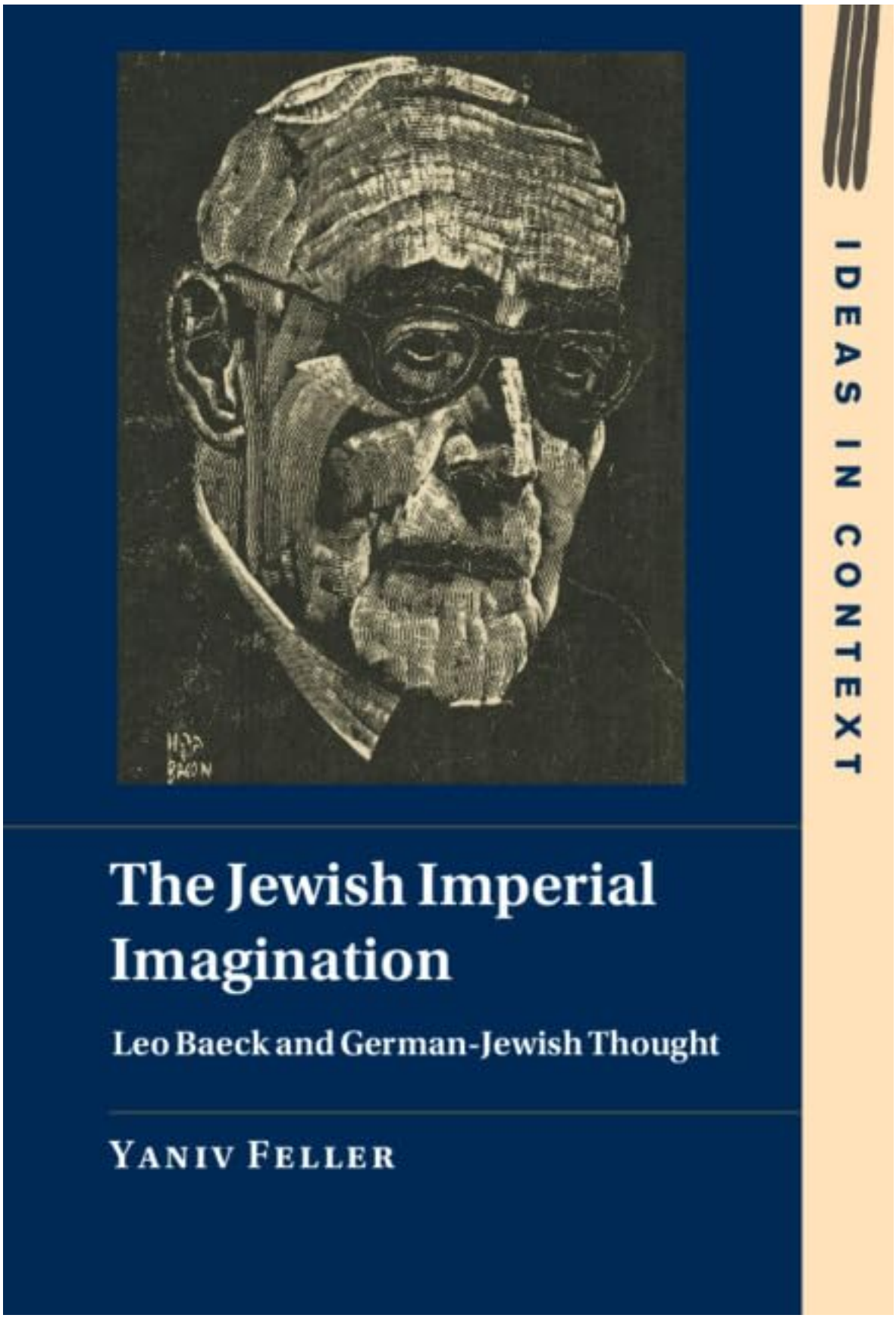
The Jewish imperial imagination: Leo Baeck and German-Jewish thought

01.11.2026 | Arie M. Dubnov

Yaniv Feller: The Jewish imperial imagination: Leo Baeck and German-Jewish thought.Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2024 243 pp., £85.00 (hardback)



Though it was only one horror site among many in the elaborate annihilation assembly line constructed by the Third Reich, Theresienstadt (Terezín) was a rather unusual place. Established in 1941 in a garrison city the northwestern corner of occupied Czechoslovakia, it functioned both as a ghetto and as a transit camp (its official purpose was to serve as a station on the way to Jewish ‘resettlement to the east’) and housed some of the most brilliant minds of German-speaking Jewry from Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Germany, including renowned writers,

professors, musicians, and artists, who secretly chronicled the brutal reality of their existence. A place of further profound contradictions, the Nazis were also keen on using Theresienstadt for their propaganda, presenting it as a 'model ghetto' put on display for the International Red Cross and in an infamous short 1944 documentary movie that was quickly given the sardonic title Der Führer schenkt den Juden eine Stadt ('The Führer Gives Jews a City'), a work of forced labor, directed by a German-Jewish prisoner and a Czech filmmaker, under close supervision of SS officers of the Jewish Affairs department of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia.

Among Theresienstadt's distinguished residents was Rabbi Leo Baeck (1873–1956), a towering figure in German Jewry known for his scholarship and spiritual leadership. Striking a perilous balance between defiance and collaboration with the devil, Baeck took on the mantle of leadership for the Reichsvertretung—the representative body for the Jewish population—after the Nazi regime had seized power. After he was deported to the camp in 1943, Baeck was involved in producing a lengthy manuscript on 'The Legal Position of the Jews in Europe, notably in Germany 1830–1930,' which was discovered only after the war and remains unpublished, and served briefly on its Council of Jewish Elders (Judentrat). While Hannah Arendt infamously branded him the 'Jewish Führer' for his leadership role, for most German Jews, Baeck was regarded as a symbol of resilience, a spiritual leader leading his people in the darkest of times. The lectures he delivered to fellow inmates on history, philosophy, and theology – most of which did not survive – added to his iconic image: a thinker who sought to remind those around him of the enduring power of ideas even in an environment where the very fabric of humanity was being unraveled. In extremis, the unbridgeable divide between the Greek civilization and the Jewish tradition he held dear, an idea that appeared in Baeck's earlier writings, was further emphasized. To demonstrate this idea, in one of these lectures, Baeck invoked Rudyard Kipling's haunting line from 'The Ballad of East and West' that carries heavy orientalist baggage: 'Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.' In a place where cultures collided in the most tragic of ways, why did Baeck choose to do so?

This poignant moment, rich with meaning and contradiction, lies at the heart of Yaniv Feller's eloquent and thought-provoking new book, which explores Baeck's religious and intellectual thought within the context of the Wilhelmine Empire and its dissolution, culminating in the destructive Third Reich. Based on a 2016 dissertation from the University of Toronto, Feller's book is not a biography—a daunting task already undertaken by the journalist Leonard Baker, who was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for his sweeping narrative, and in Michael A. Meyer's more recent book.[1] Instead, Feller is offering his readers an argument-driven analysis that stitches together religious studies and intellectual history, through a main thread: the notion that Baeck's conceptualization of Judaism and its role was congruent with German imperial imagination and informed by it.

This argument unfolds across six chapters, tracing the evolution of Baeck's thought from the early twentieth century, when he produced his best-known study The Essence of Judaism (Chapter 1), through World War I, when he volunteered to serve as a military chaplain (Feldrabbiner), and his response to neo-Marcionism and 'romantic religion' during the Weimar era (Chapter 2). It further examines Baeck's engagement with the Nazi regime's strict interpretation of Lutheranism and its de- Judaizing of the New Testament (Chapter 3), the catastrophic World War II years, marked by the destruction of German Jewry and a stark dichotomy between 'Athens' (representing Greek-Hellenic civilization informing German Kultur) and 'Jerusalem' (Chapters 4-5), and finally, the postwar decade, which grappled with the implications of Jewish suffering, German reparations, and the rebuilding of Jewish life in America and Palestine (Chapters 5-6). The book concludes with Baeck's painful acknowledgment in December 1945 that 'the history of German Jewry' had 'definitely ended' (p. 153).

Feller's working definition of 'imperial imagination' draws from Cornelius Castoriadis's concept of the 'social imaginary,' viewing the political project of Empire building as the source of underlying

values, norms, and social institutions—deep-seated ideas and almost axiomatic beliefs that shape perceptions of reality and interactions.[2] While he does not provide a comprehensive definition of 'Jewish imperial imagination' and admits that this imagination 'can be inconsistent and may contain multitudes and contradictions' (179), Feller takes it as 'a mediating concept between the shadow of empire in Baeck's thought and its real-life, political manifestations, thereby making imperial ideas visible' (12). These somewhat abstract conjectures become more tangible when applied to specific texts and demonstrated with particular case studies. Feller scores many points in reconstructing the Kaiserreich's unconventional imperialism and pushing his readers to go beyond the conventional prism nationalism studies provided for interpreters of modern German history. Despite lagging behind Britain and France, Germany aspired to establish itself as a global colonial power during the era of New Imperialism, possessing overseas territories in Africa, Polynesia, and China. It developed its own civilizing mission rhetoric and racial hierarchies and invested significantly in internal colonial efforts to 'Germanize' populations in contested borderland areas such as Alsace-Lorraine, Schleswig-Holstein, and what Feller terms 'Germany's Wild East.' Feller argues that Baeck's unconventional views on proselytizing should be understood within this context— not as a mimicry of imperial expansionism alone but as part of a 'Jewish commandment of selfpreservation' (34). According to this line of argumentation, Baeck's critique of Marcion and his modern followers, who sought to purify Christianity from its Jewish roots, was intended to enable Jews to engage in the German colonial adventure fully. Likewise, Baeck's 1933 bold assertion that 'a Jew who converts to bolshevism [sic] is an apostate' is interpreted not merely as an apologetic attempt to counter the Nazi propaganda campaign against 'Judeo-Bolshevism' but a gesture that reflected a convergence between his view of Judaism's role and contemporary imperial imagination (80-81). This line of reasoning is also used to explain Baeck's sympathetic views on Zionism—envisioning Palestine as a cultural soil (Kulturboden) for Jews—and his views on rebuilding Jewish life post-Holocaust in North America, which he perceived as an 'empty space devoid of people worthy of consideration, such as the natives' (161).

Leo Baeck's approach to history revolved around the history of ideas. In 1955, a year before his death, he articulated his vision for the institute bearing his name, stating that it should first and foremost be dedicated to documenting 'the history of Jewish philosophy in Germany, of theology, and of historiography.'[3] In this regard, Feller's book remains true to Baeck's spirit. Feller is also not a risk-averse scholar: Choosing to dedicate one's first book to a legendary figure who is revered and commemorated so widely is audacious. Feller chooses to walk a tightrope, but he does so elegantly, scrutinizing some of the ideas built into Baeck's iconography while avoiding the temptation of turning the book into a sacred cow slaughterhouse. Shifting our attention away from 'nation' to 'empire' gives his work its distinctive quality. This bold intervention is done without accusing earlier scholars of oversimplifying or making Jewish participation in German colonialism a taboo but encourages a more open, nonjudgmental exploration of the issue. The book's epilogue, which adopts a more impassioned critique of contemporary Jewish communal politics in Germany—particularly in light of the 2020 Mbembe Affair and the contentious, hopelessly futile, and by now tedious debates on BDS—appears somewhat disconnected from the main argument, with its connection feeling somewhat forced and artificial.

Like many argument-driven inquiries, while the book offers fresh perspectives, it occasionally overstretches its claims. Feller convincingly shows the degree to which Baeck's early intellectual project was contingent on a very German imperial epistemological framework and the extent to which he looked favorably at the idea of 'Germanization' of local populations. Yet, I failed to see direct textual evidence tying it to his views on Mission or showing that he explicitly thought of the German empire as a vehicle for spreading one's religion. Similarly, I found Feller's arguments about the German colonial gaze eastwards, shaped by a desire to strengthen the German grip over former Polish territories, convincing in the case of someone like Baeck who was born in Lissa (Leszno in Polish), a town annexed by Prussia in 1793, after the second partition of Poland. But is this unique or surprising? Feller is not mentioning Baeck's famous hometown compatriot, Rabbi Zvi Hirsh Kalischer (1795–1874) – often described as one of the 'forerunners of Zionism' – whose

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thought was similarly informed by the titanic cultural encounter between Polish and German nationalism. Indeed, the overall thesis could be strengthened if Feller had not left his protagonist in his splendid isolation but had explored Baeck's connections with other thinkers, mentors, and disciples. Overstating the persistence of imperial vocabulary can quickly eclipse issues of change, evolution, and adaptability. The question of whether the 'imperial imagination' remained the air Baeck breathed even after he acknowledged the tragic end of the German-Jewish partnership remains open, in my opinion. Lastly, one wonders what analytical work the descriptive adjective 'Jewish' does in the phrase 'Jewish imperial imagination.' It appears ambiguous, as Baeck's story could also be read as an example of an ecstatic Jewish involvement in a German imperial imagination, akin to the support French and British Jews offered their respective colonial ventures.

These reflections aim to engage with Feller's book critically. More than criticisms, these are my attempts to think with Feller's book. Notwithstanding these open questions, it is an original, ambitious, and insightful work that addresses a significant issue in modern German-Jewish history and demonstrates the merits of the 'imperial turn' in Jewish history.

Source: History of European Ideas, Vol. 51, 2025 - Issue 3.

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