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1

A Change of Perspective

A very fine theme, the revolution and the Jews. Make sure to treat the leading part the Jews have played in the upheaval.¹

—GUSTAV LANDAUER TO MARTIN BUBER,
NOVEMBER 2, 1918

“The Whole Thing, an Unspeakable Jewish Tragedy”

February 26, 1919, marked a unique moment in the history of Germany and its Jews. On this cold winter’s day, a crowd of one hundred thousand assembled at Munich’s Ostfriedhof cemetery to mourn Bavarian prime minister Kurt Eisner, the first Jewish head of state in German history. Eisner had toppled the Wittelsbach dynasty, which had reigned in Bavaria for seven centuries. He and his socialist government had ruled Bavaria for three months until he was assassinated by a right-wing extremist. Another German Jew, Gustav Landauer, who would himself assume a powerful position in one of two short-lived council republics established in Munich in April 1919, delivered the eulogy for his friend Eisner. Both had long since broken with the Jewish religion of their ancestors, and yet both identified with the values of Jewish tradition as they defined it. Standing before the casket of his murdered friend, Landauer told the crowd: “Kurt Eisner, the Jew, was a prophet because he sympathized with the poor and downtrodden and saw the opportunity, and the necessity, of putting an end to poverty and subjugation.”²

Kurt Eisner the Jew. Usually only his enemies rubbed his nose in his Jewish background. His estate includes a huge file of letters with crude antisemitic insults. Landauer, like other revolutionaries, also became the target of antisemitic attacks and was gruesomely murdered when the socialist experiment was brought to an end by paramilitary forces in the first days of May 1919. Even among the Jews themselves, the Jewish background of many revolutionaries was a fiercely debated topic. The majority of Bavaria's Jews were decisively opposed to the revolution or sensed that, in the end, they would be the ones paying the price for the deeds of the Eisners and Landauers. The philosopher Martin Buber, a close friend of Landauer's and an admirer of Eisner, had visited Munich at Landauer's invitation in February 1919. He left Munich on the day Eisner was murdered and summarized his impressions of his visit to the city as follows: "As for Eisner, to be with him was to peer into the tormented passions of his divided Jewish soul; nemesis shone from his glittering surface; he was a marked man. Landauer, by dint of the greatest spiritual effort, was keeping up his faith in him and protected him—a shield-bearer terribly moving in his selflessness. The whole thing, an unspeakable Jewish tragedy."³

Not long before that, on December 2, 1918, Landauer was still urging Buber to write about these very aspects: "Dear Buber, A very fine theme, the revolution and the Jews. Make sure to treat the leading part the Jews have played in the upheaval."⁴ To this day, Landauer's wish has not been fulfilled. While the connection between Jews and the Bavarian revolution has certainly been broached again and again, it has ultimately been relegated to a footnote in most historical accounts. Even in the flood of new publications occasioned by the centenary of the revolution, historians and journalists are reticent to point out that the most prominent actors in the revolution and the two council republics were of Jewish descent.⁵ Biographies of the chief actors emphasize that their subjects had stopped viewing themselves as Jews.⁶

The reason for the reticence is obvious. As a rule, one skates on slippery ice when researching the Jews and their participation in socialism, communism, and revolutionary movements. The ice becomes very slippery indeed when dealing with a place that, so soon after the events of



FIGURE 1. Gustav Landauer in the middle of a crowd at Kurt Eisner's burial at Munich's Ostfriedhof cemetery. Süddeutsche Zeitung Photo.

the revolution, became the laboratory for Adolf Hitler and his National Socialist movement. After all, it was mainly the antisemites who highlighted the prominence of Jews in this revolution to justify their own anti-Jewish behavior.⁷ In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler himself entitled the chapter about the period when he was active in Munich after November 1918, “Beginning of My Political Activity.” He drew a direct line between what he called “the rule of the Jews” and his political awakening.⁸

In conservative circles the motif of a link between Jews and leftists served, if not as a justification, then certainly in many cases as an explanatory framework for antisemitism. Thus, Golo Mann, son of the writer Thomas Mann and himself a witness to the revolutionary events in the city as a high school pupil, referred explicitly to the Munich episode: “Not Jewry—there is no such thing—but individual people of Jewish extraction have, through their revolutionary experiments in politics in Central Europe, burdened themselves with serious blame. For example, there was the attempt to set up a council regime that was

unquestionably made by Jews in the spring of 1919 in Munich, and that was indeed a criminal, horrible mischief that could not and would not end well.” There were certainly “noble human beings,” such as Gustav Landauer, among those revolutionaries, Golo Mann concluded. “Yet we as historians cannot ignore the radical-revolutionary impact of Jewry with a gesture of disavowal. It had serious consequences, it fed the view according to which Jewry was revolutionary, insurrectionary, and subversive in its totality or overwhelmingly.”⁹ An even sharper formulation of the same sentiment came immediately after the Second World War from the historian Friedrich Meinecke in his book *The German Catastrophe*: “Many Jews were among those who raised the chalice of opportunistic power to their lips far too quickly and greedily. They now appeared to all anti-Semites as the beneficiaries of the German defeat and revolution.”¹⁰

For many contemporary witnesses as well as subsequent interpreters of these events, there was a clear causality: the conspicuous prominence of Jewish revolutionaries (most of whom, moreover, were not from Bavaria) prompted a reaction that created a space for antisemitic agitation to an unprecedented degree. Jewish contemporaries claimed to have recognized the link as much as antisemites did. From the vantage point of 1933, even revolutionaries referred to this connection, albeit from another perspective: On “the day my books were burned in Germany,” Ernst Toller wrote in the preface to his autobiography *I Was a German*: “Before the current debacle in Germany can be properly understood, one must first know something of those happenings in 1918 and 1919 which I have recorded here.”¹¹

One fundamental principle of historical analysis is to reject predetermined thinking.¹² By no means did the events between 1918 and 1923 lead inevitably to the events of 1933. Yet even historians cannot simply omit their knowledge about what happened in 1933 and the years that followed. A history of the 1918–1919 revolution and the counterrevolution in Munich as it might have been written in 1930 would inevitably have produced different results than a history written after 1945, not because the course of historical events had been changed in any way retroactively, but rather because our viewpoint had shifted and other

questions had been posed in the interim. Had Hitler not been appointed chancellor in 1933, the events taking place between 1918 and 1923 would certainly have remained a marginal episode in Germany history. Yet in seeking explanation for the central event in German history in the twentieth century, we must turn to the historical moment when Hitler developed the core of his subsequent worldview.

Historians agree that we have no record of antisemitic or anti-Communist views from Hitler before 1919. But opinions diverge on whether he went through an initially socialist phase in the first half of 1919 or was rejected by another party, and whether he was already interested in politics or still apolitical.¹³ Anton Joachimsthaler was one of the first historians to draw attention to the importance of this phase for the formation of Hitler's worldview. He stated categorically: "The key to Hitler's entry into politics lies in this period of time in Munich, not in Vienna! The revolution and the reign of the councils that followed, events that profoundly shook the city of Munich and its people, triggered Hitler's hatred of everything foreign and international as well as of Bolshevism."¹⁴ In Andreas Wirsching's view, the special climate of Bavaria in the summer of 1919 provided Hitler with a stage to rehearse a new role in his search for authenticity: "What he learned by rote, amplified, and intensified demagogically, and what he also ended up believing, was initially nothing more than the kind of *völkisch*-nationalist, anti-Bolshevik, and antisemitic propaganda that was ubiquitous in Bavaria and its army. . . . What turned Hitler first into the drummer and then the 'Führer' he became, then, was by no means an idea, a firmly established, granitic worldview. Rather, he found his stage and the role that fit in with this rather more by accident."¹⁵ It is not the aim of this book to revisit once again the questions about Hitler's worldview and his role in the political events of the ensuing years, but rather to illuminate the stage on which the young Adolf Hitler tested out his new role.

We must be vigilant in recognizing that only knowledge about subsequent events allows us to assess Munich as a stage for Hitler and as the ideal laboratory for the growing National Socialist movement. To suggest that Hitler and other antisemites really needed Jewish revolutionaries in order to spread their ideology may be to encourage the

argument that, in the end, the Jews themselves were to blame for their misfortune. Without a Leon Trotsky and a Rosa Luxemburg, without a Gustav Landauer and an Eugen Leviné, Hitler's antisemitic picture of the world would perhaps have lacked the image of the "Judeo-Bolshevik." But his worldview might have still included stereotypes of Jews as war profiteers, usurers, and capitalists, as Christ-killers and unbelievers. Would these shifts in Hitler's worldview have made a difference in the astonishing success story of antisemitic movements? We can only speculate about the answer to this question.

Historians cannot act as if the Jewish revolutionaries, socialists, and anarchists never existed—as if their prominence during this brief moment of German history was not there for all to see, and as if they were denying their Jewishness—just because these arguments may have been used in the past and are revived in today's antisemitic propaganda. Let us try for a moment to turn the tables in our thinking about this: if subsequent history had turned out differently, we would have been able to regard this chapter as a success story for German Jews, as an episode of pride rather than of shame. Let us take a moment to imagine that Kurt Eisner's revolution took root in Bavaria, that the Weimar Republic survived, and that Walther Rathenau remained foreign minister instead of being murdered.¹⁶ We would then write a history of successful German-Jewish emancipation in which the Jewish origins of some of Germany's leading politicians did not stand in the way of their political advancement, a story reflecting what actually happened in Italy and France. This was the very hope articulated by some Jewish contemporaries for a brief moment in November 1918. In their minds, the fact that Kurt Eisner became the first Jewish prime minister of a German state constituted proof of successful integration. Yet this perception was quickly overturned, and when Martin Buber spoke of a Jewish tragedy in February 1919, he echoed an opinion already shared by the larger Jewish public.

This book is not counterfactual history. It is also not another summary of these years, for which we have plenty of cogently presented studies.¹⁷ Instead, this book rests on a change of perspective. It brings out those aspects of this story customarily left out of previous

scholarship and places them more firmly in the context of Jewish history. From this perspective, too, the events that played out in Munich between 1918 and 1923 acquire more than merely local or regional significance. The questions pursued in the following chapters are: What was the relationship of the Jewish revolutionaries to their Jewishness, and how did it shape them? How did the larger society and the Jewish community react to what they did? How was the city of Munich, widely regarded as a cozy hometown only a short time before, transformed within a few years into enemy territory?

The book deliberately opens by quoting a letter to Martin Buber. On his visit to Munich in February 1919, the most influential German-Jewish philosopher of his generation, and of the entire twentieth century, saw firsthand the full scale of what only a few of his contemporaries recognized: the Jewish dimension of what was happening. Buber had met Eisner, and he was familiar with the literary work of the other Jewish revolutionaries: Erich Mühsam's poems, Ernst Toller's plays, and Gustav Landauer's theoretical writings and translations. In addition, Landauer had contributed several articles to Buber's journal *Der Jude*. Buber could foresee no good coming out of these Jewish intellectuals' decision to become central actors on Bavaria's political stage. When he called "the whole thing, an unspeakable Jewish tragedy," this self-consciously Zionist thinker had more in mind than just the intra-Jewish fissures and the murder of Eisner. He was also thinking of the invisible wall that had opened up between the Jewish revolutionaries and their Bavarian-Catholic surroundings. Buber knew this environment better than many of those taking part in the Munich revolution; after all, his wife, Paula Winkler, was from a Catholic family from Munich.¹⁸

Buber's role in the German-Jewish philosophy of his time perpetuated that of Hermann Cohen in the previous generation. Just as Buber influenced Landauer, Cohen had played an important role in shaping Kurt Eisner's thinking. Eisner himself characterized the neo-Kantian philosopher from the University of Marburg as the only person who exercised "intellectual influence on my innermost being."¹⁹ To explore Eisner and Landauer without Cohen and Buber would be like reading Marx without Hegel.

Although the Jewish background of the Munich revolution's protagonists did not necessarily play a central role in their self-perception, it figured in their complex personalities and reflections, and it was also used by outsiders to reproach them. Even if they had dissolved their formal ties to the Jewish religious community, their Jewish heritage was by no means just a burdensome birth defect to them—in contrast, say, to how Rosa Luxemburg or Leon Trotsky viewed their Jewishness. Previous historical research has largely overlooked this factor, because antisemites later latched onto the events of 1918–1919 so obsessively. If the revolutionaries really regarded themselves as “Jews” and not just as having a “Jewish background,” then antisemites might possibly have a legitimate argument, according to a line of argument already articulated by a number of their Jewish contemporaries who sought to distance themselves from the revolutionaries.²⁰

So were they really Jews? In what is widely regarded as a classic contribution to our understanding of the modern Jewish experience, the Trotsky biographer Isaac Deutscher has closely examined the figure of the “non-Jewish Jew” and, in so doing, traced the tradition that emerged in Judaism of the Jewish heretic. With a view toward Spinoza, Marx, Heine, Luxemburg, and Trotsky, he wrote: “They were each in society and yet not in it, of it and yet not of it. It was this that enabled them to rise in thought above their societies, above their nations, above their times and generations, and to strike out mentally into wide new horizons and far into the future.”²¹ The same could be said of most of the Munich revolutionaries. They were not part of the organized Jewish community, and most of them did not have any kind of positive relationship with the Jewish religion or with religion in general. Yet, in contrast to Deutscher's non-Jewish Jews, some of them evinced an active interest in their cultural Jewish heritage, as will be shown in the next chapter. Like Sigmund Freud, they were “godless Jews”—Jews whose Jewishness could not be unambiguously defined in terms like religion, nation, or even race.²² It was this very ambiguity that, as the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has observed, was one of the reasons why Jews ran up against enormous resistance in the new international system of European states that emerged after the First World War, with its notion of

clear definitions of nations. Precisely because these Jews were not recognizable as the “others”—given the way they spoke and their general appearance—they came to be regarded as especially dangerous enemies in the eyes of their opponents.²³

Historians, past and present, have speculated about why a relatively large number of Jews—Leon Trotsky, Lev Kamenev, and Grigory Zinoviev in St. Petersburg, Béla Kun in Budapest, and Rosa Luxemburg in Berlin—occupied leading roles in the revolutionary events of Europe during the period of upheaval between 1917 and 1920. They have found different answers to this question.²⁴ Some scholars fall back on the conditions of earlier Jewish life to explain the high level of Jewish participation in these revolutionary movements. In the Czarist Empire, where most Jews lived, they were systematically oppressed and could not actively participate in politics. Many discovered in socialism an opportunity to escape their own desperate situation. In Germany, even before that Jews could participate in politics since the establishment of legal equality in 1871, and they were represented in legislative bodies. Yet only in the left-liberal and leftist camps did they find what appeared to be full acceptance. For this reason, most Jewish deputies in the Reichstag before the First World War were Social Democrats, although the vast majority of Jewish voters voted for centrist bourgeois parties.²⁵

Even earlier, to be sure, starting with Karl Marx (whose anti-Jewish statements were well known) and Ferdinand Lassalle, numerous pioneers of the labor movement had a Jewish background. The secularization of the Messianic tradition, so deeply rooted in the Jewish tradition, and the aspiration to justice associated with the biblical prophets, not only for Jews but also for other disadvantaged social groups, was an additional reason for the commitment of many Jews to revolutionary concerns.²⁶ To the historian Saul Friedländer it seems “that the activities of Jewish revolutionaries in Germany were based on an unquestionably naive, but very humane idealism—a sort of secular Messianism, as if the revolution could bring deliverance from all sufferings. Many also believed that the Jewish question would disappear with the victory of the revolution.”²⁷ Gershom Scholem saw in anarchism—more than he did in Zionism—the realization of a Messianic utopia: “There is an anarchic

element in the very nature of Messianic utopianism; the dissolution of old ties which lose their meaning in the new context of Messianic freedom.”²⁸ With respect to the German-Jewish revolutionaries, one may also join George Mosse in invoking the transformation of the German-Jewish *Bildungsbürgertum*—the educated middle class—in the direction of a radical political universalism.²⁹ Moreover, solidarity with the international workers’ movement offered the prospect of a homeland beyond the community of nations that often rejected Jews as rootless.³⁰ Finally, there was their willingness “to show solidarity with the stigmatized class of the proletariat, since as intellectuals they had suffered from the social stigma of their background.”³¹

None of these motives should be glossed over. Yet we must be leery of looking for a single explanation that was decisive for all of the Jewish revolutionaries active in Munich and beyond. Whatever reasons propelled individuals to action, it is indisputable that neither before nor afterward in Germany had so many Jewish politicians stood in the public limelight as during the half year between November 1918 and May 1919. In Germany, the appearance of a Jewish prime minister and of Jewish cabinet ministers and people’s commissars was especially conspicuous because, in contrast to other European countries like Italy and France, Jews had not been entrusted with any governmental responsibilities in the period prior to the First World War.³² “Until November 1918 the German public had only known Jews as members of parliament and party functionaries, or as members of municipal councils. Now, suddenly, they were showing up in leading government posts, sitting at Bismarck’s desk, determining the fate of the nation.”³³ In 1919, however, contemporaries could not overlook what Rudolf Kayser, the literary historian, unequivocally articulated in the journal *Neue Jüdische Monatshefte*: “No matter how excessively this is exaggerated by antisemites or anxiously denied by the Jewish bourgeoisie: it is certain that that the Jewish share in the contemporary revolutionary movement is large; it is, at any rate, so large that it cannot be the product of any accident, but must have been dictated by an inherent tendency; it is a repercussion of the Jewish character in a modern-political direction.”³⁴

In Berlin too, during this time, Jewish politicians, such as Kurt Rosenfeld as head of the Justice Ministry and Hugo Simon as finance minister, had governmental responsibilities, and in Paul Hirsch there was even a Jewish prime minister in Prussia for a brief time. Yet in no city was the participation of Jews in the revolutionary events as pronounced as in Munich.³⁵ There great numbers of people of Jewish background stood among the most prominent exponents of the revolution and the council republics. In addition to Eisner, these included his private secretary, Felix Fechenbach, and the finance minister, Edgar Jaffé (already baptized at a young age), as well as Landauer's comrades in arms in the First Council Republic, Ernst Toller, Erich Mühsam, Otto Neurath, and Arnold Wadler. The mastermind of the Second Council Republic was the Russian-born Communist Eugen Leviné. There were other Russian Communists active in his circle, such as Towia Axelrod and Frida Rubiner. The only city that exhibits any parallels to Munich in this respect and at this time is Budapest. István Déak wrote that "Jews held a near monopoly on political power in Hungary during the 133 days of the Soviet Republic [established] in [March] 1919."³⁶ And as in Munich, Budapest's Jews became scapegoats for all the crimes of the revolutionary era.³⁷

Jewish Revolutionaries Do Not a Jewish Revolution Make

Yet the other side of the coin is often forgotten. Just as Jewish revolutionaries wanted to have nothing to do with the official Jewish community, the great majority of the Jewish community's members distanced themselves from the revolution. Subsequently, the local Jews felt like direct victims, since they became identified with the revolution without having a hand in the matter. Many of them turned directly to Eisner or other actors in the council republic with the aim of convincing them to resign or at least letting them know about their disapproval. Some Jewish activists even attempted to topple the council republic. Jewish newspapers made it unmistakably clear that their readership did not wish to be identified with any radical political position. I argue that, in addition to the

antisemites, it was members of the Munich Jewish community who objected most strenuously to the involvement of prominent Jews in the revolution. They remembered well the saying from the Russian Revolution a year earlier about Leon Trotsky (whose real name was Bronstein): “The Trotskys make the revolution, and the Bronsteins pay the price.”

The spectrum of protagonists who had a Jewish family background and were involved in the Munich events of 1918–1919 covers an extremely wide range. In the following chapters, we encounter figures whose personalities could not be more different. There are the well-known names, like Kurt Eisner, his secretary Felix Fechenbach, Gustav Landauer, Ernst Toller, and Erich Mühsam, who figured prominently on the public stage as much for their literary output as for their politics. Next to them stand the Communists of the Second Council Republic, Eugen Leviné and Towia Axelrod. We also meet two prominent attorneys at the time, Philipp Löwenfeld and Max Hirschberg, who, like many other Munich Jews, favored a moderate socialism and campaigned against “communist terror.”³⁸

After World War I, for the first time women appeared on the stage as political activists. Although they did not figure as prominently as their male counterparts in the Bavarian revolution, some of their biographies are highly illuminating. Kurt Eisner’s early comrade in arms, the Polish-born Sarah Sonja Lerch-Rabinowitz, motivated workers (both men and women) to stage a strike in January 1918 at a munitions factory. Shortly afterward, she took her own life in the Stadelheim prison in Munich. Her sister, Rahel Lydia Rabinowitz, advocated equally radical views, though as a Zionist she argued that a Jew should not assume any public office in a German state. Then there was the physician Rahel Straus, who—also as a Zionist—did not regard Jews as aliens in Germany. Frida Rubiner, in turn, played an active role as a convinced Communist during the Second Council Republic.

We will discover Orthodox Jews like the Regensburg-based editor of the *Deutsche Israelitische Zeitung*, Rabbi Seligmann Meyer, who advocated voting for the conservative Bavarian People’s Party; and Commercial Counselor Siegmund Fraenkel, the chairman of the Orthodox synagogue association Ohel Jakob, who wrote a public letter distancing

himself from the Jewish members of the council government. A few years later, a gang of Nazi thugs beat him up on a Munich street.

Meanwhile, there were outside observers such as Victor Klemperer, who was lecturing as an adjunct professor at the University of Munich and reporting for the *Leipziger Neueste Nachrichten*. Although he converted to Protestantism in his early years, he described with growing alarm the antisemitism of the period—just as he would later become one of the most powerful chroniclers of Nazi rule.³⁹ For Gershom Scholem, still called Gerhard at the time, Munich was the way station (between 1919 and 1922) on his route “from Berlin to Jerusalem,” and the place where he would write his doctorate on the Kabbalistic anthology *Sefer-ha-Bahir*. That launched him on his path to becoming the most important scholar of Jewish mysticism. In Munich he also forged friendly ties with the future Nobel Prize-winning novelist Shmuel Yosef Agnon, who arrived in the city from Leipzig in the middle of the revolutionary turmoil at the beginning of April 1919, sent there by his patron, Salman Schocken, to work on a children’s book in Hebrew with the illustrator Tom (Martha) Freud, a niece of Sigmund Freud.

Finally, this book incorporates a discussion of individuals whose thoughts and actions may be at least partly explained by the ways in which they distanced themselves from their own Jewish background—an attitude characterized by the philosopher Theodor Lessing, in a much-discussed book from 1930, as “Jewish self-hatred.”⁴⁰ This group includes Paul Nikolaus Cossmann, editor of the *Süddeutsche Monatshefte*; Cossmann was also the crucial mind behind the city’s most important daily newspaper, the *Münchener Neueste Nachrichten*, and one of the chief disseminators of the “stab in the back” legend about Germany’s defeat in the First World War. Cossmann had converted to Christianity, like the Hungarian-born Ignatz Trebitsch-Lincoln, who after his roles as a Canadian missionary to Jews, English member of Parliament, and German spy, showed up in Munich in the 1920s; there he made common cause with right-wing radicals to pull the strings behind a plot aiming to establish a reactionary Alpine republic. Last but not least, mention should also be made of Eisner’s murderer, Count Anton von Arco auf Valley. He hoped his crime would win him approbation from the radical

right-wing Thule Society, which had excluded him because of the Jewish background of his mother, Emmy von Oppenheim.

Many of these characters were in open conflict with each other. Erich Mühsam rejected the politics of Prime Minister Kurt Eisner as too moderate. During the Second Council Republic, the pacifist Ernst Toller skirmished vehemently with the Communist Eugen Leviné, who in turn accused Toller, Mühsam, and Landauer of “complete cluelessness.”⁴¹ Eisner came from the moderate wing of Social Democracy, and he joined the Independent Social Democrats (USPD) as his rejection of the war slowly grew. Landauer’s worldview was shaped by the basic tenets of anarchism, and Leviné took his marching orders from the Communist Party. These conflicts extended far beyond differences of opinion. On Palm Sunday 1919, the Social Democratic lawyer Walter Löwenfeld and Franz Guttman, a law student, attempted to topple the council republic. In 1922, Paul Nikolaus Cossmann (as plaintiff) and Felix Fechenbach (as defendant) were on opposite sides of a trial for high treason. Frequently the political fissure cut right through the middle of families. A cousin of Ernst Toller in 1919 fought as a lieutenant of the White Guard in the right-wing militia Freikorps Epp. Erich Mühsam’s siblings were Zionists, and his cousin, the writer Paul Mühsam, sharply condemned the “mass terror of the Spartacus group.” The brother of Max Süßheim, the Social Democratic Landtag (the Bavarian state parliament) representative from Nuremberg, was the conservative Orientalist and Munich university lecturer Karl Süßheim, who voted in 1919 for the center-right German People’s Party (DVP).⁴²

The antisemitic myth of a “Jewish revolution” is therefore just as absurd as the Jewish community’s defensive assertion that all the Jewish revolutionaries were no longer really Jews. No political consensus prevailed among the Jewish revolutionaries, nor in the Jewish community as a whole. All that can be established is that there was lively participation of Jewish actors on all sides, for reasons that, as previously mentioned, were hardly secretive but instead were entirely comprehensible historically. For a brief historical moment, Jews were swept onto the political stage—a position that, in turn, supplied their adversaries with ammunition against them. For the right-wing nationalists seeking

explanations for Germany's defeat in the world war, the downfall of the monarchy, the shame of war guilt, and the punitive measures imposed on the country, the military defeat and the failure of the old political ruling elite were not compatible with the sense of honor upheld in these circles. So they found scapegoats for the "stab in the back" legend, according to which Germany was not defeated by external armies but by the enemy within (where they were easiest to identify): among the Jews and the leftists. If these two groups overlapped, the target was especially large.

The Good Old Days?

The writer and later Nobel Prize laureate Thomas Mann was perhaps the most prominent early observer of the transformations sweeping his adopted city. Within a few short years, Munich changed from a center of "cheerful sensuality," "artistry," and "joie de vivre" to a city decried as a "hotbed of reaction, as the seat of all stubbornness and of the obstinate refusal to accept the will of the age," a city that could only be "described as a stupid city and, indeed, as the stupidest city of all." Before the war Munich had been the liberal city, Berlin the center of reaction: "Here one was artistic, there political-economic. Here one was democratic and there feudal-militaristic. Here one enjoyed a lively humanity, while the harsh air of the world city in the north could not do without a certain misanthropy." In 1926, while writing these sentences about Munich, Mann was already "watching in sorrow" as the city had "its healthy and lively blood poisoned by antisemitic nationalism."⁴³ Munich native Lion Feuchtwanger made this transformation the theme of his novel *Success*. It describes the special atmosphere of Munich in the early 1920s more vividly than any history book can. "In former times," Feuchtwanger writes, "the beautiful, comfortable, well-beloved city had attracted the best brains in the Empire. How was it that all these had left now, and that all the lazy and the vicious, who could not find a home in the Empire or anywhere else, rushed, as if magically drawn, to Munich?"⁴⁴ Berliners reading Thomas Mann or Lion Feuchtwanger might have been reminded that the *Vossische Zeitung* (the liberal newspaper "of record"

from Berlin) had already noted this development in October 1923: “In Imperial Germany, Munich was democratic and the asylum for all those in the north with a reputation for revolutionary notoriety and who needed to get away from the intolerance of the north German police. Now Munich has again become a German asylum site. Only now it is for the exponents of that old Prussian Junker [aristocratic] rule, against which the Bavarians earlier could not have been more up in arms.”⁴⁵

To properly assess the events of the period following the war, it is indispensable to cast at least a quick glance back at the period before. The stereotypes are clear. The era of Prince Regent Luitpold was regarded as the Bavaria of “the good old days,” the world war destroyed the old order, and the revolution as well as the two short-lived council republics laid the cornerstone for the ensuing reaction.

In the popular take on the prince regent’s era, this idealized image has been maintained to the present day. For the Jews as well, the world seemed to have been in order in this period—at least at first glance. One need only envisage how the Orthodox Feuchtwanger clan, after visiting the synagogue on Saturday morning and enjoying a little mid-day snack, made its way in the afternoon to the *Hofbräuhaus* to drink coffee or beer at the family’s regular reserved table. Needless to say, since carrying money was forbidden on the Sabbath, the family had its bill put on a tab, which they paid on a weekday. Not infrequently the breaking of the fast on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, ended with a liter of beer in a festival tent at Oktoberfest.⁴⁶ The beer gardens seemed tailor-made for Orthodox Jews: they could bring in their own kosher food, and the beer brewed according to the Bavarian Purity Law (hops, water, and malt were the only permissible ingredients) conformed to the Jewish dietary laws.

Munich’s Jews—who, with the exception of a few families, had long since discarded their strict orthodoxy—cultivated the same Bavarian dialect as their Christian neighbors. They loved the mountains and vacationed in the summer on Bavaria’s lakes. They were loyal supporters of the Wittelsbach monarchy. Jewish textile firms like the Wallach Brothers, merchants who specialized in retailing and exhibiting traditional folk costumes, pioneered the dissemination of *lederhosen* and

dirndls. Munich Jews headed the Löwenbräu brewery and the FC Bayern München soccer club. Some were bankers and department store owners, physicians and attorneys, society ladies hosting salons, and secretaries. Others were rag dealers and beggars, East European immigrant Jewish factory workers and artisans. They were royalists and revolutionaries, religious Jews and atheists. They pointed with pride to the central synagogue in the city center, a building that defined the silhouette of the city alongside the twin domes of the Frauenkirche, as shown on many postcards. In the presence of city dignitaries, it was dedicated on September 16, 1887, in a festive ceremony. From the outside it looked like a neo-Romanesque church. Services included organ music, a regular feature of reform-oriented communities, although it also represented an affront to Jewish religious laws for the Orthodox minority. Five years later, the latter erected the smaller but equally splendid Orthodox synagogue Ohel Jakob (Jacob's Tent). The synagogue buildings reflected Munich's steadily increasing Jewish population, which had grown from two thousand in 1867 to eleven thousand in 1910.⁴⁷

The face of the Jewish community changed after the turn of century. If the Jews arriving in Bavaria's capital before then came above all from Franconian and Swabian rural communities, seeking work and upward mobility, now they were increasingly immigrants from Eastern Europe, especially from the part of Galicia that was a province of the Habsburg Empire, a region that many Jews and non-Jews in the West regarded as the epitome of cultural backwardness. The writer Karl Emil Franzos, who grew up there, derogatorily characterized it as "Half-Asia."⁴⁸ Before the outbreak of the war, about one-quarter of the community's members were "Ostjuden" who mostly settled in the neighborhood of Isarvorstadt and were not always welcomed with open arms by their Western Jewish co-religionists.

Very few of Munich's Jews wanted anything to do with the Zionist movement founded in 1897. This became abundantly clear when Theodor Herzl announced that he planned to hold the first Zionist Congress in the city along the Isar. The city's central location and many transportation links convinced him that it was the ideal location. He had already seen to it that the invitations were printed when Munich's



FIGURE 2. The central synagogue erected in 1887 shaped the cityscape of Munich until its demolition in 1938. Stadtarchiv München.

official Jewish community signaled him in no uncertain terms that he would have to find a different venue, since Munich's Jews, like the rest of their German coreligionists, had no intention of forsaking their homeland on the Isar, Danube, or Rhine for one by the banks of the Jordan. Thus it transpired that the Swiss city of Basel, not Munich, became the birthplace of political Zionism. In Munich a small local Zionist chapter, supported mostly by recently arrived East European Jews, was formed. As elsewhere in Germany, the aim of local Zionists was not so much to emigrate to Palestine themselves as to create a national home there for the much larger Jewish population of the Czarist Empire, who were plagued by pogroms and economically impoverished.⁴⁹

Munich's Jewish community regarded itself as part of the city but also had numerous institutions of its own, from welfare organizations to student fraternities, from the Jewish Nurses' Home to the Jewish Women's League. The most important organization politically was the local affiliate of the Central Association of German Citizens of the Jewish Faith, which was committed to intervening everywhere it saw the legal equality of Jews, guaranteed on paper since the foundation of the modern

German Empire in 1871, under threat. Along the spectrum of political parties, most Jews in Munich, like Jews elsewhere in Germany, voted for the National Liberals and Progressives. They did not find a home in the parties on the right, with their open or thinly disguised antisemitism, nor, for most, did the Social Democrats, at the time still largely a class-based party, appeal to their economic interests.

Munich's reputation as Germany's cultural center had been increasingly challenged by Berlin since the turn of the century. Yet for now Munich remained the center of numerous cultural enterprises, from the artists of the Munich Secession to the satirists and cartoonists of the journal *Simplicissimus*, from the journal *Jugend* (which owed its name to its youthful new artistic style) to the trendsetting painters of the Blue Rider group. In those years Munich was home to the writers Heinrich and Thomas Mann, to Rainer Maria Rilke and Ludwig Thoma, Frank Wedekind, and Lion Feuchtwanger. The master painters Franz von Lenbach and Franz von Stuck resided here, while the master poet Stefan George presided over his literary circle. Cultural life mostly played out in the narrow quarters of the Schwabing district. One may imagine this space—a few square kilometers between the Café Stefanie, also known as the “Café Größenwahn” (“Café Megalomania”), and the Café Luitpold, between the Alter Simpl and the cabaret Elf Scharfrichter (the “Eleven Executioners”)—as the capital of German-language culture and simultaneously as a mix of provincial Bavarian Gemütlichkeit, bohemia, and avant-garde.

But for both Munich's cultural society and its Jews, the good old days were hardly as rosy as often portrayed. In spite of Jews' legal equality in the Kingdom of Bavaria since 1861, anti-Jewish sentiment had never completely disappeared. When the word “antisemitism” was coined in Germany in 1879, it represented a new, pseudo-scientific variation on hatred of Jews. Racially based, antisemitism meant that a Jew could no longer escape by converting to Christianity. In 1891, the first openly antisemitic organization, the Deutsch-Sozialer Verein, was founded in Munich. The cartographer Ludwig Wenng edited the journal of the organization, the *Deutsches Volksblatt*, with a telling subtitle: *Bayrische antisemitische Zeitschrift für Stadt und Land* (Bavarian Antisemitic

Magazine for Town and Country). Later Wennig's organization was re-named the Antisemitic People's Party (Antisemitische Volkspartei). In Munich, as in Bavaria as a whole, the antisemitic parties remained less successful than they were in many other parts of Germany. They hardly got more than 1 percent of the vote. But it became clear that antisemitism had the potential to appeal more widely when Hermann Ahlwardt, an antisemite known nationwide, attracted an audience of five thousand to a rally in 1895. A partial success was then scored by the party now calling itself the Christlich-Soziale Vereinigung, modeled after the party of Vienna's mayor Karl Lueger, when it struck an electoral alliance with the Catholic Center Party and succeeded in sending an antisemitic candidate to Munich's city council in 1905.⁵⁰ The extent of antisemitic prejudice in the center of society was visible on the neo-Gothic facade of the new city hall. The Jewish pair it depicted were outfitted the way a broad public imagined Jews: the husband with a money bag, the wife with a jewelry box. As the historian Andreas Heusler put it, antisemitism was "the common creed on which all of the völkisch-nationalist groups, fraternities, and sects in fin de siècle Munich could agree."⁵¹ In addition, just before the end of the war Munich became the center of pan-German agitation and, as Erich Mühsam asserted, had the reputation, in free-thinking and anarchist circles, of being the city with Germany's most reactionary police.⁵²

An epoch came to an end just prior to the outbreak of the First World War. It was symbolized by the death of the Prince Regent Luitpold. This popular ruler was succeeded by his son Ludwig III, who was reproached by many for having himself crowned in 1913 even though the actual incumbent on the throne, his mentally ill cousin Otto, was still alive. In December 1914, when municipal elections took place in Munich despite the war, the Social Democrats were able to continue expanding their first-place spot as the strongest party. A few months later, food was rationed because of supply problems and food stamps were introduced in the city. For residents of Munich things got even worse: as of 1916, the only beer to be had was watered down.⁵³ Around this time, a peace-minded group began to gather at the Goldener Anker inn. It was from this group, in which not only Kurt Eisner but also his associates Ernst

Toller and Sarah Sonja Lerch-Rabinowitz were active, that the strike movement at Munich and Nuremberg munitions factories emerged in January 1918.

The outbreak of the war and Kaiser Wilhelm's commitment to a *Burgfrieden*—the wartime political truce in which there would no longer be any differences among the parties and religious denominations—also introduced an end to social barriers, though only briefly. By 1916 at the latest, when the Prussian war minister ordered a census to see how many Jews were serving in the military, a measure that also affected the Bavarian army, the distinction was reintroduced.⁵⁴ In Bavaria there was also growing disillusionment as the war dragged on. Thus, at the general assembly of the Central Association of German Citizens of the Jewish Faith in February 1917, Munich rabbi Cossmann Werner warned: "We are heading toward hard times, let us not deceive ourselves about this. National chauvinism has come alive." After America's entry into the war, the Munich merchant even predicted pogroms against Munich's Jews.⁵⁵ The Munich branch of the right-wing German Fatherland Party (*Deutsche Vaterlandspartei*), founded in 1917, not only propagated annexationist war aims but also positioned itself as an antisemitic party and was among the forerunners of the ultranationalist and *völkisch* (right-wing nationalist and racist) movements of the immediate postwar period. Its membership included industrialists and bourgeois intellectuals, the popular writer Ludwig Thoma, the publisher Julius Lehmann, the composer Richard Wagner's widow Cosima Wagner, and the antisemitic philosopher Houston Stewart Chamberlain, as well as the man who would later found the German Workers' Party (*Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*, forerunner of the Nazi Party), Anton Drexler.⁵⁶

The "Jewish Question" Moves to Center Stage

The antisemitic excesses of the period following the war would have been unthinkable if they had not been planted on fertile ground from the outset. Anti-Jewish resentments had struck deep roots going well back into the early modern era. They repeatedly pushed to the surface, especially at times of political upheaval, such as during the restoration

of the old order accompanying the anti-Jewish riots of 1819 and during the failed revolution of 1848, when thousands of petitions from all over Bavaria arrived opposing the emancipation of Jews that was envisioned. By the turn of the century, these resentments mostly proliferated underground.⁵⁷ It is no accident that they resurfaced in 1918–1919, during another tumultuous period. Eisner and his comrades did not cause antisemitism; the events associated with them merely reactivated it.

But what had fundamentally changed now was the ubiquity of the “Jewish question.” It would be worthwhile to investigate systematically how rarely the word “Jew” appeared in the press before the First World War and how frequently it occurred after the war. Starting in 1919, hardly a week went by without reporting about Jews as Communists or capitalists, draft dodgers or war profiteers—or articles featuring disclaimers of such reporting. There was talk about “foreign” or “alien elements,” the customary code words for Jews, alongside terms like “profiteer,” “trafficker,” and “black marketeer.” The right-wing press held the Jews responsible for losing the war, for the revolution, and for the *Schandfrieden* (the “ignoble” or “disgraceful” peace treaty) of Versailles. But in the centrist and leftist press, too, there was constant talk about Jews: in reporting on the revolutionaries and their bloody demise; in discussions of expulsions of East European Jews; in the accounts of the murder of a Jewish cabinet minister and a member of parliament being publicly challenged; and in reporting on the beating of a Jewish merchant on the street and graffiti scrawled on synagogues.

The tone of these articles varied, sometimes against the Jews and sometimes in favor of them. Yet the frequency of the Jewish theme cannot be overlooked. In the Munich of the early 1920s, the idea took shape that the “Jewish question”—regardless of what anyone understood this to mean—was of immense importance. It made no difference that the Jews made up less than 2 percent of Munich’s population. The “Jewish question” had a presence in public perceptions in Munich long before it was apprehended in the same way in other parts of the German Reich.

Before Munich became the capital of the National Socialist movement, it had already become the capital of antisemitism in Germany. It laid claim to this title in the immediate postwar era thanks to many

factors: the high concentration of antisemitic groups, from the Thule Society through the Freikorps to the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP); the radical antisemitic network of ethnically German emigrants from the Baltics surrounding the later Nazi ideologue Alfred Rosenberg and his dissemination of antisemitic concoctions from the Czarist Empire;⁵⁸ the antisemitic publishing house of Julius Lehmann and newspapers like the *Völkischer Beobachter* (originally, *Münchener Beobachter*), the *Miesbacher Anzeiger* published nearby, and the paper *Auf gut deutsch* (the name meant "In Plain German") published by Hitler's mentor Dietrich Eckart; and finally, the graffiti smeared on synagogues, the desecrations of cemeteries, and the brutal attacks on Jewish citizens. Munich became the capital of antisemitism above all by the circumstance that, during the years following the First World War, antisemitism had penetrated into the center of Bavarian politics as well as into its law enforcement forces, its legal system, and its mainstream media.

There was thus no public authority capable of defusing the explosive mix concocted in Munich following the First World War. On the contrary, in the *Ordnungszelle* (cell of order) he created, the Bavarian prime minister and later the state commissioner general, Gustav von Kahr, saw to it that this mixture would also actually detonate. In 1920 and 1923, just a few days after he had taken office as prime minister, Kahr planned the expulsion of Jews who were not German citizens. Leading figures in Munich's police headquarters, including the chief of police, Ernst Pöhner, and the head of the political division, Wilhelm Frick, openly manifested their antisemitism and were among the earliest Nazis in the party organization. While crimes committed by people on the left were punished severely, Bavarian judges praised crimes committed by people on the right as heroic and patriotic deeds and handed out mild sentences for them. As of 1920, the most important Munich newspapers had also steered into right-wing channels. As early as June 1923, as far as Thomas Mann was concerned, Munich had already become "the city of Hitler."⁵⁹

Hitler's failed attempt to seize power on November 9, 1923, only appeared to mark the beginning of the end for the rise of an antisemitic

movement in Germany. In spite of the failure of his putsch, the marginalization of the Jewish population had been successfully tested. Identifying the revolution as a Jewish undertaking, branding Jews as draft dodgers or shirkers or war profiteers, attempting twice to deport East European Jews, and committing extreme acts of violence during the night of November 8 and early morning of November 9, 1923—collectively, these actions sent a clear signal to Munich’s Jews. While the city’s population continued to grow, the number of Jewish residents declined significantly between 1910 and 1933, falling from eleven thousand to nine thousand. Some of the city’s most famous Jews left Munich and Bavaria, and Jewish travelers were urged to avoid Bavaria. Nobody could have known at the time that this was only the prelude to a drama that would unfold anew ten and twenty years later when what Martin Buber had called the “unspeakable Jewish tragedy” would finally acquire a name.

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