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**Ronald Schechter**, *Obstinate Hebrews: Representations of Jews in France, 1715-1815*. Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2003. viii + 338 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$60.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-52-023557-6.

Review by Thomas E. Kaiser, University of Arkansas at Little Rock.

Conventional approaches to modern Jewish history have tended to characterize events, implicitly or explicitly, as either “good” or “bad” for the Jews; that is, they are seen as *either* conducive *or not* conducive to the “assimilation” of Jews into the surrounding non-Jewish culture. In this thoughtful re-examination of the place of Jews in the eighteenth-century French imagination, Ronald Schechter calls upon his readers to resist such simplistic antitheses. Indeed, he not only argues that complex movements such as the Enlightenment and the French Revolution were *both* “good” and “bad” for the Jews and that *both* were impediments to and promoters of Jewish assimilation; he also shows that a peculiar historical logic interconnected their “good” and “bad” effects, just as “assimilation” promoted “non-assimilation” of a particular kind. A demonstration of this sort is bound to complicate our understanding of the significance assigned to and claimed by Jews in the eighteenth century, but that is a price well worth paying for the fresh insights the author provides.

The book begins with a brief, sobering sketch of the Jewish condition in eighteenth-century France. Unlike most historians, who have contrasted the poverty, isolation, and religious autonomy of the larger Ashkenazi Jewish community in eastern France with the alleged wealth, integration, and secularization of the Sephardic Jewish community in the Bordelais, Schechter argues that the social and legal standing of both groups are hard to distinguish. In fact, the author shows, the Jews of the Bordeaux region enjoyed—if that is the right word—a status nearly as precarious as that of their brethren in eastern France, for they were viewed with almost equal suspicion by their gentile neighbors, faced similar restrictions on their economic activities, and experienced much the same legal limbo when trying to vindicate their rights as subjects. To be sure, there were more wealthy Jews among the Sephardim than among the Ashkenazi. But more significantly, over half the Sephardim lived in poverty, while reports of their secularization turn out to be as highly exaggerated as reports of their prosperity. In short, the Sephardim of Bordeaux were not prototypes of the modern assimilated Jew, but rather, like the Ashkenazi, members of a “nation within a nation.”

Given the marginal status and isolation of Jews in eighteenth-century France, what explains the large body of commentary on them by the philosophes and their contemporaries, most of whom had little direct knowledge of or personal acquaintance with Jews? Schechter argues that Jews were especially “good to think,” (p. 36) as he puts it, because more than other “others”—such as women or blacks—superficial knowledge of their cultural heritage made them appear appropriate screens on which to project social and political stereotypes in the great Enlightenment debate over the nature of man and the citizen. Allegedly ancient and modern, cosmopolitan and clannish, entrepreneurial and parasitic, learned and ignorant, religious and secular, the Jews were denounced by some and defended by others,

but they were always viewed through one or another semi-opaque ideological lens that concealed far more than it revealed about their genuine religious beliefs and aspirations.

Schechter finds that although the coming of the French Revolution offered the Jews a liberation of sorts, they continued to suffer ignorance and exclusion after 1789. The number of Jews deemed “active citizens” under the Constitution of 1791 was, as a result of their general impoverishment, pitifully small—about 100—and the subsequent elimination of property qualifications for voting led to the election of not even one Jewish deputy to the Convention. Was the protracted revolutionary debate on the Jews’ capacity for “regeneration,” then, largely irrelevant to their real political and social condition? Schechter certainly gives this impression. Rejecting Gary Kates’s argument that Jewish enfranchisement provided the acid test for commitment to the principles of revolutionary democracy,<sup>[1]</sup> Schechter shows that Judeophilia was not concentrated among the radical left but randomly scattered across the political spectrum. Indeed, he suggests that the noisy advocacy of Jewish emancipation by some moderate revolutionaries was a means of establishing political cover for their attempts to restrict voting rights among the far more numerous and potentially “dangerous” underclass. Conversely, the democratic radicals’ program to make moral character the basis of citizenship, rather than promoting inclusion—as most historians have assumed—had just the opposite effect in the case of the Jews. For it meant that in order to validate their status as citizens, the Jews had to undertake the nearly impossible mission of neutralizing the moral slurs that Europe had heaped on them over the ages for their “obstinate” refusal to convert to christianity and other alleged lapses.

The paradoxes of inclusion and exclusion are also apparent, Schechter shows, in the rhetorical defensive strategies used by the Jews during the Revolution. They certainly did try to dispel the old myths of Hebraic moral turpitude in an effort to make good on the Revolution’s promise to universalize the rights of man. But these moves were accompanied by others that, far from downplaying the particularistic qualities of the Jews, celebrated them, most notably via the contention that Judaism was the historical progenitor of the civic ethic of the Revolution. Such historical claims—which anticipated the legend that the melody of the *Marseillaise* derived from a traditional Hebrew song—not only allowed Jews to escape making the painful choice between their French and Jewish identities; they also paradoxically allowed Jews to invoke their “difference” as grounds for naturalizing them as Frenchmen.

According to Schechter, Jews were also “good to think” under Napoleon. The First Empire’s propaganda machine frequently evoked Napoleon’s emancipation of Jews across Europe as evidence of his liberating mission. But in Schechter’s view, Jews representationally exploited Napoleon no less than he did them. By drawing analogies between, for example, the Napoleonic law code and the Jewish legal tradition, they were able to validate their own religious culture as parallel to, if not identical with the Napoleonic order. Once again Jewish culture could be vindicated and Jewish identity asserted without paying the price of self-imposed exclusion. Thus, for all his debunking of the 1789 myth of “liberation” as regards the Jews, Schechter concludes his book on a note of optimism. Vichy and the Holocaust aside, he perceives the republicanism that finally emerged from the revolutionary era as more friendly and accommodating to “difference” than has sometimes been supposed, and he ventures that its capacity for absorption of Jews and other cultural minorities will continue to grow in the direction of pluralism.

Clearly written, elegantly argued, and exquisitely sensitive to the wiles of discourse, Schechter’s book constitutes a major step forward in our understanding of Jewish emancipation. By demonstrating that universalism could engender exclusion as well as inclusion and that the struggle to maintain a traditional Jewish identity did not necessarily preclude the adoption of a new national one, it challenges the historical profession to rethink the language it conventionally uses to describe the process of integrating Jews into French culture. Although there are grounds to challenge some of Schechter’s specific claims, this is a book that all historians of modern Jewish history, as well as historians of other marginalized groups, cannot afford to overlook.

At the same time, the achievements of the book should not obscure its limitations. First, one could have expected in a book of this sort a fuller treatment of the place of Jews in christian theology. If the philosophes found that Jews were “good to think,” church fathers had been thinking hard about Jews and their religion for more than seventeen hundred years in drafting the articles of their own faith, and, the Enlightenment notwithstanding, ancient and medieval christian stereotypes of Jews endured into the eighteenth century and beyond. Moreover, contemporary theologians continued to ponder and to reconfigure the significance of the Jews from a christian perspective—among them, the Jansenists, who devoted considerable attention to the place of Jewish conversion in their eschatology.<sup>[2]</sup> (This is a point largely absent from Schechter’s analysis, most noticeably in his treatment of the abbé Grégoire.) It is thus hardly so “puzzling, even bizarre” as Schechter claims, that his search for “juif” in ARTFL [Project for American and French Research on the Treasury of the French Language] turned up so many hits and that the philosophes wrote far more about Jews than about the more populous Basques (p. 36). However small their numbers, Jews had long posed major conundrums for christian civilization, and however fresh their perspective, the philosophes were picking up the threads of a debate that had long preceded them.

Second, it is an inherent limitation of Schechter’s methodology and evidence that he cannot say much about the ways in which ordinary Jews in ordinary circumstances negotiated the potential conflicts between their Jewish and French identities. Analysis of formal writing can certainly reveal much about representations of Jews and the Jewish community’s strategies for self-representation in rapidly shifting circumstances, but it remains unclear how much application these (self-)representations had to the non-discursive interactions of Jews with their non-Jewish neighbors. Social historians, for example, might still legitimately wonder after reading this book whether the admittedly begrudging extension of civil rights to Jews after 1789 did not mean more to the conduct of their lives than Schechter suggests; it should not be forgotten that in the long, sad history of Jewish exclusion even the acquisition of “passive citizenship” entailed the most profound change in the legal status of the Jewish community since the christianization of the Roman Empire. Similarly, social historians might wonder if the clever analogies drawn by Jews between their culture and the new Napoleonic order did much to moderate the lingering hostility of christians to Jews, which continued to make many Jews feel that they constituted a “nation within a nation.” To settle these questions, Schechter’s original, thought-provoking conclusions need to be tested upon a larger and more varied body of evidence than he has examined, including personal correspondence, diaries, and administrative records. Whatever the outcome of this process, the historical profession owes Ronald Schechter a great debt for having initiated it in this fine study.

## NOTES

[1] Gary Kates, “Jews into Frenchmen: Nationality and Representations in Revolutionary France,” in *The French Revolution and the Birth of Modernity* ed. Ferenc Fehér, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990): 109.

[2] Catherine Maire, *De la cause de Dieu à la cause de la Nation: Le Jansénisme au XVIIIe siècle* ([Paris]: Gallimard, 1998): chap. 6.

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