



BERLIN PERSPECTIVES

Topographies of Jewish Identity in Berlin in the 20th and 21st Centuries

- Semester:** Winter semester 2020/21
- Course instructor:** Dr. Russell Alt-Haaker, russell.alt-haaker@hu-berlin.de
- Subject area:** History and Literature
- Credits:** 5 ECTS
- Time:** Tuesdays 10 am – 12 pm
(online course, note Zoom meeting dates and times!)
- Room:** Zoom (Please note: This semester, all classes take place online. If however the general conditions allow it, the seminar room 0323-26 (3rd floor) at Hausvogteiplatz 5-7 can be used by the courses.)

Moodle information: The course title on Moodle is: Topographies of Jewish Identity in Berlin in the 20th and 21st Centuries (WiSe 2020/21). The course key (password) for self-enrollment will be sent to registered students before the beginning of the semester on 2 November 2020. **Please enroll via AGNES and Moodle!**

Course description:

Over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Berlin has been home to a heterogeneous Jewish community, from “assimilated” German Jews during the Wilhelmine era, Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe during the Weimar Republic, and people of Jewish heritage who suffered under and sought to flee from the Nazi regime to a small post-war Jewish enclave in a divided Berlin and a vibrant Jewish community after reunification that now draws thousands of others from around the world to the city as their elective home. Through selected essays, satire, newspaper reports, memoirs, poems, photographs and graphic memoirs, we will discuss how Jewish identity has been negotiated against the backdrop of Berlin’s ever-changing socio-political landscape.

Learning objectives:

The objective of this Bachelor-level course is to familiarize students with brief, but important works by Jewish writers from Germany and elsewhere, and to engage with Berlin as a physical space through the lens of these writers as they explore their identity.

Knowledge

- Read and analyze key works by Jewish authors who are connected with Berlin in some significant way
- Account for factors that contribute to negotiations of identity
- Provide an overview of the socio-political developments in Berlin and Germany that have contributed to changing configurations of Jewish identity in the city

Academic skills

- Reflect on how style and genre influence the way in which information is presented and readers respond to it
- Develop critical vocabulary for discussing texts, images, and themes
- Analyze the role of historical and cultural context regarding how texts are written and received

Competencies

- Write discursively about literature at a basic level
- Apply relevant theories and concepts in independent work to engage self-reflexively with constructs of identity

Assessment:

- Reading guides + Session attendance (Zoom) = 25%
- 2 mini essays = 25%
- Forum discussions = 25%
- Final exam = 25%

Language requirements:

This course will be held entirely in English. It will entail some advanced academic English, both written and spoken, such that a minimum level of English B2 is necessary. Most writing assignments will blend personal reflection with basic literary analysis. Basic knowledge of German is welcome, but not required. In many cases, the reading assignments (all in English) are quite brief (between 10 and 20 pages) to enable in-depth engagement with the texts.

Writing assignments:

Mini essays: You will be responsible for producing two mini essays that address the reading assignments over the course of the semester. The weeks in which I expect mini essays are indicated in the syllabus. To help you know what I expect from the mini essays, I will provide you with an example that is well written, structured, and argued and would receive high marks. You may submit your essays in either English or German.

These essays are designed for you to explore the texts and their themes in greater depth. **Mini essays should be at least 16 sentences in length (≈ four ample paragraphs), though you should feel free to write as much as you like.** The purpose of these assignments is for you to analyze an aspect, image, or theme from the text which either interests or perplexes you. You are encouraged to draw connections between the text and the material we have already discussed in class.

Reading guides: For each assigned reading, I have created a reading guide with comprehension questions that you must complete and submit to me. The questions are meant to draw your attention to important aspects of the texts we read. And because many of our sessions will be asynchronous and not held live via Zoom, the reading guides will show me that you have completed the readings.

*****Reading guides must be submitted to Moodle by 7 p.m. Berlin time each Monday before the session in question. Late submissions incur mandatory penalties. For each hour an assignment is submitted late on a given Monday, I will deduct 2%. For each subsequent day, I will deduct 10%. I do not accept any reading guide turned in more than one week after the original due date.**

Discussion forums

Because we cannot engage in group discussions in the classroom and Zoom will only be used for some sessions, you will be asked to engage in Moodle discussion forums with your peers during those weeks when there is no Zoom meeting. In most cases, I will ask you to respond to a particular question. You will then post your reply to the discussion forum. In addition, you must comment meaningfully on the posts of at least two other students. I will provide specific start and end dates for each discussion forum. If you have not participated in the discussion forum by the end date, you will not receive any credit for the assignment. **These forums are key to our exploration of the texts, so take them seriously. Provide thoughtful and respectful responses to the questions and to the answers of your peers.**

Zoom meetings

We will meet in Zoom videoconferences about every other week, but this schedule is only approximate. Please therefore note the specific dates of our Zoom meetings.

Zoom fatigue is a phenomenon that we have all experienced by now, so I will try to keep Zoom meetings to a length of 45 minutes per meeting to ensure a focused and productive discussion. All meetings will be held when our class would have met in person, namely **Tuesdays at 10 a.m.**

Timetable:

Session 1: 3 November 2020 Introduction to the course

Introduction to the course and review of expectations. Examination of the image "Mulackstraße 37" (Shimon Attie) and seeing Berlin's cityscape as a **palimpsest**, as a text, and as a site of future and past projection.

Video: Please watch the video I have created in which I discuss Shimon Attie's photograph "Mulackstraße 37" from his series *The Writing on the Wall*.

Discussion forum 1: Introductions + personal vs. social identity

Session 2: 10 November 2020 Basics of Jewish identity and assimilation

Readings: de Lange – "The Jews in the world" pp. 1-25; Benjamin – Selections from *A Berlin Chronicle* pp. 5-7 ("I have long, indeed for years," to "...and you went out with steps that nodded to the frozen ground"); 25-26 ("Language shows clearly that memory" to "and in the old ones delve to ever-deeper layer"); 52-53 ("In one of the streets" to "...it was later to render to my awakened drive"); 56-57 ("Anyone can observe that the duration" to "decades have passed between the seconds in which I think of it); 59-60 ("The déjà vu effect has often been described" to end of text)

Discussion of the basics of Jewish identity. Examination of Jewish emancipation in Germany in the 19th century and assimilation of German-Jewish bourgeoisie in the Wilhelmine era.

Reading guide: Due at 7 p.m. on 9 November 2020

Video: Please watch my video presentation on the history of Imperial Germany (1871-1918).

Zoom meeting 1

Session 3: 17 November 2020 Class concerns

Reading: Roth – “The Kurfürstendamm” (1929) pp. 147-50; Goebbels – “Around the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church” (1928) pp. 338-40

Discussion of the supposed isomorphism of space, place, and culture. Examination of Roth’s journalistic observations of the city during the Weimar era and the differences between neighborhoods and social classes (bourgeoisie vs. immigrants and working class in the Spandauer Vorstadt/Scheunenviertel)

Reading guide: Due at 7 p.m. on 4 May 2020

Video: Please watch my video presentation on questions of assimilation among German Jews during the Weimar Republic (1919-1933)

Discussion forum 2

Session 4: 24 November 2020 Immigrants

Reading: Bergelson – “Among Refugees” pp. 21-44

Discussion of the so-called *Ostjude* (Eastern European Jew) and Berlin as a destination or layover for Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. Examination of linguistic differences (German vs. Yiddish).

Reading guide: Due at 7 p.m. on 23 November 2020

Video: Please watch my presentation on the history of the Weimar Republic.

Zoom meeting 2

Session 5: 1 December 2020 Warning signs

Reading: Tucholsky – “Herr Wendriner Under the Dictatorship” pp. 56-59

Discussion of the response by German society and German Jews to the rise of the Nazi regime in the 1930s. Examination of satire as a genre and the notion of boundaries in defining otherness.

Reading guide: Due at 7 p.m. on 30 November 2020

Video: Please watch my presentation on the history of the National Socialists’ rise to power.

Discussion forum 3: Tucholsky uses satire as a vehicle of political critique. To explore the efficacy of satire, you will present a satirical program or publication from your country/language of origin and present it to your peers so that we can see how satire is used around the globe today (and if it is being used to similar ends as in Tucholsky’s day).

Session 6: 8 December 2020 Rise of Nazism

Reading: Deutschkron – Chapters 1-3 from *Outcast: A Jewish Girl in Wartime Berlin*

Discussion of life for German Jews during the first years of the Nazi regime and coping techniques in the Jewish community.

Reading guide: Due at 7 p.m. on 7 December 2020

Discussion forum 4: Our reading for this week concludes with the pogrom known in English as the Night of Broken Glass (German: *Reichspogromnacht, Reichskristallnacht*). Research online newspaper archives from your country/language of origin to find articles from the November 1938 that report on the Night of Broken Glass and present them to your peers. That way we can see how the world understood the state-sanctioned pogrom against Jews in Germany as it occurred and consider the (lack of) response by most foreign governments.

NO ZOOM MEETING THIS WEEK

Session 7: 15 December 2020 Deportation

Reading: Edvardson – Excerpts from the memoir *Burned Child Seeks the Fire* pp. 3-59

Discussion of the author's forced reckoning with Jewish identity as a child due to Nazi racial policies and her deportation to concentration and death camps. Examination of the role of genre and myth (compared with the memoir of Deutschkron).

Mini essay 1: Due at 7 p.m. on 14 December 2020

Zoom meeting 3

Session 8: 5 January 2021 Coping with the aftermath: art and poetry after genocide

Readings: Sachs – "O the chimneys" (poem); Sutzkever – "Brandenburger Gate" (poem); Adorno – "Cultural Criticism and Society" (essay); Bak – "Adam and Eve and the Celebration of Promise" (painting)

Discussion of the aporetic condition "after Auschwitz" and how survivors coped with life in a post-Holocaust world.

Reading guide: Due at 7 p.m. on 4 January 2021

Zoom meeting 4

Session 9: 12 January 2021 Reconciling Jewish identity in post-war (West) Germany

Reading: Dischereit – "A very young girl encounters Nelly Sachs" (essay)

Discussion of one woman's reflections on growing up in West Germany after the Second World War and the possibility of a German-Jewish identity in post-war society.

Reading guide: Due at 7 p.m. on 11 January 2021

Discussion forum 5

Video: Please watch my presentation on a brief history of the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany).

Session 10: 19 January 2021 Enforced performances of Jewish identity

Reading: Dischereit – “I won’t profess” (essay)

Discussion of societal pressure to perform Jewish identity as a way of ensuring group distinction.

Reading guide: Due at 7 p.m. on 18 January 2021

Zoom meeting 5

Session 11: 26 January 2021 Reconciling Jewish identity in post-war (East) Germany

Reading: Honigmann – “Portrait of Myself as a Jew” (essay)

Discussion of Jewish life in East Berlin and ways that East Germany addressed or erased the Nazi past.

Reading guide: Due at 7 p.m. on 25 January 2021

Video: Please watch my presentation on a brief history of the German Democratic Republic (East Germany).

Discussion forum 6

Session 12: 2 February 2021 Leaving the legacy of the Holocaust behind?

Reading: Becker – “My Way of Being a Jew” (essay) pp. 1-15

Discussion of the struggle between individual agency and societal forces in determining a person’s identity.

Mini essay 2: Due at 7 p.m. on 1 February 2021!

Reading guide: Due at 7 p.m. on 1 February 2021

NO discussion forum or Zoom session

Session 13: 9 February 2021 After trauma: a new beginning

Reading: Katin – *Letting It Go* (graphic narrative) pp. 1-73

Discussion of one Holocaust survivor’s attempt to come to terms with her son’s decision to leave home and move to Berlin. Examination of the rehabilitation of German identity against the many memorials in the city.

Reading guide: Due at 7 p.m. on 8 February 2021

Zoom meeting 7

Session 14: 16 February 2021 After trauma: a new beginning

Reading: Katin – *Letting It Go* (graphic narrative) pp. 74-148

Discussion of differences in the way that survivors and their children look at and understand the past. How present is the past today and from whose perspective? Can the past ever really be “let go,” as the work’s title suggests?

Reading guide: Due at 7 p.m. on 15 February 2021

Discussion forum 7: Close readings of the panels

Session 15: 23 February 2021

Reading: Feldman – *Überbitten* (selections)

Discussion of the third-generation and the possibility of creating a new German-Jewish identity not predicated on the violence of the past. Reimagining Berlin as a “haunted” place and reclaiming it as lived space.

NO reading guide

Zoom meeting 8

Final exam: Due at 7 p.m. on 22 February 2021

Literature:

*****All readings will be made available via Moodle with the exception of *Letting It Go*, which you must purchase or lend from a library.**

Adorno, Theodor W. "Cultural Criticism and Society" in *Prisms*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983. 17-34.

Becker, Jurek. "My Way of Being a Jew" in *My Father, the Germans and I. Essays, lectures, interviews*. Ed. Christine Becker. Trans. Claudia Johnson and Richard A. Zipser. Seagull Books, 2010. 1-15.

Benjamin, Walter. "A Berlin Chronicle" in *Reflections. Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*. Ed. Peter Demetz. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. Harcour Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1978. 3-60.

Bergelson, Dovid. "Among Refugees" in *Shadows of Berlin. The Berlin stories of Dovid Bergelson*. Trans. Joachim Neugroschel. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2005. 21-44.

de Lange, Nicholas. "The Jews in the world" in *An Introduction to Judaism*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000. 1-25.

Deutschkron, Inge. *Outcast: A Jewish Girl in Wartime Berlin*. Plunkett Lake Press, 2017.

Dischereit, Esther. "Ein sehr junges Mädchen trifft Nelly Sachs" in *Übungen, jüdisch zu sein*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998. 9-15. [Translation provided by Russell Alt-Haaker: "A very young girl encounters Nelly Sachs"]

----- . "Ich bekenne nicht" in *Mit Eichmann an der Börse*. Berlin: Ullstein Berlin Verlag, 2001. 21-27. [Translation provided by Russell Alt-Haaker: "I won't profess"]

Edvardson, Cordelia. *Burned Child Seeks the Fire. A Memoir*. Trans. Joel Agee. Boston: Beacon Press, 1997.

Feldman, Deborah. *Überbitten*. Munich: btb Verlag, 2019. [Selections from this memoir. Translations provided by Russell Alt-Haaker]

Goebbels, Joseph. "Rundum die Gedächtniskirche" in *Der Angriff. Aufsätze aus der Kampfzeit*. Trans. Randall Bytwerk. Munich: Zentralverlag der NSDAP, 1935. 338-340.

Honigmann, Barbara. "Roman von einem Kinde" from *Roman von einem Kinde. Sechs Erzählungen*. Darmstadt & Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1986. 7-49. [Translation provided by Russell Alt-Haaker: "Novel of a Child"]

----- . "Selbstporträt als Jüdin" from *Damals, dann und danach*. Munich/Vienna: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1999. 11-18. [Translation provided by Russell Alt-Haaker: "Portrait of Myself as a Jew"]

Katin, Miriam. *Letting It Go*. New York: Drawn & Quarterly, 2013.

Roth, Joseph. "The Kurfürstendamm" from *What I Saw: Reports from Berlin 1920-1933*. Trans. Michael Hofmann. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003. 147-50.

Sachs, Nelly. "O the chimneys" in *Beyond Lament: Poets of the World Bearing Witness to the Holocaust*. Ed. Marguerite M. Striar. Trans. Michael Roloff. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998. 446-47.

Sutzkever, Avrom. "brandenburger toyr" in *poetische verk band eyns*. Tel Aviv: yoyvl-komitet, 1963. 557. [Translation provided by Russell Alt-Haaker: "Brandenburg Gate"]

Tucholsky, Kurt. "Herr Wendriner Under the Dictatorship" from *Germany? Germany! Satirical Writings: The Kurt Tucholsky Reader*. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York and Berlin: Berlinica, 2017. 56-59.

Images:

Attie, Shimon. "Mulackstraße 37" from the photographic series *The Writing on the Wall*: <http://shimonattie.net/portfolio/the-writing-on-the-wall/>

Bak, Samuel. "Adam and Eve and the Celebration of Promise," in *Adam & Eve: Recent Paintings by Samuel Bak* (exhibition catalog), eds. Destiny M. Barletta and Justine H. Chol (Boston: Pucker Gallery, 2011), cover.

Remarks:

Diversity

As an academic enterprise, a university has the responsibility to welcome and sustain multiple cultures and to promote learning and scholarship featuring multiple voices and points of view. Our international classroom is no different; it is a space that actively values diversity and it seeks to be a forum for students to engage in an exchange of different experiences, perspectives, and ways of being. Appreciating difference and practicing inclusivity are key to doing our best work. They will therefore guide our interaction. Come with an open mind, listen to one another, and engage your peers in thoughtful discussion. That does not exclude debate or disagreement. But we must remain curious, respectful, and offer reasoned arguments. Discrimination of any kind—whether based on ethnicity, national origin, color, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age, disability (mental/physical), marital status, or some other characteristic—is prohibited.

Participation

Many aspects of this course will be conducted asynchronously, which means that you can complete them on your own time instead of in a classroom with me during specific hours. However, each task still has a specific deadline that you must observe to receive credit. I therefore expect you to do the weekly readings and assignments and to engage your peers in a thoughtful discussion of the texts you have read and images you have seen via our discussion forums on the Moodle platform.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is not tolerated under any circumstances and will result in automatic failure of this course. If you quote someone or use another person's original ideas, be sure to provide complete citations in all instances.