

Presenter: Richard S. Levy, University of Chicago

Title: **“The Defense against Antisemitism: Minor Victories, Major Defeats, 1890--”**

Panel: Modern History

I define organized antisemitism as a political-cultural movement of the late nineteenth century, built around an ideology that called for action to undo what was perceived as a menacing accumulation of the power of Jews to do harm to non-Jews. My paper treats the efforts of Jews and non-Jews to defend the rights of Jews against this movement. Therefore, it will not cover lands where Jews had little or no recourse to the law, the public sphere, or resort to armed self-defense. In those places--located for the most part in east central and eastern Europe, Jewish resistance was aimed at preservation of life and property; Jews had few rights to defend.

The paper will focus on places where Jews had rights and meaningful options to defend themselves against disenfranchisement and the marginalization that was intended. Given the format of the conference, my presentation will limit itself to a comparison of how Jews and their non-Jewish allies in Germany and the USA attempted with varying, but never complete, success to fend off their attackers. Briefly examined cases of similar efforts in Austria, France, Britain, and the EU will be drawn upon to provide a larger context for my findings.

Wherever Jews faced an organized threat to their rights and had access to defend themselves by legal and public means, they developed a three-pronged approach to defeat antisemitism: judicial pursuit of antisemitic libels; the publication and broad distribution of apologetic/enlightenment literature; intervention in national, state, and municipal elections on behalf of anti-antisemitic candidates. These weapons varied in their effectiveness according to the environments in which they were deployed; they proved reasonably effective before 1914, less so or not at all during the interwar period. The reasons behind this trajectory will provide the substance of the presentation. Also examined will be the often conflicting attitudes of Jewish and non-Jewish opponents of antisemitism, the tensions between the leadership of Jewish defense organizations and their rank-and-file Jewish members, and some observations on the historical lessons learned and unlearned by contemporaries who hope to put “An End to Antisemitism.”