

## **WAG Scholars' Working Group on German Rabbis after 1933 at LMU München**

### **Personal details**

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### **Statement of interest**

The spiritual stance of German Jewry's communities and their leaders before World War II, including questions of identity and ideological visions for their congregations, remains largely unexamined. This study aims to recover and reconstruct the missing spiritual dimension of German Jewry, focusing particularly on the rabbis who perished in the Holocaust. By doing so, we aim to provide crucial context to existing studies of German Jewry, which often focus on the community's practical aspects but overlook its religious and spiritual core.

On the eve of WWII, German rabbis formed a unique intellectual circle, isolated both from non-Jewish academic circles, often steeped in antisemitism, and from their East-European rabbinical counterparts, whose religious outlooks diverged sharply. These rabbis were generally highly educated, holding degrees from prestigious German universities, and many aligned themselves with the ideals of the Wissenschaft des Judentums movement. This fostered an extraordinary cultural dialogue between traditional and liberal rabbis, though few have been the subject of in-depth academic research.

Key questions to be addressed in this study include how these rabbis interpreted the rising tide of antisemitism and rejection, whether they perceived a divine meta-historical revelation, and what they understood to be their spiritual mission in a time of crisis. Did they aim to forge a new Jewish identity in response to their epoch's challenges?

This research will place special emphasis on the rabbis who did not survive the Holocaust. To date, no comprehensive academic study has investigated how many German rabbis perished, nor which individuals these were. Preliminary estimates suggest that dozens of rabbis lost their lives in Nazi camps or as a result of other wartime atrocities. These rabbis represent not only a physical loss but also a profound spiritual destruction, as a significant layer of Jewish leadership was eradicated during the Holocaust.

### **Project Outline**

The methodology to achieve this involves collecting their academic writings, particularly from rabbis who held doctoral degrees, as well as other works they published for the broader public. From these sources, Alongside the collection project, a parallel research process examines the geographical and historical contexts of this diverse and extensive rabbinic community. This includes mapping, locating archival materials, and studying the biographies of these rabbis, their experiences during the Holocaust, and the cultural impact of their thought in the post-war generations.

The ultimate goal of this project is to develop a comprehensive website that will house a detailed database and provide access to the works of these rabbis, along with English summaries of their

research. The aim is to reintegrate these scholars into the global intellectual sphere. Additionally, the website will serve as a platform enabling researchers worldwide, as well as interested intellectuals, to access relevant materials and utilize them for their own academic pursuits.

## **Presentation**

### **Theology of the Last Generation: The Spiritual Heritage of the Murdered German Rabbis**

#### **Short Bio**

Dr. Isaac Hershkowitz is a senior lecturer in the Department of Jewish Philosophy at Bar-Ilan University. His research focuses on modern Jewish thought, with particular emphasis on religious responses to the Holocaust, the philosophy of halakhah, rabbinic moral literature, and the application of Big Data tools to texts in Jewish philosophy across generations.

Some of his recent publications:

1. *Religious Zionism and the Settlement Project: Ideology, Politics, and Civil Disobedience* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2018) (with Moshe Hellinger)
2. *Spiritual Resurrection in the Writings of Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Vogelmann* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2022).
3. *"Grieve Silently"*
4. *Muteness, Abstention, and the Holocaust* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, in press)