

Womanhood, Female Agency, and Jewish Identities in the Nineteenth-Century Italian and German (Trans)National States

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Abstract:

Historians have studied for decades the commonality of Italian and German national histories in the nineteenth century. This edited volume aims instead to analyze them through gender and transnational lenses with a focus on women's and Jewish history. What impact did the nationalist ideology have on the notion of womanhood, on female agency and Jewish identities, and how do family and religion relate to emancipation? These issues help reconsider the essentialism of national narratives and methodological nationalism in historical research.

Weiblichkeit, weibliche Handlungsfähigkeit und jüdische Identitäten in den italienischen und deutschen (Trans-)Nationalstaaten des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts

German Abstract:

Historiker_innen haben jahrzehntelang die Gemeinsamkeiten der italienischen und deutschen Nationalgeschichte im 19. Jahrhundert untersucht. Dieser Sammelband will sie stattdessen durch eine geschlechtsspezifische und transnationale Linse analysieren, mit einem Fokus auf Frauen und jüdischer Geschichte. Welchen Einfluss hatte die nationalistische Ideologie auf die Vorstellung von Weiblichkeit, auf weibliche Handlungsfähigkeit und jüdische Identitäten, und wie verhalten sich Familie und Religion zur Emanzipation? Diese Fragen helfen, den Essentialismus nationaler Narrative und den methodologischen Nationalismus in der historischen Forschung zu überdenken.

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Baumeister, Martin; Lenhard, Philipp and Ruth Nattermann (eds.). *Rethinking the Age of Emancipation. Comparative and Transnational Perspectives on Gender, Family and Religion in Italy and Germany, 1800-1918*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2020. 444 pages, 149.00 GBP. ISBN: 978-1-78920-632-6.

Historians have taken women's lives and experiences into historical account since the feminist contestation of predominately male-oriented historiographies in the second part of the twentieth century. A more recent historiographical approach challenges in particular the role of women in European-national grand narratives. The volume edited by Martin Baumeister, Philipp Lenhard, and Ruth Nattermann, entitled *Rethinking the Age of Emancipation: Comparative and Transnational Perspectives on Gender, Family and Religion in Italy and Germany, 1800-1918*, is a novelty for this cultural turn in the study of nation, nation-state, and nationalism. Its major focal points are the gendered and Jewish perspectives on Italian and German nations. However, the contributions also encompass the historical transnational contexts of the Habsburg Empire, France, and North Africa from 1800 to World War I. The result is a vivid body of eighteen articles structured in seven sections dealing with methodological and conceptual innovations in the *Introduction* and *Concepts and Perspectives* (I), and such investigative themes as *Family and Nation* (II), *Religion and Education* (III), *Politics of Women's Emancipation* (IV), *Patriotism and Gender* (V), *War and Violence* (VI), and *War Experience and Memory* (VII). Besides the employment of emancipation to problematize these topics, one major focus seems to emerge in particular. That is the transformation of womanhood and female agency of the private and public spheres and Jewish identities by the ideology of the nation-state. This review aims to analyze this.

In the first place, Ilaria Porciani shows how nationalism transformed the concept of family which ultimately affected the meaning of womanhood and female agency. By seeing family as

the center of patriotic sentiments, the nation as a home, and women as keepers of the family order and child education for the nation, motherhood became central in defining femininity. Interestingly, this stereotyped role allowed women to become visible in the public sphere through metaphorically "vicarious motherhood" (p. 60), and religious and pedagogical engagement. Giulia Frontoni explains this cult of domesticity: Imported from France and the United States to Italy and Germany around 1848-9, it held women "to be responsible for national cohesion" (p. 110). However, even if this role has indeed broadened the sphere of activities for women, it remained defined by strict terms of domesticity. For instance, the other new contemporary role model of the "political lady" (p. 105) engaged in political clubs was highly criticized in Germany, while absent in Italy. The preference for women as mothers of the nation explains why marriage was much more important for a woman's life than intellectual work, even in the German women's movement around the 1900s. Women's professions in the public intellectual realm would have been possible only if executed with excellent results by exceptional women and, when possible, it should have supported the nation and family (Angelika Schaser).

Depending on confessions and historical contexts, religion often played a contradictory role in reshaping female agency. The Jewish catechisms written in the contexts of the confessionalization, secularization, and assimilation of German and Italian Judaism strengthened the gender order. In Germany, the transformation of faith communities pushed religious leaders toward a type of religious education that confined women to the household (Philipp Lenhard), while in Italy they coped with Christian influences (Silvia Guetta). In the new German Empire (1871), a comparative study of female education in the Protestant North and Catholic South reveals the government's attempts to make uniform the Protestant role model of womanhood - the married woman. This did not coincide with the three-type Catholic role model of a wife, unmarried woman, and widow which, according to the study, allowed larger activities in the public sphere (Sylvia Schraut). Quite the opposite in Italy. As Liviana Gazzetta shows, Protestants in Italy acknowledged more freedom for women in the new nation-state. The intransigent majority of the Catholic Church rejected *Risorgimento*, while religious minorities such as newly emancipated Jewish and Waldensians, strongly supported it with gratitude, Protestant women included. In 1908, the latter engaged in the national feminist movement as well.

In the second place, by bringing the family into the public sphere, the ideology of the nation-state created concomitant new public spaces for women and transformed the private sphere. Feminists from the German women's movement used this shift for their interests. In Germany, the term emancipation had negative connotations. Thus, by using historical parallels with the emancipation of Jews, and the abolition of slavery and prostitution, feminists only suggested emancipation in their public discourse as an attempt to receive support from public opinion (Anne-Laure Briatte). Feminists in both countries took part in the international women's movement (Magdalena Gehring). World War I is yet another example of the transformation of private-public spheres. Women's experiences of rape, famine, displacement, shooting, hanging, and air raids, question the traditional dichotomy front-home, as author Christa Hämmerle says, likewise those experiences in border areas with territories cut by or behind the front (Nadia Maria Filippini).

Last but not least, the experiences of World War I shed light as well on Jewish "mobile lives and hybrid identities" and their identity crisis between local loyalty and a "transnational, cosmopolitan outlook" (p. 14). The choice of editors to include contributions that encompass not only Italy and Germany, but also the historical transnational contexts of the Habsburg Empire, France, and North Africa, becomes clear when reading the articles about Jewish history as of diasporic people. Relevant in this sense is Marcella Simoni's reconstruction of a transnational story of an Italian Jewish family who emigrated from Livorno to Tunis. Unexplored issues of a different type of transnational loyalty arise in the story of the German Jewish historian Robert Davidsohn. Living in Italy for decades, he ultimately turned against Italy because of the breaking of the alliance between Italy and Germany. As the author Martin Baumeister notes, he experienced the war as both "a crisis of masculinity" and an identity crisis, with which "he tried to come to terms in the categories and ideas of the national rights" (p. 275). However, the tension between Jewish identities and national loyalties seems less present. For instance, Jewish women from the national German women's movement chose to not focus on their ethnic identity (Angelika Schaser). This preference for the national identity escalates in two feminist children's writers who conveyed strong Italian nationalistic tendencies against Austrians and Slovenians in the border cities of Gorizia and Trieste in World War I (Tullia Catalan). In the same war context, Jewish women in France showed loyalty for France (Marie-Christin Lux). Ruth Nattermann explains the loyalty to the Italian nation-state during the war in

the Italian Jewish family versions of World War I created after the experience of fascism as gratitude for their emancipation in 1848. Ultimately, the long-term exclusion of Jewish soldiers from the Austrian national collective memory has recently been restored through various Jewish war memorials and memorial plaques put in Jewish cemeteries and synagogues (Gerald Lamprecht).

In conclusion, this substantial edited volume analyzes the experiences of emancipation for women and Jewish people in nineteenth-century Italy and Germany up to World War I. Overall, it succeeds in its goal to deconstruct the essentialism of grand national histories (p. 3). By employing categories like gender, family, and religion, it suggests novel approaches to the study of Italian and German nations, nationhood, and nationalism through gender and Jewish history lens. While it has accomplished its aim to provide comparative analyses, it seems to fulfill partially the transnational part of the research, present in the contributions to Jewish history only. The greatest achievement of this edited volume is that it doesn't aim to define emancipation but to understand both the 'woman' and 'Jewish question' within the ideology of nationalism. The articles also provide new conceptual frameworks such as compared and integrated history, transnational, and entangled histories (Amerigo Caruso), and a variety of yet unexplored historical sources, such as ego documents. Scholars interested in the intersection of the cultural turn and nationalism studies might find this volume of prime interest as well.