Jews and Revolutions: From Vormärz to the Weimar Republic Jerusalem

Veranstalter: Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, Berlin; Leo Baeck Institute, Jerusalem; Martin Buber Chair for Jewish Religion-Philosophy, University of Frankfurt Main; Centre for German-Jewish Studies, University of Sussex
Datum, Ort: 28.02.2011–02.03.2011, Jerusalem
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What is the connection between political and social continuity, radical change and the Jewish People? Did the fact that many Jews throughout history took part in revolutions have something to do with their ethnic identities, or was it just fortuitous? These were some of the main questions dealt with in an international conference, which took place in Jerusalem under the auspices of: the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation; the Leo Baeck Institute, Jerusalem; the Martin Buber Chair for Jewish Religion-Philosophy at the University of Frankfurt and the Centre for German-Jewish Studies at the University of Sussex. Held at the Leo Baeck institute, in the midst of Jerusalem's picturesque neighbourhood of Katamon, the conference dealt with the tension accompanying the lives of Jews, who acted in the 19th and 20th Centuries within the historical dialectics of continuity and radical change. Since most of the papers of the conference dealt with individuals who strove to change the historical reality of the Jewish People, its interest lied also in the field of biography and biographical research.

The conference opened with a special evening at the Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies, in the presence of the German ambassador to Israel Harald Kindermann. In the keynote lecture MOSHE ZUCKERMANN (Tel Aviv) offered a broad theoretical introduction to the subject emphasizing its ambivalent and dialectical nature, where parallel forces of continuity and change can be discerned as existing in the different Jewish worlds in interaction with their non-Jewish surroundings. In the second part of the evening songs by Jewish composers such as Arnold Schönberg and Kurt Weil were performed by the Atar Piano Trio Ensemble.

The organizers of the conference chose to present the historical subject chronologically, and accordingly the first day was dedicated to the 19th century. CHRISTIAN WIESE (Frankfurt and Sussex) opened the conference. In his introductory words he emphasized the need to avoid generalizations while approaching such a rich and complex subject, and encouraged the participants to expose the contradictions and ambiguities which are part of it. Wiese identified the innovative potential of the academic event not by offering a coherent narrative, but in its incomplete and fragmented character which reflected the highly complex, diverse and multifaceted phenomenon which stood at the centre of this conference.

The first speaker was WILLIAM HISCOTT (Potsdam), who talked about the Jewish writer Saul Ascher. Hiscott presented some concepts of Ascher's writings from the philosophical standpoint of the radical enlightenment, depicting him as a Jew yearning for freedom in absolutist Prussia. The paper of RACHEL LIVNEH-FREUDENTHAL (Jerusalem) discussed Leopold Zunz as a Jewish rebel through analysing his political world view and his concept of Judaism. According to Livneh-Freudenthal, Zunz' encouragement of democracy was a revolutionary act within Jewish history. In his lecture, ZVI TAUBER (Tel Aviv) pointed out affinities between Heinrich Heine and Karl Marx which are discernible in their writings around 1844, when they worked together. Tauber placed special emphasis on their concepts of the relationship between enlightened theory and revolutionary praxis.

The focal point of WOLFGANG GASSER's paper (St. Pölten) was a diary written by the journalist Benjamin Kewall. The manuscript, written in German with Hebrew characters, allows a glance into the events of the 1848 revolution in Vienna, told from a personal perspective. LOUISE HECHT (Olomouc) portrayed the life of Ludwig August Frankl von Hochwart, who took part in the 1848 revolution in Vienna. After the failure of the revolution he dedicated himself to public and philanthropic activity within the Jewish community of the city. In his talk, MICHAEL L. MILLER

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(Budapest) focused on a circle of German-speaking Jewish refugees, sharing a revolutionary background. Miller showed how their shared Jewish origin shaped their intellectual worlds and impelled them to take part in international political movements.

The first afternoon session began with the presentation of MARIO KESSLER (Potsdam and Harvard) dealing with Ferdinand Lassalle, the leader of the early German Labor Movement. The paper discussed Lassale's biography as well as his attitudes towards the so called „Jewish Question", and his ambivalent relations with Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. LARS FISCHER's (Cambridge) paper examined the way Marxist perceptions of the society paradigm shaped revolutionary theory as well as notions regarding the so-called „Jewish Question", by discussing Ferdinand Tönnies' interpretation of Marx. The last panel of the day was dedicated to the interaction between theory and praxis in the lives of two prominent figures in the Socialist Movement. MICHAEL LÖWY (Paris) talked about Rosa Luxemburg's philosophy of praxis. The idea that action is at the foundation of everything is, according to Löwy, the central theme in her political writings. Concluding the day, ROBERT WISTRICH (Jerusalem) spoke about the German politician Eduard Bernstein and his attitude towards the so called „Jewish Question", and the connection between his revision of Marxism and the shift in his position regarding Jewish national aspirations.

The first session of the second day of the conference started with a presentation by STEVEN SCHOUTEN (The Hague). Through examining the early life of the Jewish German writer and anarchist Ernst Toller, Schouten asked questions regarding the connection between Jewish identity and revolutionary thought. SHULAMIT VOLKOV (Tel Aviv) opened another dimension by analyzing Walter Rathenau as a public figure who conceived of himself as a revolutionary at the time but, from the view of the historian, did not contribute at all to revolutionary thought or activism. The paper of MIRJAM ZADOFF (Munich) dealt with the Communist activist and revolutionary Werner Scholem. Locating Scholem's life within networks of family and professional relations, she drew a portrait of this forgotten Jewish revolutionary. In the discussion following the panel, questions were raised regarding the importance of the psychological dimension in order to understand the lives and complex identities of revolutionaries throughout history.

ULRICH WYRWA (Berlin and Potsdam) opened the second session of the day. While talking about three of the main figures of the Bavarian Revolution in Munich (1918-19) - Kurt Eisner, Gustav Landauer and Eugen Leviné - Wyrwa posed the question of how much Jewishness is there in the lives and works of Jewish revolutionaries. KIM WÜNSCHMANN (London and Jerusalem) presented a comparative view of three prominent personalities of political life in the Weimar Republic: Erich Mühsam, Hans Litten and Werner Hirsch. The discussion after the panel offered interesting remarks regarding the role of Jews, some of whom were anti-revolutionary and others, part of right-wing revolutionary movements.

In the afternoon session, SHARON GORDON (Jerusalem) analysed the changes in Max Nordau's life through the prism of the religious term 'conversion,' showing that his revolutionary attitude towards secular Zionism was rooted both in Christian theology and in traditional Jewish practice. A second paper on Werner Scholem was presented by RALF HOFFROGGE (Potsdam), who described the adolescent brothers Werner and Gershom Scholem as a symbol for Socialism and political Zionism, basing his argument on their correspondence in 1914. On the aesthetics of anarchism in the „Hashomer Hatzair" youth movement spoke OFER NORDHEIMER NUR (Tel Aviv), regarding eros and tragedy as the two pillars of the image of the New Jew in the movement in the 1920s.

The concluding session of the conference took a more philosophical approach. An interpretation of Walter Benjamin's messianism was made by SAMI KHATIB (Berlin), who argued that Benjamin's revolutionary concept of history accounts not only for an actual past oppressed by official historiography but also for a past which actually did not take place. CHRISTOPH SCHULTE (Potsdam) offered a view of the phenomenon of messianism without a messiah in the thought of

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German-speaking Jewish intellectuals. In his talk, Schulte referred to scholars such as Moses Hess, Herman Cohen, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Theodor Adorno and Jaques Derrida.

In his concluding remarks, Moshe Zuckermann pointed out different aspects of the broad theme which were not represented in the conference, for example Jewish revolutionaries whose contributions were in the cultural, not political spheres. And indeed, the lively discussions and comments after the panels strengthened the feeling that there is still much to be said in this field, and that we have barely scratched the surface of this fascinating old-new historical subject.

Conference Overview:

Keynote lecture
Moshe Zuckermann (Tel Aviv): „Jews and Revolutions - Aspects of a Modern Phenomenon"

Opening
Christian Wiese (Frankfurt - Sussex)

Panel I: From Vormärz to 1848
Chair: Christian Wiese

William Hiscott (Potsdam): „Saul Ascher: The First Jewish Revolutionary Thinker of Modern Era"

Rachel Livneh-Freudenthal (Jerusalem): „Leopold Zunz: From Reform to Revolution"

Zvi Tauber (Tel Aviv): „Enlightened Theory and Revolutionary Praxis: Heine and Marx"

Panel II: 1848 and Aftermath
Chair: Michael K. Silber (Jerusalem)

Wolfgang Gasser (St. Pölten): „The 1848 Vienne Revolution Based on an Example of a Diary"

Louise Hecht (Olomouc): „A Revolutionary with a Dagger: The Exemplary Life of Ludwig August Frankl von Hochwarth (1810-1894)"

Michael L. Miller (Budapest): „From Radicals to Refugees: Jewish Revolutionaries and their Émigré Networks after 1848"

Panel III: Theorists of Revolution
Chair: Christoph Schulte (Potsdam)

Mario Kessler (Potsdam/Harvard): „The 'Romantic Revolutionary': Ferdinand Lassalle and the Early German Labor Movement"

Lars Fischer (Cambridge): „Marx, the 'Jewish Question' and the Community/Society Paradigm"

Panel IV: From Theory to Praxis
Chair: Angelika Timm (Tel Aviv)

Michael Löwy (Paris): „The Spark Flares up in Action: Rosa Luxemburg's Philosophy of Praxis"

Robert Wistrich (Jerusalme): „Jews in the German Workers Movement: The Case of Eduard Bernstein"

Panel V: Jewish Perspectives on the 1918/19 Revolution
Chair: Itta Shedletzky (Jerusalem)

Steven Schouten (The Hague): „Ernst Toller: A Revolutionary Jew?"

Shulamit Volkov (Tel Aviv): „Walter Rathenau and the 'Three Dimensional Revolution" of 1918"

Mirjam Zadoff (Munich/Jerusalem): „Werner Scholem: Towards a Biography of a Revolutionary"

Panel VI: The 1918/19 Revolution and the Weimar Republic
Chair: Steven Aschheim (Jerusalem)

Ulrich Wyrwa (Berlin/Potsdam): „Bavarian Revolution and Soviet Republic in Munich 1918/19: Jews as Revolutionary Subjects"

Kim Wünschmann (London/Jerusalem): „Erich Mühsam, Hans Litten and Werner Hirsch: Revolutionary Works and Jewish Identities 1918-1933/34"

Panel VII: Zionism, Socialism and the „New Man"
Chair: Joseph Mali (Tel Aviv)

Sharon Gordon (Jerusalem): „Max Nordau's Zionist Revolution: A Secular Conversion of the Individual Jew"

Ralf Hoffrogge (Potsdam): „Utopia and Struggle: Werner Scholem between Zionism and Socialism"

Ofer Nordheimer Nur (Tel Aviv): „Tragic Man: The Aesthetic of Anarchism in the

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'Hashomer Hatzair' Youth Movement in the 1920s"

Panel VIII: Utopianism and Messianism
Chair: Moshe Zuckermann

Sami Khatib (Berlin): „A 'Weak Messianic Power': Towards Walter Benjamin's Revolutionary Messianism"

Christoph Schulte (Potsdam): „Messianism without Messiah: Jewish Philosophy of History and Messianism"

Concluding Remarks
Moshe Zuckermann

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