The Debate on Kosher Butchering in Hamburg. Discussions on Its Ban during the Weimar Republic

SOURCE DESCRIPTION

This selection of sources—a total of five documents—is taken from the files of Hamburg’s administration of abattoirs and livestock markets. The official files document part of the correspondence between the heads of the Deputation for, Commerce, Shipping, and Trade [1], the administration of abattoirs and livestock markets, and Hamburg’s Chief Rabbi. All of the selected texts date from 1930 and give an insight into the debate on the Jewish practice of kosher butchering at the time. Today the documents are housed in the Hamburger Staatsarchiv.

Religious ritual and objections

The ritual method of kosher butchering called shekhita is a commandment of Judaism. In the traditional view, only meat from an animal butchered according to Jewish dietary laws is considered kosher and may be eaten. The animal, which must not be stunned, is killed and exsanguinated by a swift, deep cut into the throat. According to Jewish dietary law, the animal must not be injured prior to its throat being cut. For this reason, blows to the head and other methods of stunning the animal are strictly forbidden. Although the animal loses consciousness within seconds of having its throat cut, the ritual sacred to orthodox Jews was repeatedly criticized and fought as “animal cruelty”. Campaigns against shekhita using animal rights arguments in order to propagate a law mandating stunning the animal before slaughter, essentially a ban on shekhita, began in Imperial Germany as early as the 19th century and continued during the Weimar Republic. In most cases, antisemites were actively involved in these initiatives. There were attempts to limit and regulate the practice of shekhita by the authorities as well. The Jews resisted any such attempts however, for defending shekhita also meant defending their right to freely practice their religion.

Conflict over the practice of kosher butchering

The correspondence between the head of Hamburg’s Board of Commerce, which was called “Deputation for, Commerce, Shipping, and Trade” [2] at the time, the director of the city abattoir, and Hamburg’s Chief Rabbi illustrates how the practice of shekhita was organized in Hamburg: the community’s Chief Rabbi had ritual supervision of all kosher butchering. As all slaughtering in Hamburg, it was only permitted on the grounds of the city’s central abattoir and subject to the regulations and official supervision of the abattoir administration and the Deputation. The correspondence shows how the practice of shekhita became caught up in the conflict between the religious authority of Jewish rabbis and the state’s authority to shape politics.
In it, the administrators urged changes in the method of shekhita, which the orthodox rabbi passively resisted. Moreover, the conflict unfolded against the backdrop of an acrimonious debate on shekhita occurring in several of the country's jurisdictions [3], in the course of which the Jewish rite became the target of fierce attacks and demands for a ban. In Bavaria, the opponents of shekhita had succeeded in effecting a statewide ban, and similar discussions were taking place in several other German states.

**Beginning of the discussion in Hamburg on the administrative level**

The first letter dated February 4, 1930 was written by the head of the Deputation, Privy Councillor Dr. Hugo Heidecker, to the director of the abattoir administration, Professor Dr. Johannes Neumann, who reported to him. In his letter Heidecker, referring to several enclosed newspaper clippings, instructs Neumann to take up the issue of shekhita once again. The enclosed clippings were reports on the shekhita ban passed by the Bavarian parliament on January 29, 1930. For the Jewish community, this first statewide ban of shekhita in the Weimar Republic had brought the long-lasting debate in Bavaria to a bitter end. The Hamburg abattoir’s director, Neumann, now was instructed to contact the local Jewish community and resume negotiations on potential “improvements” of shekhita, which had been begun in 1924 / 25 but had come to nothing. The authority's basic assumption, which was cause for criticism and resistance among the Jews, was that shekhita was undesirable from an animal welfare perspective and therefore had to be banned or at least restricted in its hitherto existing form. Animal welfare arguments of this kind were often motivated by antisemitism, conjuring up the image of the cruel and ruthless Jew as supposedly evidenced by the practice of shekhita. The so-called Weinberg casting pen[4] mentioned by Heidecker was a device developed in England in reaction to the German shekhita debate which was supposed to allow for less stressful restraining of the animals to be slaughtered. This aspect shows the transnational dimension the debate took on, for the complex interaction between the developments in different German states as illustrated by the example of Hamburg and Bavaria was by no means limited to Germany, but had effects beyond its national borders. Following his superior’s orders, Neumann contacted Hamburg’s Chief Rabbi, Dr. Samuel Spitzer. Their correspondence mainly revolves around the acquisition of the new casting pen[5] while the topic of the new method of electrical stunning and its admissibleness for shekhita, which was hotly debated in many other places, is not discussed. Neumann had serious economic concerns about mandating the stunning of animals before slaughter to Jewish citizens. He worried they might use slaughterhouses outside of Hamburg instead, which would have resulted in considerable financial losses for the abattoir. In comparison to the large state of Bavaria, it would indeed have been easy to instead carry out shekhita in Altona, for example, which belonged to Prussia at the time. Spitzer stated he was unaware of the casting pen[6] and promised to get information from the Central Office for Shekhita Concerns [7] in Berlin before issuing his verdict. The Central Office[8], founded and headed by orthodox rabbi Esra Munk as a defense post against shekhita opponents, had been engaged in nationwide activities for several years—among other things, it supervised various experiments with both electrical stunning and the Weinberg casting pen[9]. Thus Spitzer was repeatedly able to counter the abattoir director’s attempts to force the issue in Hamburg by pointing out that various tests were still conducted. His laconically negative reply of April 2, 1930 to Neumann, who had previously suggested the Hamburg Jewish community buy and test the device itself, is a good example. When Neumann brought up the casting pen[10] again six months later, the rabbi finally dismissed the whole issue: Neumann’s report to Heidecker dated October 17, 1930 and the attached letter
by the Chief Rabbi show that Spitzer had signaled he assumed “the device[11] [had] been found unsuitable”.

**The discussion takes on a political dimension**

In his reply to Neumann’s report, Heidecker no longer mentions the casting pen[12]. Instead he informed him of the Hamburg Senate’s plan to discuss the question of electrical stunning with the Chief Rabbi. The fact that Deputy Mayor Carl Petersen was getting involved with the issue of shekhita at this point is evidence of the significance this topic was given by now. For this meant that the Hamburg Senate, comparatively tolerant towards Jewish concerns, elevated the issue from a merely administrative level to a political one and withdrew responsibility for it from the head of the Board of Commerce. Following the Nazis’ landslide victory in the Reichstag elections of September 1930 and with the next local election in mind, Hamburg’s social-liberal government coalition might have been concerned about any populist and antisemitic agitation the shekhita issue might give rise to and perhaps sought to prevent this. At any rate, it seems that through its decision the Senate had factually excluded Heidecker, who had shown little sympathy for the Jewish position and had sought to introduce mandatory stunning of animals, from all further negotiations with the Jewish community. The further course of these negotiations is unknown. However, a regulation mandating stunning was only passed after the Nazi takeover in 1933.

**Special features of the Hamburg discussion**

Overall, this exchange of letters illustrates why Hamburg, unlike many other German states during the Weimar period, never saw the introduction of a shekhita ban or a debate in parliament on this issue. For in the city state of Hamburg, a ban would not have prevented shekhita, but simply relocated it outside of town and thus caused a loss of revenue. Moreover, the political climate in Hamburg, a city governed by a social-liberal coalition, was not conducive to this kind of legislation. Finally, these documents highlight the work of Samuel Spitzer. Compared to his successor, Joseph Carlebach, his work has hardly been studied at all due to the lack of primary sources.

**Selected English Titles**


**Notes**

[1] Deputation für Handel, Schiffahrt und Gewerbe
[3] Länder
[4] A device in order to move the animal for slaughter into the required position for the cut without having to rope the animal’s feet together and ‘cast’ the animal to the floor, as was customary before the development of the casting pen.
[5] see above “Weinberg casting pen.”
[6] see above “Weinberg casting pen.”
About the Author

Pavel Golubev, born in 1982 in Riga, studied history for teaching at University Hamburg. For his dissertation, he researches on the Weimar debate about Jewish ritual butchering. Among his research interests are German-Jewish history of the Weimar Republic, political cultural history of the 20th century and historical research on antisemitism.

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