

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Faculty Publications, Department of History

History, Department of

---

Fall 1998

*Review of Jews in Germany after the Holocaust:  
Memory, Identity, and Jewish-German Relations* by  
Lynn Rapaport

Alan E. Steinweis

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, [asteinweis1@unl.edu](mailto:asteinweis1@unl.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/historyfacpub>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

Steinweis, Alan E., "Review of *Jews in Germany after the Holocaust: Memory, Identity, and Jewish-German Relations* by Lynn Rapaport" (1998). *Faculty Publications, Department of History*. 85.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/historyfacpub/85>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the History, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications, Department of History by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

*Jews in Germany after the Holocaust: Memory, Identity, and Jewish-German Relations.* By Lynn Rapaport (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1997) 325 pp. \$59.95 cloth \$22.95 paper

This book is a major addition to the small, but growing, body of scholarship about Jewish life in post-World War II Germany. Rapaport presents a richly textured portrait of Jewish daily life, focusing primarily on the processes that produce and preserve a sense of Jewish identity.

Rapaport collected her data through interviews conducted in the mid-1980s with eighty-three Jewish Germans of the second post-Holocaust generation living in Frankfurt. Born and raised in Germany, these Jews, linguistically, culturally, and economically assimilated into the German mainstream, were well-educated, prosperous, and overwhelmingly secular. Yet, their sense of Jewish identity remained strong. Rapaport documents the depth and intensity of this Jewish identification, posits an explanation for its existence, and reflects on the broader methodological and theoretical implications of her findings.

According to Rapaport, collective historical memory, not religion, has been the crucial factor in shaping the identity of these Jews. The central event in that memory is the Holocaust. In response to critics who have argued that the attention of Jews in the contemporary world is excessively and unhealthily focused on the Holocaust, Rapaport asserts that Jews in Germany have successfully “instrumentalized” the Holocaust as a “major strategy for community survival” (256–257).

This conclusion is not especially novel or surprising. However, Rapaport’s study excels in showing how this consciousness of the past

was reinforced on a daily basis through the myriad personal interactions between Jewish Germans and their non-Jewish friends, neighbors, co-workers, and lovers. “Jewish ethnicity,” she observes, “is created and recreated thousands of times daily by the mental distinctions Jews make between themselves and others in the course of everyday life” (26). Through numerous excerpts from her interviews, Rapaport illustrates how these Jews achieve self-definition by calling attention to the dichotomies between themselves and the non-Jews with whom they come into contact. Historical consciousness is the main dichotomy, but not the only one. Rapaport also notes the importance of “cultural stuff”—myths, ancestral heroes, folkways—the traits that Jews, or any other people, “mobilize to create internally generated boundaries” (255).

Much has changed since Rapaport conducted her interviews. German unification has accelerated discussion about the question of ethnicity in German society—in some quarters adding to the momentum toward renationalization, in others toward an acknowledgment of multiculturalism. The arrival of Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union has also transformed the Jewish communities in Germany. Consequently, Rapaport’s contribution is mainly in the area of historical, rather than contemporary, sociology. As a historiography of post-1945 German-Jewish history continues to develop, Rapaport’s study will prove invaluable to scholars seeking to understand the mentality of one particular category of German Jews at one particular historical juncture.

Rapaport hopes that her study will raise awareness among sociologists that collective memory is a “significant factor in defining ethnic identity” (256). Historians (who have understood this phenomenon for some time) will find in Rapaport a good example of how to understand ethnic mentality as the product of an interaction between collective memory and the dense reality of everyday life.

Alan E. Steinweis  
University of Nebraska, Lincoln