

H-France Review Vol. 25 (February 2025), No. 4

Josef W. Konvitz, *Cities, Citizenship and Jews in France and the United States, 1905–2022*. Volume 1. New York: Routledge, 2023. xxxii + 320 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$144.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781032505893; \$35.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9781003399179.

Josef W. Konvitz, *Cities, Citizenship and Jews in France and the United States, 1905–2022*. Volume 2. New York: Routledge, 2023. xxii + 399 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$190.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781032505916; \$35.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9781003399186.

Review by Kolleen M. Guy, Duke Kunshan University.

The January 2025 fires in Los Angeles highlighted the vulnerabilities of Jewish communities in the face of climate change, particularly as American Jewish life is predominantly urban. With most Jewish populations concentrated in metropolitan areas like Los Angeles, New York, and Miami, these communities are increasingly exposed to the risks of climate-induced disasters such as wildfires, hurricanes, and heatwaves. In Los Angeles, synagogues, Jewish schools, and cultural institutions faced evacuation orders and disruptions, while individuals grappled with displacement and loss of property. Josef Konvitz's two-volume comparative history contextualizes this urban vulnerability while underscoring the broader challenge of adapting Jewish communal life to the realities of a warming planet. Drawing on his personal experience as an international civil servant, Konvitz looks from the past to the future to demand resilience planning and investment to safeguard physical spaces and the continuity of cultural and religious practices.

This two-volume study examines the history of Jewish rights, integration, and security in France and the United States over the past 120 years, focusing on their shared status as home to the largest Jewish populations outside Israel. Volume one explores the evolution of religious freedom and secularism in both nations, highlighting their distinct national identities while uncovering parallels in their Jewish histories. Beginning with the dynamics of cities and citizenship during the Atlantic revolutions, the author then examines the roles of Jews in the French and American armies during the World Wars, shedding light on their contributions and the challenges they faced. His focus then shifts to the interwar period, which he explores through the lens of New York and Paris, highlighting the interplay between capitalism and culture in both cities.

Throughout the volume, the author emphasizes the intersection of domestic and international issues, arguing that since the early twentieth century, Franco-American differences on Jewish

matters have fueled misunderstandings and tensions. The bridge chapter between volumes one and two focuses on the Holocaust and its enduring impact on national memory, and it offers a clear example of these strains and frictions. Konvitz highlights how the memorialization and understanding of the Holocaust differed significantly between France and the United States. In France, efforts to document and interpret the Shoah began during the war's final years and were public from the start, involving Jews and non-Jews alike, including influential intellectuals, theologians, and artists. This early engagement challenged the notion of post-war French "silence" about the Holocaust, as France took a leading role in gathering testimonies and conducting historical inquiry immediately after the war. By contrast, American Jews often approached Holocaust memorialization cautiously, influenced by domestic issues such as antisemitism, Cold War politics, and the need to balance interfaith relations. Attempts to universalize the Holocaust as a human rights issue, such as the American Jewish Committee's failed "Declaration on Human Rights," revealed internal Jewish disagreements and external tensions with other ethnic groups. While American Jews largely viewed France as silent on the Shoah, they overlooked France's significant contributions to Holocaust memory, including creating the world's first Shoah memorial in Paris. This divergence in memorialization, the author argues, reflects broader differences in the experiences and political contexts of Jewish communities in the two countries that continue to create divergences in the twenty-first century.

The second volume continues the narrative into the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, focusing on evolving challenges in Jewish integration and security. It examines tensions and common interests between France and the United States and trends in antisemitism and tolerance. The volume's central question of global climate change as a threat to largely coastal Jewish communities emphasizes the distinct nature of insecurity in the twenty-first century. The author argues for a paradigm shift in policy to address these new challenges. Urbanization in the twenty-first century, the author argues, adds new risks, particularly in coastal regions where many Jews reside, while global pressures--such as rising tensions between China, Russia, and the West--are testing the limits of universal human rights. This marks a new era in the history of state sovereignty, international law, and the legitimacy of governance rooted in popular consent.

Both volumes underscore the central theme of security, distinct from antisemitism, as a critical lens for understanding Jewish experiences in France and the United States. Security, the author argues, encompasses more than threats--it includes the ability to anticipate, mitigate, and recover from challenges, linking it to broader histories of politics, diplomacy, economics, and society. The significance of cities like Paris and New York further illustrates this theme, as these urban centers, emblematic of the revolutionary and republican ties between the two nations, have historically served as hubs of Jewish life. Yet, these cities also highlight the vulnerabilities of Jewish communities, where the impacts of terrorist attacks and urban challenges like climate change are felt most acutely.

This comparative analysis rests on the assumption of exceptionalism in both France and the United States. Each nation has historically claimed a unique role in world affairs, informed by their respective political and cultural legacies. While U.S. exceptionalism is underscored by its global military power, reserve currency status, and leadership in NATO, France's distinct position within the European Union stems from its permanent seat on the UN Security Council,

independent nuclear force, and global diplomatic reach, including the world's largest maritime zone. Together, these two nations' histories and aspirations shape their Jewish communities' experiences, highlighting the interplay of security, integration, and global influence.

Where these Jewish communities converge is in their vulnerability at this critical turning point in how we live in cities. Urbanization, shaped historically by responses to crises, according to Konvitz, now faces unprecedented challenges, particularly from climate change, which threatens to reshape coastal cities in the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe, and beyond. Entire areas may need to retreat from coastlines--a scale of relocation not seen since the fall of the Roman Empire--testing the political, economic, and social systems that underpin urban living and citizenship.

This urban transformation carries profound implications for Jewish communities, which are heavily concentrated in cities most at risk from climate change. Since the eighteenth century, as Konvitz has shown, urbanization created opportunities for Jewish integration, aligning cities with the principles of citizenship and security in places like France and the United States. However, the current crises, including rising sea levels and extreme weather, call for bold, evidence-based decisions to adapt urban spaces to a new energy-environment matrix. Cities must prioritize resilience through innovative planning, addressing systemic path dependencies and social and regulatory constraints that hinder transformative change.

Historically, periods of crisis have inspired visions of better urban futures, from utopian ideals in the eighteenth century to urban reconstruction following World War II. Today, however, apocalyptic narratives dominate public discourse, limiting the moral and material mobilization needed to envision and create sustainable cities. Democracies, committed to rational debate and compromise, Konvitz insists, must overcome factionalism and fear-driven rhetoric to achieve incremental changes that can lead to profound transformations.

What does this mean for Jews in France and the United States? Here, Konvitz suggests that there is a unique opportunity for Jewish communities to shape inclusive, sustainable urban environments. Ideally, the communities in France and the United States would come together, but their starting points are historically divergent. One issue that needs further consideration is how the two communities in these two enduring democracies might come together for shared political action. Solutions require mobilization within states with very different notions of the place of religion in political life. The French law of 1905 on the Separation of the Churches and the State established a model of secularism (*laïcité*) that sharply contrasts with the U.S. approach to religion and the state. In France, *laïcité* emphasizes the exclusion of religion from public life and institutions, relegating it to the private sphere to maintain the state's secular character. This response to historical tensions with the Catholic Church created structures to curtail religious influence in politics. By contrast, the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment protects both the free exercise of religion and the prohibition of government establishment of religion, fostering a pluralistic framework where religion can coexist with public life without state interference.

These differing models have shaped Jewish religious communities in distinct ways. In France, *laïcité* has pressured Jewish communities to adapt to a secular framework that requires them to downplay religious identity in public. This has contributed to a centralized Jewish institutional

structure, such as the *Consistoire*, which represents the Jewish community in a unified manner to the state. France's strict *laïcité* shapes the *Consistoire* to conform to a model of religion as a private matter, emphasizing traditional ritual observance and religious authority while discouraging public activism or adaptation. This conservative tendency ensures alignment with the state's expectations of religious communities and makes it resistant to change. This is a vast contrast with the decentralized model in the United States that allows for a more dynamic and diverse Jewish religious landscape, where progressive movements like Reform and Conservative Judaism thrive. American Jews openly engage in public life with their religious identity intact, creating a highly pluralistic and dynamic Jewish presence in the political sphere.

These differing trajectories complicate shared approaches to the kinds of global security threats or climate change crises Konvitz outlines in these two volumes. France's model emphasizes the state as the arbiter of collective action, relying on centralized policies that align with its secular national identity. Yet, this framework limits the inclusion of religious communities as active partners in addressing such challenges. Conversely, the U.S. approach encourages grassroots mobilization and collaboration across diverse religious groups, leveraging their resources and influence in public life. For Jewish communities, this means that French Jews often look to state-led initiatives for security or environmental action, while American Jews are more likely to integrate religious values into advocacy and grassroots solutions. This divergence can hinder mutual understanding and coordination, as the two nations prioritize different strategies for mobilization and governance, reflecting their contrasting history of religion's role in society.

Kolleen M. Guy
Duke Kunshan University
Kmg79@duke.edu

Copyright © 2025 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172