



JÜDISCHES  
MUSEUM  
FRANKFURT



HANSER



**Max Czollek, Erik Riedel, Mirjam Wenzel**  
**Revenge. History and Fantasy**

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# AMERICA

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☞ p. 4

*Judith and Holofernes*, Jacopo Ligozzi  
(1547-1627), 1602, oil on canvas, 97 x 79 cm,  
Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence

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☞ p. 5

*Captain America Comics #1*, 1946, Jack  
Kirby, Joe Simon, Marvel Comics

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☞ p 6-7 Many narratives in popular culture fantasize about a figure with superpowers fighting on the side of the downtrodden and exacting vengeance on their tormentors for them. Quite often, either this figure or the downtrodden are marked as Jewish in comics, movies, books and internet series as well as in the lyrics of some popular songs. Many of these portrayals, such as *X-Men*, the movie *Inglourious Basterds* and the Amazon series *Hunters*, have become icons in pop culture. In a three-channel video installation, visual artist Daniel Laufer takes up these icons and transports them into present-day Berlin in the form of a re-enactment. However, not all the figures are presented as we know them from the original.

*Revenge*, 2021, Daniel Laufer, still photo  
from the three-channel video installation,  
© Daniel Laufer

“According to Jewish tradition, God punishes us for bad deeds for ten generations, whereas he rewards us for good deeds for 100 generations [...]. Well, then, we’re only in the third generation.”

(Max Czollek, Desintegriert euch!, Hanser Verlag, 2018, 179–180)

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# Greeting

You'd think it wouldn't be anything special: an exhibition on the subject of revenge. After all, what would art and cultural history be without this topic? The myths and epics of antiquity are full of it. Shakespeare's dramas are unthinkable without it. Dürrenmatt's play *The Visit* would not be read in school or shown on stage—and these are just a few of the artistic cornerstones one could mention. But when an exhibition entitled "Revenge" is announced in a Jewish museum, people wince involuntarily. The idea creates widespread consternation. Hasn't our culture of remembrance for the last four decades come to agree to present Jews as the victims of fascism and anti-Semitism? And doesn't it contradict our *Staatsräson*, our self-image as a nation, to spread images of Jews as avengers whose "idols" were well-poisoners? After all, mental images of Jews and Judaism as evil or threatening are more than merely an undeniable topos of our cultural history; they are still drivers of contemporary conspiracy ideologies. However, anyone who thinks this exhibition is likely to exploit or extend anti-Semitic clichés has completely misunderstood its spirit and impetus.

The Federal Cultural Foundation is sponsoring this exhibition because here, for the first time, unique documents and works of art have been

brought together. They recall the centuries-old stories of an avenging intervention in the history of violence against Jews and the meanwhile almost completely faded traces of resistance and self-empowerment by those Jews who were unwilling to settle for the role of victim.

The involuntary wince mentioned above thus might come from the repressed knowledge (a subcutaneous irritant) that acts of vengeance by Jews against their tormentors and murderers are all too understandable and, over the course of time, would even be justified in the spirit of poetic justice. At the latest since the Shoah, the fear of avenging Jews may be considered a primal social fear whose containment has become an unadmitted priority across society, one that even takes precedence over the acknowledgment of inexcusable complicity in perpetration.

This exhibition is nothing less than the critical examination of a principle of morally immunized and immunizing justice valid in all societies, especially western Christian ones. Visitors who encounter the unsettling or unthinkable in this exhibition should remember that it is literally an occasion for thinking.

With the greatest respect for the wisdom of the exhibition concept, which so convincingly ties together stories and fantasies of Jewish revenge and can be traced to ideas from the poet and publicist Dr. Max Czollek, we would like to thank the museum's director, Prof. Dr. Mirjam Wenzel, and its curator Erik Riedel for the courage and vision they have shown with this project.

Hortensia Völckers  
Kirsten Haß  
Executive Board of the Federal Cultural Foundation

# **Interventions in the course of history**

## **Introduction to the exhibition “Revenge”**

Revenge is a dazzling concept that has shaped anti-Semitic notions of Jewish culture, but at the same time can be found in Jewish written records and the stories of Jewish authors. Its inherent ambivalence is the subject of the exhibition “Revenge: History and Fantasy” and this accompanying book. For the first time, they draw a cultural-historical arc between Jewish fantasies of revenge, anti-Jewish conspiracy myths and historical acts of revenge by Jews. The exhibition and the book provide the first-ever genealogy of this subject, looking at the cinematic, literary, graphic and general pop-culture narratives of Jewish acts and fantasies of revenge that emerged in the mid-twentieth century on the one hand, and biblical and rabbinic texts from ancient and medieval times on the other. They also address legends or stories about groups of delinquent Jews acting outside the law and seeking to restore justice. At the core of the exhibition lies, however, the “real” aspects of the topic: the few acts of retribution that Jews truly did commit against Nazis.

Recently, there has been an increase of publications about acts of revenge during and immediately after the end of Nazi rule in Europe. The

book shines a particular spotlight on partisan, Holocaust survivor and writer Abba Kovner and the plans for revenge that the group of about fifty Jews under his leadership forged against members of the SS, SA and German Wehrmacht—and indeed against the civilian population—in a number of major German cities.<sup>1</sup> That they subsumed their plans under the Hebrew term *nakam* (meaning revenge) is no coincidence; the word goes all the way back to the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible, where it refers to a retaliatory action that seeks to bring about justice where the legal systems of communities have failed to right the wrongs that were committed. The crucial difference between the biblical term and the survivors who sought vengeance in the name of those murdered, however, lies in the one who acts: “Vengeance is Mine, and recompense, Against the time when their foot shall slip,” the Torah says.<sup>2</sup> And the actor speaking here is God himself.

The history of the Jewish community is marked by persecution, oppression and violence. This is reflected not only in biblical stories of servitude in Egypt or of the Babylonian exile, but also in historical records of the period of Roman rule, the medieval pogroms and the expulsions in the European diaspora extending all the way to the Shoah. The collective memory of these experiences is kept alive in ritual practices of Jewish tradition, especially the communal reading of religious texts and prayers. However, communal remembrance of the defeats against overwhelming enemies in ancient times or of the expulsions and violence in Christian Europe does not equate to a collective perpetuation of passive victimhood. Instead, remembrance is joined and supported by other tales of Jewish heroines and heroes, including the victorious biblical figures Judith and Samson, as well as other memories, such as the story in the Book of Esther about a pogrom that is averted and results in retribution. Such narratives are reinforced by biblical stories in which God himself steps in to save his people and punish their tormentors. They come with practices of their own, such as the reading of the Esther scroll on Purim or the reciting of Psalm 79 verse 6 on the first night of Passover: “Pour out Thy wrath upon the nations that know Thee not.”<sup>3</sup>

These biblical verses and narratives of human self-assertion and divine retribution provide a counterpoint to the history of suffering and revolve around moments of self-empowerment and intervention that seek to intercept history, change its course or establish justice retroactively. They are the starting point of the imaginary thread that forms the basis of the “Revenge: History and Fantasy” exhibition, creating a semantic connection between biblical depictions of revenge, Jewish legends and their inherent fantasies, the plea for divine retribution in traditional Jewish records of the Middle Ages and pop culture narratives of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This connection lies in the (wishful) notion that a force endowed with superhuman powers would exact retribution on behalf of the Jewish community or its individual members on those responsible for violence, torment and death.

1 After having published a biography of partisan and writer Abba Kovner (*The Fall of a Sparrow*, Stanford, 2009) Yad Vashems, chief historian Dina Porat recently published a book about the group he led, translated from Hebrew into English under the title *Vengeance and Retribution Are Mine: Community, the Holocaust, and Abba Kovner's Avengers* (Pardes, 2019). Her book was used as the basis for the feature film *Plan A* by Doron and Yoav Paz, which was released in 2021. In his recently published book *Irgendjemand musste die Täter ja bestrafen: Die Rache der Juden, das Versagen der deutschen Justiz nach 1945 und das Märchen deutsch-jüdischer Versöhnung* (Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2021) lawyer Achim Doerfer, too, sets out to explore a “suppressed chapter of German remembrance culture.”

2 Deuteronomy 32:35, *The Holy Scriptures According to the Masoretic Text*, Jewish Publication Society of America, 1917.

3 Psalm 79:6, *The Holy Scriptures According to the Masoretic Text*, Jewish Publication Society of America, 1917.

The imaginary thread running through both the exhibition and this book alternates between historical and pop-culture narratives, cultural-historical and artistic essays, scientific analysis and fictional storytelling. That all of this is also a reflection on the power of stories and images becomes immediately apparent in the prologue of the exhibition. Here, a single iconic item is put on display: the baseball bat from the Quentin Tarantino movie *Inglourious Basterds*, which is used by the character of the Bear Jew as a tool of revenge against a German Wehrmacht soldier. Lea Wohl von Haselberg's essay in this book explores the thrill of this revenge fantasy, which is rounded off with a second act of revenge at the end of the film.

In the first main room of the exhibition, visitors initially encounter two biblical figures: Samson and Judith. The ultimate act of revenge of the hero Samson was to bring down the temple of the Philistines, who were holding him captive, and send 3,000 of his enemies to their deaths.<sup>4</sup> The story of Judith, on the other hand, does not, strictly speaking, describe an act of revenge, because the army of King Nebuchadnezzar had just begun his military campaign to conquer Jerusalem when Judith killed the commander Holofernes. In fact, Nebuchadnezzar succeeded in conquering Judea and driving its inhabitants into exile—a fate also reported in other books of the Bible. Thus, the Book of Judith is an apocryphal book in Greek that extends the Tanakh with an imaginary tale on the counterfactual story of retroactive revenge on the tormentor of the Jewish people.

This imaginary form of intervention is the subject of the next part of the exhibition, which examines the motif of revenge within Jewish tradition. It addresses, for example, the Talmudic interpretation of the oft-quoted biblical verse “eye for eye, tooth for tooth” as a formula for appropriate recompense,<sup>5</sup> or the revenge against the Babylonian Grand Vizier Haman from the Esther scroll. Other topics include verses intended for liturgical use (Hebrew: *piyyutim*) that plead for divine vengeance for the violence Christians have committed against Jews. In other poems related to the medieval pogroms, we find the eschatological concept of God's purple robe, which he uses to catch the blood of persecuted Jews until it is completely soaked in blood. Only then, when no more of his people's suffering can be absorbed by the robe, does God take vengeance on the tormentors.<sup>6</sup>

In Christian perception, these Jewish narratives morphed into an anti-Jewish topos that featured repeatedly in medieval accusations of ritual murder or in the well-poisoning myth, for example. The image of the vengeful Jew also occupies a central role in the anti-Jewish conspiracy tales that emanated from the Church and spread widely among the Christian population in Europe. Christina von Braun's essay in this book takes a closer look at these tales. Beforehand, the texts by Admiel Kosman and Julian-Chaim Soussan explore biblical revenge narratives and rabbinic interpretations.

The next exhibition room centers on three legends: the apocryphal story of Lilith, Adam's rejected first wife; the Kabbalistic story of the golem created from clay; and the eschatological legend of the Red Jews, the end-time avengers discussed in the essays by Daniel Laufer and Rebekka Voß.

4 See Book of Judges 16:27ff.

5 See Exodus 21:23–25.

6 See also Israel Yuval, *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, University of California Press, 2006.

These figures bring about a change in the perspective and narrative of the exhibition: After initially presenting historical paintings and manuscripts, it now also displays objects that illustrate contemporary aspects of these legends. Lilith is a demonic figure that is well established in Jewish tradition but undergoes an extensive feminist reinterpretation in the late 1960s. An amulet that is meant to protect a newborn from her demonic powers is subject of an installation by Israeli singer and sound artist Victoria Hanna. In contrast, the figure of the golem is reinterpreted as an avenger in direct reaction to the Shoah—and ultimately becomes a canvas for pop culture revenge fantasies in American comics.

The subsequent central exhibition room, which is more documentary in nature, is dedicated to real Jewish acts of revenge during or immediately after the end of Nazi rule. It includes documents on the murder of Wilhelm Gustloff by David Frankfurter in Davos in 1936, Herschel Grynszpan's assassination of Ernst vom Rath in 1938, the plans of a group of Jews led by Abba Kovner and the vigilante justice of the Jewish Brigade in the British Army against Nazi criminals after the Second World War. The group led by Abba Kovner initially planned to take revenge on the German civilian population by poisoning the water supply in a number of major cities. In his essay on one of Kovner's companions, Yehuda Maimon, Alexander Osang describes the events that ensued. Laura Jockusch juxtaposes these accounts with the murdered victims' last wishes for the generations to come and explores immediate acts of revenge against concentration camp guards. Her essay emphasizes that the German population's fear of Jewish acts of revenge—a fear tinged with anti-Semitic connotations—was out of all proportion to the very few incidents that actually occurred.

In an excursus, the exhibition and this book also address the history of Jewish outlaws, in other words, historical forms of self-organization by Jews that went beyond social and legal norms: gangs of robbers in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Jewish pirates during the colonial period and Jewish gangsters in the United States during the 1930s and 1940s. The essays by Christoph Ostermann, Michael Studemund-Halévy and Robert Rockaway leave open to what extent these self-organized groups of delinquents and the robberies they perpetrated can be interpreted as resistance or even revenge. In any case, they sought to achieve some kind of justice—outside the realm of the law.

Pop culture accounts of Jewish acts of revenge are the subject of Daniel Laufer's multi channel video installation, which concludes the exhibition by showing scenes from the feature film *Inglourious Basterds*, the Amazon series *Hunters* or the comic *Master Race*, thus reflecting a pop culture trend that began in the 1940s. The struggle of Jewish heroines and heroes against sinister forces—and in particular against Nazi Germany—is increasingly being iconized, initially in comics and pulp magazines and today also in computer games and Internet films. What started out as a fringe phenomenon is on its way to becoming a mainstream media topos. The essays by Caspar Battegay, Markus Streb and Eugen Pfister reflect on

this development. As an epilogue, the exhibition displays an Archive of the Present that invites visitors to linger, engage in conversation and further explore fictional and real stories of revenge and anti-Jewish projections, the moral aspects of the topic and its iconization in pop culture—as well as this book.

The exhibition was developed over the course of a two-year collaboration with poet, publicist and cultural producer Max Czollek, whose chapter “Inglourious Poets” in the book *Desintegriert euch!* provided the impetus for the exhibition.<sup>7</sup> Erik Riedel, Head of Exhibitions at the Jewish Museum, was in charge of curatorial project management; Janis Lutz served as co-curator, with support from Johanna Weiß, who was responsible for the accompanying program, the Archive of the Present, and image research. Marion Rossi handled the administrative aspects of the project, while Head of Collections Sonja Thäder organized the loan process. Deputy Director Michael Lenarz, freelancer Stefan Raguse and former Head of Audience Development Kathrin Schön were involved in the research and initial concept deliberations. We would like to thank them all for the intensive conversations and discussions they participated in as well as their hard work and dedication over the past months. The exhibition and cultural education program were conceived with the assistance of an academic advisory committee composed of Deidre Berger (Senior European Affairs Advisor, American Jewish Committee Europe), Alfred Bodenheimer (Center for Jewish Studies, University of Basel), Doron Kiesel (director of the education department of the Central Council of Jews in Germany), Julian-Chaim Soussan (rabbi, Orthodox Rabbinical Conference of Germany) and Rebekka Voß (Jewish studies seminar, University of Frankfurt). We express our heartfelt thanks for their professional expertise and guidance in the development of our exhibition. Its form was devised in a creative exchange with Atelier Markgraph, specifically with Uta Brinksmeier, Sabrina Renzel, Sarah Roßbach, Julia Tyrakowska and Raimund Ziemer; this book and the communication design were developed by Bijan Dawallu. We are grateful to them for successfully finding the right form for this complex topic. Our thanks also go to Carl Hanser Verlag and in particular to Maria Platte and Florian Kessler for their professional cooperation throughout the production of this bilingual book, as well as to the editor of the German-language version, Joe Rabl, and to Mary Tannert and Claudia Link-Beier, who were responsible for the German and English translations.

The exhibition is accompanied by an extensive cultural program, including the conference on third-generation remembrance cultures “Un-/Versöhnlichkeit—Kritische Erinnerungskulturen der dritten Generation.” We would like to thank “3G. Positionen der dritten Generation nach Zweitem Weltkrieg und Schoah in Literatur und Künsten der Gegenwart,” a group of young researchers funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), and in particular its members Luisa Banki, Sebastian Schirrmeister and Lea Wohl von Haselberg, for their participation. The accompanying program also includes four artist-in-residence projects, which were advertised and

<sup>7</sup> See Max Czollek, *Desintegriert euch!* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2018), 155–172.

implemented in cooperation with the artists' networks "DAGESH—Jewish Art in Context" and "Asylum Arts: Global Network for Jewish Culture." Our thanks also go to Jo Frank for his assistance.

The exhibition, this book and the accompanying program were all made possible by the generous support of the Federal Cultural Foundation, the Art Mentor Foundation Lucerne and the Schleicher foundation. We thank all three foundations as well as the lenders most sincerely for their faith in us.

Frankfurt am Main, October 17, 2021





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In the film *Inglourious Basterds* by Quentin Tarantino (USA, 2009), the figure of sergeant Donny Donowitz uses a baseball bat for an act of vengeance on a German soldier. In a scene that wasn't integrated into the film Sergeant Donowitz asks the residents of a Jewish neighborhood in Boston to write the names of their—presumably murdered—European relatives on the racket before he goes to war to defeat the German Army and avenge the Holocaust. Its plot was inspired by genuine acts of vengeance carried out, among others, by members of the Jewish Brigade. As a prop, the baseball bat symbolizes the tension between the fictional cinematic action and the real violence of an act of vengeance.

*Bear Jew's baseball bat from the film *Inglourious Basterds*, directed by Quentin Tarantino, USA/Germany, 2009, original prop, Jewish Museum Vienna, inv. no. 19196, photo: Lukas Pichelmann*