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An awareness of danger

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How did French Jews view Nazism? Beginning in 1933, they organized and prepared for war with a lucid yet often resigned outlook on Hitler's Germany.

Reviewed: Jérémy Guedj, *Les Juifs français et le nazisme, 1933-1939 L'Histoire renversée.* (French Jews and Nazism, 1933-1939: History Upended). Paris, Puf, 2024, 371 p., 22 €.

The history of sensibilities is now a well-established historical genre, exploring, from a multidisciplinary perspective, the connection between emotions or sentiments, the body, and behavior.[1] By exploring the history of Jewish emotional culture in its encounter with Nazism, Jérémy Guedj, in a study of great methodological rigor and remarkable sensitivity, immerses us in Jews' perceptions, representations, and sense of danger between 1933 and 1939.

Tumultuous times

After having studied French Jews' conflicting attitudes towards Fascist Italy (in which he noted a mix of neutrality, hope, goodwill, and concern)[2], Guedj has now devoted a book to their attitudes towards Nazism, which were characterized from

[1] Alain Corbin and Hervé Mazurel, eds., *Histoire des sensibilités*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, "La vie des idées," 2022.

[2] Jérémy Guedj, *Le Miroir des désillusions. Les Juifs de France et l'Italie fasciste (1922-1939)*, Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2011.

early on by concern and lucidity. Together, the two books, published a decade apart, form an historiographical diptych.

The two books share a similar topic and research question: how did French Jewish public opinion, representing—without completely encompassing—a sociologically, culturally, politically, and religiously diverse community, perceive a foreign political danger (Germany beginning in 1933, Italy as of 1938) driven by biological antisemitism? What intellectual tools and cultural reference points did they draw on? How did French Jews interpret these unprecedented forms of political radicalism, and how did they use these interpretations once a threat had been identified? How did French Jews, who in the 1930s were victims in their own country of growing racial hatred and violence, grapple with this unexpected and unthinkable turn taken by European modernity—the "upended" history to which the book's subtitle refers?

While examining his topic within precise chronological parameters (1933-1939), Guedj also takes us down stimulating historiographical paths that resonate with a range of contemporary debates. How does one write a sensitive history of political awareness without falling into the trap of retrodictive explanation? How does one grasp the affective experience and representations of actors "not living in history [or] current affairs,"[3] but who experience the continuum of their life trajectories with minimal historical awareness? How does one connect the history of emotions and sensitive, event-based history to crises and ruptures, which imply experiences of time that are necessarily diverse?

To answer these questions, Guedj opts for event-based history, though not in the sense of a tragic, day-to-day account of French Jews' evolving views of Nazism. Guedj, who is careful and meticulous in his analysis, refuses to sacrifice historical complexity to a typology that would confine Jews to binary categories: engaged or aloof, lucid or blind, rebellious or resigned. Like others before him, Guedj, in his introduction, distances himself from what he calls the "Arendt syndrome," which contends that the Jews, paralyzed by Nazism, allowed themselves to be passively exterminated.[4]

[3] Marc Ferro, *Les Individus face aux crises du XX^e siècle. L'histoire anonyme*, Paris, Odile Jacob, p. 5.
[4] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann à Jérusalem. Rapport sur la banalité du mal*, Paris, Gallimard, 1966.

French Jews before the “events”

Accepting the challenge of complexity, Guedj has written a chorus-like narrative that uses a version of the “emplotment” strategy embraced by Paul Veyne. Guedj’s goal is to "re-enter a narrative order that conveys the sequence of contexts and hence the atmospheres and worlds in which the witnesses to Nazism's rise were steeped."[5].

Guedj seeks, in this way, to understand how French Jews constructed representations of events as they were happening, even when they did not develop an acute historical consciousness of these unfolding events. This choice is a clear example of a "history of the possible,"[6] which seeks to convey the contradictions of a world in which danger and normality were both present but in which genocide had yet to be imagined. But what does normality mean in such a context? To what does it refer?

Though he is always careful to connect the positions taken by actors to contemporary events (from January 30, 1933, to the 1938 pogroms by way of the 1935 Nuremberg Laws), Guedj fails to present his subjects in their daily routines, which themselves were inscribed in constantly shifting social and political configurations. At a time when the world was becoming more dangerous, how do people adapt effectively to a darkening world? Given these day-to-day concerns, how did they manage their emotions?

Guedj’s history of how people saw, reacted to, and emotionally experienced Nazism draws on the contemporary press (like the Strasbourg-based *Tribune Juive*, *L’Univers israélite*, and *Le Droit de vivre*), as well as institutional and public sources. Because he has chosen to write in a polyphonic style, albeit one in which literate voices (like journalists and intellectuals) are dominant, he has effectively given up on any attempt to write a prosopography of French Jews. Above all, the book seeks to be a sounding board for the thousands of Jewish voices—mostly public, mostly male (except for Rachel Cheigam and Ida Fink), that experienced the period before the Second World and the Shoah.

[5] Jérémy Guedj, *Les Juifs français et le nazisme 1933-1939*, Paris, PUF, 2024, p. 16.
[6] Quentin Deluermoz and Pierre Singaravélou, *Pour une histoire des possibles. Analyses contrefactuelles et futurs non advenus*, Paris, Seuil, 2016.

The challenge of "upended history"

Organized into seven chapters, the book is more than just a plunge into the period between 1933 and 1939. Guedj is not content to study how French Jews experienced (in the sense of a sensitive experience of politics) Hitler's rise to power and the establishment and consolidation of his dictatorship. Guedj situates his analysis in the short term—that is, the interwar years (in which he includes a section on the Weimar Republic and Nazism's initial emergence in 1923, which triggered anxieties that quickly tapered off in the second half of the 1920s)—and the medium term—namely, French Jews' cultural representations of Germans. He also introduces the reader to the Jewish sense of time, with its emphasis on the long term and its taste for historical analogies.

All cultures have representations of time, and Guedj pays considerable attention to the tension between attitudes inherited from the past and anchored in Jewish collective memory (as seen in the Feast of Purim) and present-oriented behavior that must wrestle with unprecedented situations. This emphasis is one of the book's great qualities, as it sheds light on how culture can shape a group's outlook.

As Johann Chapoutot observes in the preface, the Jews were forced "to examine their age-old history from the standpoint of the brutal shock of Nazi violence." Guedj connects French Jewish thinking about Nazism with Biblical references to the past or the messianic future that are characterized by vulnerability and danger. For French Jews, to confront Nazism was to replay the dramatic history of the *Megillah,* in which the heroine Esther saves the Jewish people of the Persian Empire from Haman's plan to exterminate them. In this way, one reaches the heart of the matter.

Fighting antisemitism

Guedj's account shows that, in many respects, French Jews shared the same anxieties and made the same flawed assessments as their contemporaries. The main mistake was believing that, once Hitler came to power, he would be forced to abandon his political and ideological radicalism.

Hitler did indeed defy common sense. Only with the 1935 Nuremberg Laws (at the very latest) did most people become aware of a terrible truth: nothing would be

the same as before. In chapter 4, which is metaphorically entitled "The Lock and the Keys," Guedj shows how French Jewish intellectuals with an inclination to messianism (Raymond Aron, Jean-Richard Bloch, Emmanuel Levinas) were, in the 1930s, incapable of analyzing Nazism as a religion that might change history's course and reverse the direction of modern European civilization. Guedj shows that French Jews reacted not only with fear and dread but also took the Nazi threat seriously, notably by studying and discussing *Mein Kampf* and other ideological foundations of national socialism.

Aware of the danger, they fought Nazi infiltration in France, as transmitted by "agents" like Darquier de Pellepoix, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, and Jean Boissel. The passages Guedj devotes to Nazi influence in North Africa and Alsace and the activism it provoked are particularly interesting. In 1936, the International League against Anti-Semitism (Ligue internationale contre l'antisémitisme, or LICA) organized a major public awareness campaign throughout eastern France, with significant meetings in Strasbourg, Metz, Nancy, Colmar, and Mulhouse. Anti-Nazi activism also assumed more concrete forms, such as boycotting German goods, petition campaigns, and the internationalization of the struggle through the World Jewish Congress, the "diplomatic arm of the Jewish people" that was founded in Geneva (also in 1936).

Such local, national, and transnational activism, at a time when Nazism itself was becoming more radical, resulted paradoxically in a "kind of acquired tolerance that dulled emotional as well as intellectual reflexes," as one LICA member observed after the Anschluss in April 1938. After the night of pogroms in November 1938, the German Jewish refugees became an issue, which resulted in the failed Evian Conference (which "sealed the meeting of national egoisms[7] ») and the abandonment of a coordinated refugee policy. French Jews succumbed to resignation, even before the outbreak of war, despite the Marchandeau decrees against racism of April 21, 1939, which the book surprisingly overlooks.

In conclusion, this book asks us to consider the emotional history of politics as a history of multiple and subjective temporalities in which "Nazism was considered on its own terms, in its immediate present."[8] Recognizing Nazism as a religion and a civilizational threat, French Jews fought it to the bitter end. They did not enter the war without awareness of the danger, nor without having organized themselves. Their

[7] Jérémy Guedj, *Les Juifs français et le nazisme 1933-1939*, p. 320.
[8] Ibid., p. 346.

great achievement was to have looked directly at Nazi Germany—even if their concerns remained inaudible.

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