**Title:**

The Non-Jewish Jew Facing Catastrophe: Otto Heller, 1897–1945

**Keywords:**

The Jewish question, Marxism, Communism, antisemitism, The Third Reich, Holocaust, Jewish nationalism, Zionism, assimilation, resistance to Nazism.

**What makes your book unique? Please list up to five points on what the reader will learn from your work.**

1. This is the first-ever biography of the most prominent and prolific communist theoretician of the Jewish question, Otto Heller.
2. In opposition to the commonly assumed contradiction between communism (and assimilation in general) and Jewish nationalism, this book conjures the emergence of a forgotten attempt to reconcile them.
3. The book deeply analyzes an exemplary case of an intellectual oscillating between his conflicting commitments to aspiring truth and to serving a redemptive political vision and shows how this struggle remained undetermined.
4. Among many other untapped archival sources, the book exposes two exceptional unknown documents: Heller's 1939 manuscript *The Jew is to be Burned*, which proves a much earlier communist acknowledgement of world-wide Jewish national solidarity than hitherto assumed; A corpus of secret information bulletins that were smuggled from Auschwitz by the prisoners' underground, which demonstrate an early attempt to balance between particularistic and universalistic interpretations of the ongoing Holocaust.
5. Hellerʼs biography offers the reader a thrilling and tragic transnational journey throughout the tensest nerve centers of Europe during the catastrophic time of the first half of the twentieth century.

**Books published in the past three years that are written on similar subjects:**

Enzo Traverso, *The Jewish Question: History of a Marxist Debate*, tr. Bernard Gibbons, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2018.

Susie Linfield, *The Lion’s Den: Zionism and the Left from Hannah Arendt to Noam Chomsky*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019.

John Green, *Willi Münzenberg: Fighter against Fascism and Stalinism*, London and New York: Routledge, 2020.

**Series:**

German Jewish Cultures, or The Modern Jewish Experience

**450 to 500-word description of the book project, including its purpose, audience, scope, contribution to scholarship, and relationship to the existing literature on the topic.**

The proposed book is a biography of the German-speaking intellectual and journalist of Jewish descent Otto Heller.It follows his confrontation with the tension between his Jewish origins and his universalist political conviction throughout his lifetime (1897-1945). Contrary to his common image as the utmost advocate of the traditional Marxist denial of Jewish nationalism, this book shows how he came to lay the foundations for a groundbreaking communist acknowledgement of the Jews as a nation. This shift is attributed to the extreme worsening of the state of the Jews in Europe during the 1930s and 1940s, which Heller experienced intensively firsthand. Heller's individual life story offers a new look at dichotomies which are usually conceived as unbridgeable: assimilation and nationalism; communism and Jewishness; particularism and universalism.

As Hellerʼs story brings together many various historical topics, his biography may attract readers of diverse fields of interest: Jewish studies; antisemitism and racism; socialism; the late Habsburg empire; interwar Czechoslovakia; the Weimar Republic; the Soviet Union; the Third Reich; occupied France; Resistance to Nazism; and Holocaust studies. As a book combining intellectual history with biographical narrative, it can interest experts and non-experts alike. Its more analytic chapters can serve scholars and students, while the chapters in which his fascinating biographical narrative unfolds can appeal to a wider educated public. For academic teaching the book can be useful as introduction to the field of “Jews and the left,” which is witnessing growing interest in the last few years.

In scholarship Heller is discussed almost exclusively as the author of *The Decline of Judaism* (1931), which scholars agree is one of the most important communist texts on the Jewish question. Since virtually nothing else was hitherto known about Heller himself, the entire scholarly field is deficient. My book contributes a deep and comprehensive look into the communist discourse on the Jewish question, by reinterpreting *The Decline of Judaism*, considering new knowledge of the context of its publication, and especially of the life of its author as well as his many other writings. Hellerʼs case sheds new light on the history of the interrelations between socialism and the Jews and, more broadly, on the history of “the new-Jewish Jews” (following Isaac Deutscher's renown term) in a time when their existence as such was radically challenged.

Despite the frequent references to Heller's bookin existing literature on Marxism and the Jewish question, so far there is no monograph dedicated to Heller. For some decades we have witnessed growing interest in biographies in general, and more particularly in biographical studies of rank-and-file political activists and intellectuals. In recent years appeared several biographies of German-Jewish communists (e.g. Werner Scholem and Ruth Fischer). These biographies differ from Hellerʼs as their protagonists never delved into the Jewish question as he did. The proposed book joins a growing discourse on Jewish radicals, while focusing it on the Jewish aspect in the biography of one such exemplary and yet unique historical figure.

**200-word statement on why Indiana University Press is an appropriate publisher for your manuscript.**

I believe that Indiana University Press, previously publishing high-quality academic books in neighboring fields, is a very suitable publisher for my book, which I consider as a high-quality academic work. I find this book especially fitting to one of the following series: 'The Modern Jewish Experience' or 'German Jewish Cultures'. As an intersection of Jewish and internationalist histories, and of Jewish and German cultures, Heller's life story is at the same time a typical and an exceptional case of the modern Jewish experience and of converging and clashing belonging and identities. As such, I believe my book can contribute much to each of the mentioned series. Books like *Yiddish Paris* by Nick Underwood, *Yiddish Writers in Weimar Berlin* by Marc Caplan, *The Jewish Revolution in Belorussia* by Andrew Sloin, or the biography of *Fritz Bauer* by Ronen Steinke, confront many of the questions arising from Heller's transnational biography, though from completely different angles and under different circumstances. Through each of both series, it could directly reach its first hardcore of potential readership.

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The book is comprised of five main chapters, two of them (chapters 1 and 3) are focused on Hellerʼs two major works on the Jewish question, and the other three (chapters 2, 4 and 5) on the events of his life. The logic behind this structure is first to pose the questions that arise from Hellerʼs writing, and then to answer them through his biography in the years prior to the writing of each one of them. Chapter 5 exceeds this pattern, as it tells of Hellerʼs last turbulent years, from which almost no text by him is left. The non-linear structure also reflects the ruptured character of Jewish European biographies from the first half of the twentieth century.

*Prologue: A Jewish Question on the Death March*

The book opens with a short and powerful testimony: along the Death March, Heller was identified by Zionist activists who asked him if he still held onto his disputed thesis regarding *The Decline of Judaism* through assimilation. Since no one who could remember his answer survived, and Heller himself perished in a labor camp in Austria several weeks later, that question serves as a point of departure for the entire research, which is aimed at reconstructing the development of Hellerʼs conception of the Jewish question. Later, the relevant contexts for Hellerʼs biography are laid down: the phenomenon of “the non-Jewish-Jew,” and the socialist, Marxist, and communist discussion on the Jewish question. Focusing on Otto Heller himself, the prologue then points to some enigmas in his life and writing, which raises doubts regarding the common image of him in current scholarship. Finally, the sources used in this research are presented. Since the existing documentation of Heller, as a second rank activist as well as a Holocaust victim, is partial, the methods used to overcome the gaps in his life story are introduced: placing Heller in the context of the various milieus he was part of; and juxtaposing his biography with parallel life trajectories of some prominent German-Jewish writers of the time, such as Arthur Koestler, Egon Erwin Kisch, Lion Feuchtwanger, and Alfred Döblin. The unique importance of testimonies by women who knew Heller is also discussed in the prologue.

*Chapter 1: The Decline of Judaism (1931)*

The first chapter is a biography of the book which made Heller a historical figure, *The Decline of Judaism*. The common understanding of this book, which sees it as expressing dogmatic party ideology and Jewish self-hatred, is tackled from four different angles, while chronologically following the reception history of the book. The first subchapter exposes unresearched areas in the immediate reception of *The Decline of Judaism*. While a handful of reviews in German-language journals have been repeatedly referred to in scholarship, turning to other sources – such as Yiddish reviews, Hebrew references, German daily press, and private letters – reveals new viewpoints through which the book was read by contemporaries. The second part focuses on the most enigmatic aspect in the history of *The Decline of Judaism*, so far neglected in scholarship: its rejection by the Communist Party of Germany (the biggest and strongest communist party outside the USSR at the time), and Hellerʼs reaction to the harsh criticism he met in his own movement. The third section analyzes one unique contribution made by Heller in his book, which makes its interpretation much more complex then hitherto suggested: his application of Marxʼs forgotten term “trading-people” to Jewish history, through which he provided Jewish nationalism with a theoretical Marxist legitimation. Hellerʼs introduction of this term into the public discourse provoked an agitated controversy over its “correct” Marxist interpretation in the 1930s, conducted mainly in Yiddish between rival Marxist theoreticians of Jewish history. The fourth and final subchapter criticizes the scholarly interpretations of the book by showing the anachronistic character of its common retrospective reading through the dark lens of the Holocaust. All these aspects together lead to the conclusion that a full understanding of the book and the discourse it invoked is impossible without exploring its authorʼs biography.

*Chapter 2: Origins of a Jewish Question (1897–1932)*

After problematizing Hellerʼs major publication, the second chapter traces the path to its writing by reconstructing Hellerʼs biography until *The Decline of Judaism* in four main scenes. The first is fin-de-siècle Vienna – the hometown of personalities such as Freud and Herzl, which also hosted Hitler and Stalin for a time – where Heller was born to a wealthy, liberal, acculturated Jewish family. Raised in an environment of growing national conflicts and antisemitism, he was exposed to different solutions to the Jewish question: baptism, socialism, and Zionism. As a soldier in the Austro-Hungarian army in World War One, he encountered radical critiques of existing Habsburgian society: Marxist socialism on the one hand, and nationalist movements on the other. His revolt against his family heritage, which began on the frontline, continued by his leaving the Jewish community, rejecting a business career, and joining the social-democratic party. The second milieu is the German-speaking population of Bohemia, which had already become part of Czechoslovakia by the time Heller settled there after the war. In his time there, away from his family, his political views further radicalized as he became one of the founders of the German-speaking section in the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. In 1926 he was banished from the country for his political activity, which brought him to the third location, Berlin of the Weimar period. In the German capital Heller was appointed as editor of a leading communist daily until, as part of the Stalinization and de-Judaization of the German Communist Party, he became suspected of supporting an opposition fraction within the party and thus lost his job. This turn led him to a new career as a traveling reporter in the Soviet Union, the fourth arena depicted in this chapter. One of his journeys through the Soviet Republics was focused on Jewish agricultural settlements, ending up in the newly announced Jewish Autonomous Region in the Far East – Birobidzhan. The product of this journey was his book *The Decline of Judaism*, the first expression of his active interest in the Jewish question.

*Chapter 3: The Jew is to Be Burned (1939)*

The third chapter jumps a few years forward by focusing on the main archival finding of my research: Hellerʼs 1939 manuscript of a second book-length account of the Jewish question, *The Jew is to Be Burned*. The chapter begins with the intellectual and political background against which this work was written: the German-language communist discourse on the Jewish question after *The Decline of Judaism* and especially after the Nazi rise to power. After the Nazi pogrom of November 1938, the crisis of Jewish refugees from central Europe became a major issue in international politics. Heller finished the last revision of his manuscript a week before the war broke out and made its publication impossible. Had it been published, it would have probably been the most salient communist contribution to that discussion. While Hellerʼs first book was widely discussed and requires a reinterpretation through its reception history, this manuscript was hardly addressed by scholars and obviously had no reception history. The chapter therefore explores the content of the manuscript itself, illuminating its novelties in respect to Hellerʼs earlier book. The comparison between Hellerʼs two major works focuses on two interconnected questions: What was the relationship between capitalism and the Jews, or how should the Jews be categorized in terms of class? And what were the driving forces of antisemitism? Hellerʼs new treatment of these questions was inspired by influential contemporary views beyond the boundaries of the Marxist discourse: Max Weberʼs renown theory of the relation between capitalism and the Jews; and the Zionist interpretation of antisemitism. Had the manuscript been published, Hellerʼs implementation of such concepts, which were banned in the communist world, could have had harsh consequences for him. The fact that, at the same time, he continued supporting Soviet policy and opposing Zionism makes this manuscript especially puzzling. The tensions and contradictions revealed in it are finally interpreted through the textʼs enigmatic title: *The Jew is to Be Burned*, implying Hellerʼs growing pessimism, which he dared to express only in the theoretical aspect of the manuscript while concealing it under his political obligation to revolutionary optimism.

*Chapter 4: In Flight from Two Dictators (1933–1939)*

The fourth chapter goes back to the years between *The Decline of Judaism* and *The Jew is to Be Burned* and explains both the shifts and consistencies in Hellerʼs attitude through the blustery upheavals of the 1930s, in his own life, and in European history. After the Reichstag Fire, Heller fled Germany to Zurich. From there he agitatedly tried to promote the absorption of German-Jewish refugees in the Soviet Union. His concern regarding his fellow German Jews in distress marked a shift in his views, as it was his first active expression of Jewish solidarity. Having not received a legal status in Switzerland, he sought a new asylum. Although he was deeply disappointed with the Soviet indifference to the fate of German Jewry, he lacked any other options and set off to Moscow, where he could work as a journalist for a German-language newspaper. His hesitations regarding his own migration to the Soviet Union proved justified. Many German communists fell victims to Stalinʼs Purges, which also bore a latent antisemitic aspect. When he understood his life had come under direct threat, Heller had to flee again. The Spanish Civil War, breaking out in 1936, provided Heller with an opportunity for a new post as a propagandist for the republicans, first in Madrid and later in Paris, recruiting volunteers for the International Brigades. In the French capital he also worked for several Austrian communist journals until his eventual layoff, brought about by the same suspicions regarding his political loyalty to the party line as dictated by Stalin, which had followed him from Berlin to Moscow. After losing his livelihood due to political reasons for the second time, he now devoted his time again to the Jewish question, writing his second book on the burning topic, *The Jew is to Be Burned*. The expressions of Jewish solidarity, as well as the much more empathic tone of this manuscript towards historical and contemporary Jews alike gave voice to Hellerʼs new experience as a persecuted refugee.

*Chapter 5: In Fight (1939–1945)*

From 1939 onwards, under the circumstances of the war and Nazi occupation, Heller left no more writings on the Jewish question. The fifth and last chapter follows his deeds in the last years of his life. Most of those years he was captive in various detention and concentration camps in France as an Austrian citizen, a communist, a Jew, and a Résistance activist. In between he established a communal farm for Austrian communist refugees in southern France and later served as an underground agent in a Wehrmacht unit in the north, disguised as a translator. Eventually he was caught by the Gestapo and sent to Auschwitz in early August 1944. In the notorious camp, Heller joined the international underground, known as the “Auschwitz Fighting Group.” He took part in the organizationʼs editorial, writing periodical reports to be smuggled out of the camp and delivered to the Allies through the Polish underground, bringing some of the first evidence of the true nature of Auschwitz to the world. These reports are Hellerʼs last textual footprints. The fact that they were composed collectively by four or five resistance members, reedited once outside of the camp, and survived only in their Polish translation makes it extremely difficult to reconstruct Hellerʼs part. Nevertheless, through a thorough analysis of the reports, and identification of their other authors, this chapter cautiously aims at estimating his possible contribution. The conclusion from that analysis is that he balanced between reporting on the Nazisʼ attempt to annihilate the Jews and their crimes against other groups, or between particularistic and universalist interpretations of the Holocaust. Finally, the chapter returns to the starting point of the book: The Death March, and Hellerʼs eventual demise in a subcamp of Mauthausen, Austria only a few weeks before the liberation.

*Epilogue: The Road Not Taken*

Though a definite reconstruction of Hellerʼs answer to the question addressed to him on the Death March is impossible, several concluding thoughts and remarks about the process he went through regarding the Jewish question from 1931 to 1945 are suggested in the epilogue. In those years of persecution and extermination, he moved along the scale of “non-Jewish Jewishness” in a more and more particularistic “Jewish” direction, without losing grip of his “non-Jewish” universalism. Although this movement was typical to many “non-Jewish Jews,” Hellerʼs example was unique, as he made the Jewish question his prime vocation while still denying his Jewish belonging. Facing catastrophe Heller became, already by the 1930s, an exceptionally Jewish “non-Jewish Jew.” Lastly, the epiloguereturns to the wider communist discourse on the Jewish question, the evolution of which until 1931 was presented in the prologue, and its further course in the 1930s discussed in the third chapter. Hellerʼs thought is examined here against the emergence of a new tendency among communists, who called to abandon the traditional communist denial of Jewish nationalism during the 1940s. It was mostly German-speaking communists of Jewish descent, who, facing the information of mass murder of Jews by the Nazis, legitimized Jewish nationalism. Far beyond the already formally acknowledged (though poorly realized) right for national autonomy within the Soviet Union, these communists acknowledged the existence of a worldwide Jewish nation, and its right for a homeland in Palestine. Retrospectively, Heller can be seen as a precursor of this trend, who, unlike his successors, had started turning in that direction well before the “final solution of the Jewish question” was put into implementation.

**5 to 10 appropriate reviewers for your manuscript.**

1. Prof. Jack Jacobs.
2. Prof. Mario Kessler.
3. Prof. Jonathan Karp.
4. Prof. Konrad Kwiet.
5. Prof. Michael Brenner.
6. Prof. David Meyers.

**Word count:**

90,000 words

**Does your manuscript contain illustrations?**

At the publisherʼs request, a handful of existing black and white photos of Otto Heller and his family could be added to the book.