

MUSCULAR JUDAISM

The Jewish body and the politics
of regeneration

Todd Samuel Presner

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FOR JAIME AND BRAD

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INTRODUCTION

Visions of muscle Jews

The preeminence given to intellectual labors throughout some two thousand years in the life of the Jewish people has, of course, had its effect. It has helped to check the brutality and the tendency to violence which are apt to appear where the development of muscular strength is the popular ideal. Harmony in the cultivation of intellectual and physical activity, such as was achieved by the Greek people, was denied to the Jews. In this dichotomy their decision was at least in favor of the worthier alternative.

Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism* (1939)¹

Shortly after Israel's "astounding" victory in the Six-Day War of 1967, *Life* magazine published a photograph on its June 23 cover of a smiling Israeli soldier cooling off in the Suez Canal while toting an AK-47 assault rifle and gazing upward to the sky (Fig. 0.1). The bronzed soldier—a 22-year-old platoon commander named Yosef ("Yossi") Ben Hanan—had just emerged victorious from desert combat: he is still wearing his combat uniform, and his face has dirt on it; his hair is tousled, and he triumphantly holds onto his gun. His glistening white teeth punctuate the center of the image, while his blue eyes match the color of the water. The photograph was reproduced the world over and quickly became an iconic image of Jewish might and Israeli power.

Perhaps part of the popularity of the photograph had to do with the ostensible simplicity of the image. It consists of just three things: a soldier, water, and a gun. The Israeli soldier, armed with an assault rifle, is enjoying the newly conquered territory of the Suez Canal. Viewers could easily unpack the message: the individual soldier, with a single gun, stood for the collective strength, prowess, and bravery of the Israeli nation. In effect, any Jewish man could become a Yossi Ben Hanan, and it is toward this ideal that he should strive. After all, the lightning-fast results of the Six-Day War seemed to confirm the value of cultivating these ideals: Israel decimated the Egyptian air force in a single day, took the Golan Heights and the old city of Jerusalem, and routed the Egyptian army throughout the Sinai Peninsula, reaching the

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Suez Canal in less than a week. Of course, this was not done by a single soldier; it was achieved by an army of Yossi Ben Hanans, each of whom embodied the same Jewish strength, prowess, and bravery.

Prior to the 1967 war and the *Life* magazine cover, no image in the Israeli collective imaginary better represented the “Jewish” ideals of muscularity,

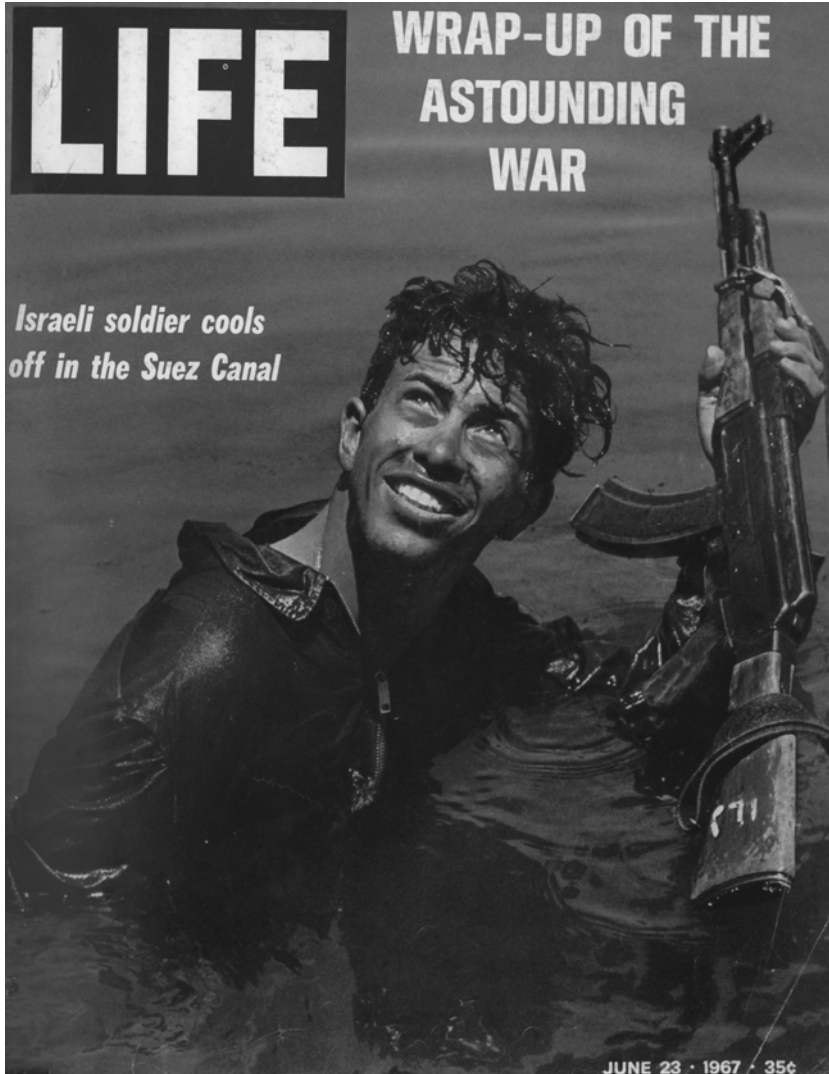


Figure 0.1 *Life* magazine cover (June 23, 1967). LIFE® used by permission of Life, Inc. Photograph by Denis Cameron.

masculinity, and patriotism than Micha Perry's photograph of Israeli soldiers raising a handmade flag in front of the police station of Um Rashrash (Eilat) on March 10, 1949 (Fig. 0.2). The picture celebrated the last operation of the Israeli War of Independence: the completion of the occupation of the Negev Desert. Explicitly reenacting the raising of the American flag in the Battle of Iwo Jima, emblematically captured by Joe Rosenthal's famous picture of four American soldiers raising the flag atop a heap of rubble in February of 1945, the Israeli brigades created an analogous staging for their victory. Armed with assault rifles and dressed in military fatigues, a group of Israeli soldiers erected a hand-dyed, Israeli flag on a white sheet while a single soldier climbed to the top of the pole. The picture immediately came to stand for the realization of the Zionist dream of a unified Jewish state.

As historically decisive moments in the development of Israeli national identity, both of these photographs bear witness to the popular ascendancy of a new ideal: the muscle Jew. And while the associated ideals of muscularity and masculinity have certainly become internalized as part and parcel of Israeli identity, they have also come to define a more widespread, contemporary mode of being-Jewish-in-the-world, one which is characterized by toughness, aggressiveness, and battle-readiness. After World War II and the Holocaust, many a generation of Jews growing up in Israel and the United States have been weaned on this ideology of muscle. Never again, we are told, will Jews go like lamb to slaughter.² Never again, we are told, can we let down our guard. As Paul Breines has amply demonstrated in his cultural analysis of "tough" American Jews, the image of the combat-ready, gun-toting warrior has come to replace that of the bookish intellectual or the gentle schlemiel.³ The image of the meek, Yiddish-speaking Jew of the Eastern-European shtetl has become supplanted by the Hebrew-speaking "Sabra" Jew who is always prepared to fend off would-be attackers and secure the perimeters of his land.⁴ The Six-Day War proved to many American and Israeli Jews that the Jewish people were now decisive and powerful agents on the stage of world history. After 2,000 years of victimization, a regenerated "muscle Jewry" will fight back and retake the land that was once theirs.

Recognized by his muscularity and imbued with a Zionist ideology, "a new type" of Jew seemed to emerge in less than a generation. An Israeli army physical fitness book marketed to Americans shortly after the 1967 war explained the transformation as follows:

The Israeli Army is producing a new type of man in this young, energetic Middle Eastern country. By means of tough, well-planned physical training, the army is contributing to the change in the physiognomy of the modern Israeli and to the transforming of the immigrants from seventy different countries into one, homogenous type. The "traditional Jew" of Eastern Europe was known, in the past, for his capability to bear mental sufferings and moral tortures and



Figure 0.2 Photograph of the ink-drawn national flag of Israel flying at Um Rashrash (Eilat) by Micha Perry (March 10, 1949). Courtesy of Government Press Office, Jerusalem.

for his physical weakness. Subjected to racial discriminations, the Jew of Eastern Europe was not conscripted into the army, nor did he engage in manual work. His main activity was in commerce and the educational field. This had resulted in the Jew having weak arms and soft back and belly muscles. . . . But with the new Israel it is quite different. The citizen is taller, he has broad shoulders and his muscles are stronger. The physical fitness of the average Israeli was one of the most important elements which led to the lightning victory of the Israeli army in the Six-Day War of June 1967.⁵

Breaking from the stereotypical Eastern-European Jew who is small in stature, weak in physical constitution, and busily engaged with commerce and speculations, the authors proclaim the birth of a new Jewish “type,” one who was incubated in the Israeli army’s fitness regiments and battlefields. The manual explains that through physical training, “close combat” such as judo and boxing, and basic fitness exercises, both soldiers and civilians will gain self-confidence, courage, and aggressiveness, resulting in “more toughness in daily behavior.”⁶ The book goes on to detail six basic exercises for men and women to increase their back and leg muscles, their lateral muscles, their abdominal muscles, their arm muscles, and their circulatory and respiratory systems. Because the exercises are simple enough for anyone to learn regardless of age, gender, or ability, the authors insist that everyone can become a muscle Jew. In essence, the physical weakness of the Eastern-European Jew is to be consigned to the distant past.

As Paul Breines and Warren Rosenberg have shown, images of tough Jewish males now permeate contemporary American culture, comprising a subgenre that Breines playfully calls “Rambowitz literature” for its glorification of violence and machismo.⁷ It includes authors as diverse as Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth, Lewis Orde, and Leon Uris, who variously glorify Jewish courage, aggressiveness, and militancy. Indeed, these representations of muscle Jews in the cultural imaginary—Jews fighting terrorism, Jews killing enemies in hand-to-hand combat, Jews infiltrating into Palestinian society, Jews squelching neo-Nazis—are not only meant to reflect but also to produce these very ideals and, thereby, lay the groundwork for a new, militant and decidedly masculinist Jewish identity.⁸

This is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the institutionalization and spread of Krav Maga throughout the United States and the world. Krav Maga, Hebrew for “contact combat,” is the system of self-defense developed for the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in the 1940s. It was created by an Eastern-European Jew named Imi Sde-Or (Lichtenfeld), who went on to become the Chief Instructor for Physical Fitness and Krav Maga at the School of Combat Fitness in Israel.⁹ Born in Budapest in 1910, Lichtenfeld grew up in Bratislava, where his father founded the country’s first athletic and weight-training club

called “Hercules.” Far from the stereotype of the weak Eastern-European Jew, Lichtenfeld excelled at gymnastics, wrestling, and boxing, winning numerous national and international sporting competitions in the 1920s and 1930s. After immigrating to Palestine in 1942, he began training Jewish fighters in physical fitness and self-defense, eventually serving in the IDF for nearly 20 years. According to Lichtenfeld, the motivation behind Krav Maga was to develop an efficient and highly effective fighting system to control and negate a would-be attacker. The techniques of Krav Maga were honed through frequent street fighting and combat situations in close quarters where the defense against an attack with a knife, gun, or hand grenade is common. In the late 1970s, Lichtenfeld, together with some of his students, founded the Israeli Krav Maga Association, with the goal of disseminating its self-defense techniques to the civilian population in Israel and abroad. A few years later, Krav Maga was introduced to the United States, where it quickly became adopted by law enforcement officials. In the late 1990s, Krav Maga organizations sprouted up across the United States, and it is commonly hailed as the most effective self-defense system in the world.

While official “training centers” now exist globally, the ideological history of Krav Maga is largely sidestepped or erased, especially in the United States. Krav Maga is not simply a form of physical fitness and self-defense; it came into being as a critical part of the founding violence of state formation: following the Israeli War of Independence, Krav Maga was supported and developed by the Israeli military in order to fight and suppress Palestinian opposition. It was introduced to the civilian population by way of the educational curriculum, and it quickly became a tool for extending Zionist ideology into everyday life. Today, Krav Maga essentially inculcates “muscle Jews,” playing a vital role in the rearing of Israeli children on principles of self-defense, physical aggressiveness, and contact combat.

In the late 1990s, around the time Krav Maga began to gain an international reputation, an Israeli artist by the name of Adi Nes sought to deconstruct the ideals of muscular Judaism and the figure of the muscle Jew by remaking some of the key images of Israeli self-fashioning. He decided to restage both the 1967 cover of *Life* and the 1949 Micha Perry photograph as part of a critically revisionist photography series entitled *Soldiers* (1994–2000). Born in Kiryat Gat in 1966 to a family of immigrants from Kurdistan and Iran, Nes wanted to uncover the roots and allure of these powerfully totemic images of Jewish masculinity and military might. To do so, he decided to mimic the original photographs with a crucial difference. Believing that “behind every image, there is much more going on,”¹⁰ he revealed what was excluded, erased, or unspoken in these historically significant pictures. In the first, Nes takes the emblematic image of Yossi Ben Hanan in the Suez Canal raising his gun at the end of the 1967 war and recasts it as a homoerotic celebration, with the protagonist conjoined arm and arm with a bevy of shirtless, muscular young men frolicking about him (Fig. 0.3). In the other photograph, Nes

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restages the heroic raising of the Israeli flag at Um Rashrash, but he omits the flag and leaves only the soldiers with a pole to climb (Fig. 0.4).

Nes's photographs are complicated meditations on the Israeli State, Jewish identity, and male body politics. In both of these photographs, Nes draws attention to the masculinist culture of the Israeli military and the ways in which male-bonding rituals are essential to both Israeli self-fashioning and state formation. Women are conspicuously absent in the photographs, despite the fact that they are conscripted into the Israeli military.¹¹ As Micha Perry's photograph shows, it is men who found a state and raise the flag. The phallocentrism of Perry's image, something that is almost passed over in its cultural redundancy, is blatantly underscored by Nes when the flag is removed: we are simply left with soldiers climbing a giant phallus erected on the ground and pointing skyward. Just like the topography where Nes shot the



Figure 0.3 Adi Nes, "Untitled" (1999) from *Soldiers* series. Courtesy of Adi Nes.



Figure 0.4 Adi Nes, “Untitled” (1996) from *Soldiers* series. Courtesy of Adi Nes.

image, the phallus is placeless—meaning that it can reappear anywhere, at any time. The soldiers decide where to put the phallus and, then, proceed to hold it in place. Women are superfluous in this act of male parthenogenesis, for only men give birth to a state.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, it was a German thinker by the name of Hans Blüher, one of the founders and theoreticians of the German Youth Movement, who first articulated the relationship between male-bonding (*Männerbünde*) and state formation in his book, *The Role of the Erotic in the Male Society: A Theory of State Formation Based on Essence and Value*.¹² According to Blüher, societies for male-bonding—such as sporting and hiking organizations, fighting clubs, and military units—cultivate a specifically male Eros constitutive of state formation. The state, he argues, comes into existence by way of the erotic, masculinist bonds created between men. While the family for Blüher is fundamentally a heterosexual

construct, the state is fundamentally a homosexual construct. As Blüher writes: “Wherever nature has created a species that is really capable of establishing a state, this has only been achieved by smashing the dictatorship of the family as well as the male–female sexual urges themselves.”¹³ For him, homosexuality is in no way effeminizing or weakening; rather it is the culmination of masculine strength. In effect, women reproduce the species, while men reproduce the state.¹⁴

By adding Yossi Ben Hanan’s male compatriots to his restaging of the *Life* magazine cover and by removing the Israeli flag in his restaging of Micha Perry’s photograph, Nes reveals precisely these homosocial, masculinist rituals of male-bonding at the center of state formation. In the former, Nes stages the watery celebration in the dark, perhaps underscoring the homosexual acts that occur under the surface and that cannot be made explicit in broad daylight. The circle of men hold on to each other tightly while the beautiful protagonist—cleanly shaven, with his hair coiffed and his face almost powdered dry—holds the assault weapon that he can publicly display above the surface of the water.¹⁵ In the latter photograph, Nes essentially foregrounds the phallus by removing the flag from its pole, thereby allowing us to recognize the interrelationships between patriotic duty, state-formation, and same-sex masculine desire. Setting up the phallus is a means of laying claim to the land, while the unspoken and all-too-often erased results are the expulsion and subjugation of the other. Through his seductive images of masculine celebration, Nes reveals the violent contours of both contemporary Jewish identity and the Israeli landscape. In effect, he not only counteracts the “straight male” machismo of the military culture, but he also underscores the danger of phallocentrism by deconstructing and reconfiguring the trajectories of masculine, military desire.

The purpose of this book is to examine the cultural and social origins of this desire through the figure of the muscle Jew. It is to probe the images of Jewish masculinity and militancy, and it is to press on the various self-legitimizing discourses of muscular Judaism. While 1948–49 and 1967–73 are certainly key dates for the consolidation and dissemination of the Israeli ideal of masculinity, I argue that we must look a bit earlier to understand the origins of the muscle Jew. We must turn back to the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, a period in which the body politics of modernity were radically transformed in light of the “regenerative” discourses of race science, physical fitness, hygiene, eugenics, colonialism, and militarism. Not only can the birth of the modern Zionist idea be traced to this period, but the rise of pan-nationalism, the heyday of modern imperialism, the birth of the racial state, and the emergence of the eugenicist paradigm can also be found in this period—in short, the seedbed of fascism. It at this time—the European *fin de siècle*—that the modern Jewish male, as Daniel Boyarin rightly indicates, was “invented.” This, I contend, is the birthplace of the muscle Jew.

In his book, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man*, Boyarin provides an incisive and alternative history to the ideal of an aggressive Jewish masculinity. He argues that the rabbinic tradition of the gentle male was undone at the end of the nineteenth century with “the heterosexualization of Jewish culture” and the Zionist response to the pressures of modernity.¹⁶ By drawing on Talmudic sources, he reconfigures modern notions of Jewish masculinity in line with ancient practice. My own work—essentially the flipside to the history he reconstructs—owes a debt of gratitude to his bold and path-breaking book. As we will see, Boyarin and I both pinpoint the origins of the “muscle Jew” in the European *fin de siècle*, the period in which I situate my own cultural study. But instead of tracing back a lost tradition of gentleness, I seek to examine the roots of contemporary aggressiveness. Thus, in order to understand the images of the muscle Jew from 1948 to 1949, and from 1967 to 1973 (not to mention those of present-day Israel), we must turn our attention to the so-called Jewish question in European modernity more than one hundred years ago.

While the issues that my book sets out to address certainly stem from contemporaneous acts of Jewish aggression and violence, my concern is more historical: Where did the tradition of the muscle Jew originate? To what extent was it a specifically masculinist ideal? How, when, and why did it gain explanatory power? What kind of cultural and national discourses did it call upon and ally itself with? To put it bluntly, I want to know how Jews became “muscle Jews.” In much the same way that Adi Nes reveals what is hidden, erased, or forgotten in those iconic images of Israeli soldiers, I, too, want to examine what is hidden, erased, or forgotten in the tradition of muscular Judaism. To do so, we cannot take the Holocaust and the birth of the state of Israel as our historical starting points. Instead, we must look earlier to examine the origins of the Zionist idea and modern Jewish body politics in relationship to other European discourses of regeneration, ones that served dubious and dangerous ends. The muscle Jew emerged out of and in dialogue with these discourses.

THE ORIGINS OF MUSCULAR JUDAISM

In his opening speech at the Second Zionist Congress in Basel on August 28, 1898, Max Nordau invented one of Zionism's most famous, most fraught, and most challenging ideals: the muscle Jew.¹ Although Nordau did not start exploring the political implications of his initial call for a "muscular Judaism" until a couple of years later, he did, in this early speech, clearly allude to the necessity of creating a new type of Jew who is corporeally strong and morally fit as the very presupposition of realizing the national goals of Zionism. After providing an overview of the steadily deteriorating situation of Jews in Russia, Romania, and Galicia—what he terms "the classic countries of Jewish suffering" (SP, II:15)—Nordau turns to France and details how the widespread anti-Semitism that sparked the Dreyfus Affair was also a fatal affront to the Enlightenment ideal of universally recognized human rights. Nordau suggests that the Jews themselves must change their historical situation by both overcoming the apathy of assimilated Jews and thawing the "coldness" of the anti-Semitic "winter landscape" like "a spring sun" (SP, II:23–24). He argues that "Zionism awakens Judaism to new life" and continues: "It achieves this morally [*sittlich*] through the rejuvenation of the ideals of the Volk and corporeally [*körperlich*] through the physical rearing of one's offspring, in order to create a lost muscular Judaism [*Muskel-judenthum*] once again" (SP, II:24).

Nordau's idea of muscular Judaism was not only consistent with the national goals of the Zionist movement as simultaneously the spiritual and the corporeal rebirth of the Jewish people, as articulated by Theodor Herzl² and other earlier proponents of Jewish regeneration, such as Christian Wilhelm Dohm and Moses Hess³; it was also the crystallization of these goals on the individual body of the Jew. National regeneration would come through moral and physical rebirth and, recursively, moral and physical regeneration would be achieved through nationality. Not entirely unlike the "muscular Christianity" movement in Victorian England, which called for a new Christian masculinity rooted in physical strength and moral grounding,⁴ Nordau's idea of "muscular Judaism" can also be understood as a call for corporeal and spiritual regeneration.⁵ Although fundamentally connected to

the Jewish body, “muscular Judaism” was not about weight-training or bodybuilding *per se*; rather it was about the cultivation of certain corporeal and moral ideals such as discipline, agility, and strength, which would help form a regenerated race of healthy, physically fit, nationally minded, and militarily strong Jews.⁶

According to Nordau, the great masses of so-called *Ostjuden* (Eastern Jews), although often considered more “authentically” Jewish than their Western counterparts, must no longer passively accept their fate as impoverished, weak, and powerless ghetto Jews or mere *Luftmenschen*.⁷ Instead, they must rise up and reform their individual bodies in order to reform their people as a whole; the “*Luftvolk*” of the Diaspora must become grounded as a “*Nationalvolk*.” And, at the same time, the assimilated, Western Jews—many of whom, Nordau observes, had long since “fallen away” from Judaism and go to synagogue but once a year (SP, II:25)—must reclaim the richness of their Jewish heritage and resist the rabid anti-Semitism gripping Western Europe.⁸ Nordau sees the urgent modernity of Zionism appealing directly to these Jews:

Let’s go! Pull your courage together [*ermannt euch*]⁹! Do something!
Work for yourself and make a place for your people under the sun!
Don’t rest until you have convinced the indifferent and downright
hostile world that your people have a right to live and enjoy life just
like other peoples.

(SP, II:25)

Despite their significant economic, cultural, linguistic, and, perhaps most noticeably, religious differences, Western and Eastern Jewry were, in Herzl’s famous words, “one people,” and, hence, the work of Zionism was not confined to preexisting national borders.¹⁰ As Nordau had argued in 1897 at the First Zionist Congress and, once again, at the Second Zionist Congress, Jewish suffering—like anti-Semitism—knew no borders. A reunited Jewry of muscle could fight back.

Nordau’s muscular ideal resonated widely because it brought mythic elements of the Jewish tradition to bear upon the turbulent historical reality of *fin de siècle* Europe marked by both a raging political uncertainty and a paradoxical condensation of intellectual currents ranging from decadence to Social Darwinism.¹¹ He called upon both a great Jewish past and a redeemed future, two things that would give the fledgling Zionist movement its present direction and historical rationale: contrary to contemporary anti-Semitic representations of Jews as scrawny, weak, and inferior (something that was also internalized by many Jews through the violent mechanisms of self-hatred¹²), Jews were at one time, Nordau reminded his readership, muscular and heroic, as the mythic story of Bar Kochba attested.¹³ Not fortuitously, “Bar Kochba” and the “Maccabees” also became two of the namesakes

adopted by the newly formed Zionist gymnastic associations. In fact, Nordau would publish the first complete expression of his call for “muscular Judaism” in an article in the second issue of *Die Jüdische Turnzeitung* (*The Jewish Gymnastics Journal*), the central organ of the “Bar Kochba” gymnastics association and a key organ for the dissemination of German Zionism up through the end of World War I.¹⁴ In this seminal article, he described Bar Kochba as “the last world-historical embodiment of a war-hardened, weapon-happy Judaism” as well as “a hero who refused to know defeat” (JTZ, 1900, 2:10).

The muscle Jew, certainly in Nordau’s articulation of the figure, was a resolutely masculine warrior, characterized by the drive for Jews to once again become heroic warriors. It is here that he underscores the masculinity of the battle-ready Jew:

Our new muscle Jews [*Muskeljuden*] have not yet regained the heroism of their forefathers . . . to take part in battles and compete with the trained Hellenic athletes and strong northern barbarians. But morally speaking, we are better off today than yesterday, for the old Jewish circus performers of yore were ashamed of their Judaism and sought, by way of a surgical pinch, to hide the sign of their religious affiliation . . . while today, the members of Bar Kochba proudly and freely proclaim their Jewishness.

(JTZ, 1900, 2:11)

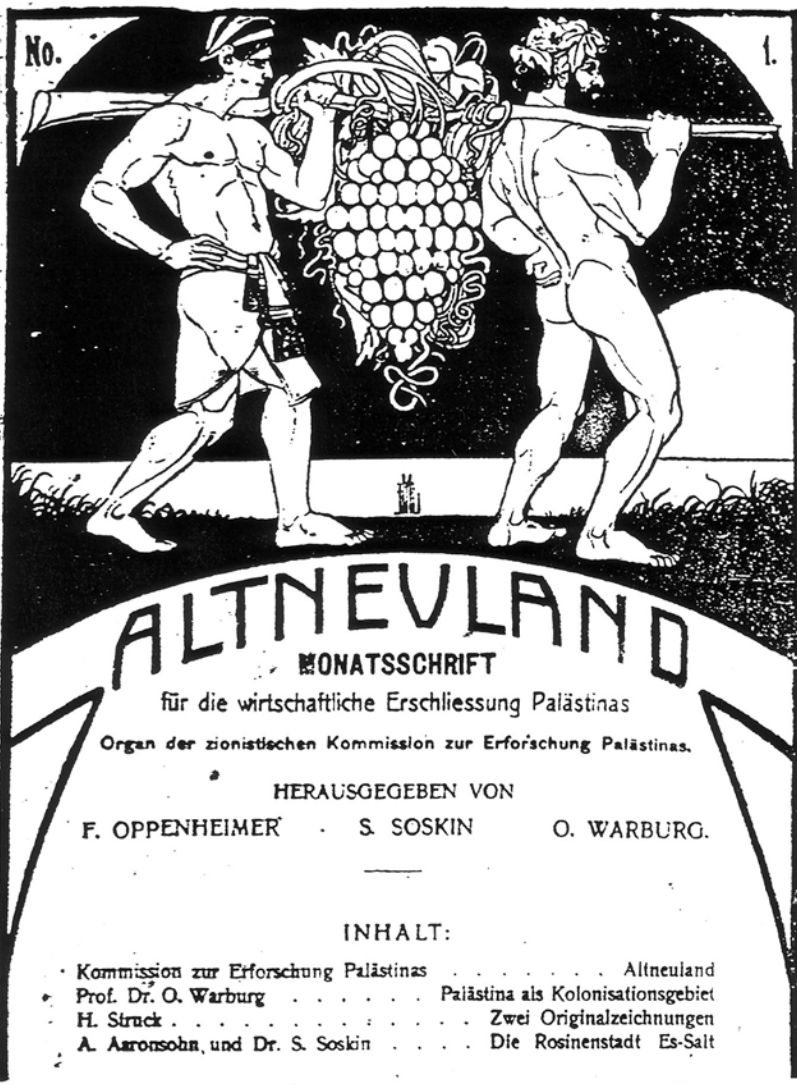
In other words, the male members of the Bar Kochba gymnastics association are no longer ashamed of the sign of their Jewishness, namely their circumcised penis; instead, they show off their “surgical pinch” with pride.¹⁵ The organ of Jewish virility evokes national pride.¹⁶ As we will see, although the phallocentrism of Nordau’s Zionist ideal cannot be overlooked in his characterization of the muscle Jew, a well-developed, semi-balancing discourse surrounding “the need for female gymnastics” and female muscle Jews (JTZ, 1902, 5:76–80) also emerged on the pages of *Die Jüdische Turnzeitung* around the overlapping themes of fertility, family, and sexual reproduction.

Over the formative and tumultuous two decades between 1898 and the end of World War I, Nordau’s re-invented muscle Jew would become arguably the most emblematic figure of Jewish regeneration and Zionism’s “body culture.” Iterations of the muscle Jew would appear in a fascinatingly wide-range of discourses on corporeal regeneration, which simultaneously addressed the reformation of the individual body and the reconstruction of the body politic of the desired nation. Beyond Nordau and the pages of *Die Jüdische Turnzeitung*, these intersecting discourses ranged from the aesthetic and the therapeutic to the eugenic and the colonial. In art, for example, the iconography of E. M. Lilien, the most important and prolific

Zionist artist of the early twentieth century, is inseparable from the “Hellenic” athletes that inspired Nordau’s competitive muscle Jew; in medicine and eugenics, the muscle Jew represents a radically hygienic and racially charged counter-image to any form of Jewish degeneracy; and in Jewish colonial and military discourses, the strength of the muscle Jew is the prerequisite of a successful colonization effort in Palestine. What these seemingly diffuse group of discourses share, I will argue here, is an investment in the modern body politics of regeneration.

Yet it is precisely here, at the confluence of these discourses of regeneration, that things become particularly difficult for writing a cultural history of the muscle Jew: *Die Jüdische Turnzeitung* was part of a broader, modernist obsession with “*Lebensreform*” (life reform), physical fitness, health, and “*Körperkultur*” (body culture), and, therefore, physical rejuvenation cannot in any way be limited to a Zionist project.¹⁷ If anything, the first decades of Zionism bear out an affinity with some of the more unsavory “regenerative” discourses of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, particularly Social Darwinism, eugenics, nationalism, and colonialism, precisely because Zionism—partly as a project of self-legitimacy—was both a Jewish response to and extension of these very same discourses.¹⁸ In this respect, the muscle Jew was a paradoxical figure of regeneration, partaking in and drawing upon a number of seemingly contradictory and decidedly problematic discourses. It epitomized the rebirth of the strong Jew as drawn from Jewish history and mythology; but, at the same time, many of the anti-Semitic stereotypes of Jewish degeneracy were internalized in its conceptualization. Moreover, the muscle Jew was a deeply conflicted ideal: even while it sought to engender a counter-image to the *Ostjude*, Western perceptions of Eastern Jews, including those of Nordau himself, as Steven Aschheim elegantly argued, condemned the regressiveness of the Eastern Jews yet simultaneously glorified their authenticity.¹⁹ And, strangely enough, the greatest visual expressions of the regenerated muscle Jew—namely, those produced by E. M. Lilien—would be created using the visual vocabulary and stylistic signs of decadence.

To briefly illustrate this convergence of discourses, let me draw attention to two overdetermined images produced during the first decade of Zionism. The first image (Fig. 1.1), produced and printed in Berlin in 1904, is an illustration by E. M. Lilien for the first edition of the journal *Altneuland* (Old-new Land). The second, “Auswanderung nach Palästina” (Emigration to Palestine), was published around the same time in the anti-Semitic, satirical journal, *Kikeriki* (Fig. 1.2), based in Vienna.²⁰ Both images, which can be read productively in dialogue with one another, depict Jews migrating to Palestine. In Lilien’s illustration, we see two muscle Jews, rendered as gigantic Hellenic athletes, carrying a bounty of grapes to the Promised Land. The two Jews are walking barefoot across the top of the earth, which is itself shaped by the rounded word “Altneuland” and gently accented by blades of protruding grass. Their muscular figures are silhouetted in front of two spheres



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 Jüdische Kolonien Vermischtes · Marktbericht

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Figure 1.1 E. M. Lilien, frontispiece for the journal *Altneuland* (1904).

Zuswanderung nach Palästina.



Jafete, geh' Du voran, Du hast die großen Stiebel an.

204. Kikeriki. Wien

Figure 1.2 Anonymous caricature in *Kikeriki* (Vienna, c. 1905).

outlining the vault of the heavens. In the caricature from *Kikeriki*, we see a band of seven Jews crammed together front-to-back holding a crudely carved, pointed spear labeled “Zionismus.” The grotesquely distorted Jews have bodies marked by exaggerated “Jewish” features including small statures, large noses, and flat feet.²¹ Their ugly countenances emerge directly from the anti-Semitic imagination: the first and third Jews display profiles of vapid eagerness; the second Jew appears conniving and mischievous; the fourth and fifth appear learned but petty; the sixth looks wide-eyed and greedy; the last bespectacled Jew has a countenance of unspeakable haughtiness. Together, this motley crew wends its way through a dense forest—populated by preying vultures, giant insects, and exotic foliage—on the way to Palestine.

Lilien’s illustration was published at the height of his popularity as the

foremost artist of Zionism, and the drawing shares some stylistic resemblance to other pictures that he created during this period for the Zionist cause.²² Although he had created many prior images of Jews with bulging muscles, this illustration was unique for the way in which he brought the masculinity of Hellenism together with the Zionist colonial project. Except for a wreath of leaves in his hair, the leading, bearded man stands naked, his clenched fists and taut muscles exhibiting a sculpted, perhaps Dionysian, male beauty; the second, wrapped in a partly diaphanous cloth, follows behind him. He is slightly taller, younger, and somewhat more androgynous. The spear that runs diagonally from the shoulder of the one muscle Jew to that of the other not only penetrates the fertility of the lush bunch of grapes but also establishes a trajectory of erotic desire between the two men. Whereas the *Kikeriki* illustration completely de-eroticizes the Jewish body by depicting the Zionist Jews as lowly cowards, Lilien's illustration might be read as the eroticization of desire, both the desire between men for one another and the desire of men for a state.

Within the tradition of Greek pederasty, as Daniel Boyarin and Michel Foucault point out, the beard signifies manhood and generally codes the erotic relationship in a certain direction: the bearded man, a *hoplite* (spear-bearer), is the subject and the young boy is the object of desire and thus penetration.²³ In Lilien's illustration, however, the trajectory of erotic desire is reversed: even though the bearded man leads, the adolescent is essentially the spear-bearer and the bearded man, with his exposed posterior, seems to be awaiting penetration. Interestingly, a similar precedent for such a reversal within the Jewish tradition can also be found in the story of Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish in the Talmud, a story Boyarin discusses in *Carnal Israel*. But rather than culminating in the virility of the muscle Jew, Boyarin sees the story as depicting an "effeminate" ideal for Jewish masculinity. Rabbi Yohanan is "beautiful, nearly androgynous, beardless and so sexually attractive to the masculine Resh Lakish that the latter is willing to perform prodigious athletic feats to get to him."²⁴ However, once the adolescent learns Torah from Rabbi Yohanan, he, too, assumes a "feminizing" ideal of masculinity. Boyarin interprets the story "as an almost exact reversal of the pattern of Greek pederasty": "It is the beardless, androgynous one who takes the virile *hoplite* under *his* wing, educates him and makes him a 'great man,' sapping, however, his physical prowess and disempowering his 'spear' in the process."²⁵ Although reversing this trajectory of Greek pederasty, Lilien's illustration does not yield a sapped, disempowered manhood; instead, masculine prowess seems to be doubly fortified by the homoerotic, masculinist bond. But, just as in the Talmudic story, the homoerotic implications are also duly displaced: in the story, they are displaced onto Rabbi Yohanan's sister, while in Lilien's illustration they are displaced by the feminine fertility of the grapes.

In terms of its specific iconography, Lilien's illustration is a reworking of the biblical story of the return of the spies from the land of Canaan, a story that had been famously depicted by many artists before him, including Nicolas

Poussin and Gustav Doré. In Poussin's "Autumn, The Grapes from the Promised Land" (1660–64) as well as Doré's "Return of the Spies from the Promised Land," two men are shown carrying a giant cluster of harvested grapes from the Promised Land, proving that it is, in fact, the "land of milk and honey."²⁶ In Lilien's rendition, the men carry the grapes back to Palestine, something that not only signifies the futurity of the land's cultivation but also repeats—with a difference—its initial reconnaissance by the spies sent by Moses. Significantly, the spies were sent to the Land of Canaan to find out about the land and its inhabitants:

"Are the people who dwell in it strong or weak, few or many? Is the country in which they dwell good or bad? Are the towns they live in open or fortified? Is the soil rich or poor? Is it wooded or not? And take pains to bring back some of the fruit of the land."—Now it happened to be the season of the first ripe grapes.²⁷

When the men return after 40 days to the wandering Israelite community, they report that the "people who inhabit the country are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large" (Numbers 13:28). Forgoing their faith in God, ten of the spies exclaim that "we cannot attack that people, for it is stronger than we," that in comparison to the inhabitants, the Israelites look like mere "grasshoppers" (Numbers 13:33).

It is precisely this story that Lilien is updating and reconfiguring in his "Altneuland" illustration. Far from depicting the Zionists as mere grasshoppers, Lilien has turned the settlers into powerful and brave muscle Jews who will bring fructification back to the "old-new land." Unlike Poussin and Doré who depicted the spies returning to the desert with the grapes of the Promised Land (the spies are shown moving from right to left, or from east to west), Lilien renders the Zionists as *already* bearing the fruits of regeneration and, therefore, reverses their trajectory from left to right, or from west to east. Not only are the Zionist settlers already physically regenerated, they are also already in possession of the territorial fruits of the land. As we will see, it is no coincidence that Lilien's illustration was featured on the cover of a journal dedicated to "the economic tapping of Palestine," for these "muscle spies" were preparing to undertake its second reconnaissance mission, as it were, and assure the conquest of the land.

By stark contrast, the Jews in the *Kikeriki* caricature are coded as lowly cowards, as the inscription at the bottom makes clear: "Jakele, geh du voran / Du hast die grössten Stiefel an" (Jakele, go forward / You have the biggest boots on). Since the beginning of the sixteenth century, the story of a certain soldier named "Hannemann," the dastardly leader of a band of "stick soldiers," became famous through the bungling legend of the "sieben Schwaben" (seven Schwabians): seven soldiers—fitted with big boots and a single spear—embarked on ill-fated adventures, which eventually cost them their lives

because of their inherent cowardice. Their slogan went like this: “Hannemann, geh du voran! / Du hast die grössten Stiefel an, / Dass dich das Tier nicht beissen kann” (Hanneman, go forward! / You have the biggest boots on / So the animal won’t bite you).²⁸ In a seventeenth-century illustration of their grand adventures, the “sieben Schwaben” hunt down a rabbit hiding in some bushes. And later, at the end of the Brothers Grimm tale of the same name, the seven soldiers all drown in a muddy part of the Mosel river because they don’t have boats to cross.²⁹ In the “Jewified” version of this story, the Zionist Jews are led by “Jakele” on an adventure, one which is doomed to end in failure and death for the whole group.

Lilien’s illustration, then, not only depicts the desire between men for a state but also links the regeneration of the individual body of the Jew to the larger and longstanding project of state formation. After all, these Hellenic muscle Jews are in the process of relocating both their desire and their reproductive fertility (“the grapes”) to the “old-new land” of Palestine, while the Jews of the *Kikeriki* caricature are viciously mocked as silly degenerates for their whimsical attempt to found a state. If the latter even survive the hostile terrain populated by wild mushrooms, flocking vultures, and insects as big as their noses, surely, we are made to believe, they could never establish a state like the great European countries.

In giving a visual representation to Houston Stewart Chamberlain’s race-based, anti-Semitic argument in his magnum opus, *Foundations of the Nineteenth Century*, the *Kikeriki* caricature shows Jews as anything but “world-historical” people. Not only are present-day Jews unfit for nation building, but Jews have, according to Chamberlain’s version of history, always been so. In this respect, after describing the physical, religious, and cultural deficiencies of the Jews in his chapter “On the Entrance of the Jews into Western History,” Chamberlain turns back to the history of the Judeans to show how Jews, unlike Germans, have never been able to found a great nation:

They were so unwarlike, such unreliable soldiers that their king had to trust his protection and the protection of their land to foreign troops; that they were so unwilling to undertake any endeavors that just looking at the ocean . . . horrified them; that they were so slothful that for every task at hand one had to hire designers, production managers, and even handworkers for all the delicate work from neighboring countries; that they were so unfit for agriculture that (as it says in many places in the Bible and the Talmud) the Canaanites were not just their teachers but were the only ones up until the end who worked the land; yes, even in a purely political respect, they were such opponents of all stable, well-ordered conditions that no rational form of government could come about by them and they felt best from early on under the pressure of foreign rule, something that did not prevent them, however, from burrowing underneath of it.³⁰

Through their scheming, their “materialistic worldview,” and their “demonic genius” (1:455), the Jews have, despite (or perhaps because of) their laziness and other deficiencies, nevertheless managed to survive as a race under the rule of other nations; however, they remain nothing more than “a foreign element,” as he quotes Herder with approbation (1:463). Because of these trans-historical racial qualities, Jews can never know the greatness of their own nation. Even Zionism, because it is always already too “Jewish,” as Otto Weininger argues, would be condemned to fail.³¹ By contrast, the Germans, Chamberlain maintains as he builds on Hegel’s quadripartite structuring of history, represented the pinnacle of “world history” because their cultural and national strength was the outgrowth of that of the great colonial empires of Greece and Rome. That the little Jews are depicted sauntering along on foot—rather than traveling by ship—is not insignificant: after all, as we will see in Chapter 5, reckoning with the ocean, traveling by ship, and cultivating the new land were world-historical achievements that, according to both Chamberlain and Hegel, assured a colonial claim to national greatness, something that Jews fundamentally lacked.³²

Lilien’s Hellenic depiction of two muscle Jews walking on top of the earth with the bounty of fertility thus represents a very different history of Judaism. The Jews are great, as indicated by their sheer scale, and quite capable of domesticating nature and cultivating the land. But even more striking are the colonial tasks that the journal, with Lilien’s frontispiece, envisioned for itself: After all, the name “Altneuland” was a direct reference to Herzl’s utopian travel novel of 1902, in which Jews settled Palestine and transformed it from a “desert wasteland” into a vibrant, technologically modern nation-state.³³ Not only did Jews cultivate the soil, they arrived by ship—just as Herzl did in 1898 for his famous visit to Palestine with the German Kaiser—to civilize this supposedly backward land. “Jewish settlers who streamed into this country brought with them the experiences of the whole cultured world [i.e., Europe],”³⁴ Herzl writes in his novel. In other words, as we will see in more detail later, the European idea of civilization, somehow able to be differentiated and divorced from anti-Semitism, was still worthy of emulation when it was imported into the service of corporeal and national regeneration.³⁵

While Herzl imagined his novel to take place in 1923, some two decades after it was written, the journal *Altneuland* was founded in 1904 (the year of Herzl’s death) with the expressed purpose of scientifically and economically investigating the conditions for the Jewish colonization of Palestine. As the frontispiece indicates, the journal was to serve “the economic tapping of Palestine.” The first edition laid out the tasks as follows:

The dream of millions floated and floats above the land through which the Jordan flows, of millions who have been and still are denied their

home because of ancient hatred and callousness. To live a full life, to establish roots in one's own ground—this is the goal of every human being. How can the poorest not dream of a fatherland when they only know a step-motherland?? The dream turned into longing and the longing into will: That is the Zionist movement. So that this will become a salvational, redeeming deed, it must, above all else, serve what represents the strongest power of our time: Science. We have to know the land precisely on which the house of Ahasver will stand . . . The journal shall collect and examine what those who know the land best know about its climate, its soil, its fruits and products, its laws and their operation, the customs of its inhabitants, its health conditions . . . it will collect reports about agriculture, business, and trade with all neighboring areas and countries with similar natural resources and composition . . . It shall collect and examine what is well-known by all colonial enterprises [*kolonisatorische Unternehmungen*] across the world . . . Like a focal point, the journal will bring together all of the thousands of scattered rays into a single bundle of light in order to enlighten the half-darkened land of two thousand years of desire, which is today only illuminated by shadows.³⁶

As the mission statement of the journal makes clear, one of the critical prerequisites of the successful colonization of Palestine was extensive scientific knowledge about the land, its inhabitants, and their customs. Moreover, utilizing the rhetoric and metaphors of the enlightenment, the Jewish colonial effort would be consistent with the European philosophy of colonization as the spread of “civilization,” the domestication of nature, and the dispensing of knowledge to the shadowy darkness of the land. At the same time, as Lilien's frontispiece shows, Palestine was not just to be scientifically studied and objectively analyzed but also actively populated and civilized by muscle Jews who were arriving from Europe—by foot, by train, and by ship—in the “old-new land.”

Lilien's illustration thus condenses a number of intersecting discourses around the iconography of the muscle Jew: first of all, he takes the muscular Hellenism of the European tradition of empire building and turns it into a Jewish colonial destiny, thereby extending the racially charged history of *Bildung*, Enlightenment, and civilization. At the same time, he attempts to combat the racial anti-Semitism prevalent in *fin de siècle* Europe by depicting the Jew's strong and healthy body as the antithesis of degeneracy. He offers a Zionist vision of redemption in which Jewish destiny is already fulfilled as the muscle Jews enter the Promised Land in possession of its fruit. Moreover, he creates a particular aesthetic form that is fully and confidently part of the secessionist new wave: through his strongly Hellenizing, sharply simplifying, decorative pictorial style, Lilien renders the visual vocabulary of decadence compatible with the Zionist idea. Finally, his illustration helps us identify the

particular modernism and the particular masculinity of the muscle Jew: as the emblem of discipline and social progress, the muscle Jew is the embodiment of Nordau's "true modern" who rises to defend society from the woes of degeneracy. Lilien, like Nordau, created a specifically masculinist ideal for the "true modern," and, therefore, it must be interrogated as such.

This begs one of the central questions under investigation in this book: Is the muscle Jew a masculinist ideal? The short—but incomplete—answer is yes. But as we will see, this does not mean that women foreswore or did not participate in "muscular Judaism." There were female gymnastics associations, fencing teams, sports clubs, and farming collectives, all of which were established, more or less, side-by-side with their male counterparts.³⁷ Indeed, we absolutely must not assume that men are the only muscle Jews.³⁸ At the same time, we must ask why women are conspicuously absent in the vast majority of discursive practices and representations of the muscle Jew. It is not simply that the vast majority of the literature was written by men. It is the fact that the theoretical models, cultural ideals, and practices of social transformation betray a problem fundamentally rooted in and originating from modern Jewish masculinity. Simply put, it was Jewish men who were supposedly not strong enough, healthy enough, and fit enough—as measured by the European benchmark—to build a modern nation.

As the comparison with the *Kikeriki* caricature indicated, the Zionist imagination emerged as a purposeful political response to a virulent European anti-Semitism that embraced ever-newer forms of disenfranchisement, hatred, and expulsion. But the discourses supporting the deployment of the muscle Jew cannot be adequately elucidated by explaining the phenomenon as simply a responsive antidote to anti-Semitism (although it certainly was that). Muscular Judaism also claimed and extended some of the more dubious components of the European idea of regenerative nationality through a dangerous investment in the ideals of military masculinity. As we will see in more detail, this played out not only in the struggle against anti-Semitism but also in the fight against degeneracy, the imagination of a Zionist form of artistic representation, the reformation of the Jewish body and body politic, the historical eugenics of Jewish hygiene and race-science, and, finally, the articulation and justification of Jewish colonialism and militarism. All of these intersecting discourses, I will argue here, bear witness to a variation on a common figure, namely the muscle Jew.

I would now like to indicate the parameters and aims of this study. *Muscular Judaism: The Jewish Body and the Politics of Regeneration* is a discursive cultural history of the regenerated Jewish body: that is to say, it is an analysis of how the muscle Jew—as both an imaginary construct and a historically grounded ideal—emerged from, participated in, extended, and justified a range of discourses concerned with the politics of regeneration. I should say unequivocally that I am not attempting to write an overarching history of the Jewish body; instead, I am attempting to articulate a specific

problem—namely, the modern origins and invention of the muscle Jew—through a synchronic cultural critique. To do so, I draw on many histories of Zionism and hope that this project of cultural criticism will both resonate with and complement these studies by illuminating the connections between the Zionist politics of regeneration and the emergence of the muscle Jew discourse.³⁹ Until recently, however, the connection between Zionism and body politics has not been seriously explored and goes by almost completely unrecognized in the classic histories of Zionism, such as those by Nahum Sokolow, Adolf Böhm, and Walter Laqueur.⁴⁰

While my book is much more than an iconographic study of representations of the muscle Jew, I argue throughout the book that “regeneration” was an eminently political and aesthetic project, effected through a wide variety of visual representations and disseminated in both scientific and non-scientific arenas, in both high and popular culture. As Michael Berkowitz rightly argues, this is because Zionism not only emerged in a highly visual era—in the European *fin de siècle*—but also because it conceived of the complexity and efficacy of the visual to articulate the ideals of the muscle Jew and the concomitant concept of regeneration. For my purposes here, I am especially interested in the multiple, paradoxical, and sometimes fragmentary ways that Zionism emerged as a politic obsessed with imagining—particularly through visual means—the regeneration of both the Jewish body and the Jewish people. I argue that the regeneration of the Jewish body was an aesthetic project of modernism, and I situate the origins of the muscle Jew and the Zionist imaginary within the complex visual culture and political discourses of the *fin de siècle* up through World War I.

Historically speaking, my book is limited to about 30 years beginning with the European *fin de siècle* and ending with the aftermath of the Great War. After starting with an analysis of the contradictory aesthetic discourses of regeneration in the *fin de siècle* using the work of Julius Langbehn and Max Nordau, I examine the cultural origins and political deployment of the muscle Jew within artistic, national, medical, colonial, and military discourses from the First Zionist Congress in 1897 through the end of World War I and into the Weimar Republic. My study ends with a focused examination of Jewish eugenics, population politics, colonial fantasies, and militarism in order to articulate the complex political and cultural origins of the regenerated Jewish body. Nordau’s cultural criticism represents an exemplary starting point for understanding the relationship between regeneration and degeneration or cultural production and societal “sickness,” something that will also be important—although articulated quite differently—to cultural Zionists, such as Martin Buber and E. M. Lilien, interested in the renewal of Jewish national art and the mythology of the muscle Jew. From there, my analysis turns to what I term, following Michel Foucault, the logic of “bio-power” that informs how sexuality was deployed for both reforming the individual body and securing the legitimacy of the greater body politic. Here, I analyze a number

of intersections between representations of the new Jewish body (particularly in *Die Jüdische Turnzeitung*) and the idea of the Zionist state in discourses concerned with regulating fertility, studying demography, applying racial science, and managing populations. I conclude by examining the militaristic “steeling” of the Jewish body and demonstrating how the Great War was the first real proving ground for the new muscle Jew.

Over the past couple of decades, a highly ramified and interdisciplinary literature on the cultural and social history of the body has been produced, building on the conceptual, methodological, and historical insights of feminist studies, gay and lesbian studies, ethnic studies, and, most recently, disability studies.⁴¹ Rather than simply considering the body as an additional lens through which to understand historical phenomena, these studies demonstrate that social, political, and cultural reality cannot be understood apart from the history of the body and the various technologies of regulating and policing sex, gender, race, and ability. Within German historiography, a number of important works have argued for the importance of studying the gendered and racialized body in order to illuminate the multiple paths and variegated landscape of German modernity.⁴² Although Nordau’s invention of the muscle Jew is fairly well-known and often mentioned in passing in German and German-Jewish social histories of the body,⁴³ it is strange that no book-length study has ever been written on the figure of the muscle Jew and its constitutive relationship to other regenerative discourses—such as eugenics, population politics, colonization, and nationalism—that also served and were part of the Zionist idea. In fact, when the muscle Jew is discussed, the concept is either largely confined to Nordau’s idiosyncratic intellectual biography (such as in the work of Michael Stanislawski) or cited as a suggestive but highly localized phenomenon within Zionism or Jewish body culture. For this reason, while the concept of the muscle Jew has received a kind of iconic status within cultural studies of the Jewish body, the muscle Jew—as both a specific figure and a complex discourse—has, amazingly, not been seriously studied. This book seeks to redress this conspicuous lacuna. To do so, I argue that the “muscle Jew” cannot be adequately understood apart from the paradoxical condensation of multiple discourses concerning the corporeal politics of regeneration such as sexual reform, physical fitness, health, hygiene, and eugenics as well as the particularities of European (specifically, German, British, and French) nationalism, colonialism, and militarism. I consider the muscle Jew as a discursive formation, one that initially emerged from Nordau’s aesthetic reflections on regeneration, but that lived on in a wide range of cultural discourses that extended and justified the corporeal politics of early Zionism from the *fin de siècle* up through the Weimar period.

Methodologically, my study is a discursive cultural history: I bring together the widest possible range of cultural material—from journals, demographic reports, and scientific studies to literature, philosophy, and visual culture—to illustrate the imaginative investment and explanatory power of the muscle

Jew. In this regard, my book owes a debt of gratitude to the work of Sander Gilman, George Mosse, Steve Aschheim, and John Efron. Mosse certainly produced a substantial corpus of work dedicated to exploring the cultural-political intersections between the body and ideology, particularly the relationship between masculinity and the modern conception of the nation-state and nationalism.⁴⁴ In a seminal article on the hundredth anniversary of the publication of Nordau's *Degeneration*, Mosse points to the connection between Nordau's relentless criticism of "degenerate art" and his Zionist project of cultivating "respectability" and "middle-class standards of masculinity" for Judaism.⁴⁵ But what Mosse does not do—and this applies to all the studies that I have encountered in which the muscle Jew is discussed—is examine the phenomenon of muscular Judaism as a complex of discourses that were simultaneously embedded in, supporting, and justifying the politics of regeneration as well as the diversity of the Zionist investment in these modern body politics.⁴⁶ This book attempts to do just that.

By reinscribing the muscle Jew into the general cultural history of this period, I consider Zionism to be an important (but not unique) expression of the dialectic of modernity. Modernity, as I have argued elsewhere, must be considered a dialectical concept⁴⁷: on the one hand, it built upon and disseminated certain universalist values stemming from the Enlightenment⁴⁸; it facilitated the attendant ideals of progress through modernization and the production of a strong, autonomous, rational subject; and it engendered new possibilities of emancipation and freedom, which had a decisively positive effect on the course of Jewish assimilation in Europe. On the other hand, modernity fostered the growth of disciplinary power and surveillance, the fragmentation of the subject, the capacity for destruction and mass death on a scale never before possible, and the creation of ever newer ways of constricting freedom and administering social control.⁴⁹ The latter critique owes much to the work of Michel Foucault, and, as Geoff Eley has pointed out, the relatively recent reception of the work of Foucault by historians has "helped change and unsettle the ways we have come to think about politics, power, knowledge, and their relationship to the ordering of the social world."⁵⁰

Over the past decade, a number of new cultural and social histories, many of which are informed by an explicit or implicit Foucauldian methodology, have emerged that examine the complex, discursive conditions of possibility for the modernity of Imperial Germany and the Nazi State (as opposed to its backwardness or irrationality) with a specific interest in articulating the dialectic of modernity or "modernity's dark side."⁵¹ Some of the key works to initiate this paradigm shift include: Kevin Repp's *Reformers, Critics, and the Paths of German Modernity: Anti-Politics and the Search for Alternatives, 1890–1914*; Paul Lerner's *Hysterical Men: War, Psychiatry, and the Politics of Trauma in Germany, 1890–1930*; Richard F. Wetzell's *Inventing the Criminal: A History of German Criminology, 1880–1945*; Thomas Rohkrämer's *Eine andere Moderne? Zivilisationskritik, Natur und Technik in Deutschland, 1880–1933*;

and Michael HAU's *The Cult of Health and Beauty in Germany: A Social History, 1890–1930*.⁵² These new historiographies “stress the coherence of the years between the 1890s and the 1930s,” to use Eley’s words, “as a unitary context in which definite themes of national efficiency, social hygiene, and racialized nationalism coalesced.”⁵³ Moreover, they not only call forth a new periodization of German history, but also demand an investigation of the specific modernity of Imperial Germany and the Nazi state, thereby further undermining the explanatory power of the so-called *Sonderweg* theory. As Repp and Wetzell point out, the *Sonderweg* theory, which maintained that the Nazi regime was the result of Germany’s incomplete modernization process and failure to undergo a proper bourgeois revolution, has lost almost all of its cogency in light of recent German historiography.⁵⁴ Historians such as Geoff Eley, David Blackbourn, Detlev Peukert, and Kevin Repp have argued instead for the decidedly modern features of Imperial Germany and the Nazi state, rather than explaining Nazism as the product of a “pre-modern” irrationality or “anti-modern” relapse, which, in turn, sought to explain the failures of a normative historical-developmental process.⁵⁵

In the newer historiography, the contradictions and visions of German modernity are articulated by examining the cultural and social projects of reform, policing, and regulation, projects that are repeatedly and significantly realized on the racialized body. My book, *Muscular Judaism: The Jewish Body and the Politics of Regeneration*, fits within this critical trend. I consider the period from the *fin de siècle* through the beginnings of the Weimar Republic as a “discursive regime” in which modernity’s dialectical underbelly becomes inscribed on and indissociable from the racialized body. But rather than show how the strategies of social policing and regulation (eugenics, hygiene), bio-politics (sexual science, race science), and corporeal reform (sport, “body culture” movements, militarism) laid the discursive ground for Nazi policy,⁵⁶ I am interested in demonstrating how Jews participated in, extended, and variously adopted these strategies of “bio-power” for reforming the Jewish body and conceiving of the regeneration of the Jewish state. This is what distinguishes my work from other cultural and social histories of this period: I show how Jews—especially, but not exclusively, Zionist Jews—participated in the discourses of bio-power and actively formulated policies, programs, and strategies for creating a new, racially strong, physically fit, muscle Jew. They often invoked, cited, and extended the very discursive strategies and intellectual strains that would later be used by the Nazi state to exclude and annihilate them. Of course, this does not alter the fact that Nazi eliminatory anti-Semitism radicalized the well-established eugenicist paradigm; however, it does add an important layer of complexity to our understanding of the history of the bio-politics of modernity in Germany. Very much in line with Repp’s discussion of “alternative modernities,” I consider the muscle Jew discourse as part of an open field of visions and possibilities that emerged in the richly complex

and shifting landscapes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Repp writes: “Without losing sight of the ‘ideology of radical nationalism’ that ultimately won out in 1933, historians need also to chart the other competing visions . . . that pushed in many directions at once, as indeed did Wilhelmine modernity.”⁵⁷ Muscular Judaism is one such “alternative modernity” that pushed in a direction that did not lead to the purifying ideology of the Nazi state, even while some of its intellectual, cultural, and social strains in the field of bio-politics emerged from the very same seedbed that gave rise to fascism.

For this reason, it is no longer sufficient to see the Jewish body as simply “degenerate,” weak, and effeminate and the fascist body as “regenerate,” strong, and masculine⁵⁸; instead, as I argue in this book, the “muscle Jew” is the prototype of the hardened, strong, hygienic, and resolutely masculine warrior. Indeed, most of the major studies of “degeneration”—particularly newer cultural and social histories such as those by Daniel Pick, Paul Weindling, and Kevin Repp—are quite sensitive about the risks of collapsing history into a reductive and inevitable procession toward the Final Solution. Nevertheless, there are still many cultural studies of degeneracy, which maintain an implicit teleology stretching from nineteenth-century conceptions of race and degeneracy to the Final Solution.⁵⁹ While Pick speculates that it may be “impossible . . . to avoid teleology altogether in the reading of nineteenth-century degenerationism,”⁶⁰ the more problematic issue is the fact that Jews are given little agency in these histories of modernity. Instead, the rise of the purity and strength of the fascist male body is posited as the end-point of the dialectic of degeneration/regeneration, while the Jewish body is condemned to its perennial formlessness and passivity.

My book problematizes this antithesis by showing that the birth of the muscular, healthy, and masculine Jewish body had some of the same cultural, social, and intellectual origins as the fascist body. We must ask ourselves: What does it mean that Jewish militarism and its body ideals (aggressive, steeled, warrior-like) overlapped with other, more dangerous regenerative movements that also posited the birth of a “new man,” including fascism? What does it mean—especially from our twenty-first-century vantage point—that the “muscle Jew” and the “fascist body” draw, at least in part, from the same discursive well?⁶¹ Let me be unequivocally clear: this does *not* mean that Zionism and fascism are in any way equivalent, as there was no external enemy that Zionism sought to annihilate. The purpose of this book, then, is to probe the discursive well of muscular Judaism, namely the intellectual, cultural, and social currents that gave rise to modern Jewish body politics between the years of 1890 and 1930, years that also gave rise to the logic of fascism and the armored fascist body. In this respect, one of my implicit goals is to examine the origins of the popular—and decidedly problematic—ideal of muscularity and militancy that has come to define contemporary Jewish (especially, Israeli) identity. Zionism, I argue, must be seen as a manifestation

of the dialectic of modernity, both its progressive ideals and its dark sides. It is my hope that we might gain a more balanced historical consciousness, which might enable us to better assess and understand how we got to where we are today.

In line with the new social and cultural histories of German modernity, Foucault's work on bio-power provides an important conceptual framework that I will apply (with some amendments) to my analysis of the modernity of Zionism's bio-politics. In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues that sexuality began to be deployed in the Classical era (the beginning of the seventeenth century) around two poles: the first centered on the disciplining of the individual body, what he calls "an anatomo-politics of the human body." The second, growing out of it in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, focused on "the species body" and was concerned with knowing, monitoring, controlling, and regulating the health of the body politic or the greater population.⁶² Foucault writes: "Through the themes of health, progeny, race, the future of the species, the vitality of the social body, power spoke of sexuality and to sexuality."⁶³ He uses the term "bio-power" to describe how these two poles—the disciplining of the individual body and the regulation of the population—came together through the deployment of sexuality as a form of state power. For my study, Foucault's concept of bio-power will help us connect together the various imaginary constructs and discourses of muscular Judaism by focusing on the ways in which the muscle Jew was deployed by the Zionists in the service of securing the legitimacy of the Jewish state.

In applying his conceptual structure to my work here, I am not interested in trying to confirm or reinforce the historical stages that Foucault claims to track genealogically. In fact, to accept them out of hand would undermine the very specificity and uniqueness of Zionism's deployment of sexuality since, in my application of his term, the logic of bio-power served to found a state rather than maintain, extend, or police a pre-given state's population. At the same time, Foucault's claim about what is new with regard to sexuality in the nineteenth century—namely, its modes of deployment and strategic alliances that cast the political in terms of spheres of bio-power—does confirm the Zionist belief that the problem of Jewish degeneracy could only be resolved via state formation. For the case of Zionism, I argue, the intersecting discourses of the muscle Jew—the aesthetic, the therapeutic, the hygienic, the colonial, and the militaristic—gave form to a state through the logic of bio-power. This logic motivates Max Nordau's cultural critique of degeneracy as well as his steadfast investment in the politics of regeneration as the prerequisite of achieving a healthy body politic. It can be found in the strategy of reclaiming the visual arts and a Jewish art historical tradition for the purposes of regenerating the Jewish people. And, most pointedly, the logic of bio-power informs the deployment of sexuality in the service of regenerating the individual body of the Jew and, thereby, the population as a

whole in gymnastic associations, colonial politics, and military organizations. This played out most impressively in the discourses dedicated to studying the demography of Palestine and generating extensive statistics for documenting, understanding, and improving every aspect of Jewish life, ranging from fertility, birth rates, and life expectancies to racial characteristics, muscle composition, hygiene practices, and military fitness.

In his study of two late nineteenth-century paradigms for scientifically investigating human development, sexology and psychoanalysis, Sander Gilman makes the important point that “no realm of human experience is as closely tied to the concept of degeneracy as that of sexuality.”⁶⁴ Not only are degeneracy and sexuality “inseparable within nineteenth century thought” (72), but I hasten to add that the counter-concept of regeneration is inseparable from the regulative economies for policing sexuality that emerged in the same period. To the same extent that degeneration was a labile term for designating the pathology of the other through “sexual opprobrium” (89), regeneration was a similarly elastic term for consolidating and extending the power of the “normal” by way of sexual fitness and vitality. Both concepts are important to my analysis insofar as they were simultaneously employed to designate and manage the pathology or health of both individual bodies and that of the greater body politic, species, or population. Indeed, as I have already indicated, the dialectic of degeneration and regeneration cannot in any way be limited to the Zionist imaginary, an argument which speaks, I think, to the necessity of integrating the muscle Jew discourse into general cultural histories of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European modernity.

Through the writing of this discursive cultural history of the muscle Jew, I have developed four methodological theses, which I will briefly explicate. The first thesis is the intersectionality of discursive formations, the fact that multiple discourses—racial, national, colonial, eugenic, and aesthetic—related to and build off one another. These discourses of regeneration were not exclusively “Jewish” but were internalized and variously redeployed, often for the sake of gaining greater legitimacy, within the context of European body culture. The second thesis is the embrace of paradox and contradiction in writing cultural history. Muscular Judaism cannot be reduced to a singular, developmental narrative; instead, the discourse of regeneration and the history of the muscle Jew are fraught with contradiction and complexity, perhaps the most glaring being the extension of certain European structures of hegemony (the nation-state, the concept of civilization, racial and colonial models) even while these very structures were often responsible for the anti-Semitism that gave rise to Zionism in the first place. This is, in part, because the Zionists internalized the anti-Semitic stereotypes of degeneracy and abnormality and, then, created a program of regeneration for establishing Jewish normalcy and national legitimacy.

The third thesis is the use of conceptual history to avoid the danger, as much as possible, of mixing cultural history with contemporary ideology:

“Begriffsgeschichte” (conceptual history) has a long and venerable tradition in Germany, particularly by its practitioners such as Reinhart Koselleck in Germany and in a related, tropological tradition, Hayden White in the United States.⁶⁵ The idea is to trace the history of concepts or governing tropes in cultural discourses: When did certain concepts enter into language? How were they deployed and with what sorts of explanatory power? For my purposes, when I make use of loaded concepts such as “race,” “colonization,” or “degeneration/regeneration,” I am interested in how these concepts or tropes were deployed by particular people, in particular places, at particular times, for particular ends, not how they are used today to justify (often problematically) certain ideological stances, as in the facile equation of Zionism with colonialism or fascism.

The fourth and final methodological thesis is to conceive of Zionism as an expression of the German/Jewish dialectic of modernity. Although the origins of muscular Judaism cannot be limited strictly to Germany or to German language sources, it is striking that the German sources are arguably the richest and most telling.⁶⁶ Rather than providing a distorted picture of the muscle Jew discourse, I think that this fact necessitates reflection on its own terms: might it be that the “body culture” of German modernity uniquely supported the invention and spread of muscular Judaism? If this is the case (and I think it is), then there is no such thing as “German” or “Jewish” modernity pure and simple; instead, “German” is always mixed together, for better and for worse, in splendor and in horror, with “Jewish.” For this reason, we have to move beyond historiographic models that presuppose a structure of traumatic loss, failed dialogue, questionable symbiosis, or retrospective commemoration and consider the constitutive ways in which Jewish cultural history is entangled with German cultural history. We must make sense of the slippages, tensions, encounters, relationships, and movements of the German/Jewish dialectic of modernity, its hopes and its catastrophes, both of which are embodied by Zionism.⁶⁷ As a discursive cultural history of the origins of the muscle Jew, this book illustrates the deeply ambivalent and complicated entanglement between muscular Judaism and German intellectual history and culture.

Let me now introduce briefly the chapters that follow. Each chapter is structured around a different axis of Jewish regeneration: the rhetoric of regeneration in the *fin de siècle*, the aesthetics of regeneration in discourses around art and culture, the gymnastics of regeneration in body reform movements, the land of regeneration in Zionist colonial discourses, and soldiers of regeneration in military discourses. The second chapter, “The Rhetoric of Regeneration,” begins by providing an intellectual and cultural context for both Nordau’s *Degeneration* (1892) and his turn to Zionism (after 1895) within the critical diagnoses of “degeneracy” and anxious calls for “regeneration” of the late nineteenth century. By placing Nordau’s *Degeneration* in dialogue with Julius Langbehn’s *Rembrandt als Erzieher* (Rembrandt as Educator, 1890), I argue that Nordau’s conceptualization of

the muscle Jew is informed by the same aesthetic logic of “education,” “discipline,” and “regeneration” found not only in the project of *Degeneration* but also Langbehn’s decidedly more “*völkisch*” cultural criticism and his rhetoric of regeneration. I show how all the traits that Nordau attributed to the “true modern” in 1892—the health and originality of race, clarity of vision and purpose, strength of body, depth of discipline, and ability to adapt—were transposed to the muscle Jew and adopted as part of the intersecting Zionist discourses that emerged in the following decade.

The third chapter, “The Aesthetics of Regeneration,” examines the role of Jewish artistic production in the creation of the idea of nationality. I begin with an analysis of the first Zionist art exhibit of 1901 and show how Buber and Lilien, the chief curators and exponents of the exhibition, reconceived of the very idea of Jewish art vis-à-vis the longstanding tradition of Jewish aniconism and cultural degeneracy. Here, I examine how Buber, reformulating the hegemonic modernist tradition that maintained that Jews were “artless,” considered art to be a critical kind of “*aesthetische Erziehung*” (aesthetic education) that undergirded the vitality and productivity of the nation. It is this pedagogical function of art that the nineteenth-century anti-Semitic imagination, exemplified best by Richard Wagner, used to doubly exclude Jews: simply put, because Jews do not have a nation, they do not have an artistic tradition; and, recursively, because Jews do not have an artistic tradition, they do not have a nation. Rather than extending this tradition, Buber, I argue, turned back to Friedrich Schiller’s concept of “aesthetic education” and re-imagined Jewish art in the service of state formation. In the second part of the chapter, I look at how this functioned in practice. Here, I focus on the early work of the best-known Zionist artist, Lilien, and discuss how his challenging work made use, seemingly paradoxically, of the techniques and visual styles of “decadence” to regenerate Jewish mythical traditions and national art.

In the fourth chapter, “The Gymnastics of Regeneration,” I turn to the concept of bio-power within muscular Judaism. I begin by placing the muscle Jew within the broader European “body culture” of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including the rise of “muscular Christianity” in England, the physical fitness boom in Europe and the United States, and the birth of race science and eugenics. Throughout the chapter, I demonstrate how the fashioning of the muscle Jew in both *Die Jüdische Turnzeitung* and the public exhibition of Jewish hygiene drew on and were an integral part of the German *Lebensreform* movement. Applying Foucault’s concept of “bio-power” to the culture of German Zionism, I examine how the rhetoric of corporeal reform in gymnastics discourses, indebted to and inspired by the German nationalism of Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, moved from a project of individualized rejuvenation to a broader project of state formation. The second part of this chapter looks at Jewish population politics, focusing on two, not fortuitously connected events of 1911: the publication of Felix Theilhaber’s

apocalyptic book, *Der Untergang der deutschen Juden* (The Destruction of the German Jews) and the Jewish section of the International Hygiene Exhibition in Dresden. Theilhaber, a committed Zionist, argued that Jews would perish as a race if drastic social and biological measures were not taken immediately to stave off what he saw to be the rapid population decline of the German Jews. His argument, in many ways quite consonant with the Jewish section of the 1911 hygiene exhibition organized by Max Grunwald, posited that modern Jews had to urgently reform their bodies and, by extension, their race through time-honored principles of hygiene and modern-day eugenics. Through this new emphasis on the management of reproduction, fertility, population politics, and ethnic demography, the muscle Jew discourse also became a kind of Zionist race science.

In Chapter 5, “The Land of Regeneration,” I turn to the beginnings of Zionist colonial discourse in order to show how the muscle Jew was connected to the geographic possession of the land. Using travelogues, scientific reports, land surveys, and reconnaissance studies published in the journals *Palästina* and *Altneuland*, I examine points of contact as well as points of divergence between the Zionist colonial idea and European colonialism. Here, I give special attention to the discourse of seafaring, a discourse whose lineage is characterized by voyages of discovery and conquest. By re-inscribing Hegel’s famous argument that world-historical people have a relationship to the sea, I show how the seafaring discourse was integrated into muscular Judaism by Max Grunwald, Theodor Herzl, and Davis Trietsch. In the last part of the chapter, I turn to the photo documentary, *Bilder aus Palaestina* (Pictures from Palestine), and discuss how photography was deployed in imagining, reconnoitering, regenerating, and, ultimately, possessing both the territory and people of Palestine. In drawing explicitly from the German, French, and British models of colonialism, I indicate some of the ways in which Zionism created an aestheticized politics of regeneration that sought to elevate muscle Jews into agents of the European Universal.

The final chapter, “Soldiers of Regeneration,” examines how Jews—both Zionist and non-Zionist—made the Jewish body fit for military service by embracing an “old-new” Maccabean rhetoric of heroism, bravery, and military masculinity. The Great War contributed to the “steeling” of the muscle Jew, resulting in a new image of the Jewish male fit for combat and able to defend the European idea of nationality (in both Europe and Palestine). Here, I study how Jewish soldiers, particularly airmen, emerged as exemplary antidotes to the so-called “stab-in-the-back” legend and, ultimately, as the justification of a renewed militarism during the Weimar period. For Jewish soldiers, unlike most of their German counterparts, World War I was a critically enabling moment and even a sort of proving ground for a regenerated Jewish masculinity—not its destruction or degeneration. Not unlike the arguments of “reactionary modernists” such as Ernst Jünger who embraced the war for bringing about a technologically reinvigorated

masculinity, many Jews saw the war as a regenerative opportunity for the Jewish body. With World War I, the muscle Jew was “hardened” in a way that not only fought anti-Semitism but also galvanized the struggle for nationality in both Germany and Palestine in the tumultuous years that followed.

THE RHETORIC OF REGENERATION

“Clear heads, solid stomachs, and hard muscles”

The dialectic of Jewish regeneration/degeneration

In 1781, Christian Wilhelm Dohm, a virtually unknown German archivist and councilor in Frederick the Great’s department of foreign affairs, published an extraordinary treatise called *Ueber die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Juden* (On the Civic Improvement of the Jews).¹ The treatise represented Dohm’s attempt to find both an explanation for and a way to fix what he, along with many of his contemporaries, perceived to be the “degeneration” of the Jewish people. He saw this degeneration exemplified by the fact that the vast majority of Jews throughout Western and Eastern Europe were ailing, itinerant hagglers, wed to rigidly archaic religious laws, who barely eked out a living on the edges of the modern, civilized world. Inverting traditional explanations for their condition, Dohm argued that the degeneracy of the Jews cannot be blamed on the Jews themselves but rather on the Christian rulers who refused to grant Jews civil rights and equality before the law. If these rights were granted to the Jews, they would become morally, spiritually, and physically regenerated.

Almost immediately after its publication, Dohm’s book was widely read and debated, prompting responses from some of Germany’s foremost intellectuals, including the Jewish philosopher, Moses Mendelssohn, the Protestant theologian, Johann Gottfried Eichhorn, and Germany’s leading Orientalist scholar, Johann David Michaelis.² The following year it was translated into French and inspired many French treatises, most notably Abbé Grégoire’s *Essai sur la régénération physique, morale et politique des Juifs* in 1788, a work that played a critical role in facilitating the emancipation of the French Jews shortly after the Revolution.³ In Dohm’s homeland of Prussia, Jewish emancipation came in 1812, and his treatise is often cited as a key turning point in the debate over Jewish civic equality.⁴

Although Dohm, like Grégoire, bought into the contemporary anti-Semitic stereotypes of Jews as morally corrupt, spiritually bankrupt, and physically inferior (something for which Mendelssohn would take him to task), the revolutionary significance of his argument was to be found in the fact that he shifted the discourse away from the belief that these “degenerate” traits

naturally inhere within individuals or within the Jewish people as a whole and, instead, refocused attention on what he perceived to be the social, economic, and political causes and conditions for the disenfranchisement and subsequent corruption of the Jews. But more than this, Dohm pointed out that the Jewish people were not always degenerate:

Moses had wanted to found a lasting, flourishing state . . . and up until the fifth century, the Jews were good citizens of the Roman Empire. It was only afterward, when all civil societies on earth excluded them, that they forgot how their religious teachings related to civil society.

(D 1:143)

If the laws of the state were reformed to grant full civil rights to the Jews, the Jewish people themselves, Dohm believed, would regain their moral rectitude, spiritual richness, and physical strength in just a couple of generations: “They will return to the freer and nobler ancient Mosaic constitution” (D 1:144) and thus become productive members of civil society. In effect, the Jewish people could be regenerated.

Dohm was particularly concerned about the Jews’ singular investment in “trade” and “speculations” (D 1:143) and their apparent inability to become good citizens who served the state as disciplined soldiers, productive farmers, and conscientious artisans. This was not always the case, Dohm insisted, and argued that during the Roman Empire, “Jews earned confidence and commendations through their military service . . . and that the many privileges and celebrated declarations by the Roman Senate represent the irrefutable proof of the bravery and loyalty that they demonstrated in war” (D 1:140). Only when Jews were declared “unfit” for military service in the fifth century did the prejudice become grounded that the Jews were not able to fight as citizens on behalf of the state (D 1:141). “One and a half millennia later, it is natural,” Dohm explains, that the Jews have “become unaccustomed to war” and that the “martial courage and strength of the body” (D 1:145) would not immediately return without the proper guidance, support, and training.

Once the Jews are granted civic equality, Dohm proposes a program of regeneration that focuses on making them fit for military service, agriculture, and manufacturing. This approach, he believed, would stem the “degeneration” (*Ausartung*) and “corruption” (*Verderbtheit*) that has resulted directly from their “condemnation and persecution” (D 1:149). In the same way that he shows that Jews used to be exemplary soldiers, Dohm argues that Jews also used to be engaged in agriculture and artisanship: “In their Asiatic fatherland, Jews used to live almost completely from agriculture and their whole state was founded on agriculture” (D 2: 220). The same anti-Semitic laws that prevented Jews from serving in the military also restricted them to certain occupations, and this took its toll on their physical and psychic composition. Dohm,

however, is optimistic about the regenerative prospects of the Jewish people: “The necessary strength of body and the consistent diligence will reliably come back in a couple of generations” (D 2: 259), thus enabling Jews to reenter the professions from which they were barred and restoring the Jewish people to their original strength and vitality.

Shortly before the French Revolution, when Dohm published his treatise, the concept of “regeneration” had already come to designate moral, spiritual, physical, and political rebirth. As Antoine de Baecque has demonstrated in a remarkable study of corporeal metaphors during the French Revolution, the concept of regeneration first referred to the impetus to return or restore a body to its original vitality.⁵ Up until 1730, regeneration primarily referred to rebirth and resurrection within religious discourses and to the physiological processes of healing within medicinal discourses. But by the middle of the eighteenth century, it was explicitly linked with its antonym, “degeneration,” and gained explanatory power as part of the Enlightenment ideology of progress and the concomitant belief in the perfectibility of the human race.⁶ Not only could individual bodies be regenerated and perfected, but the larger social or political body could also be reborn, renewed, and revitalized. Regeneration thus gained a revolutionary corporeal meaning: it now signaled the possibility of political and social reform, in which degeneracy—in all its backward facing forms—could be permanently overcome. Strong, robust, and vital individuals would form a strong, robust, and vital body politic. For Dohm, Jewish degeneracy was not merely the prerequisite of their regeneration but also the proof of the Enlightenment idea of social and political progress. Anything and everyone could be “improved” and perfected. What makes Dohm’s argument unique is that he is the first German thinker to propose a civic rationale for Jewish emancipation together with a program of regeneration for the Jewish people.⁷ As we will see, his arguments concerning the physical, moral, and spiritual regeneration of the Jews anticipate many of the ideas of Zionism, including its most important figure of self-refashioning: the “muscle Jew.”

Before moving to the synchronic context for the invention of the muscle Jew, I want to underscore the diachronic history of the concept of regeneration by indicating how its meaning emerged from the political history of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. The reason that this is important is the fact that precisely during this period the concept of “regeneration” changed in two decisive ways, both of which are important for its modern usage. First, it moved from being a term used primarily in theological and medical contexts to one applicable to virtually any sphere of social and political development; and, second, it gained a new, active meaning as a human potentiality. These shifts in meaning are closely bound to one another. As Sepinwall and de Baecque point out, prior to the mid-eighteenth century, the term regeneration (in French, *régénérer*) had a limited use primarily in theology as the equivalent of resurrection, baptism, and rebirth.⁸ The word was almost never used as an active verb since only God, not human beings, had

the power to regenerate. But over the course of the eighteenth century, the term came to be secularized and was used to designate rebirth in any sphere, whether physical, moral, or political. Moreover, it became a human potentiality: not only could human beings and their political structures be reborn, but they have the power to regenerate themselves.

To see what this shift in meaning signified in practice, let me cite a portion of a text written in 1789 on the regeneration of the French people. In its urgent description and historical justification, it bears an uncanny resemblance to the Zionist program of Jewish regeneration. The author is Jérôme Pétion de Villeneuve:

The free man does not walk with his head bent; nor is his gaze haughty or disdainful, but rather assured; his walk is proud; none of his movements proclaims fear; full of confidence in his own strength, he sees no one around him of whom he need be afraid and before whom he might have to abase himself. His joy is pure, it is honest, his affections are gentle and good; these sentiments of the soul give his body the most perfect development, the most beautiful proportions. . . . How much do constraint, how much do depressing and irritating ideas attack our temperament, disturb our health, ravage our external form: the cheeks cave in, the complexion becomes livid, the eye dims, our limbs shrivel, we are without strength and courage. The least moral revolution occasions a physical upheaval. . . . [The] men of the free nation will be physically larger, more handsome, more courageous; morally, they will be more virtuous and better. . . . Make man free if you desire his happiness, if you wish to see him handsome, strong, and virtuous. The deeper we go into this truth, the more we follow it in its developments, the more striking it will seem.⁹

Although written more than a century before the birth of Zionism and the invention of the muscle Jew, the French author is calling for the creation of a reinvigorated, revolutionary man who is free, self-confident, and strong. The reborn body is the site upon which the revolutionary ideals of political regeneration are to be realized. Not unlike the body of the “new Jew,” the new Frenchman will develop “perfect” forms and “beautiful proportions,” which correspond directly to his moral probity and political freedom.¹⁰ The degeneration of body and mind will be permanently overcome by the liberating powers of regeneration.

As both Grégoire and Dohm would thus argue, regeneration was effected first and foremost on the individual body and, thereby, the body politic. The new deployment of the term brought together a whole range of social meanings and political possibilities for rebirth and human agency, all of which were used by Grégoire and Dohm in their respective essays on Jewish regeneration: the physical correction of the Jew’s weak body and the mastery

of degeneracy; the moral rectification of the Jews and the normalization of their participation in civil society; and, finally, the overcoming of Jewish particularity through intermarriage, conversion, and assimilation. In a word, Jewish regeneration was to be proof of the Enlightenment's ideology of progress and belief in human perfectibility. And at the same time, as David Sorkin has shown, German Jews brought the Jewish tradition of *Haskala* together with these Enlightenment ideals of progress, secular knowledge, *Bildung*, and acculturation, all of which were embodied by its "mythic hero" Moses Mendelssohn:

The symbol of *Bildung* unified and represented this cultural system [of the radicalized *Haskala*] through its ideal of man (moral individualism), and the program of regeneration (occupational restructuring; reform of religion, manners, and morals) showed how the ideal could be attained.¹¹

Enlightenment, *Bildung*, and emancipation would facilitate Jewish regeneration.

Following the French Revolution, the rhetoric of regeneration not only engendered a modicum of progressive change that led to the emancipation of the Jews throughout most of Western Europe and the liberalization of anti-Jewish laws over the next few decades, it also contributed to a backlash in which Jews were considered in need of redemption from their original fate as Jews, often—although not always—through the salvific logic of Christianity. As Paul Lawrence Rose has argued in his genealogy of modern anti-Semitism, the resolution of the Jewish question in the first half of the nineteenth century meant both the redemption of the Jews from being Jewish and the redemption of humankind from what came to be seen as the disease of Judaism, namely egoism and capitalist greed.¹² Karl Marx, for example, concluded his notorious tract, "On the Jewish Question" (1843), with the following pithy formulation, which plays off the double meaning of "*Judentum*" in the mid-nineteenth century as both "Judaism" and "commerce": "The social emancipation of the Jew is the emancipation of society from Judaism."¹³ Marx, of course, did not want to regenerate the Jews as Christians but rather overcome Judaism entirely, both the affliction of religion and the affliction of capitalism.

With the emergence of race science and Darwinism in the mid-nineteenth century, the questions of "blood" and "race" took center stage in the debate over diagnosing national degeneration and imagining the possibility of regeneration.¹⁴ In 1853–55, Arthur Comte de Gobineau published his treatise *Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races*, in which he argued that "racial vitality" was the key determinant of human history. For Gobineau, degeneration is a problem of impure blood:

The word degenerate, when applied to people, means (as it ought to mean) that the people has no longer the same intrinsic value as it had

before, because it has no longer the same blood in its veins, continual adulterations having gradually affected the quality of the blood.¹⁵

Unlike Grégoire or Dohm who viewed intermarriage and racial mixing as a desirable way for Jewish particularity to be overcome, Gobineau considered the intermixing of races to be dangerous because it would defile and thus weaken the vitality of a given nation:

So long as the blood and institutions of a nation keep to a sufficient degree the impress of the original race, the nation exists . . . But if, like the Greeks, and the Romans of the later Empire, the people has been absolutely drained of its original blood, and the qualities conferred by the blood, then the day of its defeat will be the day of its death. It has used up the time that heaven granted at its birth, for it has completely changed its race, and with its race its nature. It is therefore degenerate.¹⁶

For Gobineau, degeneration was a problem of mixed blood and, hence, mixed races.

Although Gobineau's ideas were not initially well received in Europe, his argument for the supremacy of the "Aryan race" was widely accepted by the Wagner circle in the 1870s and later became the basis of many ultra-right, nationalist ideologies. Karl Eugen Dühring, for example, one of the most influential proponents of racial anti-Semitism in Germany, applied many of Gobineau's ideas in his book, *Die Judenfrage als Racen-, Sitten-, und Culturfrage* (The Jewish Question as a Racial, Moral, and Cultural Question).¹⁷ Dühring argued fervently against the mixture of Jewish blood with German blood, considering the dilution of German racial strength to be a Jewish scheme:

The diverse admixture of our modern cultures, or in other words, the sprinkling of racial-Jewry in the cracks and crevices of our national abode, must inevitably lead to a reaction. It is impossible that close contact [between Germans and Jews] will take effect without the concomitant realization that this infusion of Jewish qualities is incompatible with our best impulses.¹⁸

In 1876, Gobineau befriended Richard Wagner who was a leading subscriber to the latter's theories of Aryanism, and Cosima Wagner later used Gobineau's theories to articulate the relationship between anti-Semitism and Aryan superiority.¹⁹ The Gobineau Society was established in Germany at the end of the nineteenth century, and its founder, Ludwig Schemann, asserted that "only Germany can be the receptacle for Gobineau and his ideas."²⁰ The Society was comprised of aristocrats, philologists, and artists, including,

perhaps most famously, Houston Stewart Chamberlain, whose *Foundations of the Nineteenth Century* (1899) helped popularize Aryan mythology and establish race as the driving principle behind historical greatness.²¹ After 1902, the nationalist pan-German League joined the Gobineau Society, something that led, according to Paul Weindling, to “the linking of Aryan theories with the ultra-nationalist and anti-Semitic right” in the decade prior to World War I.²²

With the ascendancy of the Darwinian view of social evolution and human progress in the second half of the nineteenth century, the concern over racial degeneracy caused by modernization and industrialization took on new significance.²³ Here, a wide range of practices were instituted throughout Europe and the United States for “scientizing” cleanliness, professionalizing hygiene, administering public health, and monitoring social disorders.²⁴ The principles of Darwinism assumed a chief role in social and political affairs, and new fields emerged to track deviations and stop their dangerous proliferation.²⁵ In psychiatry, for example, Bénédict-Augustin Morel explained imbecility within a Darwinian framework: over the course of several generations, he maintained, mental neuroses would express themselves somatically and gradually worsen, such that the enfeebled descendants would eventually die out.²⁶ In criminology, Cesare Lombroso characterized the deviant type of the so-called born criminal as “an atavistic being who reproduces in his person the ferocious instincts of primitive humanity and the inferior animals.”²⁷ By measuring parts of the criminal’s body, such as his skull and facial features, Lombroso assembled a massive criminal anthropology for tracking pathology and, thereby, he believed, protecting society. His work helped introduce new policing practices, most notably preventive detention, to fight criminality, social deviancy, and moral degeneracy.

In this new context of “racial” explanations for degeneracy, the question of Jewish regeneration—in both its individual and national dimensions—was given a significant first expression by a Jewish thinker in 1862: it is in this year that Moses Hess, the most important precursor to modern Zionism, published a book on “the last nationality question” called *Rom und Jerusalem* (Rome and Jerusalem).²⁸ He dedicated it “to the generous pioneers of all the historical people fighting for national rebirth.” Not unlike Grégoire and Dohm, Hess argued vigorously for the “rebirth” and “resurrection” of the Jewish people through the reclaiming of their ancient strength and original vitality.²⁹ But in contrast to Dohm or any other late eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century thinker reflecting on the stakes of Jewish regeneration, Hess believed that the Jews were already world-historical agents in and of themselves and that their redemption was tied to the redemption of all of humankind. The Jewish people thus had a critical role to play in the history of humankind: far from being condemned to the first stage of world history, as Hegel famously posited,³⁰ the Jews have “defied the storms of world history” through “the secure racial instinct of their cultural-historical calling”

and stand ready to “unite the world and all of humanity in the name of the eternal creator” (H, xiv–xv). With the “rebirth of Israel” (H, 94) and, hence, the answer to “the last nationality question,” Jews will be able to “take their place in world history next to other historical peoples” (H, 102). This, in turn, will redeem both Jews and humankind as a whole.

Like other “world historical races” (*welthistorische Racen*) such as the English, the French, the Germans, and the Americans, Hess believes that the Jews are endowed with a special significance in human history. Yet at the same time, the Jews are also unique in that they are “the only ancient people who still exist today, just as in days of yore, with undiluted strength and integrity [*ungeschwächten Kraft und Integrität*]” (H, 60). He cites two important reasons for their uncanny survival as a people: first, the fact that the Jews cannot change their racial composition or physical features because of the purity of their race. He explains:

The Jewish nose cannot be reformed and the black, wavy Jewish hair cannot be transformed into blond hair through baptism or made straight with a comb. The Jewish race is an original race, which has reproduced itself in its integrity despite climatic influences.

(H, 12)

And second, he cites the sheer fact of their survival over the millennia while scattered across the world as both an indicator of racial strength and a testament to their decisive role in world history. In effect, the seeds of Jewish regeneration are to be found within: far from being degenerate, the Jewish race is characterized by an astounding regenerative capacity—“the ability to acclimatize under any circumstances” (H, 13)—and “the fertility and indestructibility of the Jewish tribe” (H, 12). It is this inhering, transhistorical strength that will secure Jewish national regeneration. As we will see in more detail in Chapter 5, Hess transformed the Hegelian philosophy of world history into a positive Jewish destiny by appropriating the hygienic claims of the emerging field of race science as a testament to the unlimited regenerative capacity of the Jewish people.

In the decades leading up to the founding of the modern Zionist movement, the German discourse on regeneration and *Lebensreform* (life reform) became explicitly linked to *Rassenhygiene* (racial hygiene) and eugenics. Racial hygiene was a broad movement, which not only included biological and medical programs for ‘improving the race’ but also measures for increasing the population, fighting social ills, creating healthy living and work environments, and generally increasing the standard of living.³¹ As Sheila Weiss points out, “race hygiene in Germany was far more heterogeneous in its politics and ideology than is generally assumed,”³² and its origins were quite distinct from Nazi ideology. While some of its founders (such as Alfred Ploetz, Max von Gruber, Ernst Rüdin, and Fritz Lenz) were undeniably

“Aryan enthusiasts,” others, most notably Wilhelm Schallmayer, were “uncompromising in their critique of all Aryan ideologies.”³³ The common denominator was not Aryan supremacy but rather the formation of a new science, which was concerned with the health and well-being of the race, as opposed to just the health and well-being of the individual.

Alfred Ploetz coined the term “Rassenhygiene” in 1895 in a book called *Die Tüchtigkeit unserer Rasse und der Schutz der Schwächen* (The Fitness of our Race and the Protection of the Weak). Since 1879, when Ploetz founded the League to Reinvigorate the Race, he was interested in the ethical and social issues raised by Social Darwinism, namely the question of what happened to the weak and infirm under the cruel pressures of natural selection. Ploetz, like some of his colleagues interested in social reform, advocated for a program of “rational selection,” in which a strong government would create social policy focused on hygiene and sanitary reform in order to improve the race.³⁴ Ploetz founded the influential journal, *Archiv für Rassen- und Gesellschaftsbiologie* (Archive for Race and Societal Biology), in 1904, the first journal in the world dedicated to eugenics. It had the avowed platform of using the scientific advances of eugenics and racial hygiene (terms that would be used virtually interchangeably at this time) to regenerate the family and the *Volk*. Significantly, Ploetz did not see the Jews to be inherently “degenerate” or “polluting” the Aryan race; rather, he considered “the Jewish race [to be] quite probably overwhelmingly Aryan in composition,” and Aryans to be “the cultural race par excellence.”³⁵

In 1892, the same year as Max Nordau published his massive study of degeneration, *Entartung*, Alfred Damm, a physician from Wiesbaden whose ideas played a significant role in forming the intellectual basis of the German *Körperkultur* movement, established the League for Regeneration (*Liga der Regeneration*). He was responsible for much of the content of two monthly journals, *Die Wiedergeburt der Völker* (The Rebirth of Peoples) (1892–95) and *Regeneration* (1896–1901), both of which formed the intellectual groundwork for *Kraft und Schönheit* (Strength and Beauty), the major journal of the *Körperkultur* movement.³⁶ In a series of lectures that he delivered in Berlin in 1895, *Die Entartung der Menschen und die Beseitigung der Entartung* (*Regeneration*) (The Degeneration of Humankind and the Elimination of Degeneration (Regeneration)), Damm sought to understand how the “health and blossoming strength” of German men and women in their twenties and thirties was lost.³⁷ He asks: “Why are almost all colorless and pale in the face? . . . Why is everyone in their best, strongest years ailing, the men suffering from poor digestion, nervousness and so forth, the women from chlorosis and other disorders specific to women?” (Damm, 9). The answer that he gives is that the exigencies of modern society have resulted in physical, mental, and spiritual degeneration and that a full-fledged program of regeneration is necessary to rejuvenate the German people and re-cultivate their wholeness: “The goal of regeneration is to make humankind more

perfect, and not just the perfection of one side but rather the perfection of body, mind, and soul” (Damm, 50). To do so, he argues, the criminal and sick elements of society must be separated from the rest of the population and steadily removed by state intervention (Damm, 60), while the strong and healthy are given a properly balanced education accompanied by both intellectual and physical training, such as “hiking trips, gymnastics, rowing, and ice-skating” (Damm, 77). In the end, Damm is confident that the “rebirth of our German people must come” and urges his audience to join his recently founded “League for Regeneration” (Damm, 82).

It was precisely this rhetoric of regeneration that was explicitly taken up by Jewish thinkers of the *fin de siècle* who sought to rejuvenate the Jewish people using the experiences of other Europeans as a model. In a short article entitled “Degeneration—Regeneration” (1901) published in the Jewish cultural periodical, *Ost und West: Illustrierte Monatsschrift für modernes Judentum* (East and West: Illustrated Monthly for Modern Judaism), during its first year, an anonymous author posited that “all the adherents of the theory of degeneration underestimate the boundless regenerative capacity of human nature.”³⁸ Not unlike Hess who connects the “national rebirth” of revolutionary France with the contemporary struggle for Jewish nationality (H, 8), the optimistic author of “Degeneration—Regeneration” points out that world-historical nations have always had to emerge from turmoil and rebuild themselves from destruction: “After the Thirty Years War, Germany found itself in deep economic ruin, just as England did in the first half of the 19th century. The human material of both nations was demoralized, weakened, and corrupted” (DR, 609). Yet each of these nations has become world-historical powers, variously reborn and regenerated. Today, although the Jews in Eastern and Western Europe are “psychically and physically hindered in realizing their strengths,” they, too, will soon experience “a new upswing” due to “the elasticity of human nature itself and Jewish elasticity in particular as well as the wealth of slumbering strength and eager talents” (DR, 611–612).

It is no coincidence that later the same year *Ost und West* featured an article on the burgeoning Jewish gymnastics movement in Europe written by Hermann Jalowicz, one of the strongest proponents of the regenerative powers of gymnastics. Jalowicz points out that “the corporeal degeneration of the Jewish nation” and the “degeneration process” itself can be effectively counteracted by physical exercise and the healthy benefits of light, air, and nutrition.³⁹ He cites the rapid growth of the “Jewish gymnastics movement” throughout Europe as a signal of the successful regeneration of the Jewish body:

The skills, muscular strength, and sinews of the gymnast are increased through training, while marching and formation exercises aim at cultivating a strict discipline (something that Jews need particularly). Gymnastics contributes to evoking a love of nature,

to making the body more resilient in responding to stress and accustomed to small privations. The shared experiences strengthen and bring about a feeling of comradeship.⁴⁰

In the spirit of other advocates of body reform and racial hygiene, Jalowicz concludes by drawing a connection between the regeneration of the individual body and the reform of the race as a whole: “The Jewish gymnastics movement can fulfill its goal of elevating the race [*volkserziehlicher Zweck*]: It will contribute to the strengthening of the body, to the consolidation of the will, and the recovery of the Jewish people.”⁴¹

More than a century after Dohm and Grégoire published their initial calls for the physical, moral, and spiritual improvement of the Jewish people, the discourses of regeneration, particularly the ideas of corporeal reform and racial hygiene, would be taken up by a host of Zionist thinkers such as Max Nordau, Theodor Herzl, Martin Buber, Felix Theilhaber, Max Grunwald, Arthur Ruppin, Elias Auerbach, Alfred Nossig, and Davis Trietsch, each of whom variously contributed, as we will see over the next several chapters, to the creation of muscular Judaism. As a program of national, spiritual, and physical regeneration, Zionism can hardly be said to be unique or even original since virtually all of the regenerative movements across the political spectrum posited the birth of a “new man”⁴² and the revitalization of the nation. Zionism essentially accepted the anti-Semitic stereotypes, many of which were solidified by the political disenfranchisement of the Jews, and internalized them: ‘We are, in fact, degenerate’, and thus pursued a radical project of regeneration, rebirth, and normalcy. The “muscle Jew” emerged as the emblem of the Jewish “*homo novus*,” epitomizing the attempt to reinvigorate the individual Jewish body and the body politic by endowing them both with “the most perfect development, the most beautiful proportions.” The intellectual origins of the muscle Jew and the modern Zionist idea are to be found in the discursive period of the 1890s, and it is here that we will now turn.

Julius Langbehn, Max Nordau, and the crisis of the 1890s

It is not surprising that “critique” and “crisis” come from the same Greek root, *krino*, which means to cut, select, decide, and judge. The term “*krino*” was first used in the domains of law, medicine, and theology in order to indicate the pressure of two pointed alternatives and the necessity of making a decision one way or the other. The concepts of critique and crisis, as the philosopher of history, Reinhart Koselleck, has demonstrated, “aim at an irrevocable decision,” which, when made, will result in success or failure, right or wrong, life or death, salvation or damnation.⁴³ Crisis, then, refers not only to the assessment of a critical state of misfortune, struggle, and test, but it also necessitates a measured critique, an informed judgment, and a decisive action.

For this reason, as Koselleck argues, crisis implies a theory of time suffused with an eschatological dimension: the time for decision is now and, once the decision is rendered, there is no going back.

In the tumultuous final decade of the nineteenth century, it was precisely this necessity of deciding between two critical alternatives in a time of inescapable crisis that structured the logic of Julius Langbehn's *Rembrandt als Erzieher* (Rembrandt as Educator) and Max Nordau's *Entartung* (Degeneration). Although the content of their arguments and their political diagnoses are quite distant from one another, both books emerged out of the same *fin de siècle* culture and shared an uncanny number of similarities with respect to their belief in "education" (*Erziehung*) for the salvation of the nation as well as their urgent calls for regeneration. For both, overcoming cultural decline—with all its perils of degeneracy, loss, and valuelessness—was the order of the day. Langbehn's book, published anonymously "by a German," first appeared in 1890 and was an instant bestseller, going through more than forty printings and well over 60,000 copies in its first two years.⁴⁴ Nordau's *Degeneration* appeared in 1892 and was also an instant success, becoming one of the most hotly contested and ten best-selling books of the decade. Both authors posited grandiose cultural critiques of their "decaying" age and argued that there was no more time for passively contemplating the future because the corrupt *Zeitgeist* of the *fin de siècle* demanded immediate action, an irrevocable decision. The alternative, in their view, was degeneration.

In 1888, in his last completed work before collapsing in Turin, Nietzsche emblematically summed up the anxieties of the late nineteenth century with the following words: "Nothing is better known today, at least nothing has been better studied, than the protean character of degenerescence."⁴⁵ Through the figure of Wagner, Nietzsche mounted a choleric critique of modernity and its vogueish nihilism, arguing that decadence and degeneracy—ranging from cultural decline to physical sickness and moral turpitude—are the truest signs of this "nervous age." As Nietzsche suggests, signs of degeneracy were detected and studied everywhere: the fast pace of modern life rendered the nerves of city dwellers weak⁴⁶; the "natural" borders of races and classes had become porous, causing them to breakdown and merge together; the spread of venereal diseases and prostitution evidenced the loosening of codes for policing sexuality, while the eager embrace of the rhetoric of sickness and decadence in art and literature displaced traditional moral authorities.⁴⁷ But most of all, the birth of the discipline of race science and eugenics in the mid-1850s turned the regulation of degeneracy into an urgent social imperative, which, by the 1890s, had become indistinguishable from the enforcement of a normative understanding of race and sexuality.⁴⁸

It is precisely this confluence of discourses around the concept of degeneracy—medical, socio-economic, political, and racial—that fed the apocalyptic tone of Langbehn and Nordau's *fin de siècle* cultural criticism.

Across Europe, the crisis years of the 1890s would be marked by social instability as well as fierce political backlashes and nationalist fragmentation, from the dismissal of Bismarck and the introduction of the social reform decrees of the Kaiser in Germany to the Panama Scandal and the Dreyfus Affair in France, to the election of the rabidly anti-Semitic Christian Democrat Party in Austro-Hungary. In his classic study of “the rise of the Germanic ideology,” Fritz Stern famously characterized the 1890s as a period of “cultural despair,” in which political turmoil resounded with cultural discontent, and the pangs of modernity produced a veritable chorus of fear and disenchantment.⁴⁹ For historians such as Stern and Mosse, these years of cultural despair and anti-modernism marked the “ideological origins” of Nazism because it was at this time that the pathologies and irrationalities of later German history were first consolidated.⁵⁰

Following in the wake of Geoff Eley and David Blackbourn’s critique of the German *Sonderweg* argument, many of the recent historiographies of this period have taken issue with the developmental pattern articulated by Stern and Mosse. These new historiographies attempt to show how the 1890s saw the flourishing of many reform movements across the political spectrum, resulting, as Kevin Repp has argued, in a wide range of divergent, open-ended, and alternative modernities.⁵¹ As Eley has shown in his history of the German right, Stern and Mosse essentially perpetuate the *Sonderweg* argument of Germany’s mis-development: They fail to recognize the modernity of the *Kaiserreich* and refuse to see how many of the ideas of this turbulent period were composed of “a complex amalgam of ‘progressive’ and ‘reactionary’ motifs,” which did not inevitably lead to Nazism.⁵² At the same time, the conditions of possibility for Nazism certainly began to congeal in this period and thus modernity’s “dark side” must be recognized in the discursive regime of the 1890s. It is in this context of multiple modernities, I maintain, that Langbehn and Nordau formulated and positioned their own cultural politics of regeneration.

Before attempting to reconstitute and resurrect what he believes to be essential “German” virtues—individuality, originality, devoutness, and simplicity, among others—in the figure of Rembrandt, Langbehn introduced his diagnosis of his age with the following understated words: “It is no secret that the spiritual [*geistige*] life of the German people finds itself today in a state of slow (some say rapid) decay.”⁵³ Over the next 300 pages, Langbehn repeats over and over again that the German people are facing a final spiritual “battle” between *Kunst* (art) and *Wissenschaft* (science) and that only with a return to the nearly lost “German” values exhibited, seemingly paradoxically, by Rembrandt can the German people survive. The alternative is to perish into the atomizing, valueless sterility of science. Nordau, not one for understatement, couched his shrill diagnosis like this:

The feeling of the time is curiously confused, a compound of feverish restlessness and blunted discouragement, of suspicious fear and

forsaken gallow-humor. The prevailing sense is that of destruction and extinction . . . In our days there has awakened in the minds of the more highly developed a dark fear of a dusk of nations (*Völkerdämmerung*) in which all the suns and stars are gradually burning out and humankind with all its institutions and creations is perishing in the midst of a dying world.⁵⁴

Nordau's solution, while definitely motivated by the preservation of traditional, classical values and forms, does not look backwards to reclaim a lost personage but rather prognosticates an evolutionary break, imbued with the ideology of Social Darwinism, in which the "degenerates" shall perish and those who are strong, disciplined, and well-adapted will come forward to preside over a new world.

For Langbehn, the solution to the *fin de siècle* malaise was an adamant rejection of all intellectual activities that "democratized, leveled, and atomized" (R, 1) the true uniqueness of the German spirit. In place of what he thought to be the atomizing rationality of science, he sought to revive the mystery and creative powers of art. The figure of Rembrandt represents the redemption of the "scientized" world. Also employing the meta-concepts of art and science, Nordau diagnosed and attempted to overcome the same *fin de siècle* malaise but in almost the opposite fashion: condemning virtually every contemporary artistic or literary movement as proof of "degeneracy" (his unforgiving criticism jumps effortlessly from particular figures such as Manet and Tolstoy to the pre-Raphaelites, Symbolism, and "Ibsenism"), Nordau argues that only the calm rationality and disciplined logic of scientific progress can save humanity from the woes of degeneration and its attendant horror, formlessness. While their diagnoses and solutions are ultimately at odds with one another, both Nordau and Langbehn see a definitive need to break out of the degeneracy of the present through a logic of regeneration, and in this respect, their cultural critiques can be understood as emblematic of the crisis of the 1890s.

The purpose of this chapter is less to analyze the particular logic (or lack thereof) of these *fin de siècle* desires to break with the decay of the European present and more to understand how these desires are structured by the same apocalyptic "decisionism"⁵⁵ and ideology of a redemptive regeneration. More specifically, I want to interpret Nordau's *Degeneration* by placing it within the same apocalyptic discourse as the regenerative project of Langbehn's *Rembrandt als Erzieher* and, from there, to show how these ideas for national regeneration formed the critical, conceptual groundwork for his articulation of the "muscle Jew." In what follows, then, I give a careful reading of Nordau's *Degeneration*, taking seriously the terms of his analysis, in order to distill the corporeal and aesthetic concepts that will later return and inform his understanding of the tasks of Zionism.⁵⁶ Although critics are somewhat split between those who view Nordau's Zionism as a "sudden eruption" and those

who see “no real division in his thought between his Zionism and the worldview he outlined in his non-Zionist and earlier writings,”⁵⁷ I want to argue that Nordau’s articulation of the muscle Jew is informed by the same logic of “education” and “regeneration” found not only in the “social Darwinian” project of *Degeneration* but also that found in the “*völkisch*” cultural criticism of Langbehn. As will become clear, Nordau’s Zionism—especially his conceptualization of the muscle Jew—was hardly a “sudden eruption.” If anything, the invention of the muscle Jew, grew out of the cultural crisis of the *fin de siècle* and epitomized the dialectic of German/Jewish modernity.

I would like to start by looking more carefully at some of the obvious differences between Langbehn and Nordau in order to characterize their responses to the crisis of the 1890s. To do so, I will begin with Nordau’s own dismissal of Langbehn and, then, discuss their opposing approaches to the question of regeneration by showing how both make use of the same decisionist logic to structure and justify the legitimacy of their arguments. After analyzing the arguments of Langbehn and Nordau, I will turn to Nordau’s conceptualization of the muscle Jew and connect it to both of the foregoing projects of regeneration.

In a chapter dedicated to demonstrating the “degeneracy” of Symbolism, Nordau contextualizes Langbehn’s *Rembrandt als Erzieher* next to the work of Charles Morice, “the theorist and philosopher of the Symbolists” (E, I:190), and, later in the chapter, the “emotionally degenerate” (E, I:228) poetry of the chief Symbolist poet, Paul Verlaine. Symbolist or decadent poets, he argues, are characterized by the fact that their language evidences “all the signs of degeneracy and imbecility: overweening vanity and self-conceit, strong emotionalism, confused and disconnected thoughts, garrulity (the logorrhea of mental therapeutics), and complete incapacity for serious sustained work” (E, I:182). But Nordau’s real problem with the Symbolists, the same problem that he accuses Langbehn of suffering from, is their compulsive need to write about the rejection of science in favor of the mysticism and subjectivity of faith. It is in this respect that Nordau mentions and just as quickly dismisses Langbehn:

Another graphomaniac, the author of that imbecilic book, *Rembrandt as Educator*, drivels in almost the same way. “Interest in science, and especially in the once so popular natural science, has widely diminished of late in the German world. . . . There has been to a certain extent a surfeit of induction; there is a longing for synthesis; the days of objectivity are declining once more to their end, and, in their place, subjectivity knocks at the door.”

(E, I:191)

The rejection of the scientifically disclosed world was, according to Nordau, not a sign of re-enchantment but rather a sure sign of mental debilitation.

Although this is the only time he engages with Langbehn's work, Nordau's argument, driven forward by an unflagging investment in the lucidity of science and the rationality of the Enlightenment, can be seen to repudiate Langbehn's investment in Rembrandt's mysticism. For Nordau, healthy and sane people—those who see clear forms, articulate rational ideas, and defend the truth of science and progress—stand radically opposed to those who are degenerate and give expression to their confused mental states through emotional mysticism, acute self-centeredness, and feeble-minded impressions of the world. He sums up his “portrait of the most famous leader of the Symbolists,” Verlaine, with the following words, which might just as well apply to Langbehn:

We see a repulsive degenerate with an asymmetric skull and a Mongolian face, an impulsive vagabond and dipsomaniac, who, because of crimes against morality, was placed in a penitentiary; an emotional dreamer of feeble intellect, who painfully fights against his bad impulses and in his misery sometimes utters touching words of complaint; a mystic, whose qualmish consciousness is flooded by thoughts of God and saints; a dotard, who displays the absence of any definite thought in his mind by incoherent speech, meaningless expressions, and frizzy images.

(E, I:228)

In other words, degenerates can be recognized not only by the confused content and chaotic structure of their thoughts or artistic expressions, but they also suffer from race-based, physical deformities (such as an “asymmetric skull” and “Mongolian face”) that prevent them from adapting to the demands of civil society. Instead of engaging in productive labor, rational activities, and deliberate moral standards—the cornerstones of an enlightened society—the degenerate is lost, desperate, overly emotional, drunk, and sex-craved. Nordau, not one for restraint (although, ironically, he considers restraint to be a critical characteristic of the healthy and sane), spends the next 300 pages of his book mercilessly castigating an astonishingly wide range of artists, literati, critics, and philosophers, as well as anyone else who dares to question the truths of science and the rational foundations of civil society.

To be sure, Langbehn's *Rembrandt als Erzieher* is not an argument about (let alone informed by) the clear rationality of science, but, then again, Nordau's *Degeneration* can hardly be adduced as the model of clarity and objectivity. Fritz Stern once characterized Langbehn's book as “wild,” “breathless,” and “chaotic,” as “a shrill cry against the hothouse intellectualism of modern Germany which threatened to stifle the creative life, a cry for the irrational energies of the folk, buried so long under layers of civilization.”⁵⁸ Much the same could certainly be said of Nordau's *Degeneration*. In my opinion, Langbehn's apocalyptic tone is actually more subdued than Nordau's, although the organizing structure of his argument is far from

apparent. Langbehn's book is divided into five sections, each with some 30 to 70 subsections on disparately juxtaposed themes. The five sections are German art, German science, German politics, German education, and German humanity and include short subsections on diverse topics such as individuality, personality, blood, *Japonisme*, and the German rule of the world. The leitmotiv of the book is Langbehn's fictionalized image of Rembrandt as the embodiment of authentic (although lost) German ideals and the struggle to recover them through art.

In approaching Langbehn, certainly the most obvious opening question is: Why Rembrandt? Are there not any *German* artists—perhaps Matthias Grunewald, Albrecht Dürer, or Lucas Cranach—who Langbehn can use to make his argument? Langbehn addresses this objection right from the start. Let me quote him at length:

If the Germans are primarily an individual people, then in the area of art only the most individual of their artists can serve as their spiritual guides . . . Of all the German artists, the most individual is Rembrandt. The Germans want to blaze their own trails and no one did that more than Rembrandt; in this sense, he has to be considered the most German of all German painters and even the most German of all German artists. . . . Rembrandt is the prototype of the German artist; he and he alone is the perfect model for the wishes and intellectual needs of the German people today. . . . Because the Germans suffer from specialization and triteness in their education [*Bildung*], only the most expressive universalist and individualist can help: namely, Rembrandt. He can lead us back to ourselves. He is the concerned, historical ideal for the time to come; he is the fixed point to which new forms of education, rich in their futurity, can connect. Rembrandt, however, was Dutch. It is significant and an external confirmation of the eccentric character of the Germans that their national artist only belongs to them internally and not even politically. The spirit of the German people [*der deutsche Volksgeist*] turned the body of the German people [*der deutsche Volkskörper*] inside out, so to speak. Now that has to change. Spirit and body, in both the people and the individuals, have to be reunited. . . . Rembrandt is the person [to do so].

(R, 9)

This is the unbeatable logic of Langbehn's entire book. The German people have certain inhering, spiritual qualities, such as individuality and simplicity, which, although largely contaminated by modern science, nevertheless still survive throughout and beyond the national borders of Germany. Sometimes, as in the case of Rembrandt, these spiritual qualities can be found to endure even more gloriously in others than in German artists. Therefore,

Rembrandt—as the model for and embodiment of “Germaness”—can help the Germans to recover and reconstitute their lost spirit.⁵⁹

Langbehn’s Rembrandt bears little relation to the historical Rembrandt, and, for this reason, he spends very little time with accurate biographical details about Rembrandt’s life or, for that matter, with discussions of his painting.⁶⁰ Instead, Langbehn is concerned with the myth of Rembrandt, the refined qualities and superhuman ideals for which he believes Rembrandt to have stood, and how these qualities match up with mythological German qualities. These qualities are neither geographically nor historically bound, and, hence, Langbehn can invoke Rembrandt as a German:

Music and genuineness, barbarism and piousness, childlike sensibility and independence are outstanding qualities of the German character. To the degree that Rembrandt reckoned with them in the domain of art, he reveals himself as a true German. Loyalty to oneself, loyalty to the native and narrow piece of German earth, loyalty to the capacious spiritual life of the German people; in short, the preservation of the most beautiful German virtue of all—loyalty—this is what Rembrandt can and shall teach us.

(R, 26)

Here, Langbehn is not only reaching back to the mythology of German bravery, strength, and loyalty immortalized in German song and verse, such as in the *Nibelungenlied*, the battle of Hermann, the *Song of the Germans*, and the myth of Barbarossa; he is also pointing forward to the enduring, transhistorical, and transnational nature of these qualities. The spiritual life of the German people lives beyond the finite bounds of human space and time. This is why he believes that “a return to Rembrandt means a forward step into the future at the same time” (R, 35). Rembrandt represents both the transnationality of the German spirit (after all, Langbehn never denies the fact that he is Dutch by birth, while insisting that he is German by character) and the transhistoricalness of the German spirit (it can be resurrected from the greatness of the past in order to move forward out of the crisis of the present). Rembrandt will teach the German people how to overcome their current “spiritual sickness [*geistige Krankheit*]” (R, 29), which wrongly exalts the rationality and objectivity of science above all else and, in so doing, reduces the mystery of the world to “colorlessness and monotony” (R, 65).

In a rare mention of one of Rembrandt’s works, Langbehn augments his argument by citing Rembrandt’s picture of “Abraham visited by three angels” as “perhaps the most religious picture ever painted” (R, 89). It represents “human spirit set against divine spirit . . . in which God is entirely made human and the human being is entirely made into God. . . . Art has performed a wonder once again; inner life has turned into outer life; thoughts have transformed themselves into history” (R, 89). In other words, the picture

embodies the mystery and enchantment of art as a kind of religious transformation. “Abraham visited by three angels” represents the religious world before its destruction by the Enlightenment and the rationality of science; it captures the moment of the miraculous, the revelatory, and the wondrous, precisely that which cannot be explained by or reduced to the objectivity of science. For Langbehn, to return to the world depicted in this painting would mean the spiritual regeneration of his nation.

As the master of chiaroscuro, Rembrandt also created a visual technique of painting that is, according to Langbehn, true to the German spirit. His pictures offer an alternative to the triumph of Enlightenment clarity and rationality, symbolized by the light of science, by the way in which they unequally mix together darkness and light. As Langbehn argues, the clarity of thought preached by professors, scientists, and specialists has poisoned the depth and mystery of the German spirit: “A generous dose of darkness would do today’s German *Bildung* quite good; mixed with the Enlightenment, it would result in a light-dark, pregnant with the future, for the spiritual being of the Germans” (R, 290–291). In other words, the mystery and play of light and dark are better suited to the complexity of the German spirit than the democratizing clarity of the all-too-French Enlightenment.

Langbehn discusses very few of Rembrandt’s actual works of art in his book, just mentioning some of his religious images, portraits, and self-portraits in passing. Instead, he is much more concerned with endowing Rembrandt with mythological qualities that could, at one time, be detected in the German people and be emulated, in the future, by Germans once again. With respect to the latter, it is in this way that Langbehn considers Rembrandt to be an “educator” (*Erzieher*), that is to say, one who helps raise and regenerate “the people” (*Volkstum*). Both of these concepts—*Erzieher* and *Volkstum*—must be briefly explained, since they form the hinge upon which Langbehn’s entire book turns. Langbehn sees Rembrandt within the tradition of “*Erziehung*” (literally translated as “pulling up” or “raising”) exemplified by the likes of Lessing and Schiller and, in fact, makes passing references to the former’s “*Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts*” (Education of the Human Race) and the latter’s “*Briefe über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen*” (Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Human Beings).⁶¹ For both Lessing and Schiller, education or rearing represented a formative process wherein the moral qualities of the human being were cultivated and refined. Langbehn situates the concept of “*Erziehung*” within this field of usage and considers it as a kind of “*Bildung*” (education) or process of formation. Here, he makes reference to the concept’s original theological and sculptural meanings, namely “*Bildung*” as that which is formed in the image of God and the essence of artistic practice as creation.⁶² The concepts of *Erziehung*, *Bildung*, and regeneration thus share a common background meaning rooted in theology.

Extending this model to politics, he then makes the surprising point that “the axis of true German *Bildung* runs from Bismarck to Rembrandt and

Shakespeare!” (R, 165). In other words, beginning in his present with the leader of Germany who unified the fragmented people (*Volkstum*) through blood and iron, Langbehn sees the history of “true” *Bildung* stretching back not to Goethe, Lessing, or Schiller, but rather to Rembrandt and Shakespeare. Once again, Langbehn’s point is not that Rembrandt and Shakespeare are really “German,” but rather that both exhibited the highest of German ideals—namely, “*Volksthümlichkeit*”—and can, therefore, be said to be “educators,” even saviors of the presently sick, German spirit. For Langbehn, “*Volksthümlichkeit*” is a mythic quality best exemplified by German peasants because they connect the piety and simplicity of the people most closely with the cultivation of the land. His logic runs as follows:

The peasant, as master of the house, is an economic king in small; the king, as master of the land, is an economic artist in large; the artist, who forms (*bildende*) and intuits, stands between both: As with the peasant, the artist has instinctive feelings about the soul of the people [*Volkseele*] and shares the autocratic right to give them form [*Recht ihrer Ausgestaltung*] with the king.

(R, 127–128)

He mentions Shakespeare and Frederick the Great, as well as Rembrandt and Bismarck, as examples of artists and rulers who “gave form”—as educators—to the spirit of the people. He includes a paeon to Rembrandt: “In his own way, Rembrandt, the peasant-like and kingly artist, is an iron rock, a fixed and unmovable point on which the soul of the German people can crystallize in new and more beautiful forms” (R, 129).

We can now understand why Langbehn isolated Rembrandt’s picture of Abraham visited by the three angels as emblematic of the wonder of art. The picture depicts the origins of a people, who, as peasants, are rooted in the fertility of the ground. Rembrandt shows the miraculous moment when God tells Abraham that he and Sarah will be the progenitors of a multitude of nations. About the painting Langbehn writes: “The figure of the patriarch [*Erzvater*] is the only instance in all of art history which is equal to Phidias’ Zeus” (R, 89). In other words, through its representation of the originary moment of the birth of a people, the picture is an expression of true *Volksthümlichkeit*. Langbehn’s Rembrandt is thus a “true educator” because his art teaches Germans what it means to be German.

Here, it is worth mentioning that Langbehn was somewhat sympathetic to certain strands of Judaism, particularly Orthodox Judaism, because he thought orthodox Jews exhibited “*völkisch*” qualities similar to those of the original Germanic people or the progenitors of all nations, Abraham and Sarah. “Rembrandt’s Jews,” he writes, “were true Jews, who did not want to be anything else but Jews and, therefore, they had character” (R, 42). On the other hand, those Jews who wanted to become German-Jews or otherwise

assimilate had committed, in Langbehn's opinion, "the crime of all crimes" (R, 42). In an updated edition of his book published in 1892, Langbehn introduced unambiguously anti-Semitic arguments against the modern, assimilated Jew: "The modern Jew has no religion, no character, no home, no children. He is a piece of humanity that has become sour."⁶³ For Langbehn, nothing could be more important than preserving, protecting, and redeeming the "*Volkstümlichkeit*" of one's people, their "völkisch" purity.

In the conclusion of his book, this insistence on redeeming the *Volkstümlichkeit* definitely took on more violent, more apocalyptic, and more racialized forms, which certainly call to mind early formulations of the *Blut und Boden* ideology. In a chapter dedicated to the origins of German "blood," for example, Langbehn prognosticates that the German peasant, the embodiment of Rembrandt's most original and authentic qualities of character, "will beat the Professor [the man of science] to death" (R, 227). In other words, the decisive battle between science and art will be settled when the German artist-peasants defeat the representatives of the atomizing objectivity of science and return to "rule over the world" (R, 230). But this will only happen successfully if the German people emerge from the "spiritual misery of their present" (R, 329) and look back to Rembrandt—"a true Aryan" with "Aryan blood" flowing through his veins (R, 328)—in order to foster the rebirth of the German spirit. He concludes by thrusting this mandate for rebirth back onto the German people: "Art and science will have to battle themselves out to establish which of them is the master of the German spiritual life; the fight must be honestly conducted and the German people will determine its outcome. Their word decides!" (R, 329).

Most commentators who mention Julius Langbehn or discuss his ideas vis-à-vis the crisis of the 1890s tend to place his "mysticism" and "anti-modernism" within a developmental lineage of *völkisch* nationalism that led to the Nazi regime. Langbehn's ideas for overcoming moral decay can certainly be read next to those of Paul de Lagarde, Heinrich von Treitschke, and Houston Stewart Chamberlain, all of whom were anti-Semitic ideologues of German nationalism and advocated for the regeneration of the spiritual and racial integrity of the German people.⁶⁴ Stern, as I indicated earlier, sees Langbehn's ideas as both the product of a "nervous age" of rapid modernization and the harbinger of a decidedly more dangerous pan-Germanism that gave rise to, among other things, the instrumentalization of Nietzschean ideas of superiority, the spread of popular notions of eugenics and race science, national reforms in education and in the arts, and, perhaps most saliently, the *völkisch* elements of the German Youth Movement.⁶⁵ In Mosse's analysis, Langbehn's call "for the regeneration of the individual through membership in the Volk" gave rise to a Germanic religion of romantic, mystical longing grounded in a rudimentary *Blut und Boden* ideology that later "provided a systematic framework for future *Völkisch* ideas."⁶⁶ Langbehn and Lagarde were "two *Völkisch* prophets [who]

transformed this crisis, actually the birth pangs of modernity, into a crisis of ideology.”⁶⁷ In their most racist, romantic, and nationalist incarnations, these calls for regeneration gave root, according to Mosse and Stern, to the ideology of National Socialism.

My point, however, in examining Langbehn and Nordau next to one another is not to extend the *Sonderweg* argument by tracing out a diachronic lineage for understanding later incarnations of Langbehn’s *völkisch* nationalism or probing the “irrationalist” origins of Nazism; rather my goal is to show how the crisis of the 1890s—with all its conceptual fallacies and cultural apocalypticism—engendered two synchronic and dialectically related critiques of modernity that illuminate one another by the ways in which they simultaneously sought national regeneration. Both Langbehn’s *Rembrandt als Erzieher* and Nordau’s *Entartung* emerged, at roughly the same time, from the very same confluence of intellectual currents that responded to the pressures of modernity and sought to overcome racial, cultural, and national degeneracy. And more significantly, they are both structured by a violent, decisionist logic that mandates the redemption of a new beginning. That is to say, both works are theories of apocalyptic time, as Koselleck’s conceptual history of crisis makes clear, which posit the urgency of deciding between two absolutely pointed alternatives—right or wrong, salvation or damnation, healthy or degenerate, science or art—in order to escape the crisis of the present.

While Langbehn’s ideas probably did, in fact, contribute to the ideology of *völkisch* nationalism, it is important to recognize that Imperial Germany was not simply an incubator of Nazi ideology. This is revealed by the comparison with Nordau, and this is also why we have to situate the origins of Zionism—as an alternative modernity—within this period. As Eley explains in his *Reshaping the German Right*:

The desire to make Wilhelmine intellectual history obey an iron logic of proto-Nazi development is clearest and most pernicious in Anglo-American discussions of the idea of the Volk, which have normally reflected the belief in a peculiar mystical tradition of thinking about racial or national matters in Germany linking Nazism to early nineteenth-century romanticism.⁶⁸

In this historiography, the crisis of the 1890s is located midway on a continuum from romanticism to Nazism. What it fails to account for is the alternative modernities and divergent visions that this period engendered, not all of which were the precursors to Nazism. Zionism was one such vision, which exemplified the hopes and dangers of the dialectic of modernity.

Both Nordau and Langbehn imagined the urgency of spiritual, national, and physical regeneration as the cure for the degeneration of the present. Whereas for Langbehn science is to blame for the degeneracy of the German

spirit and art represents its singular redemption, for Nordau, just the opposite is true: modern art is the expression of society's degeneration and scientific rationality represents the only chance for its redemption. The decisive battle, as we have already seen with Langbehn, pits art against science, and, in the case of Nordau, trumpets the vanquishing of degenerate art (and thereby the degenerates themselves) by the evolutionary logic of science. Although their arguments for overcoming the degeneracy of the 1890s were divergent in terms of the specific solutions proffered as well as in the politics of their subsequent reception histories, both Langbehn and Nordau sought to effect national regeneration through an apocalyptic, decisionist logic. The issue that I want to tackle in the next section is how this logic informed the conceptualization of Nordau's "true moderns" in *Degeneration* and, a few years later, the figure of the muscle Jew.

Muscle Jews as "true moderns"

In the first part of *Degeneration*, Nordau begins by mocking the uncritically pervasive use of the term "*fin de siècle*" to describe virtually anything, from *fin de siècle* moods of sickness and feelings of exhaustion to *fin de siècle* kings, bishops, officials, weddings, and girls. To illustrate the wild deployment of the concept, he cites a number of instances from French journals and books where the concept had recently been invoked. To quote three of his examples:

After his execution, the body of the murderer Pranzini underwent an autopsy. The head of the secret police cuts off a large piece of skin from the corpse, has it tanned, and the leather made into cigar-cases and card-cases for him and some friends. *Fin-de-siècle* official. An American gets married in a gas-factory, then boards a hot-air balloon with his bride, and goes on a honeymoon in the clouds. *Fin-de-siècle* wedding. An attaché of the Chinese embassy publishes clever works in French under his own name. He negotiates with banks for a large loan for his government and draws large advances for himself on the unfinished contract. Later, it comes out that his French secretary composed the books and that he had swindled the banks. *Fin-de-siècle* diplomat.

(E, I:8–9)

Although the examples are admittedly silly and barely help to illuminate the concept of *fin de siècle*, they do share a common feature and indicate something important for Nordau, namely "contempt for traditional views of respectability and morality" (E, I:10).⁶⁹ Established customs, traditional moral authorities, and conventional ways of doing things have been glibly displaced. Expressed by Nordau with an even finer point, *fin de siècle* indicates the "practical release from conventional discipline [*Zucht*]" (E, I:10).

The idea of “discipline,” arguably the central concept in Nordau’s lexicon, had, at one time, insured the reliability of moral authorities, the stability of values, the containment of lewdness, the steadfastness of ideals in art, and the sublimation of base desires and greed. Historically, through the discipline of their form, artists, poets, and musicians taught us what is good, valuable, beautiful, enviable, and inspirational. But this is no longer the case in the *fin de siècle*, which announces “the end of an order to the world that for thousands of years satisfied logic, fettered depravity, and in every art matured something of beauty” (E, I:11). Forms have become blurred, order forsaken, boundaries upset, logic and values abandoned—all in favor of undisciplined chaos. The catchall term for this breakdown is “degeneration.”

Nordau’s concern is less about properly defining “*fin de siècle*” and more about untangling the contemporary symptoms and etiology of degeneracy and its attendant horror of formlessness. He proclaims at the start of this chapter that, when we speak of *fin de siècle*, we “ought to correctly say *fin-de-race*” (E, I:5) since what is taking place is not simply the end of a century, but rather the degenerative end of a race, something that—for various historical reasons—is occurring in the 1890s. To understand his point, we should dwell briefly on the etymology of “degeneration” or “*Entartung*.” In German, the verb “*entarten*” (“to degenerate”) means “*aus der Art schlagen*,” approximately, “not true to form or kind” (*Art*). It implies a process of withdrawal (*ent-arten*) or movement away from an ideal or, at least, normative type. In English and French, the word “degenerate” (from the Latin “*degenerates*”) also contains the idea of a debased movement away from a norm as well as the idea of a “natural” form, namely a “race” or genus. Thus, to be degenerate, means “to deviate from one’s race or kind.”

To explain his idea that degeneration is a “*fin-de-race*,” he cites the seminal text of the French psychiatrist Bénédict-Augustin Morel, *Traité des dégénérescences physiques, intellectuelles et morales de l’espèce humaine et des causes qui produisent ces variétés maladives* (1857), the first articulation of degeneration as a hereditary, race-based problem:

Degeneration has to be spoken of as a pathological deviation from an original type (*Typus*). This deviation, even if, at the outset, it was ever so slight, contains transmissible elements of such a nature that anyone bearing them becomes more and more incapable of fulfilling his tasks to humanity; moreover, intellectual progress [*geistiger Fortschritt*], which is already inhibited in his own person, finds itself endangered in his descendents as well.

(E, I:32)

Building on Morel’s work, Nordau argues that degenerate organisms—as pathological deviations from the norm—produce offspring, which, to an even greater degree, suffer from debilitation and malformations.⁷⁰ As examples of

physical degeneracy, he names various deformities such as stunted growth, asymmetry of the face and cranium, protruding ears, squinted eyes, pointed or flat palates, syn- and polydactylia, all of which are meant to establish the power and value of the norm over the deviation.⁷¹ These offspring, living among “us” today at the *fin de siècle*, represent the “end of race”: although Nordau is optimistic that they will “fortunately soon become sterile” (E, I:32) and die out, the societal risk is that degenerates will be “imitated,” rather than shunned, as if their deviations somehow represented new social norms. Here, we can detect the first expression of Nordau’s Social Darwinism, something that runs throughout the entire book and will, later, become an essential part of his conceptualization of the tasks of Zionism. It is no coincidence that “*Zucht*” (Nordau’s term for “discipline”) and “*Zuchtwahl*” (natural selection) are terms from evolutionary biology that Nordau uses to assess social phenomena.⁷²

The task of his cultural exposé is not simply to confirm that the originators of the *fin de siècle* movements in literature and art—from Ibsen and Zola to Symbolism, Decadence, and so-called Mysticism—are physical degenerates, but rather to argue that these dangerous works of art and literature themselves provide sufficient grounds for tracing the etiology of degeneracy in Europe and expecting it to be completely overcome through the evolutionary logic of Social Darwinism. For the next 400 pages, Nordau cites case after case of cultural degeneracy, placing virtually every artist or movement of the contemporary, European avant-garde under one of his three rubrics of degeneration: mysticism, egomania, or pseudo-realism or naive naturalism. In the final analysis, only the calm rationality of science, with its normalizing rules and clarity of perception, can save humanity from the corrupt morality and undisciplined forms of the degenerate artists.

Nordau’s book is essentially a moralizing treatise on the loss of form and its dire social consequences. By building on Morel’s definition of degeneration and cataloguing the undisciplined excesses of his day, Nordau warns his readership about the loss of original “types” through the blurring of boundaries and the haphazard mixing of unconventional or unnatural traits. He writes, “Forms lose their outlines and are dissolved into floating fog” (E, I:12), unprecedented stimulations and new combinations of qualities dazzle the senses, and an anything-goes morality displaces traditional social customs and laws. In the same way that previously reliable laws and stable forms for organizing social reality have disintegrated into nothingness, Nordau argues that the physiology of the body of the degenerate confirms this loss of form: the degenerate man cannot correctly order his perceptions of the world and, instead, “allows his brain-centers to produce semi-lucid, nebulously blurred images and scarcely formed, embryonic thoughts” (E, I:40). Through their delusional perceptions of the world, skewed by emotional outbursts, physical deformities, and mystical reverie, the degenerate can only render quivering, inaccurate impressions of the world.

Degenerates are nothing more than “intellectual eunuchs” [*Geisteseunuchen*] (E, I:58) who, through their weakened minds and feeble perceptions, produce works of art and literature that ultimately have the effect of destroying the social and moral fabric of civil society.

This is why so-called degenerate artists are to be loathed. They bring new, blurred, and hybrid forms into being and thereby disrupt the authority of traditional, binary distinctions for ordering the world. The “trembling eye” of the degenerate artist not only produces painterly “derangements” under spuriously intellectual rubrics such as impressionism, pointillism, and colorism (E, I:51), but also produces a chaotic world devoid of moral and social discipline.⁷³ Such works, he argues, can only become “intelligible” if we consider them within the context of the “visual disturbances of degenerates and hysterics studied by researchers at the Charcot school” (E, I:51). He uses the broad category of “mysticism” to group together these disparate painters with other artists and authors who he believes—due to their hysteria or degeneracy—have abandoned, willingly or not, the clarity and order of the scientifically disclosed world: “The mystic dissolves the firm outlines of phenomena; he spreads a veil over them and conceals them in blue vapor. He muddies what is clear and makes what is transparent opaque” (E, I:109–110).

But the ultimate danger, Nordau asserts, comes from the fact that degenerates throw the binary organization of the world into disarray: good and evil, virtue and vice, right and wrong, beautiful and ugly become nothing more than empty, “arbitrary distinctions” (E, I:35). This anxiety becomes particularly evident in his discussion of the literary decadence of the novels of Joséphin Péladan and J.-K. Huysmans. In commenting on Péladan’s ideas and the content of his novels, Nordau explains that for Péladan:

the highest intellectual aim of humankind is to hear and thoroughly appreciate Wagnerian music; the highest development of morality consists in renouncing one’s gender attributes and in transforming oneself into a hermaphrodite (Androgyne and Gynander); he can give up and retake his body at will, soar into space as an “astral being,” and subject to his will the entire supernatural power of the world of spirits, both the good and the bad.

(E, I:393)

Here, Nordau condemns Péladan alongside Wagner for incorrectly understanding the concept of evolution: the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art) is a mystical amalgamation of everything, rather than a scientific process of critical differentiation. The figure of the hermaphrodite or androgyne represents the breakdown of the binary male/female. The spiritual mysticism of “soaring” into space is a testament to the rejection of science and the world of the Enlightenment. In effect, Péladan represents the wild destruction of the disciplined grounds for ordering and preserving civil society.

But he saves the brunt of his vitriol for Huysmans, certainly the best-known decadent artist of the *fin de siècle*. In his novel *À rebours*, we not only find a radical reevaluation of traditional binary categories for ordering experience—male/female, right/wrong, progress/decline, health/sickness, moral/immoral, true/false, and so forth—but we also encounter the representation of a world in which binary categories themselves are no longer the reliable structuring matrices for organizing experience. The novel portrays the perceptions and experience of a physically anemic and nervous man by the name of Duke Jean des Esseintes, who can no longer distinguish between dreams and reality, right and wrong, near and far, present and past; he is, instead, nothing more than the embodiment of an endless array of monstrous sensory experiences. Nordau sums up his description of Esseintes with these overblown words:

We now have him, the “super-man” of whom Baudelaire and his disciples dream, and whom they wish to resemble: physically, sick and feeble; morally, an arrant scoundrel; intellectually, an unspeakable idiot who passes his days choosing the colors of things to artistically drape his room, observing the movements of mechanical fish, sniffing perfumes and sipping liqueurs. . . . His complete inability to adapt reveals itself in the fact that every contact with the world and other human beings brings pain. Naturally, he heaves the blame of his discomfort on his fellow men and rails at them to no end. He classes them altogether as scoundrels and blockheads and hurls horrible, anarchic maledictions at them. . . . A parasite of the lowest level of education [*Rückbildungsstufe*], a sort of human sacculus [a parasite, Nordau notes, that is virtually indistinguishable from the “diseased excrescence of its host’s intestines”], who would be condemned, if he were poor, to die miserably of hunger, provided society did not, through a misguided charity, afford him the necessities of life in an idiot asylum.

(E, II:110–120)

The degenerate hero of Huysmans’s novel thus stands radically opposed to Nordau’s ideal of the “sane” and “healthy” man who sees clear forms, articulates sensible ideas, acts with purpose, restrains his emotions, adapts easily to new situations, and is physically disciplined and strong. In stark contrast to Huysmans’s figure of degeneracy, Nordau posits the ideally formed body and the disciplined behavior of the “true moderns,” which, as we will see shortly, are exemplarily embodied by the Zionist muscle Jew.

As Barbara Spackman has argued in her compelling article on Huysmans, “Interversions,” decadence and degeneration do not merely signal the reevaluation of inherited binaries but rather the disruption of the very system or logic of absolute difference that authorizes the tools for organizing the world into binaries.⁷⁴ In her words, “permutations of ‘male’ and ‘female’

produce figures of androgynes, hermaphrodites, eunuchs, and unequivocal creatures *sans sexe*" (36), resulting in a system of monstrosity, contamination, and "diversity" rather than a logic of binary difference. Her formulation helps clarify the structuring decisionism of Nordau's argument. Nordau considers degeneration to be a crisis of formlessness: degeneracy blurs outlines, contaminates structures of difference, and disintegrates the binary logic of the world. His book is an assault on degeneracy, executed through the binary logic of scientific rationality. He insists that "the concepts healthy and sick, moral and immoral, social or anti-social are as valid for art as for every other human activity, and there is not a scintilla of reason for regarding a work of art in any other light than that in which we view every other manifestation of individuality" (E, II:148). In other words, the argument is structured—as a critical decisionism—by the very logic that decadence and degeneracy upset.

As a good social Darwinist, Nordau ends the book on a note of "therapeutic" optimism, directed at the "highest educated classes" (E, II:545), who are not yet entirely seduced by the "ravings" of the degenerate artists:

The people will recover from their present fatigue. The weak, the degenerate will perish; the strong will adapt themselves to the achievements of civilization or will subordinate them to their own organic capacity. The aberrations in art have no future. They will disappear when civilized humanity has triumphed over its condition of exhaustion. The art of the twentieth century will connect itself at every point to that of the past, but it will have a new task to fulfill: to bring a stimulating variety to the uniformity of cultured life, an influence that probably just science, many centuries later, will be in a position to exert over the great majority of humankind.

(E, II:544)

In other words, Nordau predicts that the twentieth century will bring an end to both degeneracy and degenerate art; art will return to its traditional, canonical forms, and science will combat superstition and mysticism through enlightenment and the force of its truth. In the end, only the "true moderns" (E, II:562)—those who are best adapted to the demands of modern society through discipline, rationality, and clarity of vision—will survive.

Whereas for Langbehn the return to the art of Rembrandt marked the safe passage out of the crisis of the 1890s, for Nordau, it is the triumph of science over degenerate art. For both authors, however, the final battle comes down to a do-or-die struggle between art and science, wherein the respective victor will sow the seeds of redemptive regeneration. Both of their apocalyptic fantasies conclude with an invocation of violence—organized and orchestrated according to the binary logic of a final decision—to describe the resolution of the crisis. Langbehn's reinvigorated artist-peasant beats the professor of science to death in a bloody battle for the future of German blood;

Nordau's apocalyptic fantasy ends with the degenerate "vermin" being crushed and beaten to death by the "true moderns."

Mystics, especially ego-maniacs and filthy pseudo-realists, are enemies to society of the worst kind. Society must unconditionally defend itself against them. Whoever believes with me that society is the natural organic form of humanity, in which alone it can exist, prosper, and continue to develop itself to higher destinies; whoever considers civilization to be a good that has value and deserves to be defended, must mercilessly crush the anti-social vermin [*Ungeziefer*] under his thumbs. . . . We cry: "Get out of our civilized society [*Gesittung*]! Rove far from us! . . . There is no place among us for such lusting rapiers and if you dare return to us, we will pitilessly beat you to death with clubs."

(E, II:556–57)

The degenerate artists are no better than vermin and must be expelled or clubbed to death in order for Nordau and the ranks of the true moderns to found a new, regenerated society based on the mechanisms of social evolution. It is here that Nordau's own ideas for violent social exclusion evidence a decidedly uncomfortable resemblance to a whole host of racist ideologies obsessed with ridding society of its so-called "anti-social vermin." In Nordau's formulation, the anti-social vermin are not simply to be separated from the rest of society, as Alfred Damm suggested in his Berlin lectures, but rather they are to be mercilessly crushed to death and beaten with clubs. The violence of this image of social purification cannot be easily exaggerated.

In Nordau's wake, the concept of the "*Ungeziefer*" has consistently indicated the abject of society, the absolutely vile deviation from the norm. Franz Kafka famously thematized this in his short story *Die Verwandlung* (The Metamorphosis), in which Gregor Samsa wakes up to find himself transformed into an "*Ungeziefer*" and is ultimately killed by his family for the sake of preserving bourgeois society.⁷⁵ More ominously, the association of Jews with parasites and vermin was a persistent topos of Nazi propaganda, something that was given a direct visual association in the virulently anti-Semitic Nazi film *The Eternal Jew* (1940). Although I am not suggesting that the ideas expressed in Nordau's *Degeneration* led to the purifying ideology of National Socialism, it is worth remembering that Nordau's critique of degeneracy as well as the violence of his Social Darwinism and cultural decisionism did have an afterlife in the fervid adoption of race-science and eugenics in the service of state formation. Indeed, it is one of the ironies of history that Nordau has to be saddled with the responsibility for popularizing the very term "Entartung," a concept that was—in its violently normalizing corporeal dimensions—later elaborated and staged by the Nazis in their infamous exhibition of 1937, "Entartete Kunst" (Degenerate Art), in a way that closely parallels Nordau's 1892 critique.

While one can certainly argue that key elements of National Socialist ideology were first conceptualized around the *fin de siècle*—one might cite Langbehn as an originator of *völkisch* nationalism, or Nordau’s diatribe against “degenerate art” and the eugenics of Social Darwinism—I am not interested in attempting to trace the reception history of Nordau’s ideas past his turn to Zionism in 1895 and his own formulation of the muscle Jew a few years later. In what follows, then, I want to show how Nordau conceived of the muscle Jew according to the same logic as the “normal man,” who, rising to the challenges of modernity, does not degenerate but rather reembodies his race by becoming a “true modern.” To do so, I will turn to how Nordau and Herzl conceptualized the early Zionist project as a politics of the regenerated Jewish body. I will focus on their descriptions of the body at the first Zionist congresses and in several short articles that they published during the first years of Zionism, concluding with a detailed analysis of Nordau’s muscle Jew vis-à-vis the project of *Degeneration*. What we will recognize is that all the traits attributed to the “true modern”—the health and originality of race, clarity of vision and purpose, strength of body, discipline, and adaptability—have been transposed to the muscle Jew. Applying the ideas of Social Darwinism and the decisionist logic of the crisis of the 1890s to his critique of anti-Semitism, Nordau conceives of Zionism as a project of regeneration effected on the body of the Jew.

In the speech that he delivered at the First Zionist Congress in 1897, Nordau described two kinds of Jewish suffering: the first, material suffering, encompassed the great majority of orthodox, Eastern Jews who lived in poverty and were legally disenfranchised, second-rate citizens of their “host” countries; the second, moral suffering, referred to the minority of assimilated, Western Jews, who had, by and large, abandoned Judaism but were still not fully welcome in their respective countries of birth or residence.⁷⁶ They suffered even more bitterly, Nordau argued, because they were forced to hide their Jewish heritage and nevertheless were still subject to anti-Semitic aspersions. He concludes the speech with a strangely veiled threat—directed foremost at the Jews attending the Zionist Congress who might act as ambassadors to Jews and Christians in general—that Jews could destructively “degenerate,” like lethal microbes, if the Zionist cause is not supported:

Neither Christians nor Jews can indifferently ignore Jewish suffering. It is a great sin to let a people degenerate [*verkommen zu lassen*] in mental and physical need . . . it is a sin to the work of civilized society [*Gesittung*], and the Jewish people could and would gladly be energetic partners. And it can turn into a great danger for everyone if strong-willed people, whose size extends beyond the average in good and bad, become embittered through undignified treatment and, through embitterment, become enemies to the existing order [*Ordnung*]. Microbiology teaches us that microorganisms that

are harmless as long as they are living in open-air turn into terrible, disease-causing pathogens, if one deprives them of oxygen and, to use the technical language, transforms them into anaerobes. Governments and peoples had better beware of making the Jews into anaerobic beings. They could have a high price to pay, regardless of what they do, to get rid of these Jews who they turned into pests [*Schädling*] by their own guilt.

(SP, I:20)

Unlike the racist, anti-Semitic arguments of the day, there was nothing inherently “degenerate” about Jews, at least not in the sense that Nordau articulated in his cultural exposé of 1892. But he does warn, however, that Jews could degenerate into particularly destructive pests, should their disenfranchisement continue.

What makes this warning so striking (besides the fact that it was uttered as part of an opening speech at the First Zionist Congress) is that Nordau has clumsily imported the conceptual terminology of *Degeneration* into the Zionist cause but with a defiant, Jewish twist: “Civilized society,” with its rules of discipline and order, is still the goal; but now, if Jews are not allowed to participate in its construction as partners, at the very least, through their own efforts at nation building, Nordau admonishes both assimilated Jews and Christians alike that the embittered Jews, through their strong wills, might be transformed into disease-causing pathogens who will undermine its very foundations. Whereas a few years earlier parasites, microbes, and vermin were exclusively identified with the “degenerates” who were to be shunned and crushed by the “true moderns”—as the only rational defenders of civil society—now degeneracy could be reembodied, as it were, by Jews working to subvert the anti-Semitic hegemony. Far from the weak and ineffectually degenerate Jews of the anti-Semitic imagination and equally far from the degenerate artists crushed to death by the true moderns, these microbe-like “pests” would vigorously exact revenge on civil society.

Needless to say, this formulation of the embittered Zionist Jew as destructive anaerobe would not be Nordau’s greatest claim to fame within the Zionist movement. In fact, at the Second and Third Zionist Congresses in 1898 and 1899, he would entirely forgo this revaluation of parasitic degeneracy in favor of a mythically heroic figure of regeneration, namely the muscle Jew. To be fair to Nordau, he—very much unlike contemporary anti-Semitic ideologues such as Houston Stewart Chamberlain or the self-hating Otto Weininger—never considered Jews inherently “degenerate” nor did he endorse the racial determinism and popular conspiracy theories of the anti-Semitic imagination. Whereas Weininger, for example, gladly co-opted Chamberlain’s arguments of Jewish inferiority in his *Geschlecht und Charakter* (Sex and Character), considering the Jew to be “a spreading parasite, straggling all over the earth and finding true root nowhere, . . .

[able] to adapt himself to every circumstance and every race, becoming, like the parasite, a new creature in every different host, although remaining essentially the same,”⁷⁷ Nordau only invoked the concepts and arguments that he introduced in *Degeneration* in order to describe the range of Jewish suffering and to advocate for a national solution. As Anita Shapira has pointed out with respect to Nordau and his contemporaneous German Zionist colleagues, his “acceptance of the anti-Semitic diagnosis did not entail concomitant acceptance of the racist deterministic prognosis preached by anti-Semitic ideologues.”⁷⁸ Jews would only behave like “parasites” if they were working to undermine the oppressive social and political structures that treated them as such.

Nevertheless, in the founding years of Zionism, Nordau and Herzl sometimes legitimized the anti-Semitic diagnosis of Jewish degeneracy through their increasingly nationalistic rhetoric of moral, physical, social, and even linguistic regeneration. In 1898, for example, shortly after the First Zionist Congress in Basel, Nordau published an essay entitled “Die Aufgaben des Zionismus” (The Tasks of Zionism) in which he argued that Zionism had two fundamental goals: the first is “to conquer” Palestine for the Jewish people and the second is “to prepare” the Jewish people for Palestine.⁷⁹ He considers the second to be the absolute prerequisite of the first and urges Jews to begin to think of themselves simultaneously as a single “people” (*Volk*) and autonomous citizens who, with the discipline of a soldier, could contribute to the reformation of the fragmented whole. By depriving Jews of “organic coherence” and “unity,” Nordau argues, “the Galut [exile] made a chaos out of us,” creating a people completely without the knowledge, ability, and experience for establishing the necessary infrastructure (from police headquarters and juridical organizations to administrations for taxation, postage, engineering, and education) to build a civil society (AZ, 323). The first thing that every single Jew had to learn was:

to feel the affairs of the entire Jewish people as one’s own personal concern and to listen to the leaders that they chose with iron-like obedience; in other words, the most engaged possible participation in the affairs of the people and manly discipline [*Mannszucht*].

(AZ, 324)⁸⁰

Through discipline, always a masculine quality for Nordau, Jews could relearn lost physical ideals, moral principles, social behaviors, worthy customs, and a serious work ethic before immigrating to Palestine. In order to “become, once again, a fully entitled citizen [*Bürger*] of his own people” (AZ, 325), the body and behavior patterns of the Jew had to be reformed in accordance with the standards of bourgeois civil society. Although he concedes that it took Moses “forty years to educate his people” (AZ, 327), Nordau is confident that the Zionist program of disciplined regeneration will

take place much faster. Through a rigorous work ethic that entailed the creation of order, unity, and harmony of purpose, Jews could act “like good soldiers” (AZ, 326) charged with vigorously reconstituting their race and methodically establishing a new society in Palestine.

Elaborating on the transformation of the Jew into a soldier of regeneration, Nordau gave a rousing speech to Jewish college students the following year in which he allied his own Jewish heritage with a triumphal strain of Greek history: far from being condemned to historical oblivion like the routed Helots, Zionist Jews—as masculine fighters—would now reembody the heroic, martial tradition of the Spartans.⁸¹ In this deeply personal account of his own path to Zionism, Nordau recounts how, in his childhood, he learned about the defeated Helots and even planned, at one time, to write his own “Helot tragedy” (HS, 376). This never happened, he tells his listeners, and he forgot about the Helots until “the war howls of anti-Semitism” (HS, 376) at the *fin de siècle* thrust them back before his eyes: Jews, he feared, might become nothing more than modern-day Helots. Zionism, he adamantly retorts, is precisely why Jews will never become like the poor Helots; Zionist Jews, he concludes, “are Spartans. . . . For to be a Zionist means to be doubly and triply a fighter” (HS, 378). Through “manly discipline”—the keyword in his lexicon for combating the ills of degeneracy—and military dominance, Nordau fashioned Zionism into an ideology of the Jew–Greek warrior.⁸²

But it would be Theodor Herzl, the founder of Zionism, who fully articulated the violently “degenerate” counter-image to the new heroism of the Zionist muscle Jew through his description of the figure of “*Mauschel*,” the hapless “*Ostjude*.”⁸³ About a month and a half after the First Zionist Congress, Herzl wrote an infamous article in which argued that “*Mauschel*”—speaking Yiddish or speaking German with a Jewish-Yiddish accent—was “anti-Zionist.”⁸⁴ Zionism, in this early formulation, is exclusively allied with the Western-European traditions of nationality and culture, whereas Yiddish and Yiddish speakers are denigrated as antithetical to this project:

The Germans are a nation of poets and thinkers because they have produced Goethe, Schiller, and Kant. The French are brave and brilliant because they have brought forth Baynard, Duguesclin, Montaigne, Voltaire, and Rousseau. We are a nation of hagglers and crooks because *Mauschel* practices usury and speculates on the stock exchange. . . . *Mauschel* is the curse of the Jews!⁸⁵

Here, Herzl conflates the speech with the person speaking. Since national languages have great cultural traditions, Zionism was conceived—in Herzl’s German—as the origin of Jewish cultural and national greatness. It sought to transform the Jew speaking *Mauschel* in the Eastern European ghetto and living-off the expanding world system of capital into the culturally refined Jew

speaking German and living in a civil society derived from the ideals of the Enlightenment.

Indeed, Herzl never hid his dislike and distrust of Yiddish. In *Der Judenstaat* (The Jewish State) (1895), the founding text of modern-day Zionism, for example, he imagines the new nation to be a “federation of tongues,” but not including the “stunted and crumpled jargons of those ghetto languages.”⁸⁶ Yiddish, always already a non-national language, would not be given any space—whether literal or figurative—in Herzl’s state, for it was nothing “but the stealthy tongue of prisoners.”⁸⁷ Arguably co-opting some of the nationalist and anti-Semitic rhetoric prevalent in contemporary right-wing political ideologies of pan-Germanism, Herzl peremptorily declares that “*Mauschel*” and “the Jew” are not from “the same race [*Rasse*]”⁸⁸ and ascribes the pantheon of anti-Semitic stereotypes to *Mauschel*: insolence, arrogance, deceit, and greed. *Mauschel* is nothing but “a distortion of character, something unspeakably low and repugnant [*etwas unsagbar Niedriges und Widerwärtiges*].”⁸⁹ Zionism, then, became a task of trying to separate them, a separation enacted in terms of language and on bodies. Herzl conceded that it is “difficult to prove that they are not [of the same race]”⁹⁰; however, alongside Max Nordau, he endeavored to do precisely that. If *Mauschel* could somehow be severed from the Jewish people—if not through racial sophistry and assertion then through linguistic, corporeal, and national regeneration—the Jewish state would be one step closer to realization.

In perhaps the most violent, nationalist image he ever gave to the Zionism, he ends his article on “*Mauschel*” with an admonition that Zionism “could act like [Wilhelm] Tell”:

When Tell got ready to shoot the apple from the head of his son, he had a second arrow in waiting. If the first missed, the second was to serve as revenge. Friends, the second arrow of Zionism is meant for the chest of *Mauschel*.⁹¹

Schiller’s legendary play, *Wilhelm Tell*, to which Herzl was undoubtedly alluding, is a call for nation formation, motivated by the recurring mantra, “*Wir sind ein Volk, und einig wollen wir handeln*” (We are one people, and as one we will act).⁹² In Herzl’s modern incarnation, the potential failure of Zionism will seek revenge by scapegoating the repugnant, Yiddish-speaking, ghetto Jews.

By 1899, Herzl declared—somewhat more compassionately—that Zionism was “a kind of new Jewish care for the sick,” quoting its justification from a poem by Heinrich Heine, “Das neue Israelitische Hospital zu Hamburg,” in which Jews suffer from “that thousand-year old family affliction” of living in the Diaspora.⁹³ As Herzl says, “We have stepped in as volunteer nurses, and we want to cure patients—the poor, sick Jewish people—by means of a healthful way of life on our own ancestral soil.” He conceives of his work

as a kind of altruistic deed for the sake of the helpless: “People should never forget that the cause which we have championed was once the most hopeless, the most lost, the most despised thing in the world.”⁹⁴ Here, once again, Herzl extends the anti-Semitic stereotype of the “degenerate” Jew in order to articulate the “regenerative” project of Zionism. In fact, a few years before becoming a Zionist, Nordau had concluded *Degeneration* with a similar call for healthy, truly modern men to step forward and help those who had not yet entirely degenerated:

It is the sacred duty of all healthy and moral men to take part in the work of protecting and saving those who are not already too deeply diseased. Only if everyone does his part will it be possible to dam up the mental sickness.

(E, II:556)

In quite the same way, Herzl and Nordau now considered Zionism to be a salvational movement predicated on the urgency of regenerating and redeeming both the Jewish body and, by extension, the Jewish people.

Both Nordau and Herzl thus urged Jews to become physically stronger, healthier, and more disciplined in order to achieve a decidedly European concept of nationality. Building on the ideal of the disciplined Jewish soldier, it was Nordau who most famously called forward a new “race” of Jews who, through their special adaptation, are capable of realizing the national goals of Zionism. Exactly unlike Herzl’s description of *Mauschel*, the celebrated new genus—*Art* or “type”—was the “muscle Jew” (*Muskeljude*). Nordau first mentioned the need for “muscular Judaism” at the Second Zionist Congress in 1898. A couple of years later, he fully articulated the concept in two articles published in *Die Jüdische Turnzeitung*, and, in 1902, Herzl even imagined the future Palestine to be populated by strong, German-speaking muscle Jews in his colonial travel narrative, *Altneuland*.⁹⁵

Whereas earlier Jews and non-Jews of the Enlightenment such as Dohm and Grégoire called for cultural “*Bildung*” (education) and social “*Verbesserung*” (improvement) to achieve assimilation within German society, Nordau shifted attention to what he perceived to be “a missing corporeal upbringing” [*eine fehlende, körperliche Erziehung*] (JTZ, 1902, 7:110). He urges Jews—in his case, male Jews—to become strong and muscular by participating in athletic associations and argues that exercise, specifically gymnastics (*das Turnen*), is of the utmost importance for the health of the Jewish race.⁹⁶ Due to a range of historical reasons largely connected to anti-Semitism and the challenges of life in the Diaspora, the Jewish body had been “destroyed” (*abgetötet*): in the cramped quarters of the Jewish ghetto, Jews forgot how to move their limbs freely; in dark houses, their eyes blinked nervously; out of fear of persecution, their formerly strident voices turned to mere whispers (JTZ, 1900, 2:10). As a redemptive figure, then, the muscle Jew represents

both a future ideal and the return to a heroic Jewish tradition characterized by the likes of Bar Kochba and the Maccabees. In his rally-cry for “muscular Judaism,” Nordau proudly touts the idea that Zionists are rejoining “our oldest traditions by becoming strong-chested, tautly-jointed, boldly-looking men” (*tiefbrüstige, strammgliedrige, kühnblickende Männer*) (JTZ, 1900, 2:10). Far from the hunched-over body, nervous disposition, and underdeveloped musculature of the degenerate, the muscle Jew exhibits elegant posture, decisive confidence, and, most of all, physical strength (Fig. 2.1).

Nordau’s muscle Jew not only built upon the heroism of Jewish history, but the concept was also suffused by a social ethos of survival of the fittest, in which Jews, overcoming the extenuating circumstances that rendered them weak and adapting to the new challenges of nation building, could now become “true moderns” in order to thrive. As Nordau writes in his call for all Jews to practice gymnastics:

Our muscles are outstandingly capable of development. . . . No one need be satisfied with the muscles they are given. Everyone can have the muscles that he wishes for. Methodical, persistent exercise is all that is necessary. Every Jew who is or believes himself to be weak can attain the musculature of an athlete.

(JTZ, 1902, 7:112)

Figure 2.1 “From the World of Jewish Gymnastics,” *Die Jüdische Turnzeitung* (January 1902).

Although a cursory reading may render these ideas more like a kind of self-help guide for achieving the body you've always wanted, the adaptability of the Jew through the cultivation of discipline and physical musculature explains precisely why the Jew is not "degenerate." After all, adaptability, as Nordau argued in *Degeneration*, is both the prerequisite of social evolution and the critical characteristic for becoming a "true modern."

Nordau's 1892 argument is thus quite consistent and continuous with his Zionist call for the re-creation of muscle Jews: through their heroic traditions, Jews embody precisely what degenerates are not. As he distinguishes in *Degeneration* between organisms and races that are degenerate and those that are capable of adapting themselves to historical circumstances:

As long as the vital powers of an individual as well as of a race are not entirely consumed, the organism makes efforts, actively or passively, to adapt itself by seeking to change injurious conditions or by adjusting itself in such a way that conditions that cannot be changed cause as little damage as possible. Degenerates, hysterics, and neurasthenics are not capable of adaptation. Therefore, they are fated to disappear. They will become irretrievably destroyed because they do not know how to come to terms with reality.

(E, II:528)

Jews, on the other hand, just like their muscles, are entirely capable of development and adaptation. Despite the historical challenges presented by anti-Semitism, Jews are not innately degenerate and cannot be classed among hysterics and neurasthenics. In fact, precisely because of their discipline and commitment to the ethical and social principles underlying civil society, they are capable of embodying the social-Darwinistic spirit of the "true moderns."

Although Nordau conceded that he was at first willing to accept the anti-Semitic stereotype of the weak Jew as a national-racial characteristic given the fact that some historical evidence exists that proves that Jews are "small" in stature and that present-day Jews are "on average somewhat smaller than Germans, Russians, Anglo-Saxons, and Scandinavians," he was convinced that Jews were not racially "degenerate" and that Jewish self-improvement was both possible and desirable (JTZ, 1902, 7:111). Their small size and ostensible physical weakness—something that may, upon first sight, appear to be "evidence of degeneration" (*Entartungserscheinung*)—can easily be explained, Nordau says, by the fact that Jews have "necessarily lost their ability for physical fitness, having lived for a thousand years deprived of exercise in the ghetto" (JTZ, 1902, 7:110). To regain it, all that is necessary is disciplined training.⁹⁷ At no point does Nordau ever situate Jews—whether assimilated, Western Jewry or so-called "*Mauschel*"-speaking Eastern Jewry—under the rubric of degeneracy that he developed in his 1892 book.

If Jews have “deviated from their race or kind,” to invoke the conceptual history of the term “degeneration,” then it is because the “original type”—namely, the heroic muscle Jew of the likes of Bar Kochba and the Maccabees—has been temporarily “destroyed” through the violent, historical mechanisms of anti-Semitism. Far from replicating the racial grounds for explaining the pervasiveness and expected death of both degenerate art and the degenerate artists themselves, Jews, Nordau maintains, represent a latent race of “Spartan” fighters who will not perish by the challenges that modernity presents. Instead, through their discipline and adaptability—the two, fundamental traits of the “true moderns”—the weak Jews will evolve back into muscle Jews, uniting, in turn, their scattered people and founding a new nation with all the scientific solidity, social order, and racial strength of the greatest European civil societies.

Articulated around a paternal picture of himself (Fig. 2.2), Nordau’s 1902 article, “What does Gymnastics Mean for us Jews?,” specifies precisely why gymnastics is central to the Zionist project: gymnastics not only makes one healthier “by facilitating the physical development of strength as well as beauty,” but it also “teaches manly discipline [*Manneszucht*], reciprocal adaptation to different personalities, and carefully constructed combinations of many efforts leading to a single, common goal” (JTZ, 1902, 7:109). Besides its corporeal benefits, gymnastics also embodies certain ideals—such as intellectual clarity, moral rectitude, and social competence—that correspond with races that are well-adapted, disciplined, and healthy. It is the perfect way of training individual Jews to strengthen their own bodies and work together for the attainment of a shared national goal. Jews thus gain in physical strength and moral character: muscle Jews are known for their “ruthless boldness,” “complete mastery of the muscle groups,” “energetic exclusion of inhibitions of an anxious or doubting nature,” and, finally, “mental nimbleness, clarity, and sharpness” (JTZ, 1902, 7:112). In the muscle Jew, intellectual acuity is matched by physical prowess—and it is this ideal which is to be cultivated through the propagation of the race.⁹⁸

It is, therefore, no coincidence that Nordau’s description of the muscle Jew is diametrically opposed to his descriptions of the degenerate characters in the novels of Péladan or Huysmans. Conceptually, the muscle Jew is essentially the outgrowth of Nordau’s “normal man,” who, rising to the challenges of modernity, transforms himself into a “true modern” and crushes the degenerates to death. This is how Nordau described the prototype of the muscle Jew in 1892:

The normal man, with his clear mind, logical thought, sound judgment, and strong will, sees, where the degenerate only gropes; he plans and acts where the latter only dozes and dreams; he drives him effortlessly from all the places where the life-springs of nature bubble up, and, in possession of all the good things of this earth, he

leaves to the impotent degenerate at most the shelter of the hospital, lunatic asylum, and prison, in contemptuous pity. Let us imagine the driveling Zoroaster of Nietzsche, with his cardboard lions, eagles, and serpents from a toyshop, or the noctambulist Des Esseintes of the Decadents, sniffing and licking his lips, or Ibsen's "solitary powerful" Stockmann, and his Rosmer lusting for suicide—let us imagine these beings in competition with men who rise early, and are not weary before sunset, who have *clear heads, solid stomachs, and hard muscles*: the comparison will provoke laughter.

(E, II:529, my emphasis)

Jüdische Turnzeitung.

No. 7.

Juli 1902.

III. Jahrg.

Was bedeutet das Turnen für uns Juden?

Von Dr. Max Nordau, Paris.

Das das Turnen die Gesundheit stärkt, die körperliche Entwicklung zur Kraft wie zur Schönheit fördert, das Selbstgefühl steigert, das ist bereits so oft wiederholt worden, dass es wie ein Gemeinplatz klingt. Es ist auch hinreichend betont worden, dass

das Turnen Manneszucht, gegenseitige Anpassung verschiedener Individualitäten, sorgfältig gefügtes Zusammenwirken vieler Anstrengungen zu einem einzigen gemeinsamen Ziele lehrt und dadurch einen ganz besonders hervorragenden erziehlischen Wert für uns



Max Nordau

dem man meines Erachtens nicht genug verweilt hat, und das ist unsere ungewöhnliche Eignung zu Leibesübungen aller Art.

Mancher Leser wird hier vielleicht verwundert blicken und den Kopf schütteln. Er wird mir möglicherweise missbilligend Neigung zu Paradoxen vorwerfen. Das macht: wir haben nur allzusehr die Gewohnheit, uns selbst unbewusst mit den Augen der

Juden hat, deren grösser Fehler Eigensinn, Steifnackigkeit und Widerwillen gegen die Anerkennung des Stammgenossen und nun gar gegen die Unterordnung unter ihn ist. Es giebt aber bei der Betrachtung des Turnens der Juden einen Gesichtspunkt, bei

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Figure 2.2 "What does Gymnastics Mean for us Jews?" *Die Jüdische Turnzeitung* (July 1902).

Just like the “normal” Jew, the normal man—able to adapt to the exigencies of modernity and become both potent and muscular—is characterized by clarity of perception, discipline, adaptability, and, most of all, physical strength. He rises early and works diligently all day long; he maintains focus and acts decisively; he works out and has washboard abs to show for it. He is the reembodyment of the strength of his race.

We can now conclude by once again foregrounding Nordau’s description of the muscle Jew against the argument in *Degeneration* and the decisionist logic structuring both this book and Langbehn’s *Rembrandt als Erzieher*. As we have seen, the muscle Jew redeems a past, mythological hero as well as embodies a future ideal; moreover, and perhaps even more importantly, the muscle Jew also represents the resolution of a crisis. The founders of Zionism imagined the movement as a regenerative project that radically broke from the present by, at once, harkening back to old ideals and positing the absoluteness of a forward-facing evolution. We might even say, then, that the muscle Jew represents the critical synthesis of two opposing, decisionist logics. On the one hand, the muscle Jew turns back to a bygone, mythological time as the embodiment of “true Jewishness,” something that is not entirely unlike Langbehn’s call for a return to Rembrandt as the embodiment of “true Germanness.” Langbehn uses Rembrandt as an “educator” in order to help regenerate the scattered German people and cultivate “*Volksthümlichkeit*,” a feeling of belonging and rootedness that is tied to the fertility of the ground. Indeed, Nordau’s call for the Jewish people to cultivate their own sense of *Volksthümlichkeit* is entirely compatible with this logic of national regeneration. And, on the other hand, the muscle Jew—through his discipline, adaptability, and strength—represents an evolutionary break in which the achievements of civilization are elevated, following the logic of Social Darwinism, to a higher, more refined level. As Nordau concludes *Degeneration* with these fateful words, which might just as well describe the tasks of Zionism and the duties of the muscle Jew:

The criteria by which the true moderns can be recognized and distinguished from impostors calling themselves modern are the following: Whoever preaches absence of discipline is an enemy of progress; whoever worships his “I” is an enemy to society. Society’s first premise is love of one’s neighbor and the capacity for sacrifice; progress is the effect of an ever more rigorous subjugation of the beast in man, of an ever tenser self-restraint, of an ever keener sense of duty and responsibility.

(E, II:562)

It might well be that the muscle Jew is modernity’s most emblematic expression of discipline, social progress, and regeneracy.

The origins of the muscle Jew are thus to be found within the field of competing visions emerging from the discursive regime of the 1890s, visions that include the decisionist structure of Langbehn and Nordau's apocalyptic critiques and their injunctions for regenerating both the nation and the body of the individual according to the logic of Social Darwinism. But the ultimate efficacy of their critiques rests not so much upon the temporal direction in which regeneration is realized or upon the specific program for regeneration; instead, it rests upon the necessity of founding violence to effect the decision: Langbehn's Rembrandt beats the professor of science to death in order to cultivate a *völkisch* return to the piety of the peasant; Nordau's true moderns crush the degenerate artists to death like vermin in order to cultivate the progressive ideals of an enlightened, civil society; and, finally, Zionism's soldiers and Nordau's muscle Jews shoot their arrows through the chest of *Mauschel*, the Eastern-European ghetto Jew, in order to cultivate heroic roots within a renewed people. In each case, the founding violence enacts regeneration by cutting off or stamping out its degenerate other. This, after all, is what crisis implies.