Assimilation and Modern Jewish Identity in the Emancipation Era

Instructor:
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Course Description

The main question addressed by historiography on Jewish assimilation and identity in the long nineteenth century was and remains whether a high degree of acculturation could be consistent with a high degree of Jewish self-assertiveness and sense of Jewish communal belonging. This question is the main focus of this course, which aims to provide an overview of the identity dilemmas faced by emancipated and acculturated Jews in Central and Western Europe (with a strong focus on Germany), and of their success or failure in dealing with these dilemmas. As acculturation, secularization and integration are multi-generational processes, the course will focus on the second half of the nineteenth century, or more precisely the five decades preceding World War I. By the very nature of its inquiry, the course will restrict itself on those who found themselves entangled in these identity dilemmas, that is, those Jews whom Ezra Mendelsohn called “integrationists”, instead of the pejorative “assimilationists”. That historians are still debating the very name by which the majority of Jews in fin-de-siècle Central and Western Europe should be labeled is maybe the best indication of the issue’s enduring relevance.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this course, students will be able to:
- understand and reflect on the diversity and complexities of modern Jewish identity
- assess the ideological motives of recent historiographical works on this question
- critically analyse historiographical discourse

Course Requirements

✓ Active class participation (25%)
✓ Class presentation of one of the readings (25%)
✓ Research paper (50%) on a class-related topic (3000–5000 words)

Course Schedule

1. Introduction

2. Assimilation in Jewish Historiography

SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL READING

3. German Jews
• SORKIN, David, ‘Emancipation and Assimilation: Two Concepts and their Application to German-Jewish History’, Leo Baeck Institute Year Book, 35 (1990), 17–33.

SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL READING
• BRENNER, Michael, ‘Gnosis and History: Polemics of German-Jewish Identity from Graetz to Scholem’, New German Critique, no. 77 (Spring/Summer 1999) 45–60.

4. French Jews

SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL READING

5. Jews in Vienna


**SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL READING**


6. Jews in Budapest


**SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL READING**


7. Gender and Identity

• HYMAN, Paula E., *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), 10–49. (Chapter 1. Paradoxes of Assimilation)


**SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL READING**


8. Critics of the new historiographical trend

Suggested additional reading

9. Antisemitism and Jewish Identity

10. Jewish Self-Hatred

11. Acculturated Jews and the ‘Ostjuden’
• ASCHHEIM, Steven E.: Brothers and Strangers: The East European Jew in German and German Jewish Consciousness, 1800–1923 (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 32–57. (Chapter 2. The Ambivalent Heritage: Liberal Jews and the Ostjuden, 1880–1914)

Suggested additional reading
12. Jews and Race


SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL READING