-14-february-2024/20240304-Israel-oWB-CRSV-report.pdf>

9 A small but growing group in the United States, for instance, “denies the basic facts of the attacks, pushing a spectrum of falsehoods and misleading narratives that minimize the violence or dispute its origins.” See Elizabeth Dwoskin, “Growing Oct. 7 ‘Truther’ Groups Say Hamas Massacre Was a False Flag,” *Washington Post*, January 21, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2024/01/21/hamas-attack-october-7-conspiracy-israel/>. This also applies to the sexual atrocities that were committed. The way numerous international human rights groups dealt with the sexualized violence of October 7, 2023 was characterized not by denial, but by long hesitation. It took UN Women, the United Nations’ women’s rights agency, and other institutions months to address and condemn the gender-based atrocities – a silence and lack of solidarity that has since sparked the protest of “Me too unless you are a Jew” activists.

this context. Sexual violence is regularly weaponized in armed conflict. In fact, we can witness this tragically enough nowadays in Sudan, Ethiopia, Ukraine, or Haiti, to name just a few places. The horrifying nature of sexual violence is not unique to one place or ethnic group. Yet viewed from the perspective of Jewish history and the history of antisemitism, one can ask whether sexual violence committed against Jews and its later (non-)reception is linked to specific historical forms of sexual antisemitism, which are the topic of this forum.⁹

This forum brings together three essays by researchers who have been working on the topic for many decades. Originally, the following texts were contributions to the conference “Antisemitism and Sexualities Reconsidered.”¹⁰ These essays are not intended as reflections on current developments nor do they provide a comprehensive survey of the study of antisemitism and sexualities. They do, however, offer incisive thoughts and reflections on the history of sexual antisemitism that may help us to better understand events and debates today. With this forum we aim to deepen our knowledge of the historical connections between antisemitism and sexualities and thus to stimulate academic engagement with a subject that is, unfortunately, once again very relevant.

This forum offers new perspectives on the historical chronology of sexual antisemitism as well as its ability to bond with other categories of social hierarchization, such as gender and disability. Both perspectives provide a more nuanced understanding of the subject and new insights on the way Jew-hatred was constructed and changed over the course of history up to today.

10 The conference was organized by Anna-Carolin Augustin, Sebastian Bischoff, Kristoff Kerl, and Stefanie Schüler-

Springorum. It was funded by the GHI Washington, the Zentrum für Antisemitismusforschung, Berlin, and the DFG. See the

conference report by Laszlo Strzoda in the *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute* 70 (Fall 2022): 107–113.

The notion that Jews' sexualities constitute a threat to non-Jewish subjects and communities has been part of Judeophobic discourses since ancient times, when sexuality already played an important role in conflicts between Jews and Gentiles. The Roman historian Tacitus considered Jews to be "prone to lust" and open to "immoral" sexual practices.¹¹ Early Christians used depictions of Jews' sexuality as a means to mark and stabilize the still fluid boundaries between Christianity and Judaism. By the fourth century, the description of Jews as "carnal, sexual deviants had become a topos in early Christian texts."¹² Leading Christians such as the archbishop of Constantinople, John Chrysostom, or Augustine accused Jews of being lascivious and immodest, and depicted synagogues as places of sexual immorality by.¹³ However, Susanna Drake's research on sexualized representations of Jews in early Christian texts shows that other religious groups were depicted the same way: "Christian writers portrayed these Others, alternately, as sexually aggressive or vulnerable. Their men were too feminine, their women too masculine, their bodies too wild, their morals too loose. The creation of an orthodox Christian attitude toward the body thus coincided with the construction of an abject 'heretical' sexuality."¹⁴ Furthermore, it is important to note that in Antiquity Jews used the same sexual stereotypes and slander to describe Gentiles and to distinguish Jewish subjectivity "as superior to Gentile identity."¹⁵ Against this backdrop, it is plausible to assume that notions of a particular Jewish type of sexuality did not yet exist in Antiquity.

During the European Middle Ages, some transformations in Judeophobic politics of sexuality took place. Sexuality continued to mark the inter-community borders, but the practices of protecting these borders changed, at least since the thirteenth century, as Stefanie Schüler-Springorum argues in her essay in this forum. After the 4th Lateran Council of 1215 Jews and Muslims were obliged to wear particular clothes to mark their Otherness and to prevent any sexual contacts that would

11 Susanna Drake, *Slandering the Jew: Sexuality and Difference in Early Christian Texts* (Philadelphia, 2013), 13-4.

12 Drake, *Slandering*, 2.

13 Drake, *Slandering*, 2; Walter Laqueur, *Gesichter des Antisemitismus: Von den Anfängen bis heute* (Berlin, 2008), 62.

14 Drake, *Slandering*, 3.

15 Drake, *Slandering*, 13.

16 See Stefanie Schüler-Springorum, "The Dark Side of Modernity? Rethinking Antisemitism and Sexuality," in this *Bulletin* issue.

17 Kerstin Mayerhofer, "Von menstruierenden Männern und zügellosen Frauen: Sexualität und Geschlecht im mittelalterlichen Antisemitismus," *Jahrbuch für Antisemitismusforschung* 31 (2022): 108-111.

18 Sander L. Gilman, *The Jew's Body* (London: Routledge, 1992), 96.

19 Schüler-Springorum, "Dark Side."

transgress religious borders.¹⁶ Furthermore, Christian notions of Jewish bodies changed. The latter's religious difference was increasingly naturalized, and their allegedly deviant sexuality was inscribed into their bodies. This is reflected in the notion of the male menstruating Jew, which circulated in Christian writings from the twelfth until the eighteenth century.¹⁷ Here we can observe that already during the Middle Ages the first Judeophobic topoi that constructed a particular Jewish gender identity and sexuality started to enter the historical stage. Since the fifteenth century, Jews' genitals also became part of Judeophobic discourses in another way. With the first appearance of syphilis in Europe during the fifteenth century, Jews were blamed for the spread of the disease.¹⁸

It was only with the rise of modernity and the shaping of racialized discourses on gender and sexuality that a distinct type of Jewish sexuality appeared within so called "modern antisemitism." Jews were now held responsible for a variety of (both alleged and real) social ills that were linked to the shaping of modern social conditions. Furthermore, modern antisemitism constructed Jews as driving forces of conspiracies aimed at subjugating and exploiting non-Jewish people. These important shifts and changes had enormous repercussions for anti-Jewish discourses on and fantasies of sexuality. Stefanie Schüler-Springorum argues that "it is only with the advent of modernity that Judeophobia becomes intimately and, it seems, universally connected with gender images and fantasies about deviant or dangerous sexual predilections, performances or activities."¹⁹ Against this backdrop, she suggests that the "long nineteenth century" should be understood as a watershed moment in the history of sexual Judeophobia and sexual antisemitism respectively—a time when the antisemitic notion of a deviant Jewish sexuality was born. The question of periodization also plays a role in Dagmar Herzog's essay, which serves as a comment on Schüler-Springorum contribution. Although she agrees with Schüler-Springorum in considering the rise of modernity as

a crucial development in the history of sexual antisemitism, she argues for dating the “sexual turn” at the turn to the twentieth century.²⁰

Beyond offering stimulating thoughts on the periodization of the histories of sexual antisemitism, Stefanie Schüler-Springorum’s and Dagmar Herzog’s articles also point to sexual antisemitism’s potency for “bonding and intertwining” with other social power structures and hierarchizations.²¹ Gender is one prime example. The sexual identities and sexual desires attributed to Jews were characterized by gender ambivalence—a topic that Stefanie Schüler-Springorum traces in more detail in her essay. The dissolution of the borders between “masculine” and “feminine” sexuality corresponded to notions of “effeminate” Jewish masculinity and “masculinized” Jewish femininity. Whereas “unmanly” desires were ascribed to male Jews, antisemites imagined female Jewish sexuality as characterized by male-connotated attributes such as sexual activity, passionate lusts, and agency. This can be seen, for example, in the figure of the seductive Jewess or in the figure of the sex-obsessed vamp in 1920’s cinema.²² Despite the gender ambivalence in these constructions of Jewish sexuality, they also reproduced notions of male activity and female passivity. While fantasies of “Jewish-male” sexuality constructed Jews as very active, the beautiful and seductive Jewish woman ultimately remained an object of male desire. In contrast to the construction of non-Jewish, “white” women as “pure” objects that had to be protected from the alleged sexual desires of (often) racialized masculinities, the “beautiful Jewess” as an object of sexual desire became, as Jean-Paul Sartre has argued, an object of annihilation.²³

Scrutinizing constructions of Jewish sexuality does not only allow us to understand the historical entanglements between antisemitism and gender better. In her thought-provoking comment, Dagmar Herzog points to historical and contemporary intersections between antisemitism and discourses on (dis-)ability in West Germany. In antisemitic fantasies, the

20 Dagmar Herzog, “Unfree Associations,” in this *Bulletin* issue.

21 Schüler-Springorum, “Dark Side.”

22 Stefanie Schüler-Springorum, “Gender and the Politics of Anti-Semitism,” *The American Historical Review* 123 (October 2018): 1215.

23 Schüler-Springorum, “Gender,” 1216.

24 Herzog, "Unfree Associations."

allegedly deviant sexual practices of Jews, including incestuous acts, supposedly caused a higher percentage of disabled children among them compared to non-Jews.²⁴ Class is another category that comes to mind when we think about antisemitic figures such as the "Jew Pervert" or the "Jew homosexual" since "Jewish perversion" was considered to be the result of Jews' alleged membership in the upper-classes.

Researching racialized constructions of sexuality can also contribute to the ongoing scholarly debates on the relationship between antisemitism and racism—a topic that is being actively debated in the field of antisemitism studies not only since the so called Historikerstreit 2.0. The construction of racialized sexual morals and sexual practices has not been a singularity of Jew-hatred but has also played an important role in the history of various types of racism. To shed light on how antisemitic and racist discourses constructed the particular "Other" as a sexual threat enables us to gain new insights into the parallels but also differences in the way that racialized subjectivities were constructed in antisemitism and (other) racisms. White supremacists, for instance, assigned different "races" specific types of sexuality that correlated with the racialized subjectivities they attributed to them. Both African Americans and Jews were imagined to have enormous sexual desires for white women and thus both were constructed as sexual threats to white women's "(racial) purity" and, by extension, to the "white race" as a whole. According to white supremacists' fantasies, the way they tried to satisfy these desires differed. Whereas African Americans were often imagined as making use of their alleged physical prowess and violence to satisfy their lusts, Jews, in these discourses, were depicted as using their alleged social and economic power and influence to gain sexual access to white females. The antisemitic construction of Jews as powerful and cunning also paved the way for the fantasy of sexual conspiracies conducted by Jews. In this sense, white supremacists and white nationalists have understood a whole range of

sex-related phenomena—feminism, the struggles of LGBTQI+ people against discrimination, sexual contacts between white and non-white people as well as pornography—as tools of subversion that Jews use(d) in order to weaken the “white race” and stabilize their alleged social dominance.²⁵

Sander L. Gilman’s essay begins by examining the insurrection on the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C., on January 6, 2021. Gilman identifies male perceptions of being emasculated and castrated as a strong impetus for participating in the attack and for believing in antisemitic conspiracies. He then contextualizes his observations by tracing the history of “the Jew as [the] exemplary presence” of the stereotypes of deviant human sexuality back to the mid-nineteenth century and to discourses on Jewish circumcision. On January 6, Gilman argues, the perception of emasculation united far-right antisemites and right-wing Jews, who performed a “Jewish hyper- or hypo-masculinity in the age of Trump” in the attack on the Capitol.²⁶

This dialectic of sexual antisemitism recurs throughout its history. Fantasies of deviant and threatening Jewish sexualities not only caused emotions such as disgust and anger but were also sources of (sexual) pleasure. The National Socialist newspaper *Der Stürmer*, for instance, reported on Jews’ alleged sexual atrocities in detailed and explicit ways, and such reports were often illustrated with images of (almost) nude women. Against this backdrop, Dagmar Herzog argued in *Sex after Fascism* that “*Der Stürmer* served as pornography.”²⁷ Such pornographic antisemitism can also be found in some interrogations and investigations in cases of so-called *Rassenschande* [racial defilement], in which accused men and women had to give detailed information about their intimate acts.²⁸ Consuming sexual antisemitic tales and fantasies can, therefore, be understood in some sense as a sexual practice that allowed people to indulge in fantasies of allegedly deviant and horrible sex acts while at the same time attributing these acts to Jews. Herzog’s observation seems to confirm the

25 Jessie Daniels, *White Lies: Race, Class, Gender and Sexuality in White Supremacist Discourse* (New York/London, 1997), 113–130; Abby L. Ferber, *White Man Falling: Race, Gender, and White Supremacy* (Lanham, 1999), 125–126; Kerl, “Oppression by Orgasm”; Kerl, “Conspiracy of Homosexualisation.”

26 Sander L. Gilman, “Masculinity and Antisemitism in Our Day,” in this *Bulletin* issue.

27 Dagmar Herzog, *Sex after Fascism: Memory and Morality in Twentieth-Century Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 40.

28 Alexandra Przyrembel, “Sexualität und Antisemitismus während des Nationalsozialismus,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 39 (2013): 527–554, 549.

29 Heschel,
"Antisemitism as
Cultural Sadism," 62.

assumption that "Jews are contradictory objects of desire and revulsion" and are often "eroticized as enemies and lovers."²⁹ At the same time, it should not be forgotten that the erotic fantasies in people's minds all too often led to actual physical violence, sadistic cruelty, and annihilation in Jewish history.

Anna-Carolin Augustin is a research fellow at the German Historical Institute Washington. Her main field of interest is modern German-Jewish history and culture with an emphasis on Jewish material culture and gender history. She received her Ph.D. in modern history from the Universität Potsdam with a thesis on women art collectors around 1900, published as *Berliner Kunstmatronage: Sammlerinnen und Förderinnen bildender Kunst um 1900* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2018). In her current research project, she examines Jewish ritual objects, cultural reconstruction, and memory after the Holocaust. Most recently she published "Leo I. Lessmann's Lost Judaica Collection: Towards a Collaborative Approach for Judaica Provenance Research" (with Julie-Marthe Cohen), *transfer—Journal for Provenance Research and the History of Collection* 12/2023, and "Dealing with Germany and Reclaiming Jewish Ceremonial Objects: Guido Schönberger's Postwar JCR Mission Reconsidered," *Dubnow Institute Yearbook* XIX (2020/2021).

Sebastian Bischoff is PI of the DFG-funded research project "The West German Right and the 'Sexual Revolution'" at Bielefeld University. He studied modern history, sociology, philosophy in Heidelberg and Berlin and received his Ph.D. from Paderborn University. His publications include *Kriegsziel Belgien: Annexionsdebatten und nationale Feindbilder in der deutschen Öffentlichkeit, 1914–1918* (2018) and *Feinde werden. Zur nationalen Konstruktion existenzieller Gegnerschaft* (with F. O. Sobich, 2015). His latest contribution on sexualized antisemitism: "Nation und Perversion: Der, Anti-Porno-Anwalt' Manfred Roeder

und sein Übergang in die völkisch-radikalnationalistische Rechte, 1969–1975," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 48 (2022). His primary areas of research interest are the history of (organised) nationalism and right-wing politics, history of sexualities and memory politics in post-fascist, post-migrant and post-colonial societies.

Kristoff Kerl is an associated researcher at the Zentrum für Antisemitismusforschung (Technische Universität Berlin). He received his Ph.D. from the University of Cologne with a thesis on masculinity and antisemitism in the Southern United States, published as: *Männlichkeit und modern-er Antisemitismus: Eine Genealogie des Leo Frank-case, 1860er-1920er Jahre* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2017). Among his latest contributions to the research on the history of sexualized antisemitism are: "Oppression by Orgasm. Pornography and Antisemitism in Far-Right Discourses in the United States since the 1970s," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 39 (2020) and "The 'Conspiracy of Homosexualization'. Homosexuality and Anti-Semitism in the United States, 1970s-1990s," *Journal of Modern European History* 20 (2022). His research focuses on gender history and the history of sexualities, the history of antisemitisms, body history with a focus on states of ecstasy, and the history of countercultures.