

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study of the confessionality of secularism will be guided by the following questions: What role did confessional laws and state practice play in the articulation of secularism? How did secularist beliefs interact with theology and other forms of knowledge, in particular natural science? What role did secularism play in the articulation of social conflicts, and which professional and class segments were represented in the different associational types? How did secularism figure in the formation of Germany's modern party system?

Each of these questions points to a different dimension of secularism. In order to do justice to each and to find the interconnections between them, I chose to focus my research on the four main types of secularist organizations in a single location: Berlin. Utilizing microhistorical methods, I move from these associations and their members out into broader contexts, from the urban setting and city politics to the Prussian state and finally to the Reich. The advantage of limiting the geographic scope in this way is that we can see where characters reappear in different guises and trace relationships between them and to those outside the secularist fold. It is also possible to provide a more nuanced picture of the connections between secularism and science education, political radicalism, religious criticism, and social conflict.

My ability to provide a “thick” description of organized secularism in Berlin required, of course, a thick source base, and this I found in Berlin archives. For the most part, these sources are not, as one might have expected, the records of the secularist organizations under investigation. After Berlin's secularist organizations were banned in 1933 and 1934, their own archives were subject to spontaneous destruction at the hands of the *Sturmabteilung* (SA or

⁶⁶ Johannes Wichern, *Die innere Mission der deutschen evangelischen Kirche: Eine Denkschrift an die deutsche Nation, im Auftrage des Centralausschusses für die innere Mission*, 2nd ed. (Hamburg: Agentur des Rauhen Hauses, 1849), 200.

Stormtroopers), dissipated following police seizure, fell victim to Allied bombing, or were simply lost.⁶⁷ Only remnants remain. Given these losses, the historian of secularism finds him- or herself confronted with a problem not unlike that faced by historians of ancient Christian heresies: one has to rely on the observations made by the movement's enemies. From the inception of the Free Religious Congregation in March 1845, Berlin police officers and civil servants in the Ministry of the Interior engaged in systematic surveillance of the secularist associations. It is a testament to the anxiety secularism produced for the confessional state that the Berlin police president regularly sent an officer to observe the weekly meetings of the Berlin Free Religious Congregation and take notes on the sermons, audiences, songs, and debates. The Catholic and Protestant churches also kept voluminous records of the misdeeds of the secularist organizations. These materials, plus the wealth of published books, pamphlets, protocols, and newspaper articles by the secularists, their supporters and opponents, provided a rich source base for this study.

Berlin, Prussia, and German Reich

Given that the Christian State and modern nationalism shaped the confessional field, the interactions of Berlin secularists with state officials and urban liberals do tell a German story. However, these relations were not necessarily typical of other early centers of rationalist dissent such as Breslau or Halberstadt, let alone of the towns and cities outside of Prussia. The microhistorical approach brings with it the methodological problem of perspective. German secularism and the confessional dynamics it provoked are necessarily viewed through Berlin spectacles. As critical historians have repeatedly warned, studies that take Berlin as representative of Prussia, or Prussia as representative of Germany, ride roughshod over regional variation and produce a skewed picture of the whole.⁶⁸ Instead, we need to treat Berlin secularism as a regional case, the specificities of which have to be understood, in part, as a reflection of local conditions.

The comparison with other centers of secularism reveals three peculiarities of Berlin. First, politically and theologically, the Berlin Free Religious Congregation

⁶⁷ Part of the library of the Berlin FRC was burned in 1933 at the order of the socialist vice chairman Otto Braß. The remainder was seized in a police raid in summer 1934 and used against leading socialist members of the congregation, as indicated in a letter from Ewald Harndt to the Staatspolizei on November 12, 1934 (Adolf Harndt papers, unpag.) According to Peter Bahn (*Deutschkatholiken und Freireligiöse*, 93), the archive of national Union of Free Religious Congregations in Leipzig was destroyed during a bomb attack on December 4, 1943. In 1937, 140 boxes of documents pertaining to the Deutscher Freidenker Verband were delivered to the Gestapo and were likely destroyed or lost during the war. (Letters from the commissar of the Vaterländische Volksversicherung to the board, November 4 and December 20, 1937, Archive of FRC Berlin.)

⁶⁸ James J. Sheehan, "What Is German History? Reflections on the Role of the *Nation* in German History and Historiography," *Journal of Modern History* 53 (March 1981): 1-23.

Secularism and Religion in Nineteen-Century Germany

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Übersetzung Google:

Meine Fähigkeit, eine "dicke" Beschreibung des organisierten Säkularismus in Berlin zu liefern, erforderte natürlich eine dicke Quellenbasis, und diese fand ich in Berliner Archiven. Zum größten Teil handelt es sich bei diesen Quellen nicht, wie zu erwarten war, um Aufzeichnungen der untersuchten säkularistischen Organisationen. Nachdem Berlins säkularistische Organisationen in den Jahren 1933 und 1935 verboten worden waren, wurden ihre eigenen Archive durch die Sturmabteilung (SA oder Stormtroopers) spontan zerstört, nach der Eroberung der Polizei aufgelöst, fielen den Bombenangriffen der Alliierten zum Opfer oder gingen einfach verloren.

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Ein Teil der Bibliothek des FRC Berlin wurde 1933 auf Anordnung des sozialistischen Vizepräsidenten Otto Braß niedergebrannt. Der Rest wurde im Sommer 1934 bei einer Polizeirazzia beschlagnahmt und gegen führende sozialistische Gemeindemitglieder eingesetzt. Dies geht aus einem Brief von Ewald Harndt an die Staatspolizei vom 12. November 1934 hervor (Adolf-Harndt-Papiere, unpag.), So [Peter Bahn \(Deutschkatholiken und Freireligiöse, 93\)](#), das Archiv der Nationalen Union Freier Religionsgemeinschaften in Leipzig wurde bei einem Bombenanschlag am 4. Dezember 1943 zerstört. 1937 wurden der Gestapo und dem Deutschen Freidenker Verband 140 Kartons mit Dokumenten zugestellt wurden wahrscheinlich während des Krieges zerstört oder verloren. (Schreiben des Kommissars der Vaterländischen Volksversicherung an den Vorstand, 4. November und 20. Dezember 1937, Archiv des FRC Berlin.)