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Antisemitism in Germany, 1890-1933 **How Popular Was It?**

This essay attempts to measure the degree of support organized antisemitism was able to find among the general public in Germany between 1890 and 1933. It explores the nature of the evidence for such an assessment, produced by Jews and antisemites, and the special difficulties in its evaluation. The interpretation dispenses with the traditional and still widely prevalent view that the intensification of German antisemitism was a linear development and obvious in its meaning, stressing instead the ambiguity of its development, especially for those who experienced it.

It is given only to antisemites to find the simplest answers to the thorniest questions regarding Jews. For the rest of us, even the most straightforward of matters, such as the one that provides this essay with its title and topic, defy easy solutions. What follows will, at certain crucial junctures, be speculative and tentative, rather than conclusive and unambiguous. Fine distinctions and guarded judgments—such as antisemites cannot abide—characterize the findings presented here.

Beyond doubt, however, is the crucial importance of the question. Any serious student of the murder of European Jewry in the twentieth century must sooner or later recognize that the Holocaust cannot be properly understood as just the doing of the decision makers of the Third Reich and their high-level subordinates, that all lesser accomplices and bystanders were dragged along against their wills or that they were indifferent to the Jewish Question and its possible solutions. What was the role of the mass of other Germans in the genocide of the Jews? What did antisemitism have to do with their behavior and to what degree did antisemitism in the general public contribute to the Jewish catastrophe? Such questions give this topic its significance.

Several difficulties get in the way of arriving at satisfactory answers to these and related questions. First among them is our inclination toward the teleological. We know how this tragic story ends, and it is only natural to see that end foreshadowed in the beginning. In the case of the history of German antisemitism, this knowledge has produced a well-worn scenario. It begins usually with the medieval conceptions of Jews as religious deviants and economic tormentors; then describes repeated

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eruptions of retaliatory violence. With the passage of time, old and new grievances, imagined and real, come to dominate the culture and mold the population's attitudes toward Jews. Potent stereotypes and negative images, sometimes actively deployed, sometimes lying deceptively dormant, build in intensity and momentum, until Hitler arrives to orchestrate the dreadful, but predictable climax that Germans in their heart of hearts had wanted for so long. The trajectory is linear, the outcome inevitable. Tempting in its simplicity, but reductionist in all its essentials, this scenario ought to be jettisoned. It looks for and finds only the evidence it needs. Where the evidence is non-existent, it is nonetheless assumed. Where it is open to multiple interpretations, only one is found appropriate.¹

That this approach still appeals to both scholars and thoughtful laypeople derives in part from a second problem, the definition of *antisemitism*, a term that has become so all-inclusive, so imprecise that it effortlessly supports the scenario just outlined or any other one might wish to hang on it. This essay understands antisemitism much more narrowly. Like the word coined to describe it, antisemitism is a late-nineteenth-century phenomenon. It was a response to the terribly exaggerated perception of the Jews' highly visible successes in all aspects of modern life, usually tied to their achievement of legal equality in Europe and, more commonly, to their phenomenal rise in the world during the course of the nineteenth century. The movement produced by this perception was predicated on *taking action against Jews*, putting a stop to their advance and, at the very least, abolishing their rights as equal citizens, driving them back into marginality. It is this action component that distinguishes antisemites from traditional Jew-haters, be they casually or even pathologically prejudiced. Antisemitism prided itself on going beyond feeling to embrace and then institutionalize a desperate activism. Antisemites, according to this conception, are all those who take action against Jewish power or are willing to have others do so on their behalf; antisemitism is the ideology that justifies such action and the action itself. Distinguishing between a great range of anti-Jewish feelings--neither unimportant nor inconsequential--and goal-oriented actions to disempower the Jews is essential in order to arrive at meaningful conclusions about the popularity of antisemitism in Germany between 1890 and 1933. Emotions and their consequences vary too greatly to be accurately measured. They are too widely present to tell us anything useful. Actions leave clearer footprints.

¹ Two examples of this unnuanced approach are Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York, 1996) and John Weiss, *Ideology of Death: Why the Holocaust Happened in Germany* (Chicago, 1996).

A third set of problems has to do with the evidence. Both the victims and victimizers in the history of German antisemitism have left abundant records of their views and experiences of each other. While one might think that such evidence would be extremely valuable in assessing the level of the popularity of antisemitism in Germany at given moments and over long duration, many complications become immediately apparent when the attempt is made. Of course, the lack of objectivity on both sides of the equation is only to be expected, but the reluctance to confront the realities, apparent in both Jewish and antisemitic witnesses, goes well beyond this and requires some exploration.

The diaries of Victor Klemperer, one of the great observers of the terrible history of the twentieth century, illustrate the limited usefulness of Jewish sources. Looking back from 1938, Klemperer declares that his childhood was without antisemitism, a minor irritant he recognizes as having become serious only after finding himself in Munich in 1919. What had been merely “historical” had now turned personal and threatening.² This is more than a bit puzzling. He was born in 1881, making him a teenager when Hermann Ahlwardt, the most flamboyant political antisemite of the day, campaigned for and won the district in which Klemperer lived. The family had moved to Berlin by then, but Berlin in the early 1890s was bristling with antisemitic politics. Moreover, Klemperer went to school back in his hometown, still represented in the Reichstag by the headline-grabbing Ahlwardt. As Klemperer grew to adulthood, he certainly had to know that there were antisemitic political parties and *völkisch* groups, some with highly educated memberships, that there were university student associations pursuing vigorous antisemitic agendas, which he could not join. Is he being disingenuous when he says there was no problem back then, this acute observer who unflinchingly faced the harshest truths during the Third Reich?

I suspect that Klemperer and any number of other Jewish witnesses who could be cited were unable to face this particular truth—that antisemitism from its earliest appearance was a serious threat to Jewish well-being—because of the total identification with Germandom they had negotiated. Klemperer, son of a rabbi, had converted to Christianity, married a Christian, immersed himself in German (and European) culture, and fought bravely for his country during the war. He opted completely for Germandom, wholly abandoning his Jewish identity. He, and others like him, could not bring themselves to admit that many of

² Victor Klemperer, *Ich will Zeugnis ablegen bis zum letzten: Tagebücher 1933-1945*, 2 vols. ed. Walter Nowojski (Berlin, 1995), 1:372-73, 379, 383, 430. Klemperer’s diaries, running over 1700 pages for the Nazi years, provide an incomparable record of the steady decline of German Jewry.

their fellow Germans wanted to cast them out--not until it became undeniable. For Klemperer, even the triumph of Hitler could not fully convince him that the Nazis spoke for all his countrymen. His diary for the Nazi years asks the question being discussed in this essay, again and again. How popular was antisemitism with the Germans? How representative was Nazi fanaticism?

The historian has access to numerous collections of Jewish memoirs and letters reporting on experiences from the imperial and Weimar eras. One of the most useful of them assembles forty testimonies from a wide variety of Jewish eyewitnesses, making a largely successful attempt at capturing the diversity of German Jewry. They make for fascinating reading, but most suffer from a common flaw. Very few are contemporary to the events they describe; composed as the Holocaust was unfolding or in its shadow, they bear the marks of those horrors. The clearest effect of this timing is to relativize the importance of happenings during the period of the kaisers and the republic, diminishing, one suspects, the real impact antisemitism had on the writers. They make few connections between the anti-Jewish social slights they experienced in their youths and the utter inhumanity they suffered at the hands of the Nazis. Like Klemperer, they mark the sea change in their lives by the rise of the Hitler movement to national prominence, in most cases, the end-phase of the republic (1930-1932), by which time it was impossible to ignore the danger. Such evidence is simply too subjective to be evaluated, too overwhelmed by the realities of Nazism to provide an accurate reading of earlier conditions.³

There is, however, a body of evidence that satisfies the need for contemporaneity, although it, too, falls short of the (even relative) objectivity that would help achieve an accurate reading of antisemitism's

³ For some other thoughts on why Jews did not fully acknowledge antisemitism in the empire period, see Monika Richarz, ed., *Jüdisches Leben in Deutschland: Selbstzeugnisse zur Sozialgeschichte im Kaiserreich*, 3 vols. (Stuttgart, 1979), 2:35-37. Of the seven memoirs by Berliners she reproduces, only one mentions specific events--the Konitz ritual murder case of 1901 and the antisemitic parties' attempts to ban kosher butchering. The other six show an awareness of anti-Jewish prejudice without going into particulars. Jews living outside the capital were certainly more sensitive to antisemitism. Of the eight memoirs gathered from those who lived in small towns or the countryside, all but one recount antisemitic experiences; some go into detail about Otto Böckel's antisemitic peasant movement in Hesse; others talk about more ancient prejudices that troubled their childhoods. Every account, however, insists that relations with Christian neighbors were generally good, respectful, peaceful. A condensed English-language version is *Jewish Life in Germany: Memoirs from Three Centuries*. Trans. Stella and Sidney Rosenfeld (Bloomington, 1991).

popularity before 1914. In 1906, Julius Moses (1868-1942), a physician and journalist, sent out a survey to approximately three thousand prominent Jews and non-Jews, including some known antisemites, asking for their views on the Jewish Question and its possible solutions. The responses appeared in his newspaper, and a selection of about one hundred of them were later published in a separate book.⁴ Several defects in the results become immediately clear, at least from the historian's perspective. Confining the survey to the Jewish (and non-Jewish) elite in the arts, politics, and religious/institutional life, does not give a candid rendering of the experiences or outlook of ordinary Jews, who were probably a good deal less insulated from the more egregious forms of antisemitism. Further, the survey was conducted in the shadow of the second wave of pogroms in the Russian Empire (1905-1906), far more lethal than the first (1881-1884). Respondents tended to see antisemitism as a Russian, rather than a German problem, and for the most part do not talk about German manifestations. Despite these drawbacks, a few limited insights concerning the way some Jews saw the problem of antisemitism in the decade before the war can be extracted from the survey. Although scant on detail, few denied that there was a "Jewish Problem," even in Germany. Almost unanimously, Jewish contributors believed that the solution to the problem lay in ongoing and more complete assimilation. This required both greater effort on the part of Jews and a spirit of accommodation on the part of the state and the non-Jewish majority. It was antisemitism—a vague set of prejudices among the uneducated who were easy prey to a few demagogues—that impeded the process by which Jews would become ever less objectionable to their neighbors, at least to those of good will. Organized political antisemitism, surely visible in the Reichstag, the press, and associational life of the empire, is completely absent as a worrisome factor. Another indication of optimism among the Jewish elite was the near-unanimous rejection of the Zionist solution—a separate Jewish state to which Jews could emigrate. (This was vastly more acceptable to the non-Jewish respondents, some of whom were clearly antisemitic "Zionists.") Few Jewish witnesses saw the Jewish problem as insoluble; fewer yet betrayed fear of an immediate or future threat to their well-being.

Evidence that could have countered this rosy view or at least have dampened its inherent optimism was plentiful.⁵ But it does not seem

⁴ Astrid Blome et al., eds., *Die Lösung der Judenfrage: Eine Rundfrage von Julius Moses im Jahre 1907* (Bremen, 2010). The book contained some contributions not published in the newspaper, *General-Anzeiger für die gesamten Interessen des Judentums*; non-Jewish respondents were nearly twice as well-represented as Jewish ones.

⁵ Not all Jews were so confident about the future. The activists in various anti-defamation organizations, in contrast to the rank and file membership, vigorously

to have registered. For whatever reason so many Jews were unable to assess their situation accurately, an interpretation of the popularity of antisemitism in Germany, 1890-1933, ought not rest too heavily on their personal assessments of their circumstances. This is equally true of other sorts of evidence: deeds rather than words meant for publication. Inter-marriage, conversion, and emigration have long been interpreted, at least in part, as reactions to perceived antisemitic threats to Jewish security. While Jewish community spokesmen and independent observers had much to say about these acts, seeing them usually in a negative light and almost always as a (wrong) response to antisemitism, the motives of the actual actors remain mostly obscure and therefore difficult to evaluate as perceptions of antisemitism's strength in German society. Victor Klemperer, for example, may well have thought he was acknowledging the Christian essence of German culture and his identification with it when he converted in 1912. Or he may have simply ceased being an indifferent Jew, becoming an indifferent Christian, in the hope of overcoming the obstacles to his academic career posed by Jewishness. Similarly, rates of inter-marriage, legal only since 1875, rose and fell throughout the period under consideration; the act may be understood as an attempted escape from antisemitism into the larger society, but it can also be seen as evidence that Jewishness was not an insuperable obstacle to acceptance by non-Jewish society.⁶ Emigration from the countryside to the metropolis or overseas might have been a flight from discrimination or from an intolerant environment, but it might also have been something completely different, a pursuit of better educational or economic opportunities that had little to do with antisemitic oppression. Deeds, such as these, may speak more loudly than words, but they do not always speak more clearly.

Antisemites, like Jews, produced a wealth of important evidence that must be addressed when studying the history of antisemitism. But when it comes to the question of the general popularity of their movement and ideology, they are no more helpful or reliable than their Jewish targets. They were generally a pessimistic lot and little could move them to foresee a healthy future for their cause. Not even the rise of

engaged political antisemitism and were, by and large, realistic about the dangers it posed to German Jewry, at least in so far as these could be imagined before 1914. See Ismar Schorsch, *Jewish Reactions to German Anti-Semitism, 1870-1914* (New York and Philadelphia, 1972).

⁶ Milton L. Barron, "The Incidence of Jewish Inter-marriage in Europe and America," *American Sociological Review* 11, no.1 (February 1946): 6-13. Barron notes that mixed marriages were more frequent in times of prosperity than crisis (9). For a different interpretation, see Steven M. Lowenstein, "Jewish Inter-marriage and Conversion in Germany and Austria," *Modern Judaism* 25, no. 1 (2005): 23-61.

Hitler altered their stance—the Jews, they were certain, would be victorious. This was perhaps the disappointed reaction to foolishly exaggerated hopes, hatched at the birth of their political parties in the late 1870s. Antisemitism then drew from every political direction—disappointed democrats, Christian conservatives, radical nationalists, agrarians, culture critics, “life reformers”—confident that they had found the key to national salvation, true community, and, just possibly, a brilliant new career for themselves. All the antisemitic parties backed universal suffrage, feeling convinced that, since almost all Germans hated Jews to one degree or another, it was only a matter of time before they could be herded into a mighty mass movement that would enable its representatives to legislate a solution of the Jewish Question. They made the mistake that many who write about antisemitism continue to make. They confused the majority’s inherited anti-Jewish prejudices, lingering medieval stereotypes, resentments, and contempt with the activists’ own commitment to solve the Jewish Question, disempower the Jews, and cleanse German life of all Jewish influence—a much more ambitious project. Mere prejudice could only be a starting point. What antisemites had in mind was a long and methodical process. The masses had to be educated and steered into understanding that it was a question of survival, an absolute life and death struggle, not “a mere soap-bubble to be popped with a cheap Hep-Hep” pogrom.⁷ Jews had become too powerful to be dealt with by the customary methods. Antisemites came only slowly to the recognition that the kind of sustained, disciplined, and focused action required for a solution to the Jewish Question was beyond the capacity of the German masses. The raw Jew-hatred was there, but most of their feckless countrymen did not see a solution of the Jewish Question as something that would solve their problems or bring them happiness. They just did not care enough to do the hard work that was necessary over the long haul, and there seemed to be no way to change them, improve their character, or raise their IQs. Hence the pessimism of committed antisemites and their unreliability as witnesses concerning the popularity of antisemitism.

Theodor Fritsch, a key transitional figure between the founders of the antisemitic movement and the Nazis, will serve as a case study here. Fritsch was one of the few antisemites who made antisemitism pay, a successful publisher who sold or gave away millions of pamphlets. In

⁷ See Wilhelm Marr, *Der Sieg des Judenthums über das Germanentum*, translated in Richard S. Levy, ed., *Antisemitism in the Modern World: An Anthology of Texts* (Lexington, MA, 1991), 76-93; quotation from, 82. “Hep-Hep,” a catchphrase of indeterminate origin or meaning, traditionally signaled the beginning of anti-Jewish riots.

1926, recalling nearly fifty years of dedicated fighting against Jewish power (including his thirty-three convictions in court cases brought by Jews he had libeled), Fritsch was still filled with gloom. The movement, he pronounced, had not progressed beyond its promising take-off in the 1890s. He blamed warring leaders. He heaped scorn especially on “windbags and blowhards” who indulged in foolhardy political adventures—a clear allusion to Hitler and his putsch attempt of 1923. They could occasionally seduce the masses with their slick oratory, but they lacked the “deep knowledge” of Jewry, necessary to educate those masses in antisemitism. If the German people could not be enlightened as to the true existential significance of the Jewish Question, the outlook was hopeless. If Jew-haters could not be converted into authentic antisemites, all was in vain. He had wasted his life.

Fritsch, wedded to the posture of the lonely prophet, should make us doubt the quality of the guidance he, and the many others like him, can offer in the assessment of antisemitism’s popularity during the empire or the republic. It is surely ironic that if we take the evidence provided by both Jews and antisemites at face value we come away with pretty much the same conclusion. Neither thought antisemitism was popular with ordinary Germans. But irony aside, their evidence is not very serviceable. For dramatically different reasons they were unable to see the situation objectively.

This raises a final problem of interpretation. What can be ascertained about the great German public, all those who stood between the Jews and their most active adversaries? Before the age of scientific polling, even getting at popular attitudes toward Jews is well-nigh impossible.⁸ In the absence of hard data, I will here advance a hypothesis: most Germans did not like Jews, value their difference, respect their achievements, or believe in their professed allegiance to Germany. Even those willing to defend their rights against the antisemites hoped that they would give up their Jewish identity and become wholly German. Those few who rose above the centuries of negative thinking about Jews were the remarkable exceptions. It is this very ubiquity of anti-Jewish feeling that makes the distinction between thinking and acting imperative. What Germans thought about Jews, while far from insignificant, cannot be the main concern in seeking to gauge antisemitism’s popularity. Rather, the question should be: what were Germans prepared to do or have others do on the basis of their feeling?

⁸ For some thoughts on how to deal with “historical” public opinion, see Lee Benson, “An Approach to the Scientific Study of Past Public Opinion,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 31, no. 4 (1967-1968): 522-567.

By 1890, if Germans wanted to take *action* against their fellow Jewish citizens, they could do so in many ways, within or outside the law: cast a vote for an antisemitic political party, sign a petition calling for an end to Jewish immigration and the curtailment of occupational freedom, boycott Jewish businesses, join lobbying groups, professional associations, or one of the many societies that made antisemitism a part of their programs. One could subscribe to antisemitic newspapers or periodicals, ban Jews from privately owned hotels, or—rarely during the imperial era—commit acts of violence or vandalism against their persons, religious institutions, or property. All these sorts of acts have left evidence of Germans' orientation toward antisemitism. That evidence, like all evidence, is not without its ambiguities. Nonetheless, it is time to evaluate, as far as possible, what it says about the popularity of antisemitism between 1890 and 1933.

The obvious place to start is with the organized political movement. Beginning in 1879, a number of parties dedicated to the disenfranchisement of Jews but with otherwise varying programs, regional strengths, and special constituencies took root all over Germany.⁹ They were supported by 140 grass roots “reform clubs,” numerous newspapers, and auxiliary organizations. They contested national, state, and municipal elections, catering to the economic interests of the Protestant lower middle class in the countryside, small towns, and a few larger cities. They might well have drawn votes from people whose first commitment was not necessarily fighting Jewish power but rather the saving of their threatened livelihoods and social status. But even allowing for mixed motives, the number of Germans who voted for the antisemites because of or in spite of their anti-Jewish agenda was not impressive. The high point of their effectiveness came in 1893 when three parties elected sixteen deputies to the Reichstag, winning 263,861 votes out of a total 7.7 million cast. Another seven candidates who ran antisemitic campaigns but chose to sit with the Conservative Party raised the total antisemitic vote to 342,425 or 4.4 percent.¹⁰ The parties, unable to penetrate the Catholic or

⁹ On the minutely differentiated agendas of the antisemitic parties, see Margaret Lavinia Anderson, *Practicing Democracy: Elections and Political Culture in Imperial Germany* (Princeton, 2000), 186, n.116, which points out that the standard source on Reichstag electioneering required nineteen pages for the individual programs of the antisemitic parties, six times as much space as was devoted to the much larger and far more important Center Party.

¹⁰ See Richard S. Levy, *The Downfall of the Anti-Semitic Political Parties in Imperial Germany* (New Haven, 1975), 85-90; for the statistical decline of the antisemitic parties in national elections, see Max Schwarz, *MdR: Biographisches Handbuch der Reichstage* (Hannover, 1965), 806-08.

working class masses, could not get beyond this percentage of the vote. They probably never had more than 30-35,000 members.¹¹ Their near-total ineffectiveness as legislators—they passed no antisemitic laws, although not for want of trying—led to their virtual disappearance during the course of World War I by which time they held only six seats in the Reichstag (but still could not manage to form a united party). Other parties and occupational interest groups that had shown varying degrees of interest in using antisemitism as a mobilizing tool were edging away in the years just before the war. Antisemitism had not demonstrated its indispensability as a vote-getter, and in its parliamentary political form, never escaped its somewhat tawdry public image. Measured by these standards, it would be reasonable to declare that conventional political antisemitism did not appeal strongly to the German public. By 1914, many Jews could realistically look forward to its withering away.

The stark failure of conventional parliamentary antisemitism is a powerful indication of the limited popularity of antisemitism in the German public before World War I, but it cannot suffice as the only measurement. For example, running parallel to the formation of the antisemitic parties in 1880 and 1881 was an extraparliamentary petition drive that called upon Otto von Bismarck's government to enact four measures that would have amounted to the rescinding of Jewish emancipation. The petition demands were rejected even before the text was formally delivered, but they lived on as the essential minimum program of all the antisemitic political parties. Crucial to the circulation of the petition was the participation of university students who gathered the signatures of 265,000 adult males. Once again, this was not all that imposing a number (several activists cautioned against trying the strategy again for fear of it showing the weakness rather than the strength of the movement). There's no telling for sure who signed, but it was generally believed that a great many students, the sons of the elite of property and education, the future decision-makers and opinion leaders of the German state and society, were prominent among those ready to disenfranchise Jews.¹² The petition effort spilled directly into the formation of the Verein Deutscher Studenten (Association of German Students) whose supporters, although they rejected party politics, championed a racist-

¹¹ The grounds for this rough estimate can be found in Levy, *Downfall*, 118. On the difficulty of approximating party membership numbers, see Ludwig Bergsträsser, *Geschichte der politischen Parteien in Deutschland*, 10th ed. (Munich, 1960), 32.

¹² Nearly half the student body of the University of Berlin signed; Halle and Leipzig universities were also strongly represented. See "Antisemitism's Petition (1880-1881)," in Richard S. Levy, ed., *Antisemitism: Historical Encyclopedia of Prejudice and Persecution*, 2 vols. (Santa Barbara, CA, 2005), 1:20-21.

nationalist outlook, banned Jews and the sons of Jewish converts from membership, and later held positions of leadership in many of Germany's important patriotic societies and rightist organizations. Although the conventional political antisemites commanded the most attention during the German empire, there were several individuals and nonparty groups, in addition to the Association of German Students, that contributed directly to the vocabulary of radical antisemitism. When the Nazis and other rightists appeared in the 1920s, they were able to step into an ideology that was almost fully formed. In particular, they had very little need to invent new conceptions of the Jewish Peril.

Yet, notwithstanding these extraparliamentary developments, 1914 marked the end of one phase and the beginning of another in the history of German antisemitism: between 1890 and the outbreak of war, antisemitism fluctuated in popularity, gradually losing its appeal; it is at least arguable that the organized movement was drifting toward the fringe of German politics and that antisemitism as an issue had already reached the limits of its modest usefulness as a tool of mobilization.

The underlying reasons for this general failure are worth examining. Neither the ineffective politicians and their feckless parties, nor the racist-nationalist students, nor the numerous and active propaganda societies--their "learned" journals, shabby newspapers, or multitudinous pamphlets--had been able to stop the "rise of the Jews." Jews continued on their path of upward social mobility, enjoyed not all, but most, of the prizes of public life, and lived secure in their rights and property.¹³ To be sure, they were also subjected to insulting and psychologically wounding accusations, not just from the rabble, but from well-educated and successful individuals. Yet in the last analysis antisemites of all varieties had failed to achieve a single one of their goals (which went much further than making Jews feel bad). The best explanation for that failure was their inability to awaken sufficient interest in the general population. Jew-haters had not been converted into antisemites. An insufficient number of Germans (Hungarians, Frenchmen, and Austrians) cared deeply enough about the Jewish Question and its solution, to commit to it as one of

¹³ This did not go unnoticed by Jews outside Germany. Starting in the 1880s, and despite the existence of popular antisemitism, Germany remained a desirable place to settle for a sizeable minority of the east European Jewish immigrants (*Ostjuden*) who chose not to continue on to North and South America. By 1914, nearly 20 percent of the Jewish population was foreign born, this despite the many obstacles put in the way of immigrants becoming citizens. See Richarz, *Jüdisches Leben*, 17. For the hostile response of government to this influx, see Jack Wertheimer, *Unwelcome Strangers: East European Jews in Imperial Germany* (New York, 1987), 24.

their political priorities. Antisemitism was not popular enough. The war changed this.

Whether the turmoil of the war years and their aftermath increased the sum total of anti-Jewish feeling among Germans and prompted more people to act on those feelings is probably not ascertainable, although it seems likely. What is certain is that Jews felt more vulnerable. Many, especially those who had served in the war, were now willing to write about their unpleasant interactions with non-Jews, much more so than about their prewar experiences which paled by comparison.¹⁴ That more Jews recognized a greater threat to their safety in the rise of anti-Jewish activities explains the spurt in membership in the major Jewish anti-defamation organization, the Central Association of German Citizens of Jewish Faith (Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens). Since its founding in 1893, the Centralverein had compiled a fairly successful record of prosecuting slanderers and winning convictions against most of the major antisemitic politicians and publicists. During the Weimar years, its legal bureau continued tried and true tactics, combing the antisemitic press looking for libels of the Jewish community and religion. Its larger purpose was to criminalize antisemitic activities wherever and whenever possible, relying on the courts to achieve this goal. Already the largest Jewish voluntary association in prewar Germany, its membership spiked in the early 1920s before tailing off.¹⁵

Further evidence that the war experience contributed to a general worsening of relations between Jews and non-Jews is not hard to find. As the war turned against Germany, truisms concerning the Jewish character gathered new force. Talk of profiteering and black marketeering,

¹⁴ For accounts of wartime experiences, not at the front, but while on leave, see Richarz, *Jüdisches Leben*, 104-05; also Sabine Hank and Hermann Simon, eds., *Feldpostbriefe Jüdischer Soldaten 1914-1918*. 2 vols. (Teetz, 2002), 2:400-01. A brief but informative survey of the effects of war service on Jewish identity, often disillusioning, is Michael Brenner in *Yale Companion to Jewish Writing and Thought in German Culture, 1096-1996*, eds. Sander Gilman and Jack Zipes (New Haven, 1997), 348-54.

¹⁵ This is not the place to go into the intense debate concerning the effectiveness of the CV's tactics. For a largely positive view, see Arnold Paucker, *Der jüdische Abwehrkampf gegen Antisemitismus und Nationalsozialismus in den letzten Jahren der Weimarer Republik*, 2nd rev. ed. (Hamburg, 1969); an at times hostile evaluation, written as the destruction of the German Jewish community was being carried out, is Ambrose Doskow and Sidney B. Jacoby, "Anti-Semitism and the Law in Pre-Nazi Germany," *Contemporary Jewish Record* 3 (1940): 498-509. A balanced, not uncritical, view is Donald Niewyk, *The Jews in Weimar Germany* (Baton Rouge, 1980), chapter 4.

suspicious about international connections, and accusations concerning lack of true patriotism made the rounds on the home front. The euphoria of 1914 had turned sour by 1916. Germans who served on the Eastern Front came into contact with large concentrations of *Ostjuden*, those “unearthly, unkempt, and devious” east European Jews they had probably only known about from hearsay and frightening newspaper stories. In most cases their preconceptions were corroborated.¹⁶ German solidarity began to crumble under the strain of war.

Jews were among the first to feel the consequences. In October and November 1916, the War Ministry undertook a census to determine how many Jews were serving at the front, as opposed to the rear echelons. Whoever thought up the measure—there is no historical agreement regarding its precise origins—it was clearly antisemitic in purpose, meant to demonstrate that Jews were slackers and savvy players of the system. Also clear, and setting an ominous precedent, was the unapologetically official nature of the act. In years past, left-liberal and socialist Reichstag deputies had chastised government for violating the constitutional rights of Jews by excluding them from positions in the civil service or holding up their promotions when they were allowed to serve. The authorities had always denied antisemitic motives. In the case of the “Jew Census” of 1916, even the usual hollow assurances of government neutrality on the Jewish Question were conspicuously absent.¹⁷ The results of the census were never published, thus giving added government sanction to the suspicions of non-Jews that Jews were shirkers. (In fact, 100,000 served,

¹⁶ Vejas Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front: Culture, National Identity, and German Occupation in World War I* (Cambridge, 2000), 58, 120, 132, records the mostly negative impressions among the upper ranks, from Ludendorff on down. Even before the war, Hitler claims to have experienced an epiphany regarding the Jewish Question upon seeing an east European Jew in central Vienna. See Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston, 1943), 56ff. On the history of *Ostjuden* and their central role in antisemitic discourse, see Trude Maurer, *Ostjuden in Deutschland 1918-1933* (Hamburg, 1986). Dirk Walter, *Antisemitische Kriminalität und Gewalt: Judenfeindschaft in der Weimarer Republik* (Bonn, 1999), 60-65, sees post-war agitation, led by the powerful German National People's Party, against east European Jews as an attempt at consensus-building on the right.

¹⁷ The Prussian government denied that antisemitism prompted its expulsion in 1885-1886 of approximately 30,000 Polish-Russian subjects, although fully a third were Jews. Similarly, military officials refused to acknowledge discrimination against Jews, even though there were none on the Prussian Army General Staff from the 1870s until the early years of World War I and there were no Jews or Jewish converts to be found among the prestigious reserve officer corps. On the “Jew Census” of 1916, see Brian Crim, in *Antisemitism: Historical Encyclopedia*. 1:371-72.

approximately 80,000 at the front; they volunteered, fought, won medals, and died in very much the same proportions as non-Jews.)¹⁸

As the war was being lost, antisemites became reinvigorated--and less restrained. In June 1917, the Pan-German League, with a small but elite membership, declared war on Jewry (*Alljudentum*) and took the lead in rallying those still active in the struggle against Jewish power.¹⁹ In the context of war-weariness and then shocking defeat, antisemitic discourse became ever more radical. The charges escalated. No longer just shady dealers, exploiters of family farmers, intruders into German cultural life, or pushy strivers, Jews had engaged in gigantic and bloody crimes. They had unleashed the world war, the Russian, and then the German revolutions, pitted classes against each other, corrupted the young, undermined the Christian faith, and were seeking to install a Jewish despot to rule over all nations. The *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* made its timely appearance in Germany in 1920, melding variations of these and other accusations into an arcane historical conspiracy that revealed the relentless drive toward Jewish world domination.

A few stalwart survivors from the prewar years began new careers in the aftermath of the war. They were joined by a host of newcomers who had no ties to the tamer, mostly law-abiding antisemitism of those days. In this new era, very few could be found who still advocated a conventional, legislative solution of the Jewish Question. In a republic where "Jews made the laws" such timorous remedies met with scorn. The debate among these radicals went well beyond the need to disenfranchise Jews. Undoing emancipation, even segregation, would no longer save the nation. Now the talk was of expulsion and--in contrast to the imperial era-

¹⁸ Tim Grady, *The German-Jewish Soldiers of the First World War in History and Memory* (Liverpool, 2011), 32-34, denies that the "Jew Census" was a watershed for German Jews because their reaction to it was so diverse, much more disillusioned on the home front than in the trenches. I do not find this a compelling counterargument. For the consensus view, see Trude Maurer, "Die Juden in der Weimarer Republik," in Dirk Blasius and Dan Diner, eds., *Zerbrochene Geschichte: Leben und Selbstverständnis der Juden in Deutschland* (Frankfurt/M, 1991), 106-07.

¹⁹ Otto Bonhard, *Geschichte des Alldeutschen Verbandes* (Leipzig, 1920), 6-7, 98-99. This "authorized" history of the League sounds an almost apologetic note because of the length of time it took for the organization to "achieve clarity" on the Jewish question, Jewish membership, and the validity of antisemitism. The war finally convinced members that the time for equivocation was past. On its adoption of overt antisemitism, creation of the *Deutschvölkischer Schutz- und Trutzbund*, a mass propaganda organization with terroristic inclinations, and Pan-German influence on Hitler, see Helmut Berding, *Moderner Antisemitismus in Deutschland* (Stuttgart, 1988), 179-87; more cautiously, Roger Chickering, *We Men Who Feel Most German: a Cultural Study of the Pan-German League* (Boston, 1984), 299.

-openly and earnestly about the need for physical violence. What “dignified” antisemites used to call *Radauantisemitismus* (rowdy antisemitism) was now referred to as *Pogromantisemitismus* (just what it sounds like). And it was not just talk. A brutalization of political life took effect with stunning swiftness. In this environment many criminal acts on the persons of Jews were recorded in the early years of the republic. The murders of Jewish revolutionary leaders Kurt Eisner, Rosa Luxemburg, Hugo Haase, and Gustav Landauer in 1919 were, some observers insisted, the radical right’s response to the revolutionary left. However, the assassination in 1922 of the Jewish foreign minister Walther Rathenau, certainly no radical leftist, removed all reasonable doubts about the antisemitic motives for all these killings.²⁰

These were the acts of emboldened political extremists. But lesser crimes against Jews were also rife. Before the war, convictions for libel or incitement to class and group hatreds had once stigmatized lawbreakers and occasionally ended their political careers. Weimar’s courts, however, lacked legitimacy in the eyes of the public. Their punishments were now celebrated as badges of honor bestowed by the “Jew Republic.” A sorry state of affairs, but what did the deeds of these activists and their consequences, or lack of consequences, prove about the growth of antisemitism’s popularity among the bulk of the population? The evidence strongly suggests that the absolute number of individuals willing to act against Jews far surpassed the levels of the imperial era. They flocked to a welter of organizations, some of which received financial support from the respectable right, and many of which employed a rhetoric of unabashed violence.²¹ It is likely that this new, more radical activism helped desensitize the public to politically inspired violence, extending the boundaries of what now had “only to be expected” from zealots and fanatics in the chaotic conditions of postwar Germany. But this evidence must be treated cautiously. The breakdown in law and order, a stark new reality, ought not be read as popular approval or ironclad proof of a general readiness to join in the mayhem. Lawless acts were roundly condemned across the political spectrum (except those committed against the extreme left). The funeral rites for Walther Rathenau, for example, took on the character of a national act of contrition and produced more resolute action by the state authorities to preserve and protect the

²⁰ For example, Victor Klemperer, *Leben sammeln, nicht fragen wozu und warum. Tagebücher 1918-1924*, 2 vols. ed. Walter Nowojski (Berlin, 1996), 1:51, 245, 598.

²¹ Berding, *Moderner Antisemitismus*, 178, claims over 100 racist-nationalist “circles, associations, orders, and unions” were operative after 1918. Maurer, “Juden in der Weimarer Republik,” 107, counts a considerably greater “400 völkisch organizations and 700 antisemitic periodicals.” Whichever set of numbers is closer to the truth, they dwarfed those of the prewar movement.

Republic from such extremism.²² There is some compelling evidence that this restraining sense of the permissible reasserted itself after the chaos of the early 1920s subsided; it should be weighed against the clear markers of the growing popularity of antisemitism.

Dirk Walter, one of the few historians of this era who takes its antisemitic violence seriously, is quick to point out that the experts in brutal intimidation, the Nazi stormtroopers, operated within what they perceived to be socially imposed limits. Truth to tell, there were not a great number of Jewish fatalities, and many of these resulted when Jews defended themselves or intervened against antisemitic demonstrations—a not infrequent response. Nazi brutality produced many physical injuries, but its attacks on Jews had something of a ritual, exclusionary character, designed to let them know who controlled the streets and who ought to disappear, but not necessarily who deserved to die. Even when political violence reached new heights during the end-phase of the republic, the Nazis were reluctant to use deadly weapons against Jews (as opposed to communists), fearing the social consequences.²³

There were other sorts of violence directed against Jews that also proved objectionable to the general public. Rare before the 1920s, the desecrations of Jewish cemeteries and synagogues now became commonplace. Between 1923 and 1932, 189 such events took place. In 43 instances, the police were able to identify the malefactors; half of them had clear affiliations with radical rightist groups. Who were the other known perpetrators and what were their motives? Fully twenty-five percent were children. Their vandalism was not simply a matter of high spirits. Somewhere—at home, at school, in the streets—they had formed the notion that, while thrillingly naughty, such actions were tolerable when practiced against Jewish targets. Desecrators of all ages seemed quite able to distinguish between Christian and Jewish cemeteries, churches and synagogues. Whatever the motives at work, public response was uniformly negative, and penalties for those convicted were stiff fines and almost

²² Rathenau's death was welcomed on the right. See Theodor Fritsch, "The Desperate Act of a Desperate People," translated in Levy, *Antisemitism in the Modern World*, 192-99. Because of this article, Fritsch was tried, convicted, and fined heavily, escaping jail only because of his age. Public and private reactions may also have diverged. See Carole Fink, "The Murder of Wather Rathenau," *Judaism* 44, no. 3 (1995): 259-69.

²³ Walter, *Antisemitische Kriminalität*, 24-25, 35-37, 81-86, and especially 221. For the historical roots of symbolic violence exercised against Jews and the disparity between lethal threats and lethal realities, see Christhard Hoffmann et al., eds., *Exclusionary Violence: Antisemitic Riots in Modern German History* (Ann Arbor, 2002).

always time in jail.²⁴ Paradoxically, the judicial punishments for insulting dead Jews were generally harsher than for menacing and maligning live ones.

Notwithstanding the public disapproval for such actions, and other evidence that antisemitism had not wholly poisoned relations between Jews and non-Jews or spread to every nook and cranny of Germany by 1933, a realistic judgment is that the Weimar Republic was becoming more antisemitic, a more dangerous place for Jews than in the prewar era. In terms of the definition of antisemitism framed at the outset of this essay, a key criterion had been met: there were more people, more willing to act against Jews. Usually taken as the absolute truth of this assessment, as well as an obvious harbinger of doom, was the startling growth of Nazism in the last years of the Weimar democracy. But even this seemingly unassailable evidence of the growth of popular antisemitism requires some qualification, especially regarding the “handwriting on the wall” certitude.

Just how antisemitic were rank and file Nazis? The scholarly literature dealing with this question suggests that antisemitism exerted a much stronger appeal for the earliest recruits (1919-1923) than for the mass of newer members who joined after 1930. Among this group, the number who could be regarded as fanatical antisemites or who exhibited strongly ideological views that required action on the Jewish Question has been estimated at about twenty percent.²⁵ Leaving aside all sorts of personal motives that prompt people to join political movements, the admittedly anecdotal evidence on which this estimate rests prioritizes other ideological concerns: anti-communism, national recovery, “social justice,” the restoration of German power, among others. Even Hitler, whose personal commitment to antisemitism seems beyond all doubt, saw relatively early on the need to broaden his recruitment efforts, having recognized that antisemitism had probably exhausted its mobilizing potential for his movement. Anti-Marxism, sometimes connected to the

²⁴ Walter, *Antisemitische Kriminalität*, 164-66, 176, 298, n.30.

²⁵ The best discussion of the strength of antisemitism within the party is in Ian Kershaw, *The Hitler Myth: Image and Reality in the Third Reich* (Oxford, 1989), Chapter 9. Kershaw downplays its importance in the Weimar era and doubts the primary role of antisemitism in Hitler's achievement of massive popularity during the Third Reich (250). See also Sarah Gordon, *Hitler, Germans, and the Jewish Question* (Princeton, 1984), 56-65; Peter H. Merkl, *Political Violence Under the Swastika: 581 Early Nazis* (Princeton, 1975), 33, 453, 566-67, an analysis of life stories submitted by Nazi Party members for a contest staged by the Columbia University sociologist Theodore Abel in 1934. Merkl estimates that nearly half of these stories showed little or no antisemitism. Although neither scholar defined this term, both apparently worked from a much broader conception than mine.

Jewish Question and sometimes not, supplanted his earlier focus on the evils of Jewry and the need to combat Jewish power. After 1928, antisemitism played a diminishing role in Nazi Party election campaigning for the Reichstag or in Hitler's speeches and newspaper writing.²⁶ The party represented itself as the best hope to stave off the communist threat and to restore the failing economy rather than to save Germany from the Jews. The growth of the Nazi movement, therefore, ought not be seen as the simple equivalent of a growth in antisemitism or its popularity.

However ambiguous the evidence concerning the popularity of antisemitism in Germany between 1890 and 1933, at least two provisional conclusions can be drawn from this survey. The first of them argues in favor of acknowledging the ambiguity and giving it greater importance than it usually gets when passing judgment on the responses of German Jewry to its growing peril. This discussion has stressed the multiple meanings to be derived from the experience of antisemitism before Hitler took power. The Jews who lived this history had good cause to be confused and generally ambivalent. Few of them would have thought that things were getting better rather than worse, but how much worse could they get? They were not irrational to see Nazism as a response to awful economic conditions brought on by the Depression. Nor were they unreasonable to think that Hitler's movement would lose its appeal once the crisis began to ebb, as surely it would.

Of course not everyone was prone to such confidence. The leaders of the Centralverein read the evidence differently than most of their members. They took a much dimmer view of the present and future. Even in the so-called good years of the Weimar Republic (usually defined as 1924-1930), they never ceased urging vigilance against antisemitism or trying to develop better strategies against its hate campaigns. As the Nazi movement gathered force in the early 1930s, they continued publishing apologetic literature, pursued antisemites with nearly a hundred lawsuits a year, and supported anti-antisemitic candidates for the Reichstag and state parliaments. However, as hard-headed as they were, even the Centralverein leaders were subject to moments of hopefulness, based on a belief that antisemitism, although a present danger, was essentially alien to the German people and that, even if not wholly conquerable, it could be driven to the fringes of politics and public life. As the republic was

²⁶ Gordon, *Hitler, Germans, and the Jewish Question*, 67-71.

disintegrating, neither the leaders of the Centralverein nor those of the much smaller Zionist movement counseled flight.²⁷

In the eyes of posterity, there is something desperate about this optimism. But was it, as many still insist, willful self-delusion? Despite alarming evidence to the contrary, few Jews could have predicted Germany's descent into barbarism. Much more probable, given the prior history of organized antisemitism, was that the forces of order and the legal authorities would continue to protect the lives and rights of Jewish citizens and that the majority of Germans would stand behind these efforts.

The second tentative conclusion calls this last statement into question. Germany's Jews were slowly but surely being abandoned by other Germans. The isolation that would render them ever more vulnerable to Nazi persecution was already in evidence before 1933. Not only were substantially more people, more willing to act against them during the final years of the republic. There were also fewer willing to act on behalf of the rights of Jews. This represented a marked change in their relationship to German society. From the earliest days of antisemitic organizing in the 1880s, Jews had always found important and numerous allies among non-Jews. The Hohenzollern heir to the throne, Friedrich III, condemned antisemitism as the "shame of the century." Thirty eminent men of science and letters put their names to the "Declaration of Notables" that was widely published in the mass circulation press; they called upon all Germans of conscience to resist the attempt to curtail Jewish equality. In 1891, 535 prominent Germans called upon Christians of both churches to join the Association for the Defense against Antisemitism (Abwehr-Verein).²⁸ It was not the number of such individuals or the loftiness of their status that mattered but the fact that they were willing to take a public stand against antisemitic defamation. Such willingness, while never altogether absent in the Weimar Republic, became less and less visible, especially after the Nazi movement achieved a size and a reputation for ruthlessness that a great many Germans found intimidating.

Several telling examples of this chilling effect on German-Jewish relations were apparent during Weimar's last years. The monthly publication of the Centralverein, always aimed at a non-Jewish readership and to involve them in the struggle against antisemitism, had had a

²⁷ On the hectic activity of the CV, the difficulty in mobilizing their own members, and fluctuating levels of confidence about the future, see Paucker, *Der jüdische Abwehrkampf*, 17-22.

²⁸ Levy, *Downfall*, 136, 145-46. During the empire period, the Abwehr-Verein remained largely non-Jewish, numbering nearly 13,000 members by 1893.

circulation of 50-60,000 in its heyday; by 1932, many subscribers, leery of receiving a journal with so obvious a Jewish identity, requested it not be sent. The Abwehr-Verein newspaper, with a readership of 25,000 in the late 1920s experienced a sharp drop-off in circulation, despite its being sent out in a plain brown wrapper.²⁹ The organization, after many years of valiant struggle, grew more cautious in its interventions and began a process of withdrawal that ended with its voluntary dissolution. The Nazis reinforced this sort of squeamishness in dramatic fashion. In Berlin on the eve of the Jewish New Year in September 1931, 500 SA-men waylaid what they presumed to be Jews (many mistakes were made), hurling antisemitic insults, and beating up several. This took place in the heart of the capital's main shopping district, the Kurfürstendamm. Many perpetrators were arrested, tried, and convicted; the usual outrage over lawlessness, the rebelliousness of youth, and the damage done to Berlin's reputation made the rounds of the daily press. But few wanted to discuss the antisemitic motivation for the riot, although the choice of targets and locale made this absolutely transparent. The Centralverein called for the formation of a "front of the decent people" (*Front der Anständigen*), certainly mindful that there had been a time when it would not have been necessary to make such a plea. In any case, no such public gesture to defend Jews against Nazi hooliganism materialized.³⁰

That their abandonment was in full progress by this time must have been depressingly clear to contemporary Jews, even for those who clung to the hope that the storm would pass and things would return to normal. This attempt to keep the faith became ever more grueling, as the signs of Jewish isolation mounted. An emphatic reminder of this was the Reichstag election of July 30, 1932, when 13,779,111 Germans voted Nazi. They were surely not all antisemites, not as defined in this essay, at any rate. But if they were not people who were willing to act *against* Jews or even anxious to have others act in their name, they were also not people who were willing to act *for* them, to protect their rights as citizens and human beings, at one of the last moments when to do so would have cost them little.

²⁹ On the CV, see Paucker, *Der jüdische Abwehrkampf*, 51. On the Abwehr-Verein, see Barbara Suchy, "The Verein zur Abwehr des Antisemitismus (2): From the First World War to Its Dissolution in 1933," *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 30 (1985): 98-99.

³⁰ Walter, *Antisemitische Kriminalität*, 211-22. On the gradual isolation of Jews, see Cornelia Hecht, *Deutsche Juden und Antisemitismus in der Weimarer Republik* (Bonn, 2003), 400-03.