

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ahlich Meyer Insa Meinen. *Verfolgt von Land zu Land. Jüdische Flüchtlinge in Westeuropa 1938-1944*. Paderborn: Schoeningh Ferdinand, 2013. 332 pp. EUR 39.90 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-506-77564-1.

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This book focuses on the flight of Jewish refugees, a topic which has generated numerous studies over the past few decades but mostly with respect to a single country during the 1930s.[1] This study, however, is transnational as it deals with the flight of Jews in a broader geographical space. It is also different in its treatment of two distinct periods in Nazi antisemitism, the time of expulsion (1939-41) and the time of annihilation (1942-44). Holocaust and refugee studies meet in this book. Both authors have earned their spurs in Holocaust research—Meinen on the Belgian case and Meyer on the French case—and approach the extermination of Jews now through the lens of flight.[2] They reconstruct the (unsuccessful) flight from the Nazi genocide of Jews from Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium between 1938 and 1943. They place the refugees at the center, but not by letting them speak for themselves. We hear these refugees only indirectly; what they say is quoted from administrative documents. The main focus of the whole book is when and how they tried to flee. Meinen and Meyer chose this approach because they believe that the story of flight is monopolized by the Jewish refugees who survived the Holocaust. In contrast, they tell the story of those who fled, but whose flight ultimately failed and ended in murder. The only traces of their decisions are found in archival documents left behind by the authorities in charge of managing the mobility of these refugees. One has to search through thousands of files to get a picture, still vague at times, of the desperate attempts of these refugees to reach safety.

The first half of the book analyzes the flight of Jews from Greater Germany to Belgium in 1938 and 1939. In those years, Belgium was one of the most hospitable countries for Jews from Germany, if not the most hospitable.[3] By 1940 about twenty-five thousand Jews had found (temporary) asylum in Belgium, while the neighboring Dutch, who shared a much longer border with Germany, had “only” accepted about fifteen thousand. Meinen and Meyer have examined 3,300 files of Jews who

fled Greater Germany for Belgium but who, beginning in 1942, were ultimately deported from Belgium to the east. Their quantitative analysis points out that most of these Jews had intruded on Belgian territory. They were not invited. Their applications for visas were mostly denied. Counterfeiters provided fake visas, at great cost. Those Jews who could not obtain high-quality forged visas increasingly had to rely on human smugglers to circumvent Belgian and, from November 1939 onward, also German border guards. Notwithstanding their illegal entry, they were tolerated on Belgian territory. Only in October 1938, were a few hundred Jewish refugees who had immigrated illegally repatriated to Germany. Due to public outcry, repatriation to Germany of refugees was not repeated the following year.

With the outbreak of the Second World War, Belgian immigration policy became more restrictive: about four thousand refugees were interned in refugee camps and in May 1940, when the German army invaded Belgium, some ten thousand male Jews from Greater Germany were sent to France because the Belgian authorities considered them potential soldiers for the invading German army. Although existing research has already outlined the policy in detail, the evidence here provides additional insight into the dynamic of flight from Greater Germany. In 1938 most refugees to Belgium came from Austria and only after the *Reichskristallnacht* (November 1938) did the *Altreich*, Germany itself, become the main source of refugees for Belgium. The composition of the refugee flow also changed fundamentally at the end of the thirties. Although in early 1938 mainly single young men fled to Belgium, this changed quickly as whole families became part of the flight movement. In half of the cases the husband came first, to be joined by his wife and children a few months later. Sometimes women and children came first, as the husband or father had been sent to a concentration camp. Additionally, in 1939, more elderly fled to Belgium.

After occupying Belgium, German authorities took over the management of the Jewish refugee population there. Beginning in the summer of 1942, when the deportations from Mechelen started, the Jews from Greater Germany as well as other Jews in Belgium went into hiding en masse. In the end slightly more than half of the Jews from Germany who were in Belgium survived the war. The authors point out that the death toll of the Jews from Germany was similar to that of other Jews in Belgium. They describe this as remarkable given that the German Jews were recent immigrants who had a much smaller social network in Belgium and were also economically more vulnerable than other Jews, but the authors refrain from any explanation.

The flight during the war from German-occupied Europe as a survival strategy began in the summer of 1942, when all Jews in Belgium and especially in the Netherlands were faced with deportation to the east. By the summer of 1945, 75 percent of the Jews in the Netherlands and 42 percent of the Jews in Belgium had left for the east, never to come back. When the deportation trains began to leave from Westerbork and Mechelen for the east, many Jews in Belgium and the Netherlands decided to flee to Vichy-France in the hope of getting to Switzerland or Spain. Among those fleeing Belgium we also encounter Jews who had been forced to flee Germany a few years earlier, but the German army had caught up with them. Fleeing became more difficult. New borders had arisen, but old borders remained difficult to cross. Belgium, parts of France, and the Netherlands were occupied, but the old borders remained guarded and although the north of France and Belgium were under the same German military command, the German occupier kept an eye on the local border guards so that no Jew could slip through. The German occupier had decided that the only travel permitted to Jews was to the east. The most heavily guarded border was the border between Vichy France and German-occupied France. Any Jew caught at the so-called *Demarkationslinie* was arrested and shortly afterward deported from Drancy. The German border guards were very determined to stop Jewish flight from that part of Europe which they occupied. On August 20, 1942, two-year-old Esther Grunberger, carried by her father, was shot in the head by a German soldier when they were crossing the border. She died on the spot. Her father arrived in Auschwitz on September 2, 1942. Even if they had succeeded in crossing the *Demarkationslinie*, they would not have found themselves in a safe place.

From August 1942 onward the authorities of Vichy France ordered the arrest and extradition of Jews who

had left German territory unauthorized. In the same month, the Swiss authorities also decided not only to stop Jews from entering Swiss territory, but also to expel those who had entered without proper authorization. The Jews were trapped. Spain was still a safe place, but when in November 1942 the Germans took direct control of Vichy France, Nazi determination to annihilate European Jewry made the route to Spain more dangerous.

By comparing Belgian and Dutch lists of Jews residing in these respective countries in 1941 and French and Belgian deportation lists (1942-44), Meinen and Meyer found 1,055 Jews residing in the Netherlands and 1,677 Jews living in Belgium in 1941 who fled to Belgium or France and were deported from there. This implies that at least 3 percent of the Jews in Belgium and 1 percent of the Jews in the Netherlands attempted to flee. These 2,732 Jews are not representative of the threatened population of both countries. Based on their professions the middle and higher classes seem to be overrepresented, as well as childless couples. Very few of these refugees made it: only three hundred survived the war. However, many more refugees probably managed to get to safety but the historical documentation used in this book mostly comes from German persecutors and is thus clearly biased against successful flight.

The documentation collected on these failed flights is impressive. As border crossing was forbidden for Jews they had to carry fake travel and identity documents. Jewish refugees needed counterfeiters to make documents which masked their Jewish origin. The German occupation authorities in charge of deporting the Jews had already complained in the summer of 1942 that the plethora of fake documents prevented them from meeting their targets. It became ever more difficult to fill the Belgian deportation trains. Therefore the German authorities started an unbridled attack on the Jews in hiding and those who intended to flee. The war on flight is very well documented in this book. The German authorities began collecting intelligence among the Jews, manning border stations with experts in forged documents, and even provoking flight. Networks of counterfeiters were dismantled and those who sold forged identity cards of dubious quality were probably driven out of the market as those who carried them ended up on deportation trains. The prices for fake documents rose. That the middle and higher classes were overrepresented among the refugees is probably largely due to the financial investment necessary to attempt flight. However, the main determinant in the dynamic of flight was persecution, the worsening of which made Jews desperate enough to flee even with large families—about 10 percent of the 2,732

refugees were families representing three generations. The poor also took to the road.

The book is both a history of persecution and a history of victims' determination to flee. Without any organized support, flight was a decision made by individuals desperate to survive. This book is testimony to the efforts which many nameless Jews made to escape genocide. Although for most these proved to have been in vain, their efforts comprised part of the Jewish resistance to the murderous Nazi operation. Even many of those who ended up in Auschwitz did not walk there like sheep. The German authorities did all they could to herd all Jews to Auschwitz. The book puts the agency of Jewish refugees center stage.

The above underlines the merits of this book. The painstaking analysis of thousands of individual files presents a partial picture of these desperate attempts to flee. It is, however a difficult read, and some choices can be criticized. Therefore, in concluding I want to raise three points.

First, the authors strictly limited themselves to describing unsuccessful flight. One may wonder whether the decision to exclude successful flight was the right one. Without these stories of flight from Belgium and the Netherlands we cannot determine why some refugees succeeded where others did not. Including them would have also made a stronger case for the authors' final claim that without Jewish resistance the death toll would have been much higher. Still, focusing on (failed) flight is an acceptable research decision and this book takes an important step in illuminating an aspect of the Holocaust which has been largely ignored until now. However, in their conclusion the authors want to position their work within the literature on survival during the Holocaust. Therefore, they concentrate on the different survival rates of Jews in France, Belgium, and the Netherlands and attempt to integrate them into a discussion of Jewish resistance. However, the resistance this study analyzed failed. Nearly all the heroes of this story were murdered. Thus, by focusing on survival rather than flight in their conclusion, the authors downplay the merits of their own research. The challenge remains for another researcher to discuss the different survival rates within a framework that analyzes both successful and unsuccessful flight (and hiding) as resistance strategies.

Second, Meinen and Meyer have assembled a large number of sources of Belgian and German provenance from which to understand Jewish flight. Their analysis relies on both quantitative and qualitative data. On the

one hand, there is an at times confusing mix of figures, among them two different samples whose composition is not always precisely defined. Fortunately, the reader who gets lost can resort to the graphical maps on the inside cover of the book, which give an overview of the two samples. On the other hand, throughout the book real people replace the numbers and a mostly tragic individual story unfolds, illustrating what the figures have just revealed. The authors state in the introduction that they leave it up to the reader to judge whether the figures and statistics collected in the book are necessary to unveil this unknown territory of the murder of the Jews, or if they are rather interested in the fragments of individual Jewish life stories scattered throughout the book. It should not be an either/or proposition. It seems to me that a more systematic quantitative approach might have made it less trying for the reader to understand some of the choices made in this study and yielded better results.

Third, and this is a minor issue, the authors mention that they differ from my view that Western liberal democracies had an influence on the expulsion policy of the German authorities at the end of the 1930s. To understand expulsion policy one has of course to focus on the German perpetrators, but it seems to me that from November 1938 onward it is important to underline that the "liberal" authorities of the countries neighboring Germany added to the persecution of Jews in Germany by pressuring German authorities to stop the flood of refugees coming west. As Jacob Toury documented extensively thirty years ago, this pressure caused the Nazis to change course in their efforts to ethnically cleanse the German Reich.[4] Emigration directly overseas became the preferred way to get rid of the Jews. At the eastern border of Germany the German authorities continued by every possible means to expedite emigration, but on the western side they began cooperating with neighboring countries to prevent the unauthorized entry of German Jews. This cooperation between German and Belgian/French authorities and border guards was largely the result of continuing diplomatic pressure on German authorities and especially the desire of Nazi Germany to maintain good relations in order to preserve easy travel arrangements for "Aryan" Germans. That the German authorities largely refrained from pushing Jews to western Europe from November 1938 onward, but continued to send them east was also due to internal reasons, such as controlling currency export, but to state that external pressure was of little or no importance (p. 47) in the chaotic decision-making process in Nazi Germany seems to be an overstatement deriving from a refusal to ac-

knowledge that Western liberal democracies had even the slightest responsibility for the twisted road to Auschwitz. Liberal democracies blatantly denied the Jewish refugees arriving at their borders and even on their territory the most fundamental human rights. That the book hardly mentions the well-researched Swiss decision to close its border to Jewish refugees in 1942 (pp. 214, 254) is another indication of the little importance the authors attach to the indirect involvement of liberal democracies in the murder of Jews. The authors focus indeed on the German perpetrators, but for the forced migrants the Swiss decision had tremendous importance and in a social history of flight the events at the Swiss border should have received more attention. The title of the book, "Persecuted from Country to Country," aptly evokes its focus. Although the subtitle "Jewish Refugees in Western Europe" suggests this is a book about Jewish refugees, it is their persecution—and ultimately failed flight—that occupies center stage.

#### Notes

[1]. Frank Caestecker and Bob Moore, ed., *Refugees from Nazi-Germany and the Liberal European States, 1933-1939* (Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 1-6; Susanne Heim, Beate Meyer, and Francis R. Nicosia, eds., "Wer bleibt, opfert seine Jahre, vielleicht sein Leben". *Deutsche Juden 1938-1941* (Wallstein: Göttingen, 2010); Michael Frankl and Katarina Capkova, *Unsichere Zu-*

*flucht : Die Tschechoslowakei und ihre Flüchtlinge aus NS-Deutschland und Österreich 1933 -1938* (Vienna/Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2012).

[2]. Insa Meinen, *Die Shoah in Belgien* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2009); Insa Meinen, "Face à la traque. Comment les Juifs furent arrêtés en Belgique (1942-1944)," *Cahiers de la Mémoire contemporaine* 6 (2009): 161-203, see in English *Yad Vashem Studies* 36 (2008): 39-72; Ahlrich Meyer, *Die deutsche Besatzung in Frankreich 1940-1944. Widerstandsbekämpfung und Judenverfolgung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2000); Ahlrich Meyer Ahlrich, *Das Wissen um Auschwitz. Täter und Opfer der "Endlösung" in Westeuropa* (Paderborn: F.Schöningh, 2010).

[3]. Caestecker and Moore, *Refugees from Nazi-Germany*.

[4]. Jacob Toury Jacob, "Ein Auftakt zur 'Endlösung': Judenaustreibungen über nichtslawische Reichsgrenzen 1933-1939," in *Das Unrechts-Regime. Festschrift für Werner Jochmann zum 65. Geburtstag*, vol. 2, ed. U. Büttner (Hamburg: Christians, 1986), 164-196; Jacob Toury, "From Forced Emigration to Expulsion: The Jewish Exodus over the Non-Slavic Borders of the Reich as a Prelude to the 'Final Solution,'" *Yad Vashem Studies* 17 (1987): 72-80.

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