Emancipation in Western Europe

R
recognizing that Jews were equal to other citizens and the legal abolition of disabilities and inequities were ideals that began to materialize in Western Europe only two centuries ago. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, the manifesto of the French Revolution, inspired by the spirit of the Enlightenment, implied Jewish equality. The law passed by the Constituent Assembly on September 27, 1791, the first act of full emancipation in a Christian state, was perceived by the Jews as an historic turn which heralded a future of happiness. "France...is our Palestine, its mountains are our Zion, its rivers our Jordan. Let us drink the water of these sources: it is the water of liberty..." (a letter to La Chaumière de Paris, 1791).

After the French Revolution, emancipation became the central issue for Jews everywhere, but each community had to maintain its own struggle for emancipation. In most places the legal decision was the crowning achievement of a lengthy process of economic and social integration. However, in some cases — as in France itself — emancipation preceded the renunciation of traditional Jewish society: it was the liberals' struggle for the universal application of "natural rights" which ensured the civil equality of the Jews. Comte de Clermont-Fontenoy, in his famous speech to the National Assembly (December 1789), explicitly demanded that the Jews not be excluded from article X of the Declaration of Rights ("No man ought to be molested because of his opinions, including his religious opinions"). Therefore, he said, "The Jews should be denied everything as a nation, but granted everything as individuals."

The revolutionary French armies were to export this type of emancipation to all the countries they conquered.

Whether it was the result of a deliberate choice (as in France), a imported and enforced (as in Italy and Germany), or a product of an extended process of socio-cultural maturation (as in Austria, the emancipation was never a linear nor a painless process. The customary religious hostility toward the Jews, characteristic of traditional pre-industrial societies, was reinforced by modern ideologies and political forces, both conservative and revolutionary, which regarded Jewish equality with fear and antagonism. These animosities often merged with the opposition to Napoleon who extended the scope of emancipation with his military victories. Thus, Jewish emancipation in Europe suffered major regression during the years following the Congress of Vienna (1814-1815), which ended the age of the Revolution and sought to reestablish peace in Europe based on the restoration of the old order. Nevertheless, liberal and democratic forces everywhere took up the cause of Jewish emancipation and turned it into a central issue in their political campaign. On the eve of the revolution of 1848, the idea of Jewish equality could no longer be ignored anywhere in the west.

The upheavals which rocked Europe in the mid-nineteenth century

---


---


1791. January 14: Louis XVI abolishes the "body tax" that was levied on the Jews of Alsace.

1795: In an essay competition in 1787, the Academy of Metz selects the following subject: "Are there any ways of making the Jews of France happier and more useful?" Abbé Henri Gregoire wins the prize for his Essay on the physical, moral and political regeneration of the Jews (1789).


1799, September 27: Emancipation decreed for all Jews in France.

1806, September 9: The National Assembly of the Belgian Republic accords equal rights to the Jews of the Netherlands — a typical example of the application of revolutionary ideals in republics established with the help of the French armies, the same step will be taken in Italy, Belgium, and German states.

1801, July 15: Signing of the Concordat: the French government recognizes Catholicism as the religion of "the great majority of Frenchmen.

1802: The Consolator system imposed by Napoleon on the Jews of France represented a step backward in revolutionary ideas; the decree inflamed, determining Jewish activities, was not renewed after the expiry of its ten-year time limit.

1812, March 11: The Prussian decree of emancipation deprives the Jews civil rights, but excludes them from government service; similar to the formulation of Jewish emancipation in Baden (1809), this decree remained one of the most liberal texts in Germany until 1848.

1814, March 29: The King of Denmark
18th–19th Centuries

Emancipation in the late 18th century

1791 End of 18th century
1802 19th century

- Territory under French Code Civil, 1804–1814
- No equal rights before 19th century

600 km.

authorizes the Jews in his Kingdom to engage in all professions.

1819 August: To the raving cry ‘heh! heh! heh!’ (derived perhaps from the initials of Hebräische Gesellschaft), anti-Jewish riots break out in Weimar, quickly spreading to neighboring states. The riots expressed the anger of many Germans at the improvement in the situation of the Jews.

1830 Louis Philippe is king of France; the liberal change of the constitution, which was introduced by the Restoration.

1848: Gabriel Reissner (1905–1952), a Jewish lawyer from Hamburg and a champion of emancipation, begins publishing his journal De Jure ("The Law"). Publication of the first edition in 1833, but Reissner continued his struggle to attain equal rights for German Jews.

1857: Danish Jews become eligible for municipal elections.

1864: Demolition of the Ghettos walls in Rome. The German National Assembly

1844: March 4: The imperial government introduces a constitution guaranteeing equal rights to the Jews of Austria; suppressed in 1851, emancipation will be re-introduced in 1867 and henceforth maintained.

1865: The Jews of Sweden are accorded the right to vote.

1866: Deletion by law of the Christian portion of the oath of loyalty enabled Jews in England to be elected to public office.

1871 April 22: Granting of equal rights to the Jews of Bavaria completes the process of emancipation in the German Empire.

1874: The granting of equal rights to the Jews in Switzerland continues the process of emancipation in Europe.

5. The Jew, a member of the National Guard but still a convert. Antisemitic lithograph by H. Germar, Vienna, 1844.

3. One hundred years of Philanthropin, a moon-novel, Jewish school founded in Frankfurt in 1804.
When the French Revolution brought about the downfall of the Ancien Régime, there were approximately 40,000 Jews living in France, more than half of them in Alsace and Lorraine. Theirs was a highly heterogeneous population: well-integrated "Portuguese" Jews in Bordeaux and Bayonne, and "Papal Jews" in Avignon, barely tolerated their Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazi brethren who had acquired nothing of French culture. They were further divided over attitudes towards the Revolution. On the whole, however, French Jews supported the Revolution but did not actively participate in it. Nevertheless, although not immediately felt, the outcome of the Revolution marks the beginning of the history of modern French Jewry. Extracted with great difficulty by the more advanced elements in the National Assembly and based on broader arguments than the Jewish question, the principle of equal civil rights granted the Jews the legal emancipation that enabled their integration into French society.

It was Napoleon, who made them realize the full significance of their new citizenship. Faithful to his policy of centralization, the Empire created institutions designed to integrate the Jews into the French state system. In 1808 he set up a special body which was fashionable on its arrangements introduced for French Protestants: a Central Consistory, a vehicle guaranteeing state supervision of religious affairs. Brandishing the banner of "Religion and Homeland," the Consistory attempted to accelerate the modernization of French Jewry. Its success was undeniable, even though in certain parts of France, particularly in Alsace and Lorraine, a traditional Jewish existence persisted until the end of the nineteenth century.

Legal emancipation led to a profound transformation of Jewish society. Jews became fluent in the French language, flocked to the cities (Paris above all), entered into new careers and professions, became involved in political life, and enthusiastically welcomed the values of French civilization, its culture and education. Religious with the non-Jewish society varied according to social and geographical distribution. Hostile manifestations persisted: traditional anti-Semitism persisted in eastern France, while widespread antipathy, evidence of the growing integration of the Jews, was reaching its height in Paris and other large urban centers. All these, however, could not reverse the progress of emancipation, assimilation, and assimilation.

The unlimited trust which Jews placed in the French system survived even after the 1870 defeat, and the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine to Germany. Moreover, thousands of Jews migrated to France after the disastrous Franco-Prussian war. Their love for France was further augmented by the establishment of the Third Republic, which explicitly committed both to the principles of 1789. The emergence of an antisemitic-political movement in the 1880s following the tragic Dreyfus affair, failed to change these sentiments. Thus, the nascent Zionist movement had its adherents among French Jews.

The two dominant traits of Jewish society in France — its strong attachment to the principles of the Revolution and the homogeneity of its character — is acquired after a century of acculturation — were severely challenged in the twentieth century. Prior to World War I, and particularly in its aftermath, a wave of Jews from eastern Europe flooded France, soon becoming the majority of French Jewry. Adopting French culture was not their first priority. They remained foreigners, on the margins of the "old" community, evoking the same attitude that the "Portuguese" of Bordeaux had displayed towards Ashkenazi citizens of France 150 years earlier. Even in its darkest hour, facing persecution and extinction, the French community was incapable of surmounting its differences. The Nazi occupier and the Vichy regime, however, made no distinction between "old" and "new" French Jews.

1. Jewish decoration. A man carrying the symbols of the Festival of Tabernacles on his way to the synagogue. Bruchwiler (Haute-Alsace), 18th century.

2. "Iagen from all of you," says the Jew at the top of the "table" social hierarchy. An anti-Semitic caricature, France, c. 1880.

3. "The French citizenship to Algerian Jews by Napoleon in order to codify the decisions of the Assembly of Notables."


5. 1830. Conquest of Algeria.

6. 1840. A blood libel affair in Dantec. Adolph Cremieux and Solomon Munk are members of a delegation sent to Damascus to free the prisoners.

7. 1846. Adolph Cremieux is appointed Minister of Justice.

8. 1852. December 2: Napoleon III is crowned Emperor.

9. 1860. Founding of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, an organization based on the "idea of regeneration" and on the Jewish notion of solidarity, dedicated to the modernization of Jewish communities in North Africa and the Near East.

10. 1899. Zadoc Kahn is appointed Grand Rabbi of France.