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Medieval and Modern Jewish History

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Medieval and Modern Jewish History

Abstract
There has been a virtual explosion of scholarly writing on Jewish history in the medieval and modern periods during the last thirty years. One rough measure of this development is to compare the present entries on Jewish history in this Guide with the previous edition published in 1961. Of the hundred and twenty items on Jewish history listed in the earlier Guide, less than half actually pertain to the medieval and modern periods. This compares with some 325 items allotted to this section of the present Guide dealing exclusively with postancient Jewish history. But the sheer number of cited works is only the beginning of the story. Among the entries in the 1961 edition, the number of individual authors is relatively small; Salo W. Baron is listed several times, as are Cecil Roth, Jacob Marcus, and Guido Kisch. This obviously reflects the relatively small number of professional historians in the field as of 1961 and an even smaller number holding full-time positions in North American universities.

Disciplines
History | History of Religion | Jewish Studies | Medieval History

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Section 21

DAVID B. RUDERMAN

Medieval and Modern Jewish History

There has been a virtual explosion of scholarly writing on Jewish history in the medieval and modern periods during the last thirty years. One rough measure of this development is to compare the present entries on Jewish history in this Guide with the previous edition published in 1961. Of the hundred and twenty items on Jewish history listed in the earlier Guide, less than half actually pertain to the medieval and modern periods. This compares with some 325 items allotted to this section of the present Guide dealing exclusively with postancient Jewish history. But the sheer number of cited works is only the beginning of the story. Among the entries in the 1961 edition, the number of individual authors is relatively small; Salo W. Baron is listed several times, as are Cecil Roth, Jacob Marcus, and Guido Kisch. This obviously reflects the relatively small number of professional historians in the field as of 1961 and an even smaller number holding full-time positions in North American universities.

Even more telling is the manner in which Jewish history is organized. The only separate section on the Jews is a subdivision of a unit on the history of religions. Within this unit, one finds three pages on the history of Judaism, some sixty-seven items, of which the majority consist of general guides, surveys, or periodicals with the primary focus on Judaism in the biblical or rabbinic periods. In contrast, only eight books on the Jews are clustered together within a larger section on medieval history, with all the remaining works scattered throughout the entire volume.

The reader of this section of the present Guide will surely be impressed by the remarkable transformation that has taken place. I refer first to the vast quantity of works in English and other Western languages; the fact that most are published by university and academic presses; the emerging specializations within the subfields of Jewish history (e.g., Jews under medieval Islam, Jewish social history in modern Western Europe, Jewish intellectual history in the Renaissance); and the actual emergence of an international community of scholars from North America, Europe, and Israel engaged in the regular publication of books and periodicals, in holding academic conferences, and in training graduate students in specialized fields. I refer also to the quality of the work, its nonparochial nature, its comparative thrust, its systematic engagement with archival and manuscript research, its range of methodologies and interpretive schemes, its inner- and outer-directed nature that examines the Jewish experience both on its own cultural terms and in its dialogue and negotiation with host societies.

By way of an explanation for this sweeping expansion of the field, I offer one more example of the state of Jewish historical study during the period of the previous Guide.
Five years after its appearance, Gavin Langmuir published an essay in the *Journal of the History of Ideas* (27 [1966] 343–64; and republished in G. Langmuir, *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism*, pp. 21–41 [Berkeley, 1990]) entitled “Majority History and Postbiblical Jews.” Langmuir bitterly complained about “the scanty and erratic attention” Jewish history received. He attributed this neglect to a traditional Christian reading of history in which the first-century Jews were of great historical significance, until the coming of Christ, when their ancestors and descendants became irrelevant and uninteresting: “After the emergence of Christianity, a reproach falls on the Jews, and a dark night of ignorance conceals their activities from the historical consciousness of most of Western society until Dreyfus, the Balfour Declaration, or Hitler once more draws historical attention to the Jews.” Even when secular historians abandoned this theological position, they continued to remain faithful to its historiographical perspective, either consciously or unconsciously. Examining a wide array of contemporary surveys of Western history, Langmuir concluded that the historiographic tradition hostile to or ignorant of Jews still predominated and that most historians were “little inspired to read the work of Jewish historians, let alone study the matter for themselves.”

Langmuir acknowledged that a significant historical literature on postbiblical Jewish history already existed, written for the most part by Jewish historians. His major complaint revolved around their relative isolation from the historical community, their lack of impact on general treatments of Western history, and the reluctance of the historical establishment to integrate their findings into larger pictures of the medieval and modern worlds. Langmuir’s concern, of course, reflected a situation that had prevailed for well over a hundred years since the beginnings of modern historical scholarship in the early nineteenth century. Despite the considerable achievements of several generations of Jewish scholars, publishing their results in Hebrew, German, French, Yiddish, and other European languages, they were read primarily by other Jewish scholars in books and journals devoted exclusively to Jewish topics and produced under Jewish auspices. The isolated nature of these publications reflected directly the social circumstances under which their authors labored. While trained in European universities, they were unable to teach their fields or engage in scholarly work within the university community. Thus they worked on the fringes of academia, as teachers within Jewish-sponsored institutions or as librarians or rabbis. With the establishment of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1925, with its heavy emphasis on Judaic studies, there finally emerged an institutional base for Jewish historical scholarship within a secular, university setting. And during the last sixty-five years, universities throughout Israel have established major centers of scholarship, assembling massive archives and manuscript holdings, instituting impressive structures of academic conferences and publications, and training hundreds of graduate students in every field of Jewish history.

Within an American context, similar development was rather slow. Despite the prestige achieved by a few holders of academic chairs in Jewish history or thought at leading universities, most American universities were impervious to the idea of teaching Judaica beyond the traditional courses in Bible and Semitic languages. The Christian perspective on postbiblical Jewish history prevailed until the mid-1960s, the period in which the last *Guide* was produced and when Gavin Langmuir wrote the aforementioned essay.

The enlargement of this section thus reflects a much greater social and cultural development than the mere proliferation of publications on Jewish history. In the first place, the last thirty years have witnessed the widespread acceptance of Judaic studies in most major universities in North America. Individual courses have led to permanent faculty positions, interdisciplinary programs, undergraduate and graduate fields of specialization, the augmentation of library resources, and ultimately the growing and
increasingly lively interest in publishing in all fields of Judaica on the part of university and trade presses.

While the first stage of this process in the 1960s and 1970s focused on the establishment of positions and the institution of new courses, the 1980s and 1990s have moved steadily into another stage: the integration of Judaic studies within the larger curriculum of the humanities and social sciences. In many universities, Jewish history is taught within history departments or in departments with other historians of religion. Jewish historians and their students are accustomed to engaging in intellectual conversations with their colleagues in other historical fields; new methodological and interpretive discourses constantly encourage them to ask new and bold questions of their material, to question conventional treatments of their subjects, and to examine the dynamics of the Jewish experience through wider and sharper lenses. Conversely, students of medieval history, or early modern and modern history can no longer afford to ignore this “orphaned” minority of Western civilization; the Jews and their cultural legacy increasingly inform and enrich discussions of the history of Christian and Muslim majorities. And the publication of articles and books closely mirror the radical changes in the new university environments. Subjects of Jewish historical interest are regularly discussed in periodicals in European or American history, in the scholarly forums of historians. Thirty years ago, Jewish historians most often submitted their books to Jewish publishers such as the Jewish Publication Society of America. In today’s market, the latter have been eclipsed with the regular publication of Jewish studies by such prestigious university presses as Harvard, Yale, California, Indiana, SUNY, Oxford, Cambridge, and many others.

Along with the dramatic changes on this continent, Israeli historians have continued their scholarly activity and have even expanded it, producing an extraordinary array of articles, monographs, and edited texts dealing with every aspect of the Jewish past. This academic community has the enthusiastic support of a Hebrew-reading public with a vociferous appetite for devouring books on even the most arcane historical subjects. Israeli scholarship has also produced important scholarly work in subjects generally neglected by their European ancestors or their American counterpart especially in areas such as Zionism, history of the Yishuv, Israeli history, and history of the Jews in Islamic countries. Israeli historians have also pioneered other areas, such as the history of Jewish art and music, Jewish mysticism, and the political history of diaspora Jewish communities.

In recent years, the university teaching of Jewish history has experienced a revival in Europe as well, especially in countries such as Great Britain, France, Spain, Germany, Italy, and even in Eastern Europe. With the diminution of the European Jewish community since World War II, many of those holding university posts and publishing books and articles in Jewish history are themselves non-Jews. And with the growth of scholarly opportunities for pursuing research outside of Israel, the contact between European, American, and Israeli historians has been greatly enhanced in recent years. American and European historians regularly visit and utilize the resources of Israeli libraries and archives; Israelis regularly work in Europe and North America, teach in universities abroad, and engage in intense dialogue with scholars trained outside of Israel. The result has been a mutually fructifying experience for both sides. Historians outside of Israel are exposed to the high linguistic and paleographical standards of Israeli scholarship and to the intense scrutiny of their work by highly critical and exacting specialists in their fields. Israeli historians now regularly interact with colleagues in the United States and Europe who sometimes raise methodological issues and questions of a comparative nature that are somewhat different than their own. One result of these new contacts is the increasing number of Israeli scholars publishing in English through North American or English university presses, conceptualizing and presenting their
material to conform more to the tastes and standards of a reading audience untutored in Jewish culture but generally sophisticated in historical research.

To the peruser of the inventory that follows, the results of this notable emergence of a significant cadre of scholars, trained in diverse approaches and specialities and integrated into the larger community of historical scholarship to an unprecedented degree, are patently self-evident. While earlier scholarly writing in Jewish history was predominantly concerned with philological or intellectual questions, reflecting both the regnant tastes of classical Jewish and European scholarship, the new writing is increasingly more diverse. Novel subjects are treated and new approaches have been introduced: the social history of nonelites, family and women’s history, political history, cultural history and the history of mentalities, economic history, and the history of education, to name only a few. Fields where writing has been especially prolific and intense include Jewish social history in modern Europe, the restructuring of Jewish culture and society in early modern Europe, Jewish culture under medieval Christendom, Jewish messianism, the history of the Conversos, antisemitism and the Holocaust, the history of Zionism, and American Jewish history. With the emergence of a younger generation of scholars literate in rabbinic sources and trained in the requisite languages of the region, and with the opening of previously closed archives and repositories, the fields of East European and Russian Jewish history are receiving new attention after years of neglect. Israel’s systematic collecting and cataloguing of governmental and communal archives along with Hebrew manuscripts from all over the world have opened up untold possibilities for Jewish cultural and social history in all periods and localities.

There are undoubtedly some weaknesses that accompany all these new advances. New approaches and historical fashions usually take longer “to catch fire” among traditionally trained Jewish historians. The impact of social anthropology, the intersection between history and literary criticism, psychoanalysis and history, or quantitative history, for example, have touched contemporary historical writing only slightly. On the other hand, there is always the danger that “fashionable” historiography might replace the philological tools and exhaustive and exacting knowledge displayed by an earlier generation of Jewish historians. Attaining the proper balance between methodological sophistication and proper textual grounding offer a formidable challenge to would-be Jewish historians of the future. There remain many uncharted areas for future research. Vast bodies of literary sources such as rabbinic responsa, sermons, communal ledgers, popular moral and mystical literature, as well as archival documents, still remain untapped and need to be integrated with each other and within the larger social and cultural contexts from which they emerge.

Despite the gaps and challenges that still remain, this bibliography provides ample testimony to the enormous scholarly output of the past three decades. The reader should be aware of the severe limitation of selecting books and articles primarily written in English. For anyone wishing to engage more deeply in the subject, Hebrew is a prerequisite along with several other European languages, depending on the field of specialization. Nevertheless, because of the accelerated pace of translations into English in recent years, the lists that follow still offer a rich and representative sampling of current achievements and future expectations.
Entries are arranged under the following headings:

Reference Works and General Studies

Jews Under Medieval Islam

Jews Under Medieval Christendom

Jews in Early Modern Europe

Jews of Western and Central Europe, 1750–1914

Jews of Eastern Europe, 1750–1914

Jews in Islamic Lands, 1492–1948

American Jewish History

European Jewish Since 1914


REFERENCE WORKS AND GENERAL STUDIES


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JEU5 Under Medieval Islam


JEW UNDER MEDIEVAL CHRISTENDOM


history based on descriptive reading of Hebrew Crusade chronicles. Includes translations of central texts. [KRS]


southern Italy. Examines policies of church and emperors, persecutions of ninth century, and flowering of Jewish culture. [KRS/ APK]


21.80 Haim Soloveitchik. "Three themes in the 'Sefer Hasidim.'" *Association for Jewish Studies review* 1 (1976) 311–57. ISSN 0364-0094. • Novel interpretation of origin and character of German Jewish Pietism that flourished in high Middle Ages. Argues that Pietism was reaction to growing dominance of French-Jewish school of rabbinic commentators. [KRS/DBR]


between Jews and Christians at many levels of society, from popular folklore to leading figures of Reformation. [HEA]


Jewish cultural and social history in matters such as Jewish-Christian relations, mysticism, and community politics. Fresh essays written by a team of specialists with introduction by editor. [HEA]


JEWES OF WESTERN AND CENTRAL EUROPE,
1750-1914


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21.160 Werner E. Mosse, Arnold Paukner, and Reinhard Rüter, eds. Revolution and evolution: 1848 in German-Jewish history. Tübingen: Mohr, 1981. (Schriftenreihe wissenschaftlicher Abhandlungen des Leo-Baeck-Instituts, 39.) ISBN 3-16-743752-9, ISSN 0459-097X. • Important collection on political, economic, social, religious, and cultural features of emancipation at time of 1848 Revolution. International roster of authors represent range of voices in historiography of German Jewry. [PEH]


JEWS OF EASTERN EUROPE, 1750–1914


turn of the century. Early pogroms inspired by local police and patri-
ottic press. Only after 1905 did relationship between antisemites
and central authorities deepen. Thought-provoking interpreta-
tion. [DEF/CB/GMJ]

21.201 David Roskies. Against the Apocalypse: responses to cata-
strophe in modern Jewish culture. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Uni-
examination of central theme in Jewish literature. Focus on Yid-
dish literature from nineteenth century through Holocaust. [DEF]

21.202 Murray J. Rosman. The lords’ Jews: magnate Jewish rela-
tions in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth during the eight-
teenth century. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Center for Jewish Studies
and Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, 1990. (Harvard
Ukrainian Research Institute monograph series. Harvard Uni-
versity, Center for Jewish Studies, Harvard Judaic texts and stud-
es, 7.) ISBN 0-916458-18-0. • Role of Jews in Poland’s economic
system and their complex relationship with nobility. Meticulous
study based on archival materials. [DEF]

21.203 Isaac M. Rubinow. Economic condition of the Jews in Rus-
• United States Bureau of Labor; valuable for statistical infor-
matation. [DEF]

21.204 Michael Stanislawski. For whom do I sit? Judah Leib Gor-
don and the crisis of Russian Jewry. New York: Oxford University
poet and leading figure of Russian-Jewish Enlightenment. Focus
on Gordon’s career as publicist and social critic. Lucid and com-
pelling. [DEF]

21.205 Michael Stanislawski. Tsar Nicholas I and the Jews: the trans-
formation of Jewish society in Russia, 1825–1855. Philadelphia:
Jewish Publication Society of America, 1983. ISBN 0-8276-
0216-2. • Definitive study of tsarist policy toward Jews. State
intervention motivated less by antisemitism than by conserva-
tivism, bureaucratic inefficiency, and other reasons of state. Also
discusses emergence of enlightened Jewish intelligentsia and
internal social tensions and conflicts. [DEF/SLH]

21.206 Henry J. Tobias. The Jewish Bund in Russia from its
ISBN 0-8047-0764-2. • Ideological and organizational develop-
ment of major Jewish Socialist party. Thorough and comprehen-
sive. [DEF]

ence of Zionism in East European context. Best synthesis avail-

21.208 David Vital. Zionism: the formative years. New York:
827715-6 (pbk). • Well-written and well-conceived organiza-
tional and political history of Zionist movement in Herzlian and
post-Herzlian periods until World War I. Second of three-vol-
ume study (with 21.207 and 21.317). [DEF]

Bernard Martin, ed. and trans. Cleveland: Press of Case Western
Reserve University, 1972–78. ISBN 0-82950-228-9 (v. 1), 0-82950-
231-0 (v. 2). • Volumes nine through twelve deal with Hasidism
and Jewish Enlightenment (Haskalah) in eastern Europe. Classic,
still valuable work of scholarship. [DEF]

21.210 Steven Zipperstein. The Jews of Odessa: a cultural history,
ISBN 0-8047-1251-4 (cl), 0-8047-1962-4 (pbk). • Social condi-
tions and cultural institutions of modernizing community. Un-
restricted by traditional features of Jewish communities in Pale, new
city represented model of future. Lucid and sensitive presenta-
tion. [DEF/SLH]


21.224 Mark Alan Epstein. The Ottoman Jewish communities and their role in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Freiburg: Schwarz, 1980. (Islamkundliche Untersuchungen, 56.) ISBN 3-87997-077-7 (pbk). • Study of history of Jewish communities of Ottoman empire during first two centuries of Ottoman rule based on Ottoman archival sources. Especially important for Ottoman-Jewish relations. [AR]


munities of Tunisian island of Djerba; focus on contemporary period. [AR/LV/MS]

AMERICAN JEWISH HISTORY


21.254 Oscar Handlin. “American views of the Jew at the opening of the twentieth century.” Publication of the American Jewish Historical Society 40 (June 1951) 323-44. ISSN 0164-0178. • Classic examination of ideological and popular roots of 1890s’ antisemitism. Compares levels of tolerance for Jews and other American ethnic minorities. [JSG]


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**EUROPEAN JEWRY SINCE 1914**


Holocaust survivors in immediate post–World War II period. Oral history used to good effect. [EM]


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Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1971. ISBN 0-8371-2621-5. • Work by several hands covers Jewish communities of Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria from end of war to 1950s. Old standby, but nothing better. [EM]


SEE ALSO