

German-Jewish Agency in Times of Crisis, 1914–1938

Veranstalter: David Jünger, Weidenfeld Institute of Jewish Studies – Centre for German-Jewish Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton; Miriam Rürup, Institute for the History of the German Jews, Hamburg; Stefanie Schüler-Springorum, Centre for Research on Antisemitism Berlin, and Academic Working Group of the Leo Baeck Institute – WAG; Anna Ullrich, Center for Holocaust Studies at the Leibniz Institute for Contemporary History, Munich

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German-Jewish history of the 20th century appears to be at a turning point. If its former objective has been to uncover its constraints and compulsions, recent research has increasingly challenged this perspective, instead highlighting the spaces and opportunities of Jewish self-determination within a historically hostile environment leading up to the Holocaust. At the core of this critique stands the concept of agency, a term that is far from new in itself – its origins could well be traced back to E.P. Thompson's 1963 seminal study *The Making of the English Working Class* –, but has gained great popularity over recent years.

Such were the observations that called for the conference held at the University of Sussex. As David Jünger pointed out in his introductory remarks: a contemporary scholarship tended to focus on choices instead of coercion, thus placing a „new emphasis on Jewish agency“. The conference's call was not to further promote „agency“ as a new agenda for German-Jewish history, but rather to critically examine it, and in doing so, to re-evaluate the place of Jews in German history.

Following chronological order, the opening panel focused on the First World War. As TIM GRADY (Chester) laid out, the prevailing narrative of the Jewish engagement in the war was one of „betrayed loyalty“. While many German-Jewish soldiers regarded it as a window to gain citizenship, the Jew Count of 1916 and the post-war stab-in-the-back-myth

proved the limitations, if not the hopelessness, of their endeavour. Yet, Grady argued, such a perspective remained detached from the war itself, which offered little room for agency to all its frontline participants. The challenge, then, is to study the rise of anti-semitism through the lens of a shared wartime history.

SARAH PANTER (Mainz) set out to question the notion of a restrained space for Jewish agency within the Great War. Rather, she felt, it functioned as a watershed for both disillusionment and re-empowerment of German Jews. Whereas the manifold activities of Jewish organisations to confront the Jew Count remained ultimately unheard, Panter offered a rich comparative perspective on the presence of Jewish chaplains at the front. As field rabbis such as Leo Baeck gained importance to Jewish soldiers, Panter made the case for a display of Jewish agency in religious service that extended beyond national borders.

The second panel took a more theoretical turn, focusing directly on the analytical approach at stake: agency. Addressing the concept from a philosophical standpoint, ANTHONY KAUDERS (Newcastle-under-Lyme) distinguished between individual and collective agency. The former, he pointed out, was about intentional decision-making under restrictive circumstances, the latter referred to the formation of collective identity. Applied to German-Jewish history, Kauders placed agency along the lines of acting and reacting, which German-Jewish lives became ever more contingent on after 1938. Still, Kauders wondered whether the concept of agency could lead to new questions that would not repeat the dichotomies of the past.

If Kauders closed his talk with an essentially open-ended question, LISA SILVERMAN (Milwaukee) offered an even more sceptical perspective on the analytical potentials of agency. Jewish history, she argued, remained generally biased in favour of an anti-semitic model that sees the Jew as the Other. The concept of agency attempted to challenge this perspective. However, it did so only by neglecting the categories of distinction of how Jewish lives were formed. As a way out, Silverman proposed an alternative model of „Jewish difference“. Drawing from the core-

concepts of Gender history, it placed the relation between a socially constructed ideal of the Jew and the actual Jewish person, who is both exposed to and detached from them, at the centre of historical analysis.

The third panel returned to historical case studies. PHILIPP NIELSEN (New York) presented a paper on a distinctive group of German-Jewish intellectuals such as Arno Herzberg and Leo Löwenstein who, in the early 1930s, were engaged in right-wing politics. To be sure, their vision of a Third Reich was closer aligned to the Italian case in that it precluded antisemitism. Still, Nielsen argued, they presented a difficult case in the study of agency, as their ambitions, however marginal, seemed so greatly at odds with the hostile environment in which they were situated.

STEFAN VOGT (Frankfurt am Main) examined the Zionist self-concepts from the Weimar Republic, which, he argued, closely resembled contemporary identity politics. As such, they proved to be both empowering and repressive. Empowering in their crucial emphasis on Jewish difference, which provided an effective response to antisemitism. At the same time, however, it was precisely the insistence on a specific Jewish difference, if not superiority, that carried a fundamentally repressive notion, thus highlighting once again the ambivalence of collective agency.

MARTINA STEER (Vienna) presented a third case of distinctive German-Jewish engagement in the interwar years: the 200th birthday of Moses Mendelssohn in 1929. Through an analysis of the many books, articles, as well as the commemorative events themselves, German-speaking Jews used Mendelssohn's heritage as proof of their long-lasting cultural achievements. While the celebrations were indeed widely observed, Steer also stressed the limitations of their endeavour, which became all too visible in the continuing exclusion of Mendelssohn from the literary canon. Nevertheless, his commemoration shed light on the meaning of memory in the context of agency.

MICHAEL BERKOWITZ (London) delivered a keynote lecture on the emigration of the Warburg Institute to London in 1933. Its relocation, he pointed out, was largely due to the diplomatic genius of the institute's

director, Fritz Saxl, who managed to convincingly frame its universalistic approach within the British landscape of higher education. Furthermore, members such as Walter Gersheim actively reflected the experience of emigration in their works. Leaving behind previously learned conventions, Gersheim's photographic experiments would significantly impact the perception of photography as art. Berkowitz maintained, however, that the Warburg Institute remains largely underappreciated as a refugee-driven institution of historic relevance.

The next panel focused on different facets of German-Jewish agency after 1933. MARTIN JOST (Leipzig) presented a paper on the Jewish involvement at the 1938 Évian Conference. Through an in-depth analysis of the manifold discussions within the German-Jewish community on how to diplomatically engage in the conference, he countered a popular understanding of the Évian Conference as a negation of Jewish agency. Such a conclusion, however, was made merely retrospectively. Instead, Jost argued for an approach to Évian that takes into account the Jewish expectations and initiatives as well, despite their de facto exclusion from the conference's meetings.

Shifting the perspective away from high-level diplomacy to the extreme circumstances of imprisonment, KIM WÜNSCHMANN (Munich) asked about the presence of Jewish agency in pre-war concentration camps. Drawing on memoirs written by former inmates, Wünschmann reconstructed some of the details of camp-life that were not represented in accounts of the perpetrators. In particular, she reconstructed the mechanisms of internal conflict-solving between inmates, which, amongst other ways, included the staging of court-like scenarios to settle disputes. These stories, she argued, not only illustrate the complexity of life within a camp-society, they also opened up the possibility to write a German-Jewish history of the Holocaust in an active voice.

The last panel set out to explore the possibilities of culture as agency. GIDEON REUVENI (Brighton) scrutinised the meaning of the marketplace in the negotiation of Jewish-/non-Jewish identities and relation-

ships. The importance of commerce, after all, was most clearly demonstrated in the efforts to exclude Jews from the marketplace. Nevertheless, Reuveni argued, the Jewish responses were just as manifold. In reaction to boycotts, Jewish newspapers and outlets made great efforts to highlight the Jewish differences in the realm of consumption, thus attempting to turn the experience of economic exclusion into a source of collective empowerment.

JOACHIM SCHLÖR (Southampton) returned to the question of photography as agency. Turning to pictures by Roman Vishniac from the early Weimar Republic as well as Abraham Pisarek's photographs from the 1920s and 1930s, he proposed to view them as complex negotiations of Jewishness and self. While Vishniac's early amateur photography reflected a playful, experimental search of artistic identity, Pisarek's pictures from a decade later functioned as immediate acts of resistance. In each case, however, one would have to momentarily abandon the history that followed them. Only then, Schlör argued, could the potentials of photographic agency be properly understood.

In his concluding remarks, Schlör captured a thought that had been brought up frequently throughout the talks and during the subsequent discussions: As an analytical approach to German-Jewish history, agency demanded a focus on the historically present moment. It could hardly be measured by its consequences. Rather, to focus on experiences and practices, was to leave aside what came after them.

Beyond that, however, there seemed to be little agreement on what agency at its core really meant. As Anna Ullrich argued in the final discussion, agency's appeal on choices – and the manifold discussions leading up to them – could offer a new perspective on the diversity of German-Jewish experiences. Going further, Miriam Rürup stated that the concept called for a reconsideration of the marginalised, even within the marginalised. As such, it challenged a continuing all too dominant understanding of German-Jewish history as a history of modernisation and the bourgeoisie. Stefan Vogt further substantiated this argument by placing agency at the centre of Postcolonial and Subaltern Studies.

And yet, for all its promises, the conference's participants also stated severe doubts on the analytical potentials of agency. However well-intended the empowering appeal of agency might be, the focus on Jewish choices stood at risk of neglecting the circumstances in which they were made. As Lisa Silverman remarked, this became all too evident in a recent emphasis on the rather critical aspects of Jewish history such as homophobia or right-wing ideologies. While the related research certainly helped to diversify the Jewish experiences beyond a mere victimisation, their singularisation of Jewish self-determination tended to gloom the structures in which they were embedded. In a similar vein, Anthony Kauders asked whether the conference had framed agency all too positively, stressing its liberating notion at the price of leaving out the responsibilities that came along with historic agency.

But ultimately, the conference was not about agreeing on a specific understanding of agency. Instead, the concept facilitated a debate on the analytical directions of the field. As Tim Grady argued, towards the end, it functioned as a vehicle for a broader discussion, which was about the place of German-Jewish history – its periodical, theoretical and chronological markers as well as its relation to transnational and German history. Where agency will be placed along these lines, was essentially left open. At the same time, however, it showed the healthy state of a field that is critically reflecting its own progress.

Conference Overview:

David Jünger (Brighton), Anna Ullrich (München), Miriam Rürup (Hamburg), Stefanie Schüler-Springorum (Berlin): Introduction:

Panel 1: First World War

Chair: Anna Ullrich

Tim Grady (Chester): German Jews and the First World War: A Deadly Legacy

Sarah Panter (Mainz): Beyond Marginalisation: The (German-)Jewish Soldiers' Agency in Times of War, 1914–1918

Panel 2: Theorising German-Jewish Agency

Chair: Gideon Reuveni

Anthony Kauders (Newcastle-under-Lyme): Was heißt und zu welchem Ende brauchen wir agency in der deutsch-jüdischen Geschichtsschreibung?

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Lisa Silverman (Milwaukee): Jewish Difference as a Category of Analysis in German History

Panel 3: Imperial and Weimar Germany

Chair: Miriam Rürup

Philipp Nielsen (New York): Creating a Space for a Jewish „New Right“ in Weimar Germany

Stefan Vogt (Frankfurt am Main): Zionism as Identity Politics: Making Sense of German Zionists' Attempts to „Understand“ Antisemites

Martina Steer (Vienna): Mendelssohn in Berlin. Memory and Agency on the Verge

Evening Lecture

Chair: Stefanie Schüler-Springorum

Michael Berkowitz (London): Improvisation and Agency: Between Art History, Photography, and Public History

Panel 4: Nazi Germany

Chair: David Jünger

Gabriele Anderl (Vienna): Deceptive Security. Austrian Jews vis-à-vis Nazi Germany. 1933–1938 (cancelled)

Martin Jost (Leipzig): „It is not about your prestige, it is about our future.“ Possibilities and Expectations of German Jews at the Évian Conference

Kim Wünschmann (Munich): Jewish Agency in the Extreme Situation: Writing about Antisemitic Terror in the Active Voice

Panel 5: Culture as Agency

Chair: Stefanie Schüler-Springorum

Gideon Reuveni (Brighton): The Good, the Bad and the Marketplace: Boycott, Economic Rationality and Jewish Consumers in Inter-war Germany

Joachim Schlör (Southampton): Photography as Agency: Self-assurance through Documentation in the Works of Roman Vishniac and Abraham Pisarek

Final Discussion