

Jewish Anticlericalism in Germany and France: A Transnational Polemic¹

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In December 1870, Simon Bloch (1810–79) wrote a survey of the past year for his journal, *L'Univers israélite*. His retrospective touched on various far-reaching developments, including the defeat of French forces at the hands of Prussia and its allies, the declaration of the French Third Republic, and the siege of Paris. Rather than focus any of these major moments in French national history, however, Bloch suggested that the most relevant event for his French Jewish readers had taken place in a different country:

The principal Jewish event that we can report for the year 1870 was the deliverance of our coreligionists from papal oppression; an oppression all the more odious as it took religion as a pretext and God as an accomplice. Through the fall of the pope's temporal power, God and religion are in turn liberated from this monstrous complicity that the self-declared vicars and representatives of God on earth imposed on them.²

Italian troops had taken Rome in September after the French state withdrew its garrison from the city in the course of the war with Prussia and its allies. As a French patriot Bloch had never been enthusiastic about the war, which represented a major setback for his country and had caused widespread suffering, yet he welcomed this particular development.

Many Jews on the other side of the conflict concurred. The German Jewish journal whose position was closest to Bloch's conservative Jewish periodical issued very similar comments in the wake of the war. Just a week after the Prussian king accepted the imperial crown of the unified German Empire,

1 A version of this chapter appeared in French as "L'anticléricalisme juif en Allemagne et en France: Une polémique transnationale," *Archives Juives* 46, no. 2 (2013): 97–115. It draws on examples and arguments that I develop in more detail in *The Modernity of Others: Jewish Anti-Catholicism in Germany and France* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014).

2 S. Bloch, "1870," *L'Univers israélite* (U1), Jan. 15, 1871, 196.

the *Israelitische Wochen-Schrift's* editor Abraham Treuenfels (1818–79) complained about the bloodshed the hostilities had caused, writing:

It is to be hoped that it is more than patriotic wishful thinking that the misery of war will be a blessing for Germany. Already the overthrowing of Cesarism and the temporal rule of the papacy are events that compensate for the great sacrifice and the awful suffering.³

By suggesting that liberalism had emerged victorious precisely as French troops abandoned their positions in the remaining papal territories, Bloch, Treuenfels, and other Jewish journalists across France and Germany offered a decidedly Jewish and anticlerical reading of the events unfolding before their eyes. Despite the different positions they took as German or French nationals on the 1870–71 Franco-Prussian War, and the overall horror they evinced at the devastation it had caused across Europe, Jewish commentators on both sides of the Rhine consistently celebrated the fall of Rome.⁴

This essay proposes that this shared conclusion was the result of a long-standing Jewish preoccupation with Catholicism and the papacy in both countries. Indeed, it argues, claims of Catholicism's resistance to modernity had already become central pivots of modern Jewish political thought in German and French-language spheres nearly a century earlier. To bring this trend into focus, this essay surveys Jewish anti-Catholicism and anticlericalism in Germany and France from the Enlightenment to the early twentieth century. It also offers reflections on the history of these polemics as a transnational development with an eye to answering the following question: What does it mean to pursue a shared discourse across national contexts that are otherwise deeply divided?

This question is all the more perplexing in light of an important scholarly tradition that focuses on how differently French and German societies came to regard the relationship between religion and politics in the modern era. Among the contrasts that appear most frequently in the literature are the following: whereas France was a predominantly Catholic country, Germany had both large Protestant and Catholic populations; whereas conflicts in France flared between Catholics and liberals or republicans (mostly from Catholic backgrounds), in Germany there existed the additional element of a politicized

3 "Mutter und Tochter," *Israelitische Wochen-Schrift* (*IWS*), Jan. 25, 1871, 25–6 and Feb. 8, 1871, 41–2.

4 On German Jews' reactions to the war, see Christine G. Krüger, *'Sind wir denn nicht Brüder?'* *Deutsche Juden im nationalen Krieg 1870/71* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2006).