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Steven E. Aschheim. *Culture and Catastrophe: German and Jewish Confrontations with National Socialism and Other Crises.* New York: New York University Press, 1996. Ppp.x + 210. $24.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8147-0642-8; $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-0639-8.

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Steven Aschheim has been an astute, insightful observer of the varied permutations of German history in general and German-Jewish culture in particular for many years. The seven essays contained within this volume offer highly-focused analyses of the nexus between "culture and catastrophe" as manifested in German society. The focal point of the book is an investigation into the "origins, disposition and aftermath of National Socialism" (p. ix). Aschheim's sophisticated reading of the seven interrelated topics offers a stimulating commentary on the often-researched but continually intriguing relationship between *Deutschtum* and *Judentum*.

The first essay, "Culture and Catastrophe," surveys the multiple ways in which National Socialism has been and continues to be inscribed with meaning. This wide-ranging treatise moves from the efforts by victims of the Nazi regime to articulate their experiences to attempts by intellectuals from Germany and other nations to make sense of and–if possible–to historicize the Nazi phenomenon. The historical irony deftly presented by Aschheim is that those victimized by the Nazi regime employed the same cultural prism as their captors to orient themselves and define their experiences. Although consensus remains illusive, a common thread runs throughout the discourse: German cultural traditions are deeply integrated into National Socialism's brutal campaigns. The fact that, as George Steiner writes, "a man can read Goethe or Rilke in the evening, that he can play Bach and Schubert, and go to his day's work at Auschwitz in the morning" (p. 9) elicits a sense of outrage, scandal and enduring fascination. It is little wonder, then, that the Holocaust challenges the very premises of historical representation and has led some observers to signal its extra-historical essence. In spite of such ruminations, however, the historicity of Nazism and the Final Solution are interwoven into the evolving national identities fashioned by both Germans and Israelis.

Chapter Two, "German Jews beyond *Bildung* and Liberalism: The Radical Jewish Revival in the Weimar Republic," revisits the model of German Jewry given by George Mosse and David Sorkin. Aschheim questions the extent to which German Jewish intellectual activity during Weimar can be described as operating within a context defined by *Bildung* when the non-progressive, nihilistic and "modern" elements of Weimar's radical right are found within the writings of Franz Rosenzweig, Gershom Scholem, Walter Benjamin, and Ernst Bloch. The radical disjuncture between present and past contained within the work of these authors and the messianic overtones therein demonstrate the extent to which German-Jewish intellectuals of Weimar were ingrained in the social and cultural milieu of their time. By moving beyond the enlightened concept of a unified continuous self, German Jewish intellectuals re-conceptualized Judaism in a manner that resonated with many of their co-religionists.

In the third essay, "The Jew Within: The Myth of 'Judaization' in Germany," Aschheim explores the concept of *Verjudung* (Judaization), a metaphor which signified Jewish domination from within. Beginning with medieval notions of heresy and the introduction of pejorative words in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries such as *judeln* and *mauscheln* to indicate "distasteful (Jewish) ways of thinking, talking, and economic dealing [,] ...the theory of Judaization was the negative mirror image of assimilation" (pp. 47-8). Central to Aschheim's thesis is that the delineation of a negative Jewish essence by writers as diverse as Moses Hess, Karl Marx, Richard Wagner, Wilhelm Marr, Werner Sombart and others, was employed by the Nazis when attempting to rid Germany of its "Jewish influences." While there is no denying the centrality of the *Verjudung* myth within Nazi ideology and the radicalization of the concept under the Nazi regime, the essay's focus on the history of ideas does not satisfactorily explain how such ideas motivated the actions of individuals who carried out the extermination campaigns against the Jews.

A similar critique holds true for the chapter on "Nietzsche, Anti-Semitism and Mass Murder." Drawing on the work of Jacques Derrida, Aschheim focuses on the latent meanings of Nietzsche's text–that is, "the interpretive spaces open to those who selectively read and received the texts" (p. 72)–to illuminate the "historical transmission belts" that propel human beings to act. For Aschheim, Nietzsche's writings were instrumental in radicalizing the actions of the Nazis and enabling them to move from a biological-racial conflict which pitted "Jews" against "Germans," to a program of genocide. As a self-defined historian of culture, Aschheim posits that ideas, words, and texts motivate human activity. He sees Nietzsche's thought, vocabulary, and sensibility as "an important (if not the only) long-term enabling precondition of such radical elements in Nazism" (p. 80). Although it is clear that Hitler and other Nazi ideologues drew inspiration from Nietzsche's writings, evidence connecting such ideas with the deeds of the SS, the Reserve Police Battalions and others involved in the mass murder of the Jews is not presented in this essay. Admittedly, my understanding of the killing campaigns of the Nazis is deeply indebted to the work of Christopher Browning, a historian whose work Aschheim acknowledges as containing important insights but who ultimately does not, in Aschheim's opinion, reveal the historical transmission belts which set the killing process in motion.

The fifth and sixth entries utilize two sets of correspondence between Hermann Broch and Volkmar von Zuehlsdorff on the one hand and Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers on the other to illuminate the multi-faceted manifestations of the Nazi phenomenon and to reflect on the German-Jewish relationship. Written between 1945 and 1949, the Broch-von Zuehlsdorff correspondence gives voice to contemporary issues ranging from German guilt and responsibility to the uniqueness of the Nazi crimes. While the exchange of letters is prescient in anticipating current individual and national views, Aschheim's essay on Arendt and Jaspers is my personal favorite. In a deeply moving analysis of this intellectually intimate correspondence, Aschheim employs the rubric of culture and catastrophe to present two individuals–one German, the other Jewish–attempting to discern the essence of their existence in the western world. While Jaspers sees an essential element to the German character, Arendt dismisses this notion while according one's Jewishness a dominant role in one's position in European society. Neither Rahel Vanhagen, the subject of Arendt's biography, nor Arendt herself could escape the consequences of being Jewish. The discussions of the Nazi phenomenon, the effort to remove ideas of the satanic and evil from descriptions of it, and the introduction of the banality concept central to Arendt's coverage of the Eichmann trial are highlighted beautifully by Aschheim. The closing passages of the essay are among the most moving lines of text that I have ever read–a tribute to the amazing friendship between Jaspers and Arendt, and Aschheim's craftsmanship.

The final chapter, "Small Forays, Grand Theories and Deep Origins: Current Trends in the Historiography of the Holocaust," offers no new information for individuals familiar with the field, yet provides a fitting conclusion to this finely-polished collection of essays. Aschheim's concern with historical transmission belts, mediated connections and concrete ties between ideas and actions, informs both his own work and his evaluation of others. In reference to the historiography of the Holocaust, Aschheim is intrigued by the connection between Nazi ideology and genocide. Criticizing studies that focus on middle and lower level functionaries–from the work of Hannah Arendt to Christopher Browning–for not addressing "the underlying motivational factors...that set all of this machinery into motion," Aschheim sifts the historical soil for meaning within the "larger contextual and mental structures that shaped the choices made, guided action and created the atmosphere in which decisions proceeded and the machine operated" (p. 120). His keen insight in this regard is illuminating, even for historians like myself who, although intrigued by similar relations, employ different historical tools.

Ultimately, the degree to which one agrees with the arguments presented in *Culture and Catastrophe* is beside the point. As an historian of culture and an interpreter of texts, Steven Aschheim is a master. His work has value for anyone engaged in historical and literary enterprises, especially for those of us whose main focus is nineteenth and twentieth century German society.

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