

## Foreword: Right-wing Jewry in Weimar Germany

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There always are multiple ways of being Jewish and multiple understandings of Jewish identity among Jews. This reality is generally apparent in the present, but often forgotten about the past. Especially when one thinks of German Jewry in the decades following emancipation, a received image quickly takes hold. Predominantly liberal, brainy, upwardly mobile, and bourgeois, the community's prototypical representatives are gifted cultural figures such as the painter Max Liebermann, the director Max Reinhardt, the philosophers Hermann Cohen and Martin Buber, the Nobel Prize winners Fritz Haber, Richard Willstätter, and Paul Ehrlich or the great commercial dynasties such as the Warburgs, the Bleichröders, the Arnholds, the Tietzes, the Shockens, the Mosses, and the Rathenaus. Insofar as one references politics, the memorable figures are generally on the centre to left, from the relatively moderate Ludwig Bamberger, Eduard Lasker, and Eduard Bernstein to the more radical Rosa Luxemburg. Not a single outspoken nationalist or militarist appears on the list, in the latter case in part because of the exclusion of Jews from the officer corps of all but a few, south German states and the impediments to Jews' ascent even there.

The subjects of this volume, therefore, represent a surprising and unfamiliar strand of German Jewry. Specialists in its history may know that Paul Nikolaus Cossmann, who converted to Catholicism, founded the *Süddeutsche Monatshefte* in 1903 and used it to favor pan-German and völkisch policies; that Georg Solmssen and Louis Hagen, both prominent and baptized bankers, belonged to the extreme right-wing Vaterlandspartei; that Georg's father Arthur Salomonsohn and the Prussian lawyer and politician Leopold Levy allied with Admiral Tirpitz and the annexationists in 1917; and that a leader of the Freikorps unit that suppressed the second Bavarian Soviet Republic was a Jew named Cap-

tain Fritz Rothenheim.<sup>1</sup> But such knowledge is not widespread. The identification of German Jewry with political liberalism remains predominant and largely justified.

Insofar as the Verband nationaldeutscher Juden (VnJ) founded by Max Naumann in 1921 has attracted scholarly attention, it has done so more outside of Germany than within. In 1980, the same year that the Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook published Carl J. Rheins' ground-breaking essay on the group, Donald L. Niewyk included a chapter on it in his pioneering but too little-known study of Jews in the Weimar Republic. Niewyk presents Naumann and the VnJ as determined proponents of seeing Jews, not as a transnational race, but as members of distinct communities formed by and identified with the culture of the nations they inhabit. This made Naumann and his organization dedicated opponents of both Zionists whose goal was a specifically Jewish national homeland and of Jews they called "In-Betweeners" ("Zwischenschichtler") who conceived of their brethren as both part of their countries in most respects and apart from their fellow citizens in others, notably religious practice. More specifically, the VnJ's stance translated into opposition to the presence of Eastern European Jews in Germany; criticism of the nation's predominant Jewish organization, the Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens (CV), for its affiliation with German liberalism and belief that antisemitism could be fought with reason and facts; and openness to alliance with German right-wing parties on the basis of a shared nationalism so intense that it led Naumann and his followers to underestimate Hitler's hostility and the urgency of flight.<sup>2</sup> Some years after Niewyk, Peter G. J. Pulzer's publications drew greater attention to Naumann, the VnJ, and their positions, stressing repudiation of any sense of common identity with non-German Jews, advocacy of "cooperation between all Germans ... on the common ground of German patriotism and love for their German fatherland," and his endorsement of the "national movement" in August 1932.<sup>3</sup>

In German, the earliest extensive treatment of Naumann and his group discussed them primarily in terms of their effect on that book's subject, the Centralverein. Avraham Barkai regarded the VnJ as influential in provoking

1 Pulzer, Peter G. J.: *Jews and the German State. The Political History of a Minority, 1848–1933*, Oxford 1992, pp. 172, 202, 204, 212–13.

2 Niewyk, Donald L.: *The Jews in Weimar Germany*, Baton Rouge 1980, pp. 165–77.

3 Pulzer: *Jews and the German State*, pp. 234–35, 318–19.

the CV to issue defensive statements asserting members' patriotism and reticence about the immigration of Ostjuden, but as otherwise so marginal to Jewish life in Germany that the organization considered expelling Naumann and his acolytes more trouble than it was worth.<sup>4</sup> Only in recent years, as the editors of this volume note in their Introduction, have German historians begun to deepen our knowledge of the organization and its arguments, a process to which this book now adds.

Events in Germany after 1933 dealt harshly with the illusions of the little VnJ, along with those of the slightly larger Reichsbund jüdischer Frontsoldaten (RjF), which insisted that the solidarity of the "front-fighting experience" in World War I should cancel out all claims of Jews' distinctness from other Germans, let alone of Jewish disloyalty.<sup>5</sup> Both groups' insistence that right-wing German nationalists could be won over by an argument that "we are more like Germans than like other Jews" fell, for the most part, on willfully deaf ears. Most Jews during the Weimar era anticipated this and preferred the more measured, if temporizing stance of the CV. They sensed that trying to convince antisemites to abandon their core belief in the eternally and collectively alien nature of Jews was a fool's errand. Since the belief rested on nothing but itself, it never could (or can) be disproven, only repeatedly and relentlessly rejected.

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4 Barkai, Avraham: "Wehr Dich!" Der Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens 1893–1938, Munich 2002, pp. 138–142, 305, 307.

5 Two recent studies that are illuminating on the RjF are Crim, Brian E.: *Antisemitism in the German Military Community and the Jewish Response, 1914–1938*, Lanham, Maryland 2014, and Geheran, Michael: *Comrades Betrayed: Jewish World War I Veterans under Hitler*, Ithaca 2020. On both the RjF and VnJ, see also Lewy, Guenter: *Jews and Germans. Promise, Tragedy, and the Search for Normalcy*, Philadelphia 2020, pp. 55–62.

