

8. The History of the Jews in Europe during the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries



A Jewish family enjoys an outing in pre-war Berlin, Germany, 1929.

Photo: Peter Goldberg

Gift of the Beate Klarsfeld Foundation

*Courtesy of the Museum of Jewish Heritage—
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The History of the Jews in Europe during the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

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When discussing the experience of the Jewish people, it is important to study Jewish life before the tragedy of the Holocaust. Jews were human beings with their own history, culture and individualities. Regarding them only as victims means to dehumanize them. This paper will describe the factors affecting the integration of Jews into society and the social and economic conditions governing their lives before the Holocaust.

1. Emancipation

Jews had lived in many parts of Europe ever since they came here with the Romans. They were regarded as a special nation. Under Christian rule in the Holy Roman Empire they became very restricted in their freedom and their rights. In the eighteenth century in all of Europe, Jews still did not have the freedom of movement and could settle only in territories where they had received special permission. Many rulers had completely closed their countries to the Jews. Even when admitted, Jews in many States could not buy land or houses. In some cities they had to stay in assigned areas called

“ghettos”, which they could only leave during the day. Also, Jews were highly restricted in their occupations. In most States all jobs were forbidden to them except trading and money lending.

French Jews were the first to be emancipated in Europe. In 1791 they received legal equality by the French revolutionary parliament, which meant full citizenship without any conditions. But this model of instant emancipation was not followed by the rest of Europe. While in the Western and Central European States, including England and Italy, Jews finally became emancipated step by step during the nineteenth century, this did not happen in Imperial Russia where most of the European Jewish population lived. The Tsarist government forced Jews to settle only in a certain area of Russia, the so called “pale” or district of settlement. Here and in the areas Russia had taken over after the division of Poland, most Jews lived in great poverty, crammed into towns often making up the majority of the inhabitants. Many of them had no jobs at all and relied on alms. Only some members of the small Jewish upper class were permitted to live in Moscow or St. Petersburg. The legal discrimination of the Jews even increased during the nineteenth century because the Tsarist government regarded the Jews to be a potentially revolutionary element. In 1887, a quota system for Jewish students was introduced, which caused many Russian Jews to study in Germany, Austria or Switzerland. After Tsar Alexander II was assassinated in 1881, many anti-Jewish riots and pogroms took place in Russia until the First World War. This and the extreme poverty of the Jews led to their mass emigration. About two million Jews left Russia between 1881 and 1914, mostly emigrating to the United States. It was only when the October Revolution ended Tsarist rule that the Russian Jews finally became emancipated.

It had taken 125 years for emancipation to become effective for all Jews in Europe. But this did not mean they really enjoyed all constitutional rights. Quite often administrations would undermine the constitution. In Imperial Germany, for instance, it was almost

impossible for a Jew to become a full professor of humanities or a member of the officers' corps, even if highly qualified. Such positions were just not given to Jews. So when analysing the situation of a minority, it is not enough to consider their legal status but the social practices have to be looked at as well. Emancipation does not work if society does not accept a minority as equal. And the acceptance of the Jews was a factor that greatly varied from state to state and also over time.

Generally speaking, one may say that acceptance depended on the impact anti-Semitism had on a society. In Russia, the large Jewish minority regarded itself as a nation and was less acculturated than Jews in the West, which made their position in society even more endangered. Anti-Semitism existed more or less in all of the nineteenth century European societies, increasingly so up to the Second World War. The economic and social problems that accompanied the rise of capitalism and industrialization were often blamed on the Jews. But while in the East anti-Semitism even led to extended pogroms, in the West it was still mostly expressed in print and by putting up social barriers for Jews. The social upward mobility of the western Jews during the nineteenth century especially frightened the bourgeois middle class that became the main supporter of anti-Semitic ideas.

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2. Acculturation

As mentioned, in Central Europe acculturation was regarded as a precondition for emancipation. Acculturation is a modern term. In the nineteenth century, the term assimilation was used, which implies a much more radical adjustment, even to the point of absorption. Jews were supposed to give up their national culture in order to become culturally German or French etc. Some supporters

of assimilation assumed that the Jewish minority would eventually even accept Christianity and finally vanish by intermarriage. In contrast to this, acculturation is a less radical and more academic term which implies that people accept a new culture or part of it, but do not give up completely their own traditions. This term describes more accurately what really happened in Western as well as—to a lesser degree—in Eastern European societies. Why did the question

of acculturation become so important in Western Europe during emancipation?

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Before emancipation Jews had traditionally been a separate nation with their own culture. They had not only their own religion, but their own communities, their own schools and occupations, and they dressed, wrote and spoke differently. This was regarded as a barrier to full citizenship in many modern nation States. Jews were expected to open up to

the surrounding world and to leave their cultural ghetto to become individual Jewish citizens. This was a revolutionary change which most Jews in the West were eventually ready to accept. But in Poland and Russia the large Jewish population for the most part maintained their cultural traditions. A symbolic expression of this was their language, called Yiddish, which is written in Hebrew letters but derived from medieval German and was enriched with Hebrew and Polish vocabulary. In the eighteenth century, Yiddish had still been spoken by Jews all over Europe in an eastern and a western version. That made connections possible between all of the European Jewish communities. In a certain respect, Jews in pre-modern times were a transnational European community. This became visible, for instance, in marriage networks or in the student bodies of the famous Talmud schools for advanced religious studies. But there never existed any religious or political umbrella organization for all these European Jewish communities. Each was governing itself

independently by a community board which also hired a rabbi if the community could afford it.

Naturally there had been religious and cultural differences between Jews in Eastern and Western Europe, but they were not so important as long as all of European Jewry shared its traditional life and common culture. This ended in the second half of the eighteenth century when Haskala, the Jewish enlightenment, originated in Germany. It was this movement that first opened the Jewish mind to the culture of Europe. Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786) in Berlin, himself an orthodox Jew, became the best known representative of the Haskala and advocated Jewish emancipation. He also translated the Hebrew bible into German in order to teach Jews the language of the surrounding culture. This translation was banned by Polish rabbis who felt the bible should only be read in the holy Hebrew language.

From now on cultural and religious differences between eastern and western Jews became much stronger and soon alienated them from each other. In the West, Jews were fast to embrace contemporary culture. While Mendelssohn had been combining Jewish and European culture, the next generation started to neglect Jewish traditions and advocated religious reforms in Judaism. They gave up speaking western Yiddish, learned less Hebrew and became culturally German. The Jewish religion, which had formerly dominated almost every aspect of their lives, was subjected to reforms in order to better adjust to modern life. This was the birth of liberal Judaism.

This cultural revolution that took place within only about two generations, shocked most Jews in Eastern Europe while a minority of them was attracted to it. But in Poland, Russia and Lithuania, the Haskala never took deeper roots. The poor masses continued their traditional life observing Jewish ritual law. The Tsarist government tried with little success to force them into modern life by founding Jewish schools with secular subjects in the curriculum. Eastern

Jews kept speaking Yiddish and an important literature developed in this language. Still, at the end of the nineteenth century even here changes became visible. The extreme lack of work forced some Jews into the factories turning them into industrial workers. Here they encountered socialist ideas and union life. In 1897, Jews founded the “Bund”, the Federation of Jewish Workers from Lithuania, Russia and Poland. This organization acted as trade union and became part of the Russian Socialist Party. Besides this Jewish labour movement the Jewish national movement had its origin in Eastern Europe as well. Oppression by poverty and pogroms made many Jews look for a solution. Millions left for the United States. Because eastern Jews perceived themselves as a separate Jewish nation, some saw the solution in the return to Zion and the founding of a Jewish state.

In Western Europe, the Zionist movement faced strong opposition from most Jews. They had not only become acculturated but were by now patriotic citizens of their countries and in large part, became middle class. They felt threatened by Zionism because they had a lot to lose. They did not want their loyalty to their country to be questioned or to endanger their citizenship. Thus, in Western Europe the Zionist movement grew very slowly and mostly among the young. Very few western Jews left for Palestine before 1933.

3. Demography, urbanization and migration

Up to the Second World War, Europe was the centre of all Jews in the world. In 1939, at the beginning of the war, 58 per cent of the Jewish world population still lived in Europe—more than half of the world Jewry became endangered by the Holocaust.

The distribution of the Jewish population in Europe was very uneven. Before 1880, about 4.2 million Jews lived in Eastern Europe, mostly in small towns of Russia, Poland and Lithuania, compared to 2.5 million living in Western and Central European States. About half a million Jews lived in Imperial Germany, amounting to only less than 1 per cent of the German population. In France and Great

Britain, the Jewish population was even smaller. Up to 1918, Poland had not existed as a separate state any more, but when it came into being again it had about 3.3 million Jewish citizens who made up 10 per cent of the Polish population. This was the European state most densely populated by Jews.

Ever since Western European Jewry became emancipated and Jews were able to move about freely, they migrated to the cities where they had better opportunities to earn a living, expand their businesses, study or start a career. This resulted in rapidly increasing Jewish urbanization. After the First World War, large Jewish communities had developed in the capitals. The concentration of the Jewish population in large cities had a strong impact on their lifestyle and made them more visible in the economy and in the culture. The newcomers to city life acculturated very fast, because it was mostly the younger generation that often moved to the city for a better education. Social upward mobility increased and many Jews, except the recent immigrants, moved up into the bourgeois middle class. More and more western Jews dropped all religious practices. Many developed a secular Jewish identity, joining Jewish organizations and marrying only Jews.

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4. Jewish occupational structure

The occupations of Jews in Eastern and Western Europe showed similarities but also obvious differences. In the twentieth century, at least half or more of the Jews in the West and in the East remained in their traditional occupations of trade and commerce. This sector of the economy offered new opportunities ever since industrialization had greatly increased the production of consumer goods. While in Eastern Europe most Jews just barely made a living in petty trade, western Jews developed new careers in commerce. Jews who had

been peddlers now became shopkeepers, sales representatives or even wholesale merchants. Jews also founded the first department stores and the first mail order businesses. Some even moved from commerce into production, opened printing offices and publishing houses, and very successfully entered the garment industry. In Germany, Jews also became entrepreneurs in the metal, chemical and electrical industries, as well as in coal mining. European Jews continued to be active in banking and in financing industrialization.

In many western cities like Berlin, Hamburg or Vienna, an extended Jewish middle class developed in the nineteenth century. Jews increasingly entered the universities and became professionals. Most of the Jewish students studied medicine or trained to become lawyers to be self-employed in order to avoid potential anti-Semitism by employers. The proportion of Jews studying in universities and entering the professions increased, which, when compared to the Jewish population at the time, was very significant. For example, in 1925 in Germany, 26 per cent of all lawyers and 15 per cent of all doctors were Jewish, yet Jews constituted only one per cent of the general population.

While the Jewish occupational structure in Tsarist Russia continued to be much more traditional, some modernization did take place. Still, most of the Jews were small traders or poor craftsmen, often working as tailors, and some went into manufacturing and became important entrepreneurs in certain sectors of the economy. But in Eastern Europe, the Jewish middle and upper class remained small and was only partly acculturated.

5. Jews as creators of European culture

Since the beginning of the Haskala, Jews had not only become consumers of European culture but also participated in creating it. Soon highly talented Jews became visible in the arts, in the sciences and in the humanities. At the end of the nineteenth century, Vienna, Berlin and Prague had turned into cultural centres with the strong

participation of its acculturated Jewish elites. Persons of Jewish background were very prominent in the Viennese literary scene, especially among the playwrights, poets and journalists. In some fields, notably psychology and music, Jews broke with the traditions of the profession. Best known among those is Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), the Viennese creator of psychoanalysis. The Czech writer Franz Kafka (1883-1924) became world famous. Just like Vienna, Berlin was a centre of Jewish writers and journalists as well as actors and theatre directors. But in Berlin, Jews also participated to a large extent in physics, chemistry and biology. Albert Einstein (1879-1955) became universally known among the Berlin scientists. While western Jews had become most creative in European culture, their own Jewish culture lost its importance for many of them.

This was quite different in Eastern Europe where the majority still lived in the Jewish tradition, spoke Yiddish and regarded itself as a separate nation. But the strong anti-Semitism in Poland and Russia helped to keep Jews apart and made them politically more radical. Many Jewish schools in the Polish Republic taught in Yiddish. Polish Jews founded several political parties including an orthodox, a liberal and a workers' party as well as several Zionist parties. Yiddish culture was flourishing, especially in literature, in the Yiddish theatre and in the Jewish press. Many outstanding writers like the Nobel Prize winner Isaac Bashevis Singer (1902-1991) wrote in Yiddish. In 1925, an Institute for the Academic Study of the Yiddish Language and Culture (YIVO) was founded in Berlin and soon moved to Vilnius, at the time belonging to Poland.

Jews in Tsarist Russia had suffered many pogroms. When the Soviet Union was founded, Jews for the first time became citizens with equal rights. But the politics of the Soviet government forced the Jewish population to completely change its social structure and to drop its religious identity. Many of the 2.7 million Jews in the Soviet Union lost their income because production and commerce were socialized and private trade became illegal. These Jews were

now forced into the new agricultural collectives. The Jewish Social Democratic Party as well as the Zionist movement were banned. During the anti-religious campaigns until 1939, the Jewish communities, the Talmud schools and most synagogues were dissolved. Even the secular use of Yiddish now became very difficult. Under these conditions, traditional Judaism and a positive Jewish identity could not survive. Jews were forced into complete assimilation. On

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the other hand, they took advantage of career opportunities they now had when entering the party and state-run institutions. Under the leading functionaries of the Bolshevik party, Jews were well represented in the first years of the Soviet Union. Later, numerous Jewish functionaries became victims of Stalinist terror. The large number of intermarriages in the Soviet Union showed that the Soviet Union had succeeded in assimilating the Jews to the point of absorption. Ironically, it was only anti-Semitism that, in the long run, kept alive the

idea of being Jewish in the Soviet State.

Jewish life had become very different in Eastern and Western Europe in modern times. Western Jewry had socially and culturally integrated itself to the extent that they could not imagine that a genocide could happen in the western culture to which they belonged. In Poland, Jews remained a nation apart, fighting for minority rights while in the Soviet Union, Judaism itself, was almost extinguished by government politics. The increasing influence of anti-Semitism and anti-democratic parties in many European countries destabilized Jewish existence even before the Holocaust.

Discussion questions

1. What impact did the emancipation of Jews in Western Europe have on their lives? How was this different for Jews in Eastern Europe?
2. How was anti-Semitism generally expressed in the nineteenth century in the West? How was this different in the East?
3. What was the difference between acculturation and assimilation of the Jews? What impact did this have on their lives?
4. What was the result of Jewish urbanization? What role might this have played in the Holocaust?
5. What were some of the cultural and political contributions of the Jewish people in Europe?