

**Laurence Duchaine-Guillon, *La vie juive à Berlin après 1945*
(Paris: CNRS Editions 2011), 464.**

by *Henri Zukier*

In Berlin, the modern era for the Jews started in 1671, when the great elector of Brandenburg, Friedrich Wilhelm, allowed fifty wealthy families from Vienna's expelled Jewish community to settle in Berlin and the Margravate Brandenburg, in return for heavy taxes and costly residence permits. Over the next few centuries, from Moses Mendelssohn to the end of the Weimar Republic, the community expanded and played an increasingly important role in the Jewish and German cultural, economic and political spheres.

The major periods in Berlin Jewish history have received extensive scholarly attention. This ambitious study focuses on a relatively neglected period: the post-war years, from 1945 till German reunification in 1989. During that period, Jewish life recommenced of course at a historical low, and was demographically and institutionally desolate. In 1933, there were about 170,000 Jews in the organized Jewish community. In 1946, the community numbered about 7,000 members: the majority, about 4,200, had been spared deportation because of a non-Jewish spouse; 1,500 had returned from concentration camps and 1,200 had survived in hiding. Various other Jewish groups also arrived in Berlin. In 1946, about 6,000 Jewish Displaced Persons (DPs) lived in Berlin, most of whom subsequently left the city; some Eastern European Jews also immigrated to Berlin, followed, in the 1970s, by about 3,000 Soviet Jews. The Jewish community remained unified through the beginnings of the Cold War in 1947, the Soviet blockade of the city in 1948, and the establishment of two German states in 1949. In 1953, however, the communities completed their own division, with profound demographic, social and political differences.

Post-war Berlin, then, is a city of many German and Jewish contradictions. The heterogeneous mix includes the political conflict between East and West, and a city in renewal and division; a Jewish community trying to rise from the ruins, amidst complexities of Jewish identity with most members intermarried, and tensions between Jewish groups of different religious and cultural backgrounds; and the inter-group dilemmas of a renewed Jewish-German relationship bringing victims and perpetrators together. The book explores these dynamics through

the use of the Berlin Jewish press after 1945, the very incomplete archives of the Jewish communities till 1978, and a number of interviews designed to supplement the historical information. Typically, the histories of the two communities are treated separately. Starting in 1952 with the Slansky show trial, a wave of Stalinist anti-Semitic propaganda and anti-Jewish persecutions in Eastern Europe led many of the few remaining Jews of East Berlin to seek refuge in the West. Thus, while the West Berlin community numbered over 6,000 from the 1960s on, the East Berlin community steadily declined from a few hundred members to under 200 in 1989. Given the considerable disparities in size, composition and political context of the two communities, a comparison is not unproblematic. This study seeks to transcend the differences with a comparative and “integrative historiography”.

The book is divided into five chapters, examining the early unitary history, then comparing the demographics, the institutions, the politics and culture in the two communities.

The first chapter explores the reconstruction of the community from 1945 to 1953; it describes striking resilience and distress. On 6 May, a few days after Berlin’s surrender, a first religious service is celebrated, followed by two Shabbat services on 11 May. The first wedding between two Auschwitz survivors takes place on 29 July. In the second half of 1946, the birthrate among Jewish DPs is the highest among worldwide Jewish communities. At the same time, the surviving Jews face considerable hardship, including shortages of housing and food and plenty of illness. The misery was somewhat eased by the assistance of international relief organizations, such as the Joint. The primary activity of the Jewish community in Berlin does not focus on culture or religion, but on social work. There are also repeated expressions of anti-Semitism, and debates rage within the community about the future, whether to stay or to leave. By 1953, the rupture between the two states is also finalized in the Jewish communities. The communities, too, are not divided by religious differences, but by the politics of the Cold War. The East Berlin community dwindles, led by officials loyal to the state.

The second chapter offers a comparative demographic analysis of the two communities from 1953 onwards. While the East Berlin community is an “endangered species” on the brink of extinction, the West Berlin community consolidates as a result of several waves of immigration. Both communities, though, are aging, have few youth, uncertain prospects, and an inverted

employment pyramid: only twenty percent of members are active in a very limited number of occupations.

The third chapter describes communal institutions of the two communities: cemeteries, synagogues, academic institutes, social clubs and the Jewish hospital. A “Jewish Cold War” marked the relations between the two communities until a detente in the late 1980s. The administration of the communities is transformed, as the role of rabbis and religious authorities declines, and leadership is instead assumed by communal officials.

Both Jewish communities forged close ties with the local and national authorities, a topic which is examined in the fourth chapter on the political and ideological relationships between the communities and the state. In contrast to the West, East Berlin Jewish officials were largely figureheads representing the government’s policies. The East Berlin community was even enlisted to legitimize the Berlin Wall, presented as a defense against imperialism and anti-Semitism. Stretching the search for parallels, the author suggests that both states treated the Jews as “court Jews,” affording them protection in return for their services. Jews were used for policy goals— primarily to gain international legitimacy for the state and its ideology. The Jewish experience in Berlin remains ambivalent, torn between integration and marginality, in “negative symbiosis.”

The final chapter presents Jewish culture in post-war Berlin, which remains largely barren during this period. The difficulties of the aftermath of devastation are further aggravated by design, as Jewish culture is suppressed in the East. In both societies, post-war Jews are sometimes treated as relics from the past and living “museum pieces.” The book sketches several types of artists and intellectuals of that period.

The book ends in 1990, on the cusp of a renewal of the community with the influx of Russian immigrants and, more recently, Israelis. The study’s macro and comparative focus on demographics, institutions, and on the political conflict between East and West, has inherent limitations. The elevated focus unfortunately leaves too little room to examine the intriguing and unique Berlin post-war questions about the disjunctures of identity and the moral and psychological complexities of victims returning to Germany. Throughout the period covered in the study, it remains unclear whether the Jewish return to Berlin would merely remain an epilogue, or would become yet another chapter

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in the city's long Jewish history. The book opens tantalizing perspectives and invites further exploration.

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