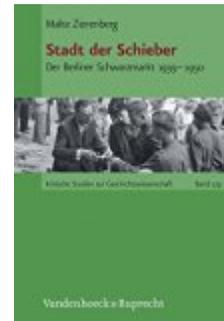


Malte Zierenberg. *Stadt der Schieber: Der Berliner Schwarzmarkt 1939-1950*. Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008. 349 pp. ISBN 978-3-525-35111-6.

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## Black Market Berlin

In the summer of 1947, an American Military Government officer in the uplands of northern Franconia responded to a directive ordering him to crack down on black market activity with the frustrated comment that, “To do so would necessitate arresting the greater portion of the population.”[1] The black market is indelibly associated with the postwar period by scholars and contemporary witnesses alike. By placing the structures and practices of illicit trade within a longer story of economic life in Berlin, Malte Zierenberg’s book offers a bold reconceptualization of the black market, its practitioners, and the economic culture of illegal commerce. It is one of the best books available on the subject, and will likely become a standard work for anyone interested in the black market and life on the homefront in wartime and postwar Germany.

Zierenberg suggests that the conventional focus on black marketeering in the postwar period overlooks the longer-term development of illegal and quasi-legal markets. The book examines the period from 1939, when wartime rationing began, until the early 1950s. During this time, the image of both black marketer and customer changed as a new “culture of exchange” (*Tauschkultur*) emerged from the exigencies of war and postwar occupation. The result is a “cultural history of markets” that never loses sight of the critical and specific roles that such markets played in the economic lives of ordinary participants.

The book is divided into five sections of widely vary-

ing length. The book begins with a discussion of the legacies of wartime and postwar shortages after 1918 before moving quickly into the Nazi era and concluding with the aftermath of the Currency Reform. Along the way, the book traces the transformation of the stereotypical *Schieber*, a protean category of black marketer. During this long and chaotic period, the image of the *Schieber* changed from a symbol of the “world gone wrong” after World War One to an enemy of Nazi efforts to mobilize the population before morphing into a symbol of a free-wheeling post-1945 market structure that made many Germans hope for the speedy return of stability. Of course, the very normality of the black market meant that most urban Germans had to engage with it at some level. The best parts of this book are those that deal directly with the places, spaces, and relationships that defined that engagement.

The second and fourth chapters are the most interesting and the places where Zierenberg’s analysis really shines. The second section follows the career of Martha Rebbien, an older, unemployed Berliner who built a remarkable network of black market contacts in the north of the city. After her arrest on November 9, 1944 (the irony of this date is not lost on Zierenberg), Rebbien provided police with a wealth of detail about her associates. Zierenberg uses this case to discuss the growth of professionalized networks of illegal commerce that leveraged contacts within the Wehrmacht and among foreigner laborers working in Germany. Due in large part to the depth of the available sources, Zierenberg is able to draw

dense webs of individuals whose relationships with each other had as much to do with trust and personal relationships as they did with economic rationality. A picture emerges of an increasingly sophisticated set of market structures operating alongside, and increasingly in place of, the official economy. As Allied bombing destroyed ever more of Berlin's civilian infrastructure in late 1944, opportunities to covertly exchange goods declined dramatically. As a result, the collapse of the Third Reich was mirrored by the growth of illegal commerce in public spaces around the city.

The fourth section examines the open-air markets of postwar Berlin. These public spaces of illegal commerce grew out of wartime black market activity but became possible because the postwar power vacuum lowered the costs of participation for individuals. Occupation troops, acting as suppliers, consumers, and occasional opponents of informal markets, added additional layers of complexity. Cigarettes, to use just one example, were status symbols, hedges against inflation, informal currency, and symbols of new cosmopolitan society with a profoundly changed gender order. Zierenberg calls them the "collective symbol" of the black market era. "A *Schieber* without cigarettes was no *Schieber*" (p. 283). Again drawing on a number of examples from the archive, Zierenberg examines both the physical geography of these markets, the "microstructures" of exchange, and the human relationships that underlay such transactions. The book is richly

illustrated with maps, photos, and diagrams. These prove to be of varying comprehensibility and utility. Many of the maps are absurdly small and this reviewer admits to being thoroughly confused by some of the flow charts intended to help readers understand the dense networks of association.

Zierenberg's study reminds us that market relationships are fundamentally interpersonal ones as well. Markets that operated on the fringes or outside the boundaries of legality suffered from a lack of transparency and rewarded skillful, resourceful, or connected participants as much as they punished those who lacked those assets. This volume is a refreshing and intellectually stimulating corrective to efforts to ascribe rationality to the seemingly omnipresent black market. By situating the black market, as well as the people who made the system possible, in the longer story of Germany's tumultuous experience during the era of the world wars, Zierenberg has given other historians a tremendous amount to consider and to apply to our own work.

#### Note

[1]. MG Detachment Annual Report, 1946-47, National Archives and Records Administration II, RG 260/39047/19/4/194, Washington, DC.

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