

Michael Brenner, *Der lange Schatten der Revolution. Juden und Antisemiten in Hitlers München 1918 bis 1923*, (Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag im Suhrkamp Verlag, 2019), pp. 399.

by Ulrich Wyrwa

At the beginning of the age of extremes, an extreme antisemitism emerged from the historical confluence of war, revolution and counterrevolution in Europe, and one of its most powerful new motifs was that of Jewish Bolshevism. True enough, the percentage of revolutionaries coming from Jewish communities was disproportionately high, not only in Russia, but also in Budapest and Munich. Even though these individuals thought of their activism not as Jewish, but as revolutionary, their family background fed the antisemitic delusion. Within the Jewish communities, the participation of Jews in the revolution triggered fierce defensive reactions and accusations. The complexity of these circumstances has so far been inadequately illuminated. Michael Brenner has now presented a thorough study on Munich Jews and antisemites in Revolution and Counterrevolution, which reconstructs the intertwined links between antisemitic phantasmagoria and Jewish revolutionaries, the behavior of Jewish liberals and social-democrats, the counterreactions from Jewish communities, and activities of converted Jews.

The fact that the number of Jews in the Bavarian Revolution was disproportionately high, as Brenner explains at the outset, has been emphasized and elaborated upon many times. A systematic study of the attitude of Jewish revolutionaries to their Jewish origins has, however, been lacking, as has a reconstruction of the attitude of the majority of the Jewish population to the revolution. Brenner shows that the Jewish background of many revolutionaries was “a fiercely discussed topic” among Jews, with the majority being “resolute opponents of the revolution,” or at least viewing it “with concern” (p. 14). Furthermore, Brenner’s particular interest is in “integrating the events more strongly into the context of Jewish history” (p. 19).

Brenner notes that most of the Jewish revolutionaries no longer participated in Jewish community life, and had no connection to religion. But “they did not deny their Judaism, either” (p. 21). According to Brenner, the “antisemitic myth of a Jewish revolution” is therefore “just as absurd.” He succinctly sums up this connection in the subheadings: “Jewish revolutionaries do not make a Jewish revolution” (p. 25) and “like the Jewish community’s claim to protection, the

Jewish revolutionaries are all no longer Jews” (p. 28), an assessment that is also often found in literature.

Skillful and convincing, Brenner sets out to integrate the history of the Bavarian Revolution and Counterrevolution more completely into Jewish history, by introducing the central chapters of his presentation of each case with explanations of the Jewish festivals celebrated in the temporal context of the political events of the time. Brenner examines in detail the relations of Jewish revolutionaries such as Kurt Eisner, Gustav Landauer, Erich Mühsam, Ernst Toller and Eugen Leviné with Judaism and asks what influence their origins had on their political activities. Brenner also examines Jewish contemporaries who were less central to the political events, as well as a number of Jewish liberal or social-democratic activists. He closes this chapter with references to conservative and right-wing extremist Jews who fought against the republic of councils, some of them in the Freikorps.

Brenner introduces the chapter on the “Pogrom Mood in Munich” of April 1919 with references to the Pesach Festival celebrated that month. The focus is on the antisemitism unleashed immediately after Eisner took office. Brenner refers to a collection of hundreds of antisemitic letters sent to Eisner, kept in the German Federal Archives. Portraying in detail the antisemitism of the Catholic Church in Bavaria, Brenner also points to the accusations that then papal nuncio in Munich, Eugenio Pacelli (the future Pope Pius XII), who fled the city during the revolution, made against Kurt Eisner, whom he saw as the “symbol of the revolution” (p. 139).

Brenner also addresses the complexity of questions associated with the murder of Kurt Eisner, pointing out that the murderer, Count Anton von Arco auf Valley, on his mother’s side also had a Jewish family background.

The defeat by military force, including the extremely aggressive, antisemitic Freikorps, of the republic of councils, was accompanied by the brutal murder of the Jewish revolutionary Gustav Landauer, among others. The aftermath left the authorities faced with growing hatred against Jews and the likelihood of pogroms. What distinguishes the police reports of these events is that, as Brenner writes, they are “themselves full of antisemitic stereotypes” (p. 155).

After the suppression of the revolution – Brenner introduces this chapter with the Jewish New Year festival, Rosh Hashanah - Munich became the “refuge of the reaction” and “the capital of antisemitism in Germany” (p. 183). The Bavarian

military was again “in the hands of the far right (p. 191). Hitler had “in this atmosphere [...] an easy game” (p. 186); his “rapid political rise” had begun (p. 192).

As early as January 1920, the first mass events held by antisemitic organizations took place in Munich. The journalist Paul Nikolaus Cossmann, who had converted from Judaism to Catholicism, was also involved in the creation of the antisemitic climate. Cossmann was an influential editor of the daily newspaper *Münchner Neueste Nachrichten* and editor of the *Süddeutsche Monatshefte*. In both, Cossmann propagated the canard of the stab in the back and played a decisive role in spreading the accusation.

In connection with Cossman’s Jewish self-loathing, Brenner also points to another extremely bizarre biography: Ignaz Trebitsch-Lincoln, a Jew born in Hungary and converted to Protestantism in England, became active as a Jewish missionary in Canada. In 1910, he was elected to the British House of Commons as a liberal and then offered to work for the German authorities as a spy during the First World War. Arrested in England, he was expelled after the war. He then went to Germany, where he supported the Kapp Putsch in 1920. After the Putsch’s failure, Trebitsch-Lincoln fled to Munich, where the Bavarian police protected him from an arrest warrant from Berlin. Shortly thereafter, he joined work on conspiracy plans alongside General Ludendorff. The communist newspaper *Red Flag* on the other hand connected him with Benito Mussolini. Trebitsch-Lincoln fled to Vienna with false papers issued by the Munich police. “The Munich police files,” Brenner sums up, “show the complete confusion that the impostor Trebitsch-Lincoln created here, as well” (p. 252).

Brenner opens the last chapter, “The City of Hitler,” with Sukkoth 1923. On September 28, a Sukkah burned down; the same day saw an attack on a Munich synagogue. The situation of the Jews in Bavaria became more and more precarious during that month, especially since the Prime Minister was planning the expulsion of Eastern Jews and searched for allies in the right-wing camp. Finally, the night between November 8-9, 1923, was the date of Hitler’s coup. For most Jews in Munich”, Brenner emphasizes, “this night meant the first real confrontation with the life-threatening horrors of National Socialist terror” (p. 282). The antisemitic climate in Munich after the suppression of the revolution “served Adolf Hitler as a stage” and “as an ideal testing ground for his later plans.” Nevertheless, Brenner emphasizes, “no direct path led to 1933” (p. 318).

Summing up the results of his study, Brenner writes that this chapter of German history makes clear “the misunderstanding of many German Jews” about the practical meanings of emancipation (p. 315). After 1919, no Jewish politician in Bavaria ever held “government office again” and even in everyday life the “old trenches persevered” (p. 315). Furthermore, “this historical episode is a learning play in the complexity of ‘Who is a Jew?’” (p. 316).

At the end of the book, Brenner refers to another Jewish festival, Purim on March 12, 1933, a holiday commemorating national rescue from imminent danger of annihilation. A few days after the holiday – Brenner concludes with this memory – “the first German concentration camp opened;” another few weeks later “the first four concentration camp murders of Jewish prisoners took place” (p. 319).

Rarely has the complexity of the relations between Jews, revolution and antisemitism been reflected so thoroughly as in this study by Michael Brenner of the Munich Revolution.

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