Institute of Jewish Studies at the University of Antwerp
European Association of Jewish Studies
Bucerius Institute for Research of Contemporary
German History and Society, University of Haifa

Workshop:

Jewish Thought and Empire: 1830-1939

8-9.12.2025

Venue: Hof van Liere – Prentenkabinet
Prinsstraat 13, 2000 Antwerpen.

University of Antwerp

Organisers:
Vivian Liska (University of Antwerp), Cedric Cohen-Skalli (Haifa University),
Daniel M. Herskowitz (Duke University)

Theodore Gudin
The Attack on Algiers by Sea, 29 June 1830
Musée National Du Château de Versailles

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The Gerd Bucerius Research Institute for Contemporary German History and Society
המכון ע"ש גרד בוצריוס לחקר ההיסטוריה והחברה הגרמנית בזמננו
معهد غيرد بوتسريوس لبحث تاريخ ألمانيا ومجتمعها المعاصرين
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Monday, 8.12.2025

10:00–10:30	Welcome and Greetings
10:30–11:30	Cedric Cohen-Skalli: *An Intellectual History of the 1870 Crémieux Decree*
11:30–11:45	Coffee Break
11:45–12:45	Adam Sutcliffe: *Imperialism and Cosmopolitanism in late Nineteenth-Century French Jewish Thought* (via ZOOM)
12:45–14:00	Lunch (Speakers only)
14:00–15:00	Avi-ram Tzoreff: *"Since King Messiah is a Wealthy Person" The Ottoman State, Global Capitalism and Millenarianism in Rabbi Yehudah Alkalai's Works*
15:00–15:15	Coffee Break
15:15–16:15	Isaac Slater: *Talmudic Territorialism: The Political Theology of Aharon Shmuel Tamares*
16:15–16:30	Coffee Break
16:30–17:30	Ze'ev Strauss: *The Petty-minded Rabbis and the Place of Judaism in the Christian Empires*
17:30–17:45	Coffee Break
17:45–18:45	Vladimir Biti: *Kafka as a Writer of Translatio Imperii*
19:30	Dinner (Speakers only)

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Tuesday, 9.12.2025

09:00–10:00	Daniel M. Herskowitz: *Nationalism and Empire in Moses Hess's Jewish Thought*
10:00–10:15	Coffee Break
10:15–11:15	Yaniv Feller: *Missionizing the World*
11:15–11:30	Coffee Break
11:30–12:30	Arie M. Dubnov: *Leon Roth, The Early Years of the Hebrew University, and the Circulation of Knowledge between Britain and Mandatory Palestine*
12:30–13:45	Lunch (Speakers only)
13:45–14:45	Philipp von Wussow: *Leo Strauss in the 1920s: Exploring the Politics of Jewish Thought*
14:45–15:00	Coffee Break
15:00–16:00	Dennis Baert: *Dein Reich komme (nicht): Empire and Imperialism in the Political Theology of Franz Rosenzweig*
16:00–16:15	Coffee Break
16:15–17:00	Conclusions Panel: *Discussions and Prospects with Vivian Liska, Daniel Herskowitz and Cedric Cohen-Skalli*

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The past decades have witnessed remarkable advances in the historical and conceptual understanding of empire, imperialism, and colonialism. To date, these advances have left a minimal mark on the study of modern Jewish thought. Due, among other things, to the historical success of Zionism, and the narrative of "Jewish contribution" to western nation-states (Germany, France, England, etc), the dominant paradigm in scholarship was and remains that of the nation-state. As a consequence, the imperial context in the 19th century was considered as a mere background or stage to be superseded in the 20th century. For both its adherers and detractors, the nation-state of the 20th century is the organising concept through which Jewish themes, thinkers, texts, and movements are approached.

This workshop takes as its point of departure the fact that empire – as a reality or a phantasy – was a ubiquitous frame of reference, and that the nation state and imperial expansion are not opposite concepts but intermingled and two sides of the same coin. Jewish studies have compartmentalised German Jewish thought, French Jewish thought, Zionist-Israeli Jewish thought, American Jewish thought, but taking into account the imperial paradigm enables recognising a trans-national perspective that appreciates the common imperial stand that runs across national borders and through Jewish thought in the 19th and 20th centuries.

A paradigmatic example of this duality of nationalism and imperialism is the historical line between the 1791 decree of emancipation of French Jews voted by the French revolutionary assembly and the 1870 Crémieux decree granting French citizenship to all Algerian Jews in the newly conquered and colonised Algeria - in sharp contrast to the lot reserved to the Muslim "indigènes". The emancipation of the Algerian Jews was conceived and realised by the Jews of the colonial "métropole", who succeeded to convince the French political and colonial establishment of the "utility" of Algerian Jews for further colonisation of Algeria. The destiny of Algerian Jews, including the growing divide with the Muslim Algerians, was decided in Paris, by the collaboration of French Jews and Catholics around new imperial plans.

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This colonial divide between Northern and Southern Jewries and its instrumentalization for western imperial goals is a thread that runs from 1830 Algeria to the "Mizrahi" question in the 1970s, and which has been rarely addressed in scholarship on modern Jewish thought.

By inviting reflections on the ways in which the imperial political context has informed the contours of modern Jewish thought, it aims to shed original light on familiar and less-familiar topics, introduce new aspects and texts which have so far received little or no attention, and rethink some of the basic theoretical assumptions and priorities of the existing scholarship and stake out new directions for future scholarship. Chronologically, the period of focus is from the colonization of Algeria, through the 'Scramble for Africa' and the Berlin conference in 1884, the first world war, till the British Mandate. Geographically, it looks at all the imperial configurations that are relevant to Jewish thought during this period.

The workshop, the first in a series of workshops dedicated to Jewish thought and empire, will bring together scholars from various sub-fields and career stages and provide a forum to reflect on the significance of the imperial framework for modern Jewish thought and the challenges facing relevant scholarship. Contributors are invited to cover any facets of the intersection of Jewish thought and empire during this period, in their conceptual, historical, genealogical, and geographical contexts.

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Abstracts

"Dein Reich komme (nicht): Empire and Imperialism in the Political Theology of Franz Rosenzweig"

Dennis Baert (University of Antwerp)

The concept of Reich (empire) is one that connects the different intellectual phases of Franz Rosenzweig's short life: the pre-World War I intellectual historian, the geopolitical theorist of the war years and finally the "mature" Rosenzweig of the Stern der Erlösung (1921) and in particular its political theology. But the connection is not a straightforward one. For, whereas the pre-1921 Rosenzweig sees Reich as a fundamentally positive concept, in the Stern der Erlösung, a complete transvaluation takes place where Reich becomes thought of as the fundamental temptation to prematurely force redemption.

One could be forgiven for reading into this volte face a rejection of empire and imperialism, brought about by the trauma of the war. Such a reading, however, misses the fact that the rejection of empire does not mean that Rosenzweig rejects imperialism. Indeed, the political theology of the Stern der Erlösung in many ways cannot be read as anything but a legitimisation of the European states' role to spread truth and civilization throughout the world.

One could conclude from this that Rosenzweig's political theology is but a thinly veiled last Jewish huzzah for European imperialism during its Indian summer. I would however contend that this would be too superficial a reading. I would contend that Rosenzweig's "imperialism" was in many ways an eerily prescient conceptualisation of the ideological empires that would come to shape world politics from the 1930's till the 1980's. And to go even further: that his "imperialist" conception of the state holds a valid criticism of the geopolitics of contemporary national populism.

In this paper I will endeavour to argue for these contentions. I will do this in three parts. In the first part, I will show how Rosenzweig goes from putting a "freie Luft atemendes Weltreich" center stage before and during World War I, to rejecting it in favour of individual sovereign states in the Stern der Erlösung. In the second part we will look more closely at this political theology of the sovereign state and how – for all its rejection of empire – it embraces imperialism. Third and finally, I shall evaluate how this political theology – with all its obvious problems – provides real heuristic value for the political history of the 20th century and our current predicament.

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Kafka as a Writer of Translatio Imperii

Vladimir Biti (Comparative Literature at University of Vienna)

Ever since medieval times, European empires have established a political, economic, religious, cultural and/or linguistic gap between their enlightened and benighted regions as the very basis of their identities. This made the operation of translatio imperii the conditio sine qua non of their maintenance. It consisted of several interrelated aspects whose scale of importance varied depending on the empire and the era. From a political and economic perspective, an empire was concerned with maintaining its administration and securing its economic profit in the conquered foreign territories; from a historical perspective, it was concerned with transmitting its past and present glory to posterity in as undamaged a condition as possible; and from a religious and cultural perspective, an empire wanted to introduce the values of its center into its provinces in such a way to avoid their malformation. In the twentieth century's outgoing empires, translatio imperii took the form of a shift to a faceless and dispersive administration of their peripheries.

This set in motion a far-reaching restructuring of contemporary literature. The most prominent authors responded to the traumatic withdrawal of 'paternal protection' from human horizon by removing their narrative authority from the reach of their readers. This resulted in a fleeting 'translational' configuration of their works, which relocated the gap between the author and the character into the selves of each of them. Due to that fissure amid their selves, their hitherto sovereign relationship to the other turned more complex and ambiguous, becoming an affirmation-through-negation. In my reading, Kafka's narrative authority epitomizes such equivocal attitude that identifies with its subjects only to detach itself from them, as if inadvertently mirroring the governmental technique of 'disciplinary' societies. Since this technique made all past authorities lose their recognizable faces, the same ambiguity characterizes Kafka's attitude to the Jewish tradition of his forefathers. He was constantly tempted to translate his identification with it into an identification of it. His belonging longed for non-belonging.

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An Intellectual History of the 1870 Crémieux Decree

Cedric Cohen-Skalli (Bucerius Institute, University of Haifa)

This paper wants to sketch a first intellectual history of the 1870 Crémieux decree granting French citizenship to all Algerian Jews in the newly conquered and colonised Algeria - in sharp contrast to the lot reserved to the Muslim “indigènes”. Taking the intellectual and biographical path of Adolphe Crémieux (1796-1880) as a red thread, it intends to offer a new overview of the intellectual evolution leading from the 1791 decree of emancipation of French Jews, to the imperial expansion of France in 19th century and its complex redefinition of the status and role of Jews. Shedding light on the forgotten intellectual history behind the emancipation of the Algerian and more broadly Oriental Jews, will lead to a renewed understanding of the complex articulation of liberalism, imperialism and modern Jewish thought.

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Leon Roth, the Early Years of the Hebrew University, and the Circulation of Knowledge between Britain and Mandatory Palestine

Arie M. Dubnov (Max Ticktin Chair of Israel Studies, George Washington University)

In a seminal essay entitled "Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda," historians Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler invited us to challenge methodological nationalism on the one hand and to discard older narratives of Empire on the other hand and to recognize the large degree to which 'nation building' and 'empire building' were mutually constitutive projects. The present project takes its cue from this line of investigation, which it combines with the intellectual historian's toolbox, to look at a specific test case that examples many of these interdependencies: the life and career of the Anglo-Jewish Zionist philosopher Leon (Hayim Yehuda) Roth (1896-1963). My research examines how, during the mandatory period, Roth had developed a unique cultural Zionist vision of Jerusalem and its new university, which was compatible with British imperial theories of his time, including a vision of Jerusalem as sitting at a center of a global Hebraic spiritual commonwealth. The series "*Sifre-Mofet Filosofiyim*" Roth initiated and edited, offering translations of seminal philosophical texts (including John Locke, J. S. Mill, and Bertrand Russell) into Hebrew, are not less important than his speeches and essays in providing evidence of the attempt to inject British liberal ideas into Zionist discourse. The reconstruction of Roth's scholarly itinerary and personal story offers a unique window into a broader story of the dynamics of intra- and trans-imperial transmission of ideas.

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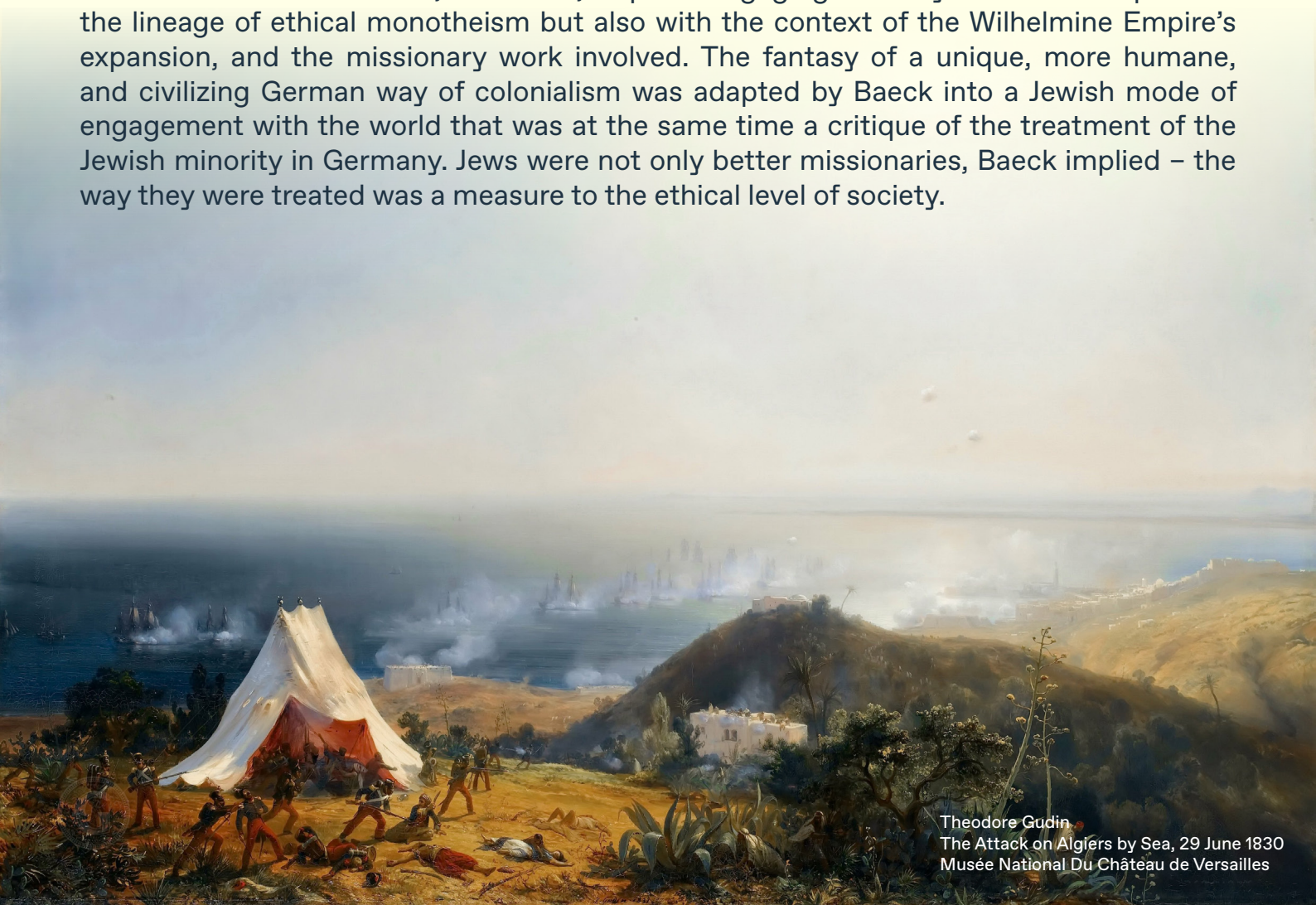
Missionizing the World

Yaniv Feller (Religion and Jewish studies, the University of Florida)

This paper explores an important yet neglected topic in Jewish thought, namely proselytizing. While scholars (most recently Adam Sutcliffe) recognized the idea of a Jewish task in the world as central, the radical implication of a call for a Jewish mission was often ignored or minimized. While this idea might sound foreign to contemporary ears, leading Jewish thinkers such as Leo Baeck—a revered rabbi, public intellectual, and the leader of German Jewry during the Holocaust—thought that Jews should actively seek to convert non-Jews to Judaism. In his *The Essence of Judaism* (1905), Baeck followed Christian scholars in emphasizing that Jews were successful missionaries in antiquity. He went further, however, both in published work and in private correspondence, by insisting on the need for contemporary Jewish missionizing.

To understand such claims, I contend, requires engaging not only with Baeck's place in the lineage of ethical monotheism but also with the context of the Wilhelmine Empire's expansion, and the missionary work involved. The fantasy of a unique, more humane, and civilizing German way of colonialism was adapted by Baeck into a Jewish mode of engagement with the world that was at the same time a critique of the treatment of the Jewish minority in Germany. Jews were not only better missionaries, Baeck implied – the way they were treated was a measure to the ethical level of society.



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Nationalism and Empire in Moses Hess's Jewish Thought

Daniel M. Herskowitz (Religious Studies Department at Duke University)

Moses Hess's thought is often presented as developing according to his gradual enchantment with the nationalistic wave that swept through Europe during the 1830s and 40s – especially the Revolutions of 1848, and especially the nationalistic Italian and German unification movements – culminating in his embrace of the nationalistic solution to the Jews, proposes in *Rome and Jerusalem* (1862). This latter work is often seen as a turning point in his thought, since prior to it, his writings – deeply marked by Hegel's philosophy of history and his admiration for Spinoza – centred on a socialist and messianic vision of history in which European nations played a crucial role and Jews featured through their spiritual contributions of the past,and only as individuals, not as a collective. It is only in *Rome and Jerusalem* that the Jews are perceived as a collective ready for their own national revival. His call to jettison hopes for emancipation in Europe and establish a Jewish socialist commonwealth in Palestine later led the Zionist movement to adopt Hess as a Proto-Zionist thinker.

In this paper I argue that while there is no doubt that the national movements in Europe were a key catalyst to Hess's thought, approaching it solely through the prism of nationalism while ignoring the imperial context of these developments leaves us with an impoverished understanding of the substance and stakes of Hess's historical, political, socialistic, and Jewish thought. By exploring a some of his main works, such as *Die heilige Geschichte der Menschheit* (1837), *Die europäische Triarchie* (1841), and *Rom und Jerusalem*, I show that from the outset his understanding of contemporary world politics is thoroughly marked by the framework of empire – his view of global roles of England, France, and Germany, as well as Russia and even China are not simply nationalistic but imperial – and that his later proto-Zionist solution to the Jewish problem cannot be extracted from this imperial reality and imagination. Thus, Hess can serve as an exemplar for the overarching claim explored in this conference, namely, the intertwined nature of national and imperial conceptuality in modern Jewish thought.

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Talmudic Territorialism: The Political Theology of Aharon Shmuel Tamares

Isaac Slater (University of Göttingen)

This paper examines the political theology of Aharon Shmuel Tamares (1869–1931), a communal rabbi and pacifist thinker whose critique of modern nationalism anticipated central tensions in twentieth-century Jewish political thought. His approach challenged the conceptual foundations of territorial nationalism, offering instead a vision of Jewish political existence rooted in imperial frameworks, exilic experience, and rabbinic traditions.

At the heart of Tamares' thought lies his diagnosis of modern nationalism as a form of idolatry, wherein state and homeland assume the sacred status traditionally reserved for the divine, with warfare serving as its primary ritual expression. Against this idolatrous nationalism, Tamares argued that Judaism's historical experience as an exilic nation provides a vital model for reconceptualizing political community beyond territorial paradigms. Jewish diaspora existence, he contended, demonstrates the viability of robust national identity and cultural autonomy while preserving the right for self-determination independent of sovereignty and political power. Tamares insisted that such Jewish autonomism must be anchored in Talmudic and rabbinic sources to resist the secular dynamics that empower the "false gods" of nation and homeland.

This distinctive synthesis of religious conservatism and political radicalism positioned Tamares within a broader network of Jewish intellectuals grappling with autonomist concepts prevalent in the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires at the turn of the twentieth century. His religious-cultural autonomism reflects both pacifist and anarchist influences while sharing conceptual ground with contemporaries like Simon Dubnow in Russia and the Bar Kokhba circle in Prague. Tamares' hope for a Hebrew-Talmudic renaissance, unencumbered by the violent tendencies of sovereignty, must therefore be understood as part of the broader intellectual ferment in the shadow of imperial transformation.

Writing during this period of fundamental change in imperial politics, Tamares' thought illuminates how imperial frameworks shaped modern Jewish thought. His work offers enduring insights for contemporary discussions of nationalism, diaspora politics, imperial legacies, and the complex relationship between political and theological discourse in Jewish intellectual history.

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The Petty-minded Rabbis and the Place of Judaism in the Christian Empires

Ze'ev Strauss (Institute for Jewish Philosophy und Religion, University of Hamburg)

This paper will foreground the pejorative assessment of the ancient rabbis as excessively pedantic (kleinlich) within the intellectual discourse of nineteenth-century Germany. Against this backdrop, it seeks to uncover the link of this negative portrayal to the societal place of Judaism and Jews within modern Christian states of the German world. Taking its cue from Samson Raphael Hirsch's (1808–1888) seminal work, *Neunzehn Briefe über Judenthum* (1836), where we encounter this negative designation, the presentation will contextualize this theological motif and clarify its ramifications for emancipatory endeavors of Jewish thinkers within broader imperial contexts.

Imperialism and Cosmopolitanism in Late Nineteenth-Century French Jewish Thought

Adam Sutcliffe (Department of History, King's College London)

This paper will trace the place of imperial themes in French Jewish thought from Joseph Salvador's Paris *Rome and Jerusalem* (1860) to Barnard Lazare's socialist universalist Zionism of the 1890s. I will aim to set both those thinkers within the context of French and European imperialist thought in the period, highlighting the similarities and connections with currents of proto-Zionist thought among non-Jews (such as the French Catholic bureaucrat Ernest Laharanne) and Jews (Moses Hess and Theodor Herzl).

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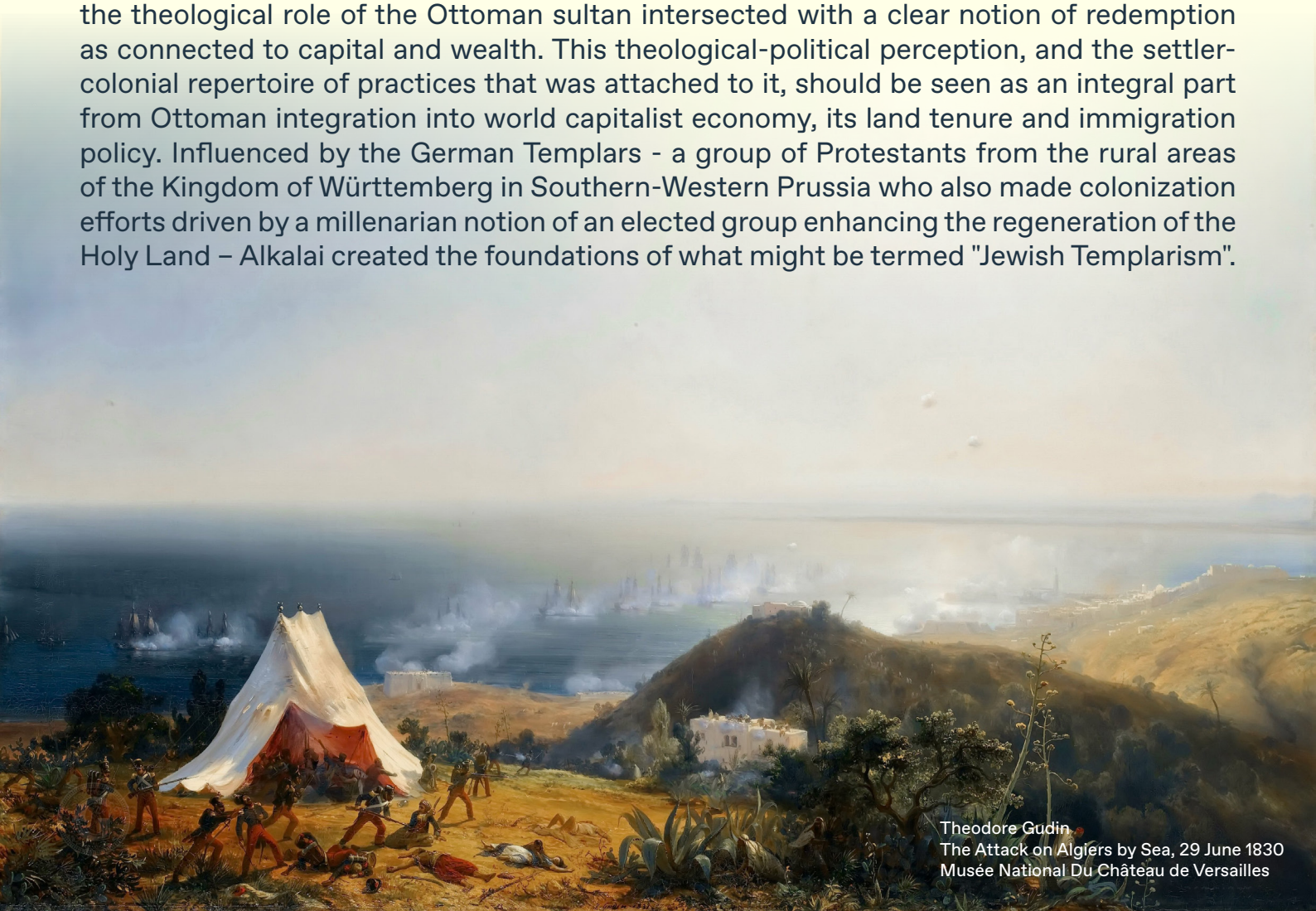
"Since King Messiah is a Wealthy Person" The Ottoman State, Global Capitalism and Millenarianism in Rabbi Yehudah Alkalai's Works

Avi-ram Tzoreff (The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute)

Rabbi Yehudah Alkalai (1798-1878) was born in Ottoman Sarajevo and served as the rabbi of the Sephardi community in Habsburg Zemlin, near Belgrade, at the "military frontier" between the Habsburg and Ottoman empires. In traditional Zionist historiography he usually been referred to as part of the group of the "forerunners of Zionism" (*Mevasrei Ha-tziyonut*), examined and read from the perspective of the later Zionist movement. As opposed to this de-contextualized reading I suggest to read Alkalai's writing against its own contemporary context, as one who lived in the frontier area on the Ottoman and Habsburg Balkan – a context to which he explicitly and continuously related to in his writings. Alkalai identified the figure of the Ottoman Sultan Abd al-Majid, who led the Tanzimat reforms, as a messianic figure, which will bring the redemption of the Jews. This understanding of the theological role of the Ottoman sultan intersected with a clear notion of redemption as connected to capital and wealth. This theological-political perception, and the settler-colonial repertoire of practices that was attached to it, should be seen as an integral part from Ottoman integration into world capitalist economy, its land tenure and immigration policy. Influenced by the German Templars - a group of Protestants from the rural areas of the Kingdom of Württemberg in Southern-Western Prussia who also made colonization efforts driven by a millenarian notion of an elected group enhancing the regeneration of the Holy Land – Alkalai created the foundations of what might be termed "Jewish Templarism".



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Musée National Du Château de Versailles

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The Gerd Bucerius Research Institute for Contemporary German History and Society
המכון ע"ש גרד בוצריוס לחקר ההיסטוריה והחברה הגרמנית בזמננו
معهد غيرد بوتسريوس لبحث تاريخ ألمانيا ومجتمعها المعاصرين
UNIVERSITY OF HAIFA אוניברסיטת חיפה

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Workshop:
Jewish Thought and Empire: 1830-1939

Leo Strauss in the 1920s: Exploring the Politics of Jewish Thought

Philipp von Wussow (Goethe University Frankfurt)

Leo Strauss (1899–1973) is a frequent reference in debates on Jewish politics, nationalism, and empire. However, his early writings on Zionism have largely been ignored or misunderstood. These writings, belonging to the context of the German Zionist youth movement, form a microcosm in which the politics of Jewish thought plays out. The paper seeks to link a close reading of these writings – including references to various empires – to Strauss's much-discussed letters from the mid-1930s on nationalism and empire, to the book "Philosophy and Law" (1935), and ultimately to his New School lecture "German Nihilism" (1941).

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