

aspects of battle; rather the *Kriegserlebnis* conveyed the spiritual and aesthetic emotions engendered by the common struggle. Even the official military releases had, alongside battle reports, a special column devoted to it. Yet hopes were soon dashed in a cruel war that brought not salvation but mass slaughter. The disillusionment, manifest in various ways, would also become part of the experience.

Most Jews fully shared the *Kriegserlebnis*—its initial enthusiasm and subsequent disillusionment—but they did so in a distinctive fashion. Hence, one can speak of a specific transformation of consciousness that occurred among Jews during the war and that profoundly affected both the self-understanding and the cultural and intellectual agenda of German Jewry. Indeed, the seeds that came to flower in the extraordinary efflorescence of Jewish cultural and religious life in Weimar Germany were sown in the experience of the Great War.

### 1. The Jewish *Kriegserlebnis*

As noted at the end of volume 3, the outbreak in August 1914 of the Great War was greeted in Germany with a new sense of fraternity. The sudden burst of patriotic emotions seemed to endow all Germans—irrespective of class and regional differences, religious affiliation and ethnic origin—with an elated sense of national purpose. On Wednesday, August 5, two days after Germany's declaration of war, Jews throughout the Reich heeded the emperor's call to devote the day to special prayers on behalf of the fatherland and its holy struggle. All of Berlin's synagogues, Orthodox and Liberal, were filled to capacity. In the fashionable suburb of Charlottenburg the Liberal Fasanenstrasse synagogue, seating two thousand worshippers, permitted hundreds to stand in the aisles and still had to hold an additional service for the thousands more who continued to gather. Conducted by Rabbi Leo Baeck, both services began with the choir singing Psalm 130 ("Out of the Depths I call You, O Lord") according to the melody with which it is sung in the most sacred rite of the Jewish calendar, the Day of Atonement. Rabbi Baeck then gave a sermon on Psalm 94:15 ("Judgment shall again accord with justice and all the upright shall rally to it"). In the words of a contemporary report:

He pointed out that the difficult days had allowed us all to feel deeply that the life of the fatherland is our life and that the conscience of the nation resonates in our own. Awareness of the just

cause, a clear conscience, united everyone; we [Germans and Jews] all understood one another because we understood the meaning of duty. This moral power meant more than numbers. It is not a war over land or influence that is now being waged, but a war that will decide on the culture and morality of Europe, whose destiny has been placed in the hands of Germany and in the hands of those who stand by its side. We were able to pray to God and trust in Him, for prayer meant self-examination and consecration. This moral consciousness will make Germany strong and lead it to victory. We should therefore venture into the future courageously and humbly; justice will triumph."<sup>3</sup>

The service concluded with a silent meditation and a blessing by Rabbi Baeck. Upon exiting the synagogue the congregation spontaneously sang patriotic songs.

The intense and almost universal identification with the German cause in those initial days of the war was borne by a sense that the longed for moment had arrived when German Jews would finally be fully accepted as fellow citizens. More than ten thousand Jews, of Orthodox no less than of Liberal backgrounds, volunteered for military service. By the war's end ninety-six thousand Jews had served in the Kaiser's armies, of whom twelve thousand died in action and thirty-five thousand were decorated. And on the home front, too, Jews were not idle. In her memoirs of the period Rahel Straus, among the first woman physicians in Germany, reported that with the commencement of hostilities, Jewish women "had immediately volunteered for service. Since some of them were very capable, and their households were cared for by maids, they were able more easily than other housewives to take over this new work. Though volunteers, they worked like paid employees. Of the many women who labored in the clinics and military hospitals as auxiliary nurses a very large percentage was Jewish."<sup>4</sup>

Gripped by the general enthusiasm with which Germany went to war, Jews also shared the tendency to attach to the sense of community engendered by the war high-redemptive significance. Writing to a fellow Zionist in September 1914, the religious philosopher Martin Buber unabashedly declared:

Never has the concept of "people" become so real for me as it has in these weeks. Also among Jews in general one finds nearly everywhere a great and solemn feeling. Among the millions that volun-

alism of the beloved Gustav Landauer and his fellow Jewish revolutionaries who dared to dream of a just and compassionate social order.

## 5. Toward Weimar

On February 16, 1919, Leo Baeck addressed Berlin's Liberal rabbinical seminary and institute for the training of Judaic scholars, the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums. It was a month since the bloody suppression of the Spartacus Revolt and the murder of its leaders, including the Polish Jew Rosa Luxemburg, and five days before the assassination of Kurt Eisner in Munich. In his address, entitled "The War Dead," Baeck preferred to overlook the radicals' attempt to seize the German revolution and focus instead on the initial impulse of the revolution to establish a liberal constitutional democracy:

In our country we are now experiencing a period coming to its end, seemingly with the suddenness of the revolution, but only apparently so. For every revolution is only a sudden means, but not a sudden goal. That which emerges violently was always prepared for in the gradual evolution of ideas. Thus it is not only a political order that has now collapsed in our country under the burden of events but far more an old concept of the state that succumbed to the pressure of new thinking.<sup>38</sup>

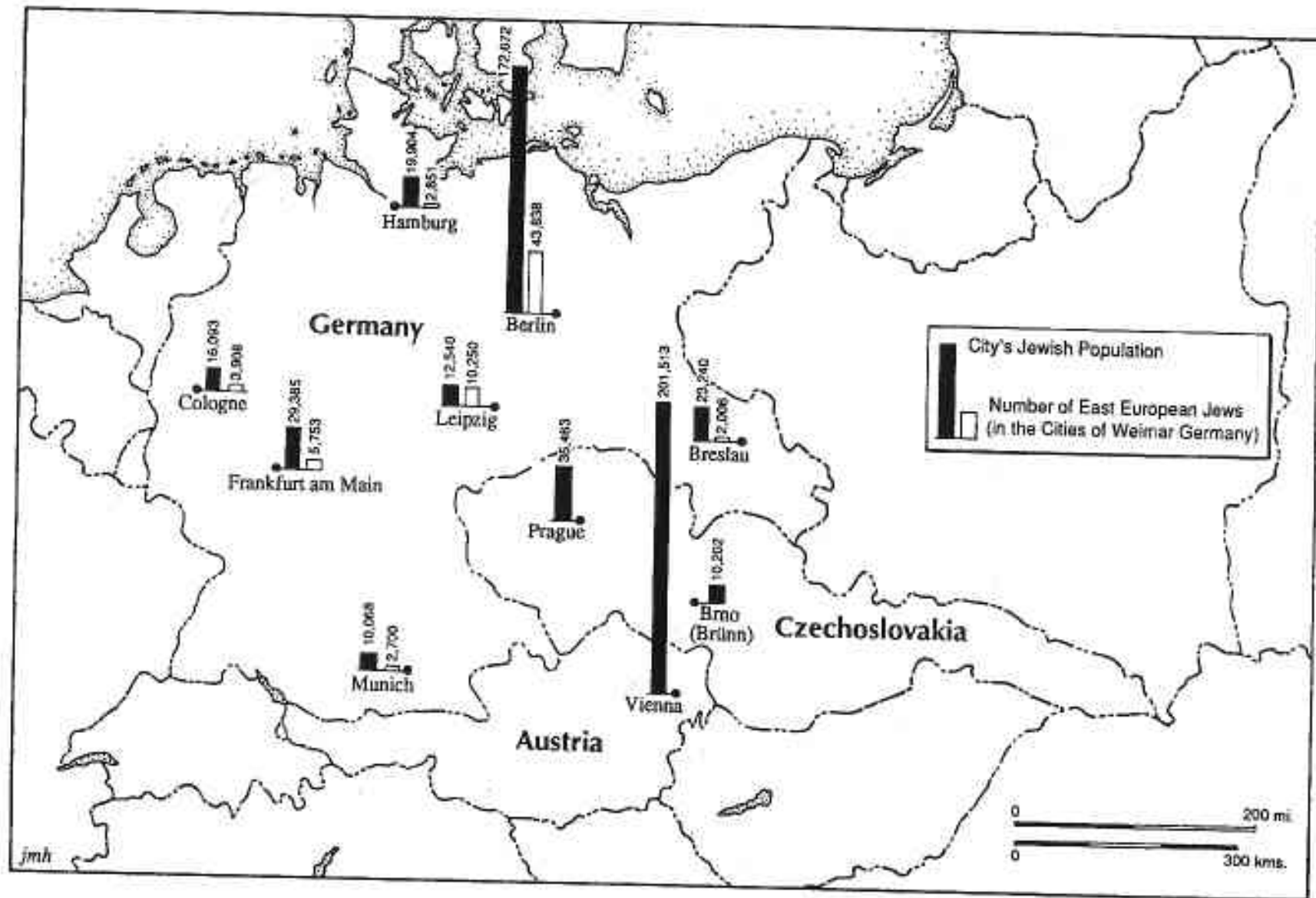
Baeck appealed to his audience not to view the efforts to found a liberal democracy as imposed by circumstance, but as emerging dialectically from forces within German history and thought. He identified two forces that had, for more than a century, competed for the soul of Germany. The first was the conservative and authoritarian force represented by Lutheranism. The social doctrines associated with Martin Luther, which were essentially antagonistic to Judaism, led ineluctably to the paternal police state that, as Baeck implied, was ultimately responsible for the political debacle and moral outrage called the world war. The other competing force, according to Baeck, was the Prussian Enlightenment, animated by the democratic spirit and Kantian philosophical principles that, reaching back (via Luther's rival Calvin) to Jewish messianic teachings, held that one has a "duty to improve the world, to place one's work and the life of the state in the service of morality."<sup>39</sup> The war witnessed the collapse of the Lutheran political principle, and the revolution the victorious ascendancy of the Prussian Enlightenment. Baeck added, with a note

of restrained joy, that the triumph of the latter—which, he emphasized, was the very same that sponsored the emancipation of Jewry—was surely welcomed by it. For "Prussian idealism, with its optimistic belief in the human future, remained at home in the Jewish communities."<sup>40</sup>

There was more hope than conviction in Baeck's words. After all, the infant Republic, which held its first elections less than a month before, was still threatened from the left and right. He also undoubtedly realized that Weimar was chosen as the site of the Republic's first National Constituent Assembly not because of its association with the memory of Goethe and Schiller and the spirit of enlightened liberalism but rather because of its distance from the turmoil in Berlin. Baeck recognized as well that the Republic was not born of a national consensus; it was bereft of a broad commitment to sustain it. Thus to cling to the symbolism of Weimar, as Baeck and other democrats would, was indeed an act of hope if not of desperation.

Significantly, Baeck concluded his lecture with a commentary on a verse from the biblical book of Ecclesiastes, "One generation goes, another comes, but the earth remains forever" (1:4). Baeck suggested that the text be read with the reverse meaning: "One earth goes, another comes, and the human race remains forever," Times—and often the "earth," the ground upon which one stands—change, but the human being, and thus also moral duty, remains. "Thus the commandment for us is to work and to look ahead."<sup>41</sup> And it was with hope as a moral—and existential—imperative that Baeck and the vast majority of Jews turned away from the war and greeted the Weimar Republic.

MAP 1  
 The Ten Largest  
 Jewish Communities in  
 Central Europe,  
 1925



kind of substitute for the mood of the war's first days; we measured our sense of well-being by the intensity of the emotional swings that we experienced, felt closer to our comrades and believed that at last we had become an integral part of the life of this alien and beloved people. . . . But now the dreamlike self-delusion had reached its height and it required only a minor stimulus from the outside to shatter all our artificial security. This stimulus was the *Juden-zählung*. . . . The dream of commonality was over. The deep abyss, which had never disappeared, opened up once more with terrible force. It could not be bridged by common suffering and bleeding, not by common language and work, not even by common civilization and manners. . . . Our vital energy would have drained away completely . . . if a second large circle of activity had not opened up for us, a circle from which we stemmed and to which we returned—if Judaism had not spread out its arms to us to take us back. We were now ready to experience Judaism as something positive, now finally to know the meaning of our sufferings and to be rewarded for them. With open hearts we reveled in the good fortune of being able to live together with Jewish comrades. . . . We had come home; we had once more become Jews. . . . Now we were Zionists, at first without wanting or realizing it.<sup>15</sup>

Simon was to become an intimate associate of Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber, who in the twenties served as the fulcrum of a Jewish religious renaissance in Germany. In 1928, ten years after he joined the Zionist movement, now an observant Jew albeit not Orthodox, he emigrated to Palestine, where he was later to hold a professorship in educational philosophy at the Hebrew University.

## 2. The Encounter with East European Jews

In his memoir Simon had noted that the return to Judaism among Jewish soldiers in the kaiser's armies was prompted by a variety of experiences. In his case it was antisemitism. For others, who served on the Eastern front, it was the encounter with East European Jewry. Simon confessed: "I do not belong . . . to those who had the great good fortune, by coming into living contact with the Jewish masses, to find in the East, easily and without a whole lot of thought, their own people as a people."<sup>16</sup> Indicative of the often radical transformation of the German-Jewish consciousness was

the changed perception of the *Ostjuden*, previously almost universally reviled. As the kaiser's armies occupied large regions of the czarist empire, they encountered traditional Jewish masses, largely untouched by Western culture. Although many German-Jewish troops were repelled, others beheld their Eastern brethren with unbridled awe.

In May 1918 the Jewish thinker Franz Rosenzweig—while still seeking to clarify the philosophical ground of his own dramatic turn from assimilation, which had brought him to the threshold of the baptismal font, to an affirmation of Jewish religious faith—was sent to an officers' training course in Rembertow, near Warsaw, which had a large traditional Jewish population. In a letter to his mother he reported his impressions:

The Jewish boys are magnificent. They are so vigorous and lively that I experienced something that is very rare for me: real racial pride. Likewise, as I was riding through the city the mass of Jews made a deep impression. Their clothing is really very lovely; their language is amazing. . . . In fact, their average people demonstrate qualities that, in our case, only the highest intellectual stratum still (or again) possesses: absolute alertness, the ability to insert seemingly insignificant details into interesting contexts. A little shrimp of a kid answered someone who was trying to tease him about being clever with an entire diatribe on cleverness—which could have come from Shakespeare. I well understand that the average German Jew no longer feels kinship with the East European Jew. He has simply lost that kinship entirely; he's become philistine and bourgeois.<sup>17</sup>

Rosenzweig's rather romantic appreciation of East European Jews thus also reflected his own discontent with German Jewry, its assimilation and embourgeoisement. Ultimately, his openness to religious faith in general, and more traditional expressions of Jewish piety in particular, rested on his questioning of the purported superiority of Western thought and culture. Indeed, his philosophical project emerges from a radical revision of the presuppositions of Western philosophy and a concomitant demand that Western civilization humble itself before the irrational precepts of faith or what he called "faith in revelation."

Hence, the innocence of East European Jewry, viewed as proudly resisting the enticements of Western civilization, seems to have served Rosenzweig as a counterimage to German Jewry, which he deemed to have grown spiritually and intellectually flaccid through bourgeois comfort and conceits. But it was not only erstwhile secular assimilated Jews