By the 16th century, court Jews appeared in Germany, making the role of the Jew important once again to powerful rulers. Jews were invited into cities as readily as they were expelled, for their skills in trade, commerce, and moneylending. Following the Chmielnicki Massacres of 1648, many Polish Jews sought refuge in Germany. There they incorporated their devotion toward Kabbalah, mysticism, and messianism into the culture of German Jews. At the same time, the slowly modernizing governments of the small German states became more involved in the governance of Jewish life, decreasing the authority of the once-autonomous Jewish communities.

By the 18th century, the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds of Germany had begun to converge. Jews in the cities began to succumb to assimilation. Moses Mendelssohn, the father of the Haskalah, or Jewish Enlightenment, wrote his volume, entitled Jerusalem, suggesting that a Jew did not have to reject the modern world to remain Jewish. However, most wealthy Jews of this time did not take Mendelssohn's advice, instead choosing to assimilate completely, many converting to Christianity.

In response to the huge rates of assimilation, many Jews began to focus on reforming Jewish practices and beliefs in an attempt to make Judaism more palatable to the modern mind. Abraham Geiger and Samuel Holdheim were two of the leaders of that movement. The first Reform synagogue was founded in Hamburg in 1817. Reform Judaism was met by traditional Jews with the Neo-Orthodox Movement, which insisted on adherence to Jewish law even in a modern context; it was led by Samson Raphael Hirsch. Alongside the rise of Reform and Neo-Orthodoxy, German Jews such as Zacharijah Frankel suggested other modern variants of Jewish culture such as the critical and scientific study of Judaism, the Positive-Historical School and Wissenschaft des Judentums.

As the Jewish communities throughout the German states became more integrated within the non-Jewish world, the states themselves slowly followed the example of France in emancipating their Jews. In 1812 Prussia became the first German state to grant its Jews full rights as citizens, although many peasants did not approve this change in status. By 1870, when Germany had completely unified, Jews had achieved full citizenship everywhere in the country. Many Jews achieved high social status in Germany; incidents of antisemitism, which increased throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, were dismissed as passing phenomena. By the 1920s the Jews had achieved prosperity and legal equality as German citizens.

This situation was totally reversed with the rise of Nazism in 1933. Jews lost all their rights with the Nuremberg Laws of 1935. In 1938 Kristallnacht, the Night of Broken Glass, revived violence on a scale not seen for centuries, as scores of Jews were killed, hundreds of synagogues destroyed, and thousands of Jewish-owned businesses vandalized or destroyed. They were stripped of any university, government, or medical posts. Those who did not escape through emigration were starved and ultimately killed in Hitler's Final Solution, the murder of 6 million Jews during the Holocaust. Germany was declared completely free of Jews on May 19, 1938, although an estimated 19,000 remained there in hiding.

The effect of the Holocaust on German Jewry was devastating. Although most of the 6 million who perished were from eastern Europe, and the majority of Jews in Germany had time to escape between 1933 and 1939, the rich culture of German Jewry was destroyed. After the war, a small number of Jews came to Germany to join those who emerged from hiding, including some who returned to their cities and homes as well as displaced persons from other parts of Europe. Less than 5 percent of the pre-World War II community returned. In the 1950s many of the few remaining Jews in Germany immigrated to Israel; by the 1960s the number of Jews in Germany hovered at 20,000, concentrated in West Berlin, Munich, Frankfurt, Düsseldorf, Hamburg, and Cologne. Very few lived in East Germany.

Until the late 1980s and the 1990s, the Jewish communities of Germany consisted mostly of the elderly. There were few communal organizations and only two Jewish schools. Intermarriage rates were very high. Oddly, however, the Jewish community of Germany became one of the wealthiest in the world because of reparations paid to Holocaust survivors and their descendents.

By the end of the 20th century, the Jewish community was revitalized by large numbers of immigrants from the former Soviet
By 1993, their numbers had reached 40,000. If one includes the nonaffiliated and the intermarried, the number of Jews in Germany is probably 100,000. The immigrants rekindled a vibrant Jewish communal life in Germany, opening kosher restaurants and founding a variety of organizations. Religious life is primarily Reform or Conservative. Assimilation and intermarriage are still significant issues among contemporary German Jewry.

There is still antisemitism in Germany and many neo-Nazi groups exist. The German government, however, punishes hate crimes severely. In addition, the German government maintains good relations with the state of Israel, continues to send war reparations to many Israelis and encourages bilateral trade. There are many Holocaust memorials in Germany, including one in Berlin marking the spot where its 55,000 Jews were deported and another on the site of the old Jewish cemetery there.

Further Information