What set antisemites apart from anti-antisemites in Imperial Germany was not so much what they thought about ‘the Jews’, but what they thought should be done about them. Like most anti-antisemites, German Social Democrats felt that the antisemites had a point but took matters too far. In fact, Socialist anti-antisemitism often did not hinge on the antisemites’ anti-Jewish orientation at all. Even when it did, the Socialists’ arguments generally did more to consolidate than subvert generally accepted notions regarding ‘the Jews’. By focusing on a broader set of perceptions accepted by both antisemites and anti-antisemites and drawing a variety of new sources into the debate, this study offers a startling reinterpretation of seemingly well-rehearsed issues, including the influence of Karl Marx’s ‘Zur Judenfrage’ and the positions of various leading Social Democrats (Franz Mehring, Eduard Bernstein, August Bebel, Wilhelm Liebknecht, Karl Kautsky, Rosa Luxemburg) and their peers.

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THE
SOCIALIST RESPONSE
TO ANTISEMITISM IN
IMPERIAL GERMANY

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Preface

Like most scholarly inquiry, this book wants to contribute to our understanding of questions that extend beyond its immediate remit. To indicate where I think the wider implications of this book lie, and to make it easier for the reader to understand my approach, I want to begin by explaining what the bigger questions were that guided me while undertaking the research for this book and trying to make sense of my findings.

Any attempt to gauge and interpret current expressions of antisemitism, and to determine how best to contain and oppose them, is invariably to a considerable degree dependent on our notions of historical precedent. Some of the most urgent and controversial relevant issues are currently these: is the antisemitism of Islamicist and Jihadic ideology inherent in its traditional roots and sources or ultimately an import from the ideological arsenal of Western modernity? Is the political Left in the West responding adequately to contemporary antisemitism? To what extent is its response indicative of an already established tradition of problematic dealings with antisemitism and ‘the Jews’? To be sure, comparison with antisemitism’s historical track record and past attempts to counter it are not our only means of assessing current risks and realities and determining suitable strategies to confront them. It is obvious, though, that historical precedent will always play a prominent role in this process. Consequently, the historical development and dynamics of modern antisemitism, and the experiences of those who opposed it in the past, apart from being a matter of historical interest, are also issues of considerable contemporary import. Yet, if what we take to be historical precedent is in fact based on a misreading of previous encounters between antisemitism and anti-antisemitism, then the conclusions we draw from that ostensible precedent will invariably be skewed, leaving us ill equipped to meet contemporary challenges.

The Socialist response to antisemitism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as exemplified by the endeavours of Imperial German Social Democracy, is one such encounter between antisemitism and anti-antisemitism that scholars have misinterpreted in a number of significant ways. In the first instance, my interest is obviously to set the record straight on the ways in which Imperial German Social Democrats grappled with antisemitism. Hopefully, though, the approach I have developed to do so is one that colleagues working on other comparable encounters, and on
relations between Jews and non-Jews more generally, will also find useful in refining their analysis.

I fully concur with Adorno’s contention that Auschwitz has established a new categorical imperative that compels mankind to undertake everything within its power to ensure that nothing comparable to the Shoah can recur. If we are to take this imperative seriously, we initially need to understand what the conditions actually were that facilitated the perpetration of the Shoah in the first place. It is this task that informed my decision to become a historian and that ultimately lies at the heart of all my academic endeavours. How it was possible for a highly developed European society to commit genocide in the way German society did during the Shoah is a question that continues to vex and haunt many of those engaged in the study of the Shoah, of National Socialism and of modern German history more generally. It is an issue that has been riddled with controversy, both scholarly and polemical.

What allowed Daniel Goldhagen to cause such a stir with his *Willing Executioners* in 1996 was the emphatic way in which he placed antisemitism squarely at the heart of his explanation of the Shoah and insisted on the primacy of antisemitism as the main motive force behind it. His approach broke radically with a false dichotomy that the long-standing controversy between the intentionalist and structuralist interpretations of National Socialism and the Holocaust had previously established. The intentionalists emphasised the significance of antisemitism as the (or at least a) central motive force underlying the Shoah. Yet they located the intention to exterminate Jewry almost exclusively with the Nazi elites and portrayed its implementation as an imposed top–down process in which German society as a whole collaborated only reluctantly and almost entirely under duress. The structuralist model, by contrast, redirected the focus towards the activities and experiences not only of the entire state and military apparatus but also of German society more generally. The complex and variegated picture of the Shoah’s perpetration that consequently emerged invariably made the issue of the motive forces driving and facilitating the Shoah a more complex and variegated issue too. This presents a real enough challenge, of course, but there can be little doubt that some historians, most notably perhaps Hans Mommsen,1 pursued the structuralist path from the outset with the intention of dislodging antisemitism from its central role in any explanation of the Shoah. Instead, a form of discourse increasingly emerged that, as Alois Hahn has put it rather aptly,2 discusses the Shoah as if a reconstruction of the means by which the perpetrator acquired the murder weapon

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already offered a comprehensive explanation of the reasons for the murder. Yet, of what relevance are potential means and opportunity where there is no motive? In fact, without such a motive they cease to be means and opportunity and simply revert to being straightforward circumstances.

Goldhagen sought not only to reassert antisemitism as the crucial point of departure for any explanation of the Shoah, he also tried to do so in a way compatible with the notion of extensive societal responsibility for its perpetration. The Shoah was not only the intentional realisation of an ideologically motivated project but this was a project, he argued, that the bulk of German society subscribed to and it did so with considerable enthusiasm at that.

Only over time did it become clear to his supporters and detractors in the public forum that Goldhagen had in fact entered into a zero sum game. The strong continuity he ascribed to eliminationist antisemitism in German society prior to the Shoah was complemented by an equally radical but quite inexplicable discontinuity in its aftermath. Almost overnight, the spectre of democratic re-education had apparently beaten the eliminationist antisemitism previously integral to the makeup of German society for centuries into retreat. As Goldhagen made this assumption more explicit, it became clearer that the preparedness to engage his stark portrayal of societal implication in the perpetration of the Shoah was in effect a cathartic exercise rewarded with a clean bill of health for post-war German society. Thus the public debate soon sailed into steadier waters and Goldhagen turned from a bogeyman to a highly decorated pet.

The problem with Goldhagen’s explanatory model is not so much that its portrayal of the implication of much of German society in the perpetration of the Shoah is unduly stark or bleak. In this respect the merits of his book remain considerable. The real problems lie elsewhere. In granting post-war German society a clean bill of health, Goldhagen not only legitimised the increasingly aggressive calls to draw a final line beneath the critical examination of German society’s responsibility for the Shoah but also sanctioned the strategies actually developed after 1945 to deal with that responsibility. Yet the bulk of these strategies in fact did more to minimise and evade than to explain and address the implication of much of German society in the Shoah. More importantly for our context here, however, his exclusive focus on the alleged continuity of eliminationist antisemitism in German society prior to the Shoah is a reductionist one that grossly oversimplifies the questions he claims to answer.

The suggestion that most Germans were rabid antisemites hell-bent from the outset on physically annihilating the Jews only detracts from the issues that need to be engaged if we genuinely want to understand and acknowledge German society’s actual (indeed extensive and horrendous) implication in the perpetration of the Shoah. What we really need to understand is why the physical annihilation of the Jews struck a sufficient cross section of the
Preface

German population as a plausible and feasible ‘solution’ to a supposedly real, existing problem. Why did the measures leading up to it not disquiet the bulk of German society sufficiently to stop the escalation towards this ‘solution’ in its tracks?

It is often said that the chief responsibility of most Germans for the Shoah lay in their indifference. Perhaps many Germans did feel fairly indifferent towards the act of genocide itself. Some of them may genuinely not have realised what was going on. Many chose not to know, either by failing to inquire even when developments before their own eyes or reports they received from sources they trusted clearly begged the question or simply by wilfully ignoring what was in fact blatantly obvious. The vast majority probably had a reasonably good idea of what was going on, even if their knowledge of the precise details was patchy. Yet, however great the role may have been that indifference played in these various responses to the act of genocide itself, indifferent towards the Jews the Germans most certainly were not. Virtually all Germans subscribed to a basic set of anti-Jewish stereotypes and the conviction that an unresolved ‘Jewish Question’ in more or less urgent need of a comprehensive solution existed.

To be sure, subjectively most of them were presumably convinced that all they wanted was to see the situation of the Jews ‘normalised’ once and for all. The Jews needed to be put in their place and the (alleged) issues of their undue influence and their inclination to subvert accepted values required a definitive resolution. The Jews had been granted emancipation on the condition that they assimilate. Yet, they had done so only partially or opportunistically or, even worse, in order to mask the ways in which they continued to maintain their own, specifically Jewish interests. Hence, sturdier measures than politicians had previously dared apply were presumably called for to guarantee that ‘the Jewish Question’ really was satisfactorily resolved. We should not forget that for many Germans National Socialism’s preparedness to implement radical ‘solutions’ that all previous politicians had shied away from was in any case one of its main attractions.

Yet this edifice of stereotypes and the entire discourse on the claims and limitations of Jewish assimilation were in large part predicated on assumptions whose underlying logic implied that the Jews were not genuinely capable of assimilating fully. In this respect, the godfather of respectable antisemitism, the leading Imperial German historian and National Liberal deputy in the Reichstag, Heinrich von Treitschke (1834–1896), had already set the standard in the late 1870s. When it came to formulating what he thought the practical consequences of his ‘analysis’ of ‘the Jewish Question’ should be, he did no more than appeal to Jewry to show more modesty and to assimilate more thoroughly. Yet the main body of his ‘analysis’ not only allowed for no other conclusion than that the Jews were in fact intrinsically incapable of assimilating but it also implied that the existence of
unassimilated elements within its sphere posed a threat to the very existence of the German nation that it could not, in the long run, afford to tolerate.  

Now, it is no foregone conclusion that people will draw the implications of their beliefs and convictions to their logical consequence, let alone that they will attempt to implement those logical consequences. Many of the remarks and statements we will encounter were made in the political arena. Often they were primarily meant to score points, rather than add up to a conceptually consistent alternative position. Whether they genuinely questioned the generally established terms of reference or those that one's opponents adhered to was therefore often of little or no concern to those who made these statements. Yet this in no way diminishes their ultimate responsibility for thereby helping to maintain and reproduce the prevalent discourse on antisemitism and ‘the Jewish Question’ and the exclusionary dynamics generated by that increasingly consensual discourse.

It is surely fair to say that no government or regime will ever be able to mobilise sufficient popular support for genocidal policies unless these policies in fact represent the ultimate consequence of an exclusionary logic with which the society whose support is required is already saturated. The National Socialists would obviously have had quite a struggle on their hands, had they tried to single out all healthy blue-eyed little girls with blonde ponytails for physical annihilation. In short, it is sustained anti-Jewish discourse that initially stops well short of explicitly drawing its own implications to their logical consequence that nevertheless helps render society susceptible to that logical consequence. It makes increasingly radical suggestions moving further and further towards that logical consequence seem worthy of serious consideration because they are in keeping with well-established patterns of reflection upon ‘the Jewish Question’.

Consequently, options that would otherwise be dismissed out of hand because they seem intolerable or untenable gain the potential to move gradually from the lunatic fringe to the heart of viable governmental policymaking decisions. In Imperial Germany even the self-avowed antisemites rarely admitted to themselves that the logical consequence of their arguments could only be the wholesale removal of the Jews from non-Jewish society, let alone that this wholesale removal might best be brought about by their physical annihilation. Hitler himself, when he began to present his emerging own brand of antisemitic ideology to the public immediately after the war, was in no doubt that there could be no solution short of the Jews’ removal [Entfernung]. Yet he used the terms ‘expulsion’ [Ausweisung] and ‘annihilation’ [Vernichtung] interchangeably. That annihilation would be the method of choice was no foregone conclusion, then. On the other

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hand, it was not an option Hitler felt the need or the desire to rule out either.  

To be sure, for most Germans, to adapt an apt formulation by Anthony Kauders, ‘the dream of a Germany without Jews’ by no means invariably implied ‘the dream of a Germany strewn with the victims of annihilation’. Yet without the former the latter could never have become reality. This dream of a future without Jews was, of course, no exclusively German phenomenon, far from it. The non-Jewish obsession with Jews and the stereotyping of Jews as a central plank of Western identity formation have been enduring features of European civilisation. Fortunately, not all warped perceptions of Jewry invariably lead down some high road to genocide but that hardly merits complacency. The degree of often willing collaboration the Germans could count on throughout Europe in the implementation of the Shoah bears testimony to the destructive potential at stake here.

Even so, it was the interaction between regime and society in Germany that turned the physical annihilation of the Jews into the centre piece of a supposedly redemptive mission and generated the determination and stamina required to see it through with such awful consequence. What we need to understand are the conditions and mechanisms that allow or compel a society to draw the logic of the stereotyping and exclusionary ideas prevalent in its midst to their ultimate consequence. Surely, our attempts to do so are most likely to succeed if we focus on the specific context in which we know that mechanism to have functioned most effectively and devastatingly.

National Socialist antisemitism only stood a chance of advancing from the lunatic fringe to viable governmental policy because German society was saturated with a set of perceptions regarding ‘the Jews’ whose implications, when taken to their ultimate logical consequence, made options that would otherwise have seemed plain mad appear plausible. These options struck many as daring and revolutionary, to be sure, but they nevertheless seemed plausible enough to deserve support, support that was perhaps unconditional but more likely conditional, perhaps it was merely tacit – but it was support all the same and there was enough of it to render the perpetration of the Shoah viable.

The purpose of this book is to help us understand the process of societal saturation with perceptions of ‘the Jewish Question’ that underpinned this development by throwing a light on the extent to which both self-avowed antisemites and those opposed to political antisemitism in Imperial Germany subscribed to many of the same anti-Jewish stereotypes. On the whole, what

4 Cf. ibid., 417–420.

set those who did consider themselves antisemites apart from those who did not was not primarily *that* they thought there was a problem with the Jews, nor even, in large measure, *what* they thought that problem was. In this respect, most contemporaries tended to agree to a startling degree. What set them apart was what they thought should be done to resolve the ostensible problem. In other words, it was their prescriptions for ‘the Jewish Question’, rather than their perceptions of it, that set them apart.

Given the extent to which the alleged problem was imagined rather than real, it could never actually have been resolved in keeping with the widely accepted terms of reference. Let alone could the underlying rival visions of a pluralist society or an ethnically homogeneous community be reconciled. Unless one of these options won out decisively over the other there could only ever be a tenuous balance between them. ‘The Jewish Question’ was only a symptom of this tenuousness, of course, but for many it soon became one of its most potent symbols. Since ‘the Jewish Question’ was no genuine conflict capable of genuine resolution, it had an inbuilt, virtually boundless potential for escalation. The more one desired its amicable resolution the more its inevitable failure to materialise would intensify the sense of frustration and futility felt even by those who subjectively wished the Jews no harm. Short of acknowledging that ‘the Jewish Question’ did not in fact exist, even those with the best intentions eventually had to concede that more radical measures would apparently be required to resolve the issue than they had ever envisaged at the outset.

*Prima facie*, it might well seem that a world that could be neatly divided into antisemites and non-antisemites would make our task inordinately easier. Yet as far as the situation in Imperial Germany is concerned, matters are far more complicated and the seemingly so tempting clear-cut juxtaposition of antisemites and non-antisemites can seriously impede our comprehension of the issues at stake. It forces us to portray in black and white a constellation actually characterised by various very murky shades of grey. It is more than evident that Imperial German society was pervaded by a set of perceptions regarding ‘the Jews’ that was more than problematic in its own right without necessarily amounting to fully blown antisemitism.

Shulamit Volkov has suggested that antisemitism was ‘transmitted’ from Imperial Germany to the Weimar period, not so much via a direct continuity of organised political antisemitism or explicitly antisemitic ideology, but primarily ‘through the persistence of a cultural system of norms, vocabulary, and associations’ that were, for the most part, not avowedly antisemitic. If we take this contention seriously, it immediately becomes evident that it is precisely the shades of grey that are of the utmost importance for our understanding of this process of transmission. It is they that ultimately formed the prevalent set of perceptions regarding ‘the Jews’ in Imperial

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Preface

German society, and this more general set of perceptions, in turn, clearly did more in the long run to render German society susceptible to National Socialist antisemitism than the ideological or organisational continuity of pre-war political antisemitism in its own right. If we limit ourselves to the more straightforward juxtaposition of antisemites and non-antisemites, we are invariably compelled either to demonise this entire spectrum of problematic perceptions by classifying them as antisemitic or to exculpate them altogether by qualifying them as non-antisemitic. Either way we impede our ability to understand the dynamics and significance of these perceptions for the process rendering German society capable of the perpetration of the Shoah. Therefore it is precisely on these shades of grey that this book will primarily focus. More specifically, it will examine the relevance and dynamics of these perceptions by checking for their impact on that sector of non-Jewish Imperial German society where we would least expect it to have gained ground: Social Democracy.
At the heart of this book is the thesis for which I received my PhD from University College London (UCL) in 2003: *Social Democratic Responses to Antisemitism and the Judenfrage in Imperial Germany: Franz Mehring (A Case Study)*. The debt of gratitude I incurred during my three years as a doctoral student (and teaching assistant) in the Hebrew and Jewish Studies Department at UCL is immeasurable. I have yet to be convinced that there could be a friendlier and more conducive academic department. I very much hope that all my colleagues there – including the world’s two most fantastic administrators! – are aware of the extent of my admiration and appreciation for them. Michael Berkowitz was the most considerate and encouraging supervisor one could wish for. John Klier and Ada Rapoport-Albert, as the former and current heads of department, have been extraordinarily supportive throughout. As an Honorary Research Fellow in the department I continue to teach there and take considerable pride in my ongoing affiliation with the department, which I have no intention of allowing to lapse. I greatly enjoyed and benefited immensely from Dorothea McEwan’s truly marvellous German Palaeography course at the Warburg Institute, which I took in 2001/2002. Finally, I am grateful to Peter Pulzer and Donald Sassoon for agreeing to be my examiners and for treating me to a painless, stimulating, and thoroughly enjoyable viva.

Already more than spoilt with a wonderful home department at UCL, I was fortunate enough to secure my first full-time appointment as a Lecturer in Modern European History in another outstanding and extraordinarily welcoming department, the Department of History at King’s College London. My colleagues there were extremely supportive and I could hardly have expected to undergo the transition from doctoral student to lecturer under better conditions. Having previously done my level best at UCL to convince students of Jewish History that they need to look beyond the immediate remit of their discipline, I now had to convince my students – and colleagues – at King’s that the Jewish experience with modernity is paradigmatic for the experience with modernity more generally and that ‘the Jews’, far from being marginal to ‘mainstream’ history, have served as an integral ‘other’ in the process of Western identity formation. This element of role reversal was extremely useful in helping me focus and clarify my thoughts as my thesis evolved into this book, which is now very much a
product of the truly blissful two-and-a-half years I spent at King's before
taking up my current position at UCL.

Over the years, a number of colleagues have shown a generous interest in
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both formally and informally, inter alia, in the context of the Seminar in
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ies Program at Wesleyan University (Middletown, CT) and the Fellows'
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mention. All the colleagues I have had the pleasure of meeting there during
my various stays, and Mieke Ijzermans in particular, have been exceptionally
welcoming and supportive and I look forward to many more pleasant and
productive visits there.

I am neither a man of independent means nor do I have wealthy relatives
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I thank Lewis Bateman for his initial interest in my manuscript and Eric Crahan for the enthusiasm with which he has brought this project to fruition. Both readers consulted by the press were extraordinarily generous in their comments and I hope they will be satisfied with my attempt to address their concerns. I am grateful to all the colleagues involved in the practical process of producing this book and putting it out there and hope I have not made their lives more difficult than absolutely necessary.

A number of friends and colleagues who are not necessarily specialists in my own field have generously accompanied all my endeavours since my days as a mature undergraduate and deserve to be named on this occasion. Jonathan Israel’s generous support has been invaluable throughout as has that of Jon Smele. I suspect that Beverly Adams hardly realises just how crucial she was in keeping me from giving up in my first year as an undergraduate. Barbara Schmidt has been immensely supportive since she too came to the UK. Timm and Karin Kunstreich have become real friends and have helped out, time and again, in a variety of ways. Tjark Kunstreich and Christian Schmidt, finally, are, as ever, the two most important people in my life and without their unstinting friendship and moral support life would be very testing indeed. Almost as important to me was the late Karin Maurer whom I continue to miss intensely. I dedicate this book to the three of them.
## Acronyms

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<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>IRSH</td>
<td><em>International Review of Social History</em></td>
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<td>IWK</td>
<td><em>Internationale wissenschaftliche Korrespondenz zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung</em></td>
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<td>JbA</td>
<td><em>Jahrbuch für Antisemitismusforschung</em></td>
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<td>JHI</td>
<td><em>Journal of the History of Ideas</em></td>
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<td>JSS</td>
<td><em>Jewish Social Studies</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>LBIYB</td>
<td><em>Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>LVZ</td>
<td><em>Leipziger Volkszeitung</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>NPL</td>
<td><em>Neue Politische Literatur</em></td>
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<td>NZ</td>
<td><em>Neue Zeit</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>TAJb</td>
<td><em>Tel Aviver Jahrbuch für deutsche Geschichte</em>; previously: <em>Jahrbuch des Instituts für deutsche Geschichte</em> (Tel Aviv)</td>
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<tr>
<td>WaM</td>
<td><em>Welt am Montag</em></td>
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