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German Studies and Jewish Studies: Symbiosis of Two Fields

Leslie Morris

German studies has always had a particular relationship to Jewish studies. While the subfield of German-Jewish studies has emerged in recent years as a vibrant place of scholarly inquiry, the larger academic field of Jewish studies has played a significant role for several decades within the German Studies Association. If the notion of a German-Jewish symbiosis (or, after Dan Diner, a "negative symbiosis") has dominated the discourse about Germans and Jews, then an analogous symbiosis can certainly be traced between the academic fields of German studies and Jewish studies. In fact, the German Studies Association has long been one of the primary scholarly organizations that have enabled the fields of German-Jewish studies and Holocaust studies to thrive and grow. Beginning with the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (Scientific Study of Jewry) in the late nineteenth century, the first scholarly inquiry into the nature of Jewish culture and civilization, scholars in Germany and in German studies have been at the forefront of forging what would become the interdisciplinary field of Jewish studies.[1] It is a given that the field of Jewish studies bears the imprint of German culture.

And yet, the model of German-Jewish symbiosis, while still the dominant lens through which public discourse continues to explain the relationship between German and Jewish cultures, has indeed been contested for decades by scholars of German studies. Instead, rather than conceptualizing the relationship of Jewish to German culture as one of symbiosis, scholars have turned to models of transnational flows between cultures to understand and analyze the complex reimaginings of what might be said to constitute Germanness and Jewishness, calling for greater fluidity and circulation between the fields of German studies and Jewish studies.[2]

But what exactly *is* Jewish studies? If we seem to know what German studies is—an interdisciplinary inquiry into the history, politics, and cultures of the German-speaking lands—Jewish studies is based on a similar premise of exploration of the full range of Jewish texts, history, and culture from antiquity to the present. The Association for Jewish Studies (AJS), an ACLS learned society of roughly the same size as the German Studies Association, was founded in 1967, nine years before the German Studies Association. In many respects, in the past decades Jewish studies as an academic

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field has undergone parallel transformations to German studies. Indeed, as a sister American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) organization to the German Studies Association, the AJS has been at the forefront of a number of important and notable shifts in the field over the past four decades. If, originally, the field of Jewish studies was concentrated on the areas of Biblical and rabbinic texts and the field of modern Jewish history, those areas of inquiry have opened to include significant work that has at its core an exploration of the dynamics of gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity, migration and race theory, and a sophisticated inquiry into the nature of text and its evolving interaction with media of all kinds. One can see a great synergy between the fields of German studies and Jewish studies. It is, indeed, almost impossible to imagine the one without the other. Significantly, at the annual meetings of both the GSA and the AJS a large number of scholarly papers are presented in the field of German-Jewish studies.

The debates about the links, disjunctions, imbrication, symbiosis, etc. between German and Jew are legendary and have been the subject of much scholarly debate. From Steven Aschheim's earlier, pivotal work exploring the relationship between German Jews and eastern European Jews in Germany to Marion Kaplan's recent focus on German Jews in the Dominican Republic, historians have turned to a range of transnational encounters to explore the complexities of German-Jewish culture and history. As Aschheim notes more recently, many of these debates have centered on "a hypostatized conception of 'essences,' of visible and hidden, external and internal characteristics taken to be profoundly determinative of 'Jewishness.'"[3] The enduring debates about what constitutes "Germanness" ("Deutschtum") and "Jewishness" ("Judentum") has, as Aschheim points out, of necessity relied on ossified notions of what the Jew and the German even is.

In an essay published in *PMLA* in 2010 entitled "Placing and Displacing Jewish Studies," I argued that the field of Jewish studies, in the long aftermath of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, might begin to occupy a more central, transdisciplinary position within the humanities. Indeed, it was German-Jewish studies that I proposed as a transformative model of the humanities. Suggesting in that article that the place of German within the field of Jewish studies is uncontested—both as the site of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* in the nineteenth century, and of current debates on the emerging role of Jews in the "new Europe"—I examined the emerging field of German-Jewish studies as a case study for reimagining the "place" of Germany in the emergence of Jewish culture in modernity. To be sure, German thought provided the primary paradigm for the emergence of European Jewish culture since the late eighteenth century, beginning with the German-based movement of *Haskala* in the late eighteenth century. As German-Jewish studies has moved from its origins as a largely historical and philological approach to texts, to considering more fully the complex border zones of religion, culture, text and media, it has also helped to expose

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the fault lines that had previously kept our notion of what constitutes Germanness and what is Jewish intact. In the field of German literary studies, for instance, critical work on the non-Jewish German author W.G. Sebald has articulated the imbrication between German and Jew in a way that might serve as one conceptual model, as it opens up a way of being (and not being) German that is also a way of being (and not being) Jewish.

Another important link between German studies and Jewish studies has been the recent focus, in both fields, on the role of multilingualism and translation in complicating our understanding of what constitutes Jewish or German culture. German studies has opened up an inquiry about the role of language in a multicultural Germany and Austria, as it has explored the question of minority cultures and languages in the case of Turkish communities in Germany. Certainly, as Germany has for decades been a country of immigration, the very question about the centrality of the role played by the German language has undergone major shifts. The influx into postunification Germany of Jews from the former Soviet Union has also necessitated an important rethinking of what constitutes Jewishness. Are these recent Jewish immigrants to Germany to be understood using the same paradigms for analyzing social and cultural difference of Turkish (and often Muslim) cultures in Germany? Can a focus on German-Jewish culture help to move past the discourse about minorities in the public sphere in Germany, one that relies on problematic terms such as "integration," "tolerance," "multiculturalism," and "migration background"?

Significantly, the German Studies Association also played a formative role in the evolution of the field that was once known as "exile studies." The presence in the field of German studies of both Jewish refugee scholars and non-Jews who emigrated from Europe immediately after the war made an indelible mark on multiple fields—including German history, German literature, philosophy, sociology, and Holocaust studies. Although much of the early scholarship on exile studies eclipsed the question of Jewish culture, at the same time it made possible a space for it to emerge.

In order to map the emergence of Jewish studies, and specifically German-Jewish studies, within the context of the German Studies Association, let me mention several pivotal events that have shaped the organization's debates and discourse about Jewish history and culture.

1986, 1989, and Beyond

The significance of the *Historikerstreit* ("historians' debate") of 1986 and its impact on the discussions and debates within the German Studies Association cannot be overstated. The very question of how to approach the Holocaust as a historical and cultural phenomenon shifted after 1986. At about the same time, the field of literary studies turned its focus to explore more fully the notion of how representation of historical events shapes our understanding of the event itself.[4] Although there were

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a large number of sessions in the first decade of the GSA devoted to German history, the history of antisemitism and the Third Reich, attention to these questions was given additional resonance in the aftermath of the *Historikerstreit*. There certainly was attention given to these topics earlier, although the tenor and the arguments were different.

In 1977 the very first conference of the German Studies Association, known then as the Western Association for German Studies (WAGS), addressed the issue of antisemitism, notably with a talk by Ehrhard Bahr entitled "The Anti-Semitism Studies of the Frankfurt School: The Failure of Critical Study."[5] Throughout the next decade, there was something on the Third Reich in every conference program. For instance, in 1978 the conference included a panel on antisemitism featuring a paper entitled "The Treatment of the Jew in 19th Century German Literature," and a session on "Germany and the Holocaust," on which papers such as "The Holocaust in Historical and Cultural Context" were presented. There were also, significantly, a large number of papers and conference sessions devoted to exploring the interplay of literature with history primarily, i.e., the National Socialist past, with papers on exile writers as well as other Jewish and non-Jewish Germans such as Alfred Döblin, Nelly Sachs, and Günter Grass. When Jewish culture was addressed specifically, papers focused on the nineteenth century or early twentieth century.

But the vast majority of conference panels in these years focused on National Socialism and the Third Reich, and paid relatively little attention to Jewish culture per se. George Mosse's banquet talk in 1983 was entitled, "The Bildungsbürger Burn Their Own Books: Remarks on the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Nazi Book Burning." In 1984, when the organization officially became the German Studies Association, a panel on "The Holocaust: Literature, History and Photography" featured Ruth Klüger (Ruth Angress on the program), who presented one of the few papers with the word Jewish in its title: "After Auschwitz No More Poems, or Is There a Jewish Problem in Post-Holocaust German Literature?" The 1987 meeting included a partial screening of *Heimat*, and a panel on "Nazis and Jews" with noted Holocaust historians Christopher Browning and Henry Friedlander. Most notably, at that same conference the luncheon talk was by Egon Schwarz, Professor of German at Washington University and a Jewish refugee from Austria. His talk was entitled, "Der Beitrag der Juden zur deutschen Literatur."[6]

After 1989, following the fall of the wall and unification, the ensuing influx of Russian Jews into Germany set the stage for a debate about whether one could speak about a "renaissance" of Jewish life and culture in Germany. There was a new proliferation of panels and sessions at the GSA on the question of Jewish life in contemporary Germany. This renewed attention to the question of the presence (and with that, the absence) of Jews in Germany found new resonance a decade after the pivotal debates ensuing from the *Historikerstreit*, when Daniel Goldhagen's controversial book,

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Hitler's Willing Executioners, was published in 1996, sparking a robust discussion in a number of panels at the German Studies Association and bringing Christopher Browning's *Ordinary Men*, published several years before Goldhagen's book in 1992, into the discussion of the subject.

Finally, public debate in Germany at the time of the *Historikerstreit* and then with German unification after 1989 must be seen in tandem with events in Austria. The Waldheim affair of 1986 opened up questions about Nazism's role in Austria and the differences in public discourse about the past in Germany and Austria. In the context of these geopolitical shifts, Austria created numerous institutions designed to foster Jewish studies, notably the Institute for the History of the Jews in Austria, a research facility that has become a showcase for the state's newly imagined position vis-à-vis its Jewish past and present. This helped to engender a proliferation of state-sponsored Jewish studies programs and institutes in the German-speaking world (i.e., in Berlin, Leipzig, Potsdam, Munich). The presence at the German Studies Association of the Austrian Cultural Forum has served to both highlight the specificity of Austria's engagement with the legacy of National Socialism and to provide an important forum at the GSA for this discussion.

In 2001, the Germanist Mark Anderson wrote a piece published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* declaring that German studies has become "too Jewish."[7] Arguing that contemporary German studies has placed an inordinate amount of focus on "Kafka, Benjamin, and Celan" while ignoring the canon of German writers, Anderson's piece hit a nerve. Anderson's provocation that German studies needed to return to examining *German* literature and culture, rather than Jewish texts, set off a storm of panels, sessions, and articles. While the article certainly sparked a lively debate in the field of German studies, with a well-attended round-table panel the following year at the GSA conference about the relationship of Jewish culture to German studies, much of the ensuing debate sought to forge new critical paradigms to undo the polemic launched by Anderson.

The following year, I organized a similar roundtable at the AJS, with the title, "How German is Jewish Studies? How Jewish is German Studies?" My goal in organizing this session was to bring the issues that had surfaced at the German Studies Association to the AJS; in doing so, I hoped to create greater dialogue between the two scholarly organizations and to bring to the AJS the lively debates that were surfacing at the GSA. At the time, it seemed that while German-Jewish studies had increasingly become institutionalized as a recognized subfield of German studies, this had not really been the case within Jewish studies. The roundtable panel at the AJS sought to address the complex relationship between Jewish studies and German studies, to highlight the new directions German-Jewish studies has taken since the fall of the Wall in 1989, and to make clear the strong presence of German-Jewish studies in the US and in Europe. For one thing, this was made evident in the early 2000s by the increasing number of

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positions listed in the Modern Language Association (MLA) Job listings for German departments seeking scholars who specialize in German-Jewish topics. In addition, in 2009 a working group in German-Jewish studies was founded at Duke University and held its first biannual workshop; now an established gathering of scholars in the field of German-Jewish studies, the Duke group also publishes *Nexus*, a journal of German-Jewish studies.

In fact, the very question of the relationship of German culture to Jewish culture was shaped in the 1990s by the claim (and the counterarguments) of a renascence of Jewish culture in Germany. Regardless of whether one ascribes to the belief that Jewish culture in Germany underwent a radical transformation post-1989, it is undeniable that the role of Jewish culture has become central to the pivotal questions that shape contemporary German culture, history, and politics. The questions that have animated scholarship in German-Jewish studies in the past decade and a half have centered on the question of what it means to rebuild Jewish culture in Germany.

Holocaust Studies vs. Jewish Studies

To be sure, the lines are, perhaps of necessity, blurred between Jewish studies and Holocaust studies. And yet what is important to note is that the German studies Association has long been one of the primary places where this intersection has been explored productively. The earliest conferences of the German Studies Association were filled with panels and sessions on the Third Reich, on antisemitism, and on World War II more broadly. In fact, it would appear that there was more discussion about Germany's years under National Socialism at the German Studies Association than in any other venues and fields within the academy. Yet it was not until 1981 when the first set of papers devoted explicitly to Jewish culture—in this case, Jewish literature—appeared. Ursula Beitter presented a paper entitled "Public Posture, Private Fear: German-Jewish self perception 1890–1920."[8]

It was also, significantly, in 1981 that a discussion group was formed at the GSA entitled, "German Studies, National Socialism in the community," described as "a discussion on the role of teachers in the field of German studies and dealing with the myths, legends, prejudices, and other problems concerning the Nazi." The following year, in 1982, an additional discussion group was entitled "Teaching about National Socialism" with the following description: "An open exchange of using ideas on approaches on treating the National Socialist era in Germany in the classroom."

Since that time Holocaust studies has become a serious field of inquiry in its own right. There are dedicated centers of research, such as the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies and Yad Vashem in Israel, in addition to many centers at universities throughout the United States. Jewish studies and Holocaust studies are both "institutionalized" in greater measure today than ever before (if we accept the statistics of the AJS and the figures from

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development offices at colleges and universities throughout the country); significantly, the German Studies Association continues to play a major role in fostering critical discussion of the Nazi genocide against the Jews.

To be sure, in recent years a number of sessions at the GSA have begun to explore both the links and the disjunctions between German studies, Jewish studies, and Holocaust studies. Following the cue of Todd Presner, for instance, whose 2009 book *Mobile Modernity: Germans, Jews, Trains*, insisted on the "always already" Jewishness of German culture, scholars in the field of German studies have continued to complicate the very categories of "Jewish" and "German" text and the matrix of German-Jewish history, memory, culture, and urban space. It seems that we have indeed moved past an insistence on, or understanding of "hyphenated " national, ethnic, or disciplinary identities, to a more nuanced understanding of the interwoven nature of German and Jewish culture, history, and identity. In the field of German-Jewish literary studies, for instance, it is now a given that "the Jewish" is always present as trace within German text; similarly, the intrinsic Jewishness of German studies and the fundamental Germanness of Jewish studies point to the porousness and entanglement of the textual, philosophical and cultural encounter between German and Jew. In a recent article, I turned to the hyphen as a "third space," suggesting that we think about it not as a mark of constriction or of limits, nor as a mark that preserves separate terms even while placing them in relation to each other, but rather as a sign that invites a space of encounter that enables us to expand the text beyond the borders of German studies, Jewish studies, and Holocaust studies.[9]

Jewish Studies/German Studies/Memory Studies

In recent years, the emerging field of "memory studies" has also played a formative role in the German Studies Association; as has been the case in the overlap with both Jewish studies and Holocaust studies, the GSA has contributed to the ongoing scholarly development in thinking about the vicissitudes of memory in German and Jewish history and culture. To speak about German memory means, of course, to address the Holocaust. Discourses seen in the 1980s about the German "mastery of the past," or the "Vergangenheitsbewältigung," which have long since been parsed and critiqued as a way of speaking about *German*, but not *Jewish* history and memory, have morphed into the recent approach that falls under the rubric now of memory studies. It is signficant that it is at the GSA that much of this work has been done; memory studies is now an established "network" at the GSA. It has now become a commonplace in critical, academic discussions about Jewish life in Germany that Germany post-1989 was gripped by a preoccupation with mourning, a "memory mania" that found expression in public commemoration, debate, and memorialization. The debates in the public sphere, stretching from Germany to the United States, on the opening of Libeskind's museum in 2000 were the focal point for this public memorialization.

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Similarly, German-Jewish studies has become saturated with discussions of memory and memorialization in Germany. There is now an enormous body of work—literary, critical, artistic, journalistic—that examines the aftereffects of the Holocaust and the various forms that memory, trauma, and its repression have engendered. The preoccupation with commemoration has itself become the subject of some of these projects, creating yet another layer of self-reflexivity about the relationship between public space and national and cultural identity and memory. As is clear from the sheer volume of books, exhibits, public debate etc., the Holocaust does not recede, but rather accrues layers of discourse. We have, perhaps, exhausted ourselves in thinking about the parameters of grief, mourning, loss, the interplay between presence and absence, between German and Jew, the reappearance of the past in the present, the fissures of memory that come to the surface in Berlin today, the exhausted tropes of testimony, witnessing, belatedness, trauma, postmemory, and finally, the exhausted trope of ennui itself. And yet, the critical and scholarly inquiry into the nature of Jewish memory in Germany is vitally important for the larger field of German studies. It is no accident that this sustained discussion has taken place, and continues to take place, at the German Studies Association.

The Early 2000s to the Present: The Transnational Turn

The first half of the 2000s brought a degree of institutionalization and visibility of German-Jewish studies in both Germany and in the US. The pivotal event was the opening of the Jewish Museum in Berlin in 1998. Daniel Libeskind's building generated enormous debate and controversy in both the public sphere and in academic circles. In 2000, the Leo Baeck Institute joined with the AJS, YIVO, and several other Jewish research organizations in opening the Center for Jewish History in New York. This move was more than a geographic integration of German-Jewish studies into the academic bodies that have defined Jewish studies in the US academy. Indeed, it signaled the integration and acceptance of the history of German-speaking Jews into the canon and institution of American Jewish history. The following year, the Leo Baeck Institute opened a branch of its archives at Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin.

As Jewish studies has become increasingly institutionalized, scholarship on the border zones of national and religious/ethnic identity has increasingly turned its attention to the encounters of Jews and Germans not as a "one-way street" between German Jews and non-Jewish Germans, but rather as a constellation of ties that complicate and transcend the concept of the nation. In recent years, the German Studies Association (along with the AJS) has been the home of a number of projects that have opened up the sphere of thinking about German-Jewish culture to include the migration of Jews and non-Jewish Germans to other locations, notably the migration from eastern

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Europe to Germany, and from Germany to England, the US, and Israel. At the 2010 GSA conference, a series of panels under the rubric "German-Jewish Transnationalism" took place.[10] This was the first sustained discussion of the vicissitudes of the transnational in German-Jewish culture. Transnational history became the frame for rethinking the relationship of Jewish studies to German studies. In reframing the German-Jewish symbiosis as a series of encounters between Germans and Jews, the model of the transnational rethinks the relationship of German Jews to the non-Jewish world in which they lived and displaces the model of assimilation (the blurring of ethnic, social, political and historical distinctions) to that of acculturation, to examine in a more nuanced way Jewish interaction with non-Jewish culture.

If transnationalism has now eclipsed the earlier model of symbiosis (negative or not), what does this mean for the future of German-Jewish studies? Historian Yuri Slezkine formulates this even more provocatively in the first pages of his book, *The Jewish Century*, when he writes: "The Modern Age is the Jewish Age, and the twentieth century, in particular, is the Jewish century. . . . Modernization, in other words, is about everyone becoming Jewish."[11] What does Slezkine's insistence on the Jewishness always already contained within modernity mean for the ongoing debates in German studies about Jewish culture, history, and memory? Perhaps, in this, we are able to move past the symbiosis: in "everyone becoming Jewish" Slezkine perhaps offers us a way to move past the divide between German and Jew, between German studies and Jewish studies.

Notes

1. While some programs at universities use the designation Judaic studies, I will use Jewish studies, in part in keeping with the academic study of Jewish culture as it is defined by the Association for Jewish Studies.
2. See Leslie Morris, "Placing and Displacing Jewish Studies." *PMLA* 125, no. 3 (2010): 764–773.
3. Steven E. Aschheim, "Assimilation and its Discontents," in *Times of Crisis: Essays on European Culture, Germans and Jews* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 67.
4. James Young's 1988 book, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988) was among the first sustained discussion of representation and the Holocaust.
5. Subsequently published in *German Studies Review* as Ehrhard Bahr, "The Anti-Semitism Studies of the Frankfurt School: The Failure of Critical Theory," *German Studies Review* 1, no. 2 (1978): 125–138.
6. See Egon Schwarz, "Der Beitrag der Juden zur deutschen Literatur," in *Conditio Judaica: Judentum, Antisemitismus und deutschsprachige Literatur vom 18. Jahrhundert bis zum Ersten Weltkrieg: Interdisziplinäres Symposion der Werner-Reimers-Stiftung*, ed. Hans Otto Horch and Horst Denkler (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1988), 309–328.
7. Mark Anderson, "German Intellectuals, Jewish Victims: A Politically Correct Solidarity," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 19, 2001.
8. A 1993 panel entitled "Post-Holocaust German-Jewish Identity in Writings by Women" was likely the first GSA panel entirely devoted to German-Jewish writing, featuring papers on Nelly Sachs,

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Barbara Honigmann, and Grete Weil. At that same conference, a panel on German Catholics and German Jews featured work by Dagmar Herzog, Helmut Walser Smith, and Doris Bergen, which complemented panels in that year on Anselm Kiefer, on Paul Celan, and on "Political Anti-Semitism in Germany and Austria Since the Late Nineteenth Century."

9. See Leslie Morris, "Epistemology of the Hyphen: German/Jewish/Holocaust Studies," in *Crossing the Disciplinary Divide: Conjunctions in German and Holocaust Studies*, ed. Jennifer Kapczynski and Erin McGlothlin (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2016).
10. A volume of essays has come out of the 2010 panels on German-Jewish Transnationalism at the GSA. Jay Howard Geller and Leslie Morris, eds., *Three-Way Street: Jews, Germans, and the Transnational* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, forthcoming 2016).
11. Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 1.

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