



Weimar Republic (1918 – 1933)

A new era in the history of German Jewry began when Imperial Germany collapsed and was replaced by the democratic regime of the Weimar Republic. The outstanding feature of this period was the polarization between the unprecedented integration of the Jews in every sphere of life, and the growth of political anti-Semitism among various organizations and political parties, especially in the immediate postwar years.

Important achievements by Jews were recorded in the theater (Max Reinhardt), in music (Arnold Schönberg), in the visual arts (Max Liebermann), in philosophy (Herman Cohen) and in science (Albert Einstein). Among the Nobel prize winners in Germany up to 1938, 24 percent were Jews (nine Jews out of a total of thirty eight). It was in political and public life, however, that the Jewish role was most prominent. Jews played an important role in the first cabinet formed after the 1918 revolution (Hugo Hasse and Otto Landesberg), the Weimar Constitution was drafted by a Jew (Hugo Pruess), and Jews were conspicuously present in the abortive attempts to create radical revolutionary regimes, especially in Bavaria. The revolutionary government in Munich was headed by a Jewish intellectual, Kurt Eisner, and after his assassination, two other Jewish leaders, Gustav Landauer and Eugen Levine, assumed positions of major influence in the “Räterepublik” (“Soviet” Republic). Rosa Luxemburg, who was also assassinated, was a leader of the revolutionary Spartakusbund, which was one of the predecessors of the German Communist party.

In the following years as well, Jews held major political posts, primarily in the leadership of the democratic and socialist parties. The most prominent Jewish Political figure was Walther Rathenau, who served first as minister for economic affairs and then as foreign minister. Rathenau’s murder by right-wing radicals in June 1922 was one of the dramatic high points of the anti-Semitic incitement that charged the Jews with responsibility for Germany’s defeat in the war (the DOLCHSTOSSLEGENDE, or “stab-in-the-back” myth) and for the economic and social crises that struck the newly born republic



after the war, reaching their climax in the terrible inflation of 1922 and 1923. The presence of Jews from eastern Europe (Ostjuden), who had immigrated to Germany before, during, and after the war, was also a favorite subject of anti-Semitic incitement.

Among the anti-Semitic movements and political parties, the most radical was the relatively small National Socialist party, which had been founded in Bavaria in 1919. Its platform included conspicuous paragraphs calling for the abolition of civil rights for Jews and far reaching measures for eliminating Jews from various spheres of life. The propaganda speeches and publications of the party's leaders, especially those of Adolf Hitler, presented a radical anti-Semitic ideology that did not stop short of demands for the "total elimination of the Jews" and called for the *Austottung* ("extermination") of the Jews *mit Stumpf und Stiel* ("root and branch"). Despite the party's nationalist character, the antisemitism it advocated went beyond the confines of national categories, its ideology demanding radical solution of the "Jewish Question" in order to save all of human society. The National Socialist radical doctrine, which was based on the inequality of races and a Social Darwinist struggle for survival among them, regarded the Jews as a biological source (including Marxism, democracy, and even Christianity) that defy the "natural order". As a result of the stabilization of the German economy and of the republic in 1924, the strength of the antisemitic parties went into a temporary decline and the number of their members in the Reichstag dropped from forty to fourteen.

According to the 1925 census, the Jewish population of Germany was 564,379 representing 0.9 percent of the total population. The great majority (377,000 or 66.8%) lived in six large cities, which also had the largest Jewish communities: Berlin (with 180,000 Jews, a third of the entire Jewish population in the country), Frankfurt, Hamburg, Breslau, Leipzig, and Cologne. Approximately 90,000 Jews (16%) lived in the smaller cities, and 97,000 (17.2%) in over a thousand towns and villages with a population of less than 10,000. For the most part of the Jews belonged to the middle class and were self-employed, in various branches of business and in the professions. The Jews' intensive participation in the life of German society accelerated the process of assimilation, which was manifested in the growing number of



mixed marriages, secessions from the organized Jewish community, and conversions to Christianity. Thus, in 1927, 54% of all marriages of Jews were contracted with non-Jews, and in that year one thousand Jews are estimated to have opted out of Judaism, about half of them by conversion to another faith.

On the other hand, in the Weimar era the activities of the Jewish political, religious, and social organizations were maintained and even expanded. New organizations were added to the Centralverein, the Zionist Federation, the Orthodox and Liberal organizations, and the HILFSVEREIN DER DEUTSCHEN JUDEN (German Jews' aid Society), which all had their beginnings before Weimar. The major new organizations were the Reichsbund Judischer Frontsoldaten (Reich Union or Jewish Frontline Soldiers); left-and-right-wing Zionist parties such as the Judische Volkspartei, or Jewish People's Party; youth and sports organizations; student groups; and so forth. The Jewish communities retained the officially recognized legal status they had attained under the Kaiser; the innovations in the Weimar era were the establishment of Landesverbände Judischer Gemeinden (State Unions of Jewish communities) and attempts to organize all of German Jewry into a nationwide body).

Religious and general Jewish studies taught in the rabbinical seminaries in Berlin and Breslau (founded in the nineteenth century) were broadened and intensified under the impact of the encounter with east European Jews and their culture. In fact, the influx of Jewish scholars and intellectuals from eastern Europe, coupled with the revival of Jewish consciousness among the established Jewish population, turned Germany in the period onto a great center of modern Jewish scholarship and culture. As a result of efforts of Jewish thinkers and educators – men like Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber – large groups among the general Jewish population began to take and interest in Jewish learning, leading to the establishment of Judische Lehrhäuser (institutes of Jewish learning) for adult Jewish education. A wide range of Jewish periodicals and Jewish publishing houses played an important role in Jewish life; two of the significant publishing projects



undertaken were the five – volume Judisches Lexikon and the Encyclopaedia Judaica (of which ten volumes had appeared when its publication came to a halt in 1934).

The final years of the Weimar Republic, during which Germany was hard hit by the global economic crises, were marked by the rise of the National Socialist party. Just before the crisis broke out, in 1928, the Nazis won only 3 percent of the vote; however, in the first elections that took place during the crisis, in September 1930, their share jumped to 18 percent, and in July 1932 to 37 % of the vote. With 230 members in the Reichstag, the Nazis became the largest party – and retained that position in the next elections, in November 1932, despite a drop to 33% of the vote and 196 Reichstag members.

During those years, antisemitism came to have a profound effect on Jewish life. It was one of the central elements in the Nazi party's violent struggle for power, and its effect on the Jews was not confined to physical violence (desecrations of synagogues and Jewish cemeteries, and even attacks on individual Jews). Nazi political propaganda succeeded in making the “ Jewish Question” into a major issue in the Nazi struggle against the democratic regime. As a result, not only was the position of the Jews in German society impaired, but the Jews themselves underwent a crisis of Jewish consciousness and began to reexamine their Jewish identity.