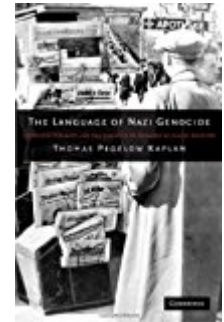


Thomas Pegelow Kaplan. *The Language of Nazi Genocide: Linguistic Violence and the Struggle of Germans of Jewish Ancestry.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009. xv + 304 pp. \$80.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-88866-0.



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In this ambitious, original study, Thomas Pegelow Kaplan explores the production and impact of Nazi words, which created "a political culture in which genocide was possible" (p. 5). He shows how National Socialist propagandists enforced the conceptual separation of Jewishness from Germanness so that readers would encounter "Jewry in Germany" but not "German Jews" (p. 63). At the same time, Pegelow wants to move away from a "top-down" model in which racial managers seamlessly directed the transformation of how Germans spoke about themselves and Jews. "At every step," he writes, "categories and statements were subject to change and were polyphonic and contested, involving multiple actors and dynamics" (p. 4). On the one hand, Pegelow wants to focus on the ways in which readers and writers co-produced the linguistic violence of the Third Reich, in which it was precisely the uneven application of Nazi language that attested to the homegrown nature of its usage. On the other hand, the "shifting, often contradictory," and even "embattled" language of racial exclusion

allowed German Jews and particularly Jews of German ancestry and so-called *Mischlinge* to subvert and contest the categories of their oppression (p. 273). Over time, the spaces of interpretation became increasingly narrow; the Nazis themselves usually had little patience with fine semantic distinctions or the records of patriotic war service that newly designated racial Jews mobilized on their own behalf. In the "view of the *Führer*" in 1938, "Jews were to be excluded from exemptions and 'acts of mercy'" (p. 158). Even so, according to Pegelow's argument, Jews created new spaces for alternative and renewed Jewish identities in the semipublic autobiographical projects they pursued. As a result, "German Jews, converts and Nazi-defined *Mischlinge*" were "anything but passive victims of state-organized violence"; they "actively engaged in a struggle for their survival and sense of self against the Nazi onslaught" (p. 11). Yet, these agents spoke up on "the verge of reifying the very terms the authors' interventions sought to subvert" (p. 84). Zionist ideas about "new Jews" who were faithful to "their ancestral

Volk," came close to essentializing "Jewish being" (p. 265). Both during and after the war, the interventions of petitioners ended up relying on "Nazified anti-Semitic racial categories" (p. 265).

In this analysis, Pegelow walks a fine line between recovering agency in extremely difficult situations and registering the horrific violence and brutal impact of the new vocabulary. He shows the ways in which German Jews deployed a re-energized patriotic discourse, in which entitlements were grounded in war service and patriotic sacrifice that contested racial categories of exclusion but reaffirmed quite illiberal notions of citizenship. To describe these interventions as amounting to a "rupture" in the discourses on race by providing "the space for 'reinscriptions'" seems far-fetched, however; in any case, such dramatic effects are not sufficiently substantiated. Neither are claims that even interventions phrased in Nazi vocabularies involved a remaking of public and private Jewish identities and the care and cultivation of the Jewish self. One reason for this insufficiency is the somewhat risky multipart methodology Pegelow has employed. His analysis is both quantitative and qualitative. Pegelow very usefully selects particular months (April 1928, April 1933, September 1935, November 1938, September 1941, and November 1944) to track the transformation of words in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, the *Völkischer Beobachter*, and the Jewish press, but this selection also strictly delimits his reading for meaning, so that he quite deliberately does not read beyond the selected months. This method does not seem designed to pick up the key articles in which German and Jewish identity might have been discussed. September 1935 is also not a good choice, since the Nuremberg Laws were only explained in the press in detail in November. Moreover, the articles themselves are not closely analyzed. Even when Pegelow moves on to petitions submitted by Germans of Jewish ancestry to various racial offices, analysis is brief, quotations (with some exceptions) scarce, and the actual nature of the request often strikingly absent.

As a result, the qualitative interpretations of all the texts have a superficial feel about them.

Perhaps surprisingly, the book does not include a sustained analysis of Victor Klemperer and his own linguistic project, "Lingua tertii imperii" (LTI). Klemperer continuously hunted for new words, new phrases, and the hard-to-pin-down "voces populi" of Dresden that enunciated them in order to make sense of the Third Reich. But the conclusions he ultimately reached, in which he held that the Germans had poisoned themselves with Nazi words (such as "arsenic"), was very strongly shaped by his own determination to find Germans so weak-willed but actually not fundamentally guilty that he could live among them after the fall of the Third Reich. Moreover, Klemperer's own "observation that nobody, not even German Jews, could escape committing 'the same sin' of speaking and being corrupted by the LTI," though it moves in the opposite direction of Pegelow's ruptures and reinscriptions, would have been worth exploring further (p. 3). How else to explain the moving depictions, which open and conclude Pegelow's book, of the frantic, compromised efforts of Bertha and Bettina Moralat to negotiate German and Jewish identities and to find a means to belong in the Third Reich and then in postwar Germany? As a result of the violent assaults of language, Bettina Moralat never felt like a "normal human being" again (p. 277). It is also unfortunate that Pegelow did not consult the "My Life in Germany" collection of autobiographical reflections at Harvard's Houghton Library. Written up in 1939, they provide rich contemporary evidence of the experience of German Jews who left the Third Reich up to the war and include the extraordinary letters of Paula Tobias who, before her emigration to Grass Valley, California, confronted non-Jewish Germans up and down the social ladder with their antisemitism; she also received and archived their astonishing replies.[1]

This important book opens up new consideration of Germans of Jewish ancestry and their humiliation by and redeployment of Nazi language, but its analysis is ultimately not as rich as it might have been, despite the author's well-intentioned commitment to the illustration of nuance and detail and to the restoration of voice and agency. What would have been in keeping with Pegelow's desire to capture the interpretive work of his subjects would have been to stop, to dig in, and to fully introduce the case; I fear the relentless movement from month to month across two decades kept him from properly doing so.

Note

[1]. Paula Tobias, Houghton Library, bms Ger 91, no. 235, Harvard University. See also Harry Liebersohn and Dorothee Schneider, *My Life in Germany Before and After January 30, 1933: A Guide to a Manuscript Collection at Houghton Library, Harvard University* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 2001); and Wiebke Lohfeld, *Es waren die dunkelsten Tage in meinem Leben: Krisenprozess und moralische Entwicklung: Eine Biographieanalyse* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1998).

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