

H-Net Reviews

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Steve Hochstadt, ed. *Sources of the Holocaust*. Houndsmill: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. xv + 319 pp. \$23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-333-96345-6; \$79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-333-96344-9.

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A Wealth of Primary Documents on the Holocaust

Steve Hochstadt's collection of documents in *Sources of the Holocaust* focuses on original sources—from anti-semitic passages in the New Testament, to memoirs and eyewitness accounts of victims and perpetrators during the Holocaust, to postwar documents such as the Norwegian government's decision to grant compensation to Norway's Shoah victims and the Maine legislature's Holocaust remembrance resolution of 2002. Hochstadt, Professor of History at Bates College in Lewiston, Maine, has compiled an impressive and diverse collection of documents composed by Holocaust perpetrators and victims, as well as sources related to the causes and the aftermath of the Shoah. These documents provide the reader with much useful and thought-provoking information concerning the origin and immediate causes of the Shoah, and the horrific, genocidal actions that followed. This collection of primary documents will prove to be a wonderful complement to Lucy S. Dawidowicz's *A Holocaust Reader* (1976), another book that contains significant historical documents related to the Shoah.

The editor divides the book into the following sections: "The Context of Christian Antisemitism"; "The Creation of Monsters in Germany: Jews and Others," "The Nazi Attack on Jews and Other Undesirables in the Third Reich, 1933-1938"; "The Physical Assault on Jews in Germany, 1938-1939"; "The Perfection of Genocide as National Policy, 1939-1943"; "Arbeitslager: Work and Death in Concentration Camps and Ghettos"; "Assembly Lines of Death: Extermination Camps"; "The Aftermath"; and "The Holocaust in Contemporary Life." Hochstadt provides brief but insightful commentary after each document that helps the reader to better understand the situation. The primary documents allow the victims, perpetrators, and eyewitnesses to tell their stories in their own words, accounts that work together to provide the reader with a better understanding of how people felt and acted in certain circumstances, such as living in a ghetto or concentration camp, or working for the Third Reich. Thus,

Hochstadt's collection gives the reader insights into the mindset of the perpetrators and victims, while showing how, from the roots of antisemitism, to hatred and remorseless cruelty, such a horrific genocide occurred.

In addition to famous documents such as the minutes from the Wannsee Conference on January 20, 1942, and a selection from the Stroop Report from the Warsaw Ghetto in 1943, the book includes some important but relatively unknown reports. These documents (such as Walter Grab's memoir concerning the persecution of Viennese Jews after the *Anschluss* of March 1938, Irene Schwarz's description of Gestapo office work at Birkenau, and Judith Isaacson's memoir on the selection of women in Auschwitz) are significant because they show how ordinary men and women experienced the Holocaust and provide a rich and comprehensive picture of everyday life and the extraordinary circumstances of the Shoah. Furthermore, by providing poignant accounts that individualize and personalize the suffering of the victims and callous narratives that demonstrate the cruelty and prejudice of common SS men, these little-known documents allow the book to carve out its niche, setting it apart from previous books of similar genres.

Hochstadt's book begins with passages from the New Testament because the editor considers it important to show the origins of antisemitism and the concept of the Jew as a Christ killer. Hochstadt first cites from the Gospel According to St. Matthew 27:20-22, 24-26 in which the Jews are said to have selected Barabbas to live and Jesus to die. The multitude tell Pilate, "Let him [Jesus] be crucified" and "His blood be on us, and on our children" (p. 9). The latter quotation might suggest to people inclined toward prejudice that this warrants the Jews deserving any pain and suffering that comes their way, i.e., pogroms, the Holocaust. The animosity that spread from antisemitic writings such as the aforementioned quotation in the New Testament—animosity that has continued for centuries and is still prevalent to this

day—explains in part why Jews are scapegoated; anti-semitism, in part, allowed Nazis and their sympathizers to excuse and justify their genocidal acts while inciting soldiers to participate in the Holocaust.

In “Report of Darmstadt SA on *Kristallnacht*, 11 November 1938,” readers see the report from the Brigadeführer in Darmstadt on the shocking vandalism and cruelty exhibited during the Night of Broken Glass. The Brigadeführer quotes the orders: “On the order of the Gruppenführer, immediately all of the Jewish synagogues within the 50th Brigade are to be blown up or set on fire. Neighboring houses occupied by Aryan population may not be damaged. The action is to be carried out in civilian clothes” (p. 70). The reference to civilian clothes is important, for it implies that there was a desire for people to think the vandalism derived from the anger of everyday people, not from a calculated government policy. After reporting his orders, the Brigadeführer provides a list of thirty-five synagogues and how the Standartenführer’s men destroyed them; the tone is official and business-like, suggestive of pride but no remorse for the suffering that the Standartenführer and his men caused and witnessed. The statistics in the report are important, yet they cannot accurately portray the suffering and the anguish that *Kristallnacht* caused the victims. Hochstadt then sheds further light on the event in his commentary, alerting the reader that the “order to destroy all synagogues was passed from the Gruppenführer in Mannheim to the Brigadeführer in Darmstadt, who sent off his Standartenführer to accomplish the task in the early morning of 10 November” (p. 72). Without this sentence, the reader would have difficulty knowing, from the document itself, who had placed and carried out the order. Hochstadt goes beyond the report, mentioning, for instance, how many Jews were murdered, incarcerated in concentration camps, and/or committed suicide during *Kristallnacht*. Hochstadt’s commentary throughout the book is useful, shedding light on documents that might otherwise be esoteric to readers unfamiliar with things like the chain of command in the SS or who placed and carried out an order.

“Instruction from U.S. Secretary of State on preventing refugees to Shanghai, 18 February 1939” is a troubling document sent by Cordell Hull in response to a telegram stating that the British embassy had decided to halt the emigration of Jews from Germany to Shanghai—the last refuge that freely accepted Jews. This is an example of Hochstadt’s use of little-known documents to support his analysis of the Holocaust. Hull’s response indicates that after conferring with President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s Advisory Committee, it was decided that the En-

glish and the American governments should inform the German government of the “desirability of discouraging the travel of Jews to Shanghai on German vessels” (p. 83). Because the Nazi policy at this time was to encourage Jewish emigration, Jews were able to flee to Shanghai (but virtually nowhere else). However, because Western businessmen in Shanghai found this immigration bad for business and realized that these new Jewish residents were competing for jobs, they complained to the U.S. government, which responded by encouraging the German government to prevent more Jews from leaving for Shanghai. Hochstadt says that the German government initially did not change their policy because of Hull’s telegram, but the Nazis subsequently did prevent further emigration from Germany to Shanghai. Those Jews unable to flee Germany were rounded up and taken to camps or murdered during “The Final Solution.” “Hull’s action here was not called for by isolationist Congressmen nor could it be defended as protecting American jobs from immigrant competitors. This telegram simply put the economic interests of a few American citizens living in Shanghai at a higher priority than the lives of Jews in Germany” (p. 84). Hochstadt claims that “such signals from the West about their lack of concern for the welfare of Jews, even after the pogrom of November 1938, helped to convince the Nazis that they could do as they wished with their ‘Jewish problem’” (p. 84).

Hochstadt includes a quotation from Mayor Viktor Brack in the “Report of meeting of German mayors concerning murder of the handicapped, 3 April 1940.” The proceedings of this clandestine meeting were top secret because Brack did not want others, such as German citizens and officials of the Catholic Church, to learn about the discussion, which indicates that Brack realized that his proposal was unlawful and unethical. Brack informed the other mayors:

In the many mental institutions in the Reich there are an endless number of incurably ill patients of all kinds, who are completely useless to humanity; in fact, they are nothing but a burden.... [They] are antisocial people unworthy of living, but otherwise their internal organs are absolutely healthy and they could live on for many decades.... Thus those seriously ill, that is, incurable patients who are involved must be *packed into very primitive special asylums*, and in these specially created asylums, nothing must be done to maintain these seriously ill patients: on the contrary, everything must be done in order to have them die as quickly as possible.... It would be best if those involved were to be placed in very bad barracks, where they could contract pneumonia; in other words, accelerate their death rather than artificially

maintaining them (pp. 103-104, emphasis in original).

Hochstadt makes a good selection by including the proceedings of this meeting because the discussion demonstrates that Brack wants to hide the murder of mentally ill people from the general public, indicating that he, like many “Aryans” during the Holocaust, was willing to participate in mass murder and that he realized that secrecy from the general public was necessary to complete successfully his part in the genocide. Brack indicates that “it is necessary to act very cautiously, for the public must learn nothing of it. It is difficult above all because of the church, which is absolutely opposed to cremating the dead.... One can keep the entire problem secret from the population; that is not such a big problem” (p. 104). Brack also says that after the victims die, they “would have to be cremated to prevent epidemics, not in city crematoriums, but in the asylums’ own ovens” (p. 104). His idea that people who are considered different or “undesirable” are thus worthless and deserve to die is consistent with the Nazi ideology concerning *Untermenschen*. Brack’s idea about placing the dead in incinerators is also revealing because of the gassings and disposal of bodies in Auschwitz 1 only one year later, beginning on September 3, 1941. Unlike historical research books that *tell* readers that Nazis acted in a callous and cruel manner, this tract *shows* readers the shocking indifference to human suffering and mass murder that pervaded Nazi ideology. Brack’s nonchalant and objective tone when advocating the mass murder of the disabled, which should be astonishing and horrific to most readers, can best be expressed to a reading audience in the mayor’s own inhumane, unemotional, and remorseless words rather than via second-hand commentary. In this selection concerning the disabled, Hochstadt demonstrates, furthermore, that not all of the Holocaust victims were Jews.

In “Normal Murders at Buchenwald in 1941,” Herbert Mindus relates his eyewitness account of the murders of thirty-seven Jews in Buchenwald, including the death of his cousin, Jacob Pelz of Emden. A sadistic SS Technical Sergeant at Buchenwald named Hubert Abraham brutally murdered Philipp Hamber, knocking him to the ground, throwing Hamber into a pool of water, and then kicking him mercilessly and relentlessly until the man died. This case is special because Hamber’s brother Eduard filed a complaint with the deputy commandant of Buchenwald, a very unique response to a murder in a concentration camp, which led to the brother being imprisoned and beaten to death. Subsequently, the deputy commandant, roll call officer, and camp doctor called in the thirty-five man work detail who witnessed Philipp

Hamber’s death and asked them about the murder; they promised the inmates that they would not be harmed if they told the truth. Knowing that the promise from the deputy commandant meant nothing, the thirty-five men, including Pelz, insisted that they had witnessed nothing. They were then taken, five at a time, to a cellblock, where they died: after the death of five men, another five were taken to the cellblock to die, and so on. The men waited helplessly for their turn. Mindus says, “I will never forget the looks of death candidates, who waited for the call to the gate, and knew precisely that their fate was unavoidable” (p. 181). Hochstadt points out correctly that this narrative, composed in either April or May of 1945 as part of a larger document—“Report on the Concentration Camp Buchenwald near Weimar,”—has a sense of immediacy. Hochstadt also reveals that much of the larger document was written by survivor Eugen Kogon. Hochstadt says that Eduard Hamber’s complaint resulted in much trepidation among those in charge because it “was apparently the first case in Buchenwald of open resistance to an SS murder. The completely hopeless situation of camp prisoners is demonstrated by the choiceless choice presented to the other members of the work detail, who believed they could save themselves only by pretending not to have seen the initial murder” (p. 182). Although one might question why this survivor narrative is included when only thirty-seven people in the camp died—only a tiny fraction of those unfortunates who perished in Buchenwald during the Shoah—the account is significant because it provides an example of inmate resistance and demonstrates the powerlessness of the victims who, even though they knew their fate, were unable to change it. This is another excellent selection by Hochstadt, and his commentary is fine. I do not, however, agree with the heading, “Normal murders at Buchenwald in 1941.” There is nothing normal about the sadistic behavior of Abraham and the other SS officers who took part in the killing of thirty-seven innocent victims. Can anything about life or death in Buchenwald be considered normal when viewed in juxtaposition with civilized society?

Individually, these are fascinating documents, but collectively they tell a thorough (though by no means complete—no book can do that) story of the Holocaust from its origins in New Testament antisemitism to the zenith of excessive nationalism and, perhaps, unprecedented racial hatred and genocidal tendencies. The book honors the victims by telling their stories and indirectly serves as an indictment of the perpetrators; the indictment is indirect because the book’s documents and Hochstadt’s commentary are never preachy. Instead, the editor lets the perpetrators, victims, and collaborators

speak to the reader in their own voices, resulting in a significant and valuable document collection that will greatly benefit scholars, college students, and anyone interested in reading primary sources that combine to tell a riveting account of the Shoah.

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