

Stefan Litt. *Juden in Thüringen in der Frühen Neuzeit (1520-1650).* Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2003. x + 251 pp. EUR 29.90, cloth, ISBN 978-3-412-08503-2.



Reviewed by Dean Phillip Bell

Published on H-German (September, 2005)

Taking up the period where volume 3 of *Germania Judaica* left off, this book (a 2001 dissertation from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem) is a welcome and important contribution to the growing literature on early modern German Jewry. Like a number of recent works, this one explores smaller, less central Jewish communities in early modern Germany, moving attention away from the key Jewish centers with relatively large populations and well-defined organizational structures. Like the work of Rotraud Ries for Lower Saxony and Stefan Rohrbacher for Swabia, both of which serve for constructive comparison throughout the book, this work provides a rich regional study.

While outlining some general themes in the historiography of the early modern period and pointing to some broader historical changes in the medieval and early modern periods, especially with regard to Thuringia, Litt poses a range of questions regarding Jewish settlement and demographic patterns; the effects of political, religious, and economic conditions; the nature and transfor-

mation of Jewish and Christian relations; and the structure of inner Jewish life.

Litt notes the central role played in the region by the Jewish community of Erfurt during the Middle Ages and the wide settlement of Jews throughout Thuringia at that time. He writes that Thuringia was part of the most important settlement region of Jews that also included Hesse, Franconia, and the Upper Palatinate. Of the 301 areas of Jewish settlement there and in Thuringia, a full 50, or 16.6 percent, were in Thuringia. This situation changed dramatically with the catastrophic consequences of the Black Death pogroms in the middle of the fourteenth century, though Litt identifies important Jewish population (re)growth in the region between 1400 and 1449. By the middle of the fifteenth century there were a number of significant expulsions from the region (e.g., Erfurt in 1453). In the Middle Ages two-thirds of the Jewish settlements were located along important trade arteries. This pattern continued into the early modern period, when the trade and travel core remained important to Jews not only for business but also for general mobility.

Litt notes the difficulty of tracing individual Jews throughout this period, but nonetheless he identifies five broad periods of Jewish settlement: a period of a noticeable reestablishment of Jewish settlement between 1520 and 1540, especially between 1522 and 1533; an increase in Jewish presence between 1541 and 1556; an unsettled period between 1557 and 1580; a peaceful phase, at first, between 1581 and 1600; and finally a period of slow but steady consolidation between 1601 and 1650. Throughout the early modern period Jewish settlements were increasingly relegated to the edges of Thuringia (unlike the more even medieval distribution), and the vast majority of Jewish settlements were extremely small, made up of only one or two families. In the early modern period more than half of all areas mentioned to have Jews lay in a relatively narrow region south of the Thuringian forest until Franconia.

Litt reviews the complex array of imperial, territorial, and civil regulations regarding Jews and the effects that territorial splintering could have on the Jews, and on the study of the Jews' legal position. He also examines the practice of issuing letters of protection to Jews, and provides useful background regarding the general characteristics and parameters of these letters. This discussion is placed within the context of frequent restriction (220 *privilegia contra Iudaeos* in the period from 1550 to 1580 alone) and expulsion.

Turning to internal Jewish structures, Litt offers insights about the average size of Jewish households, Jewish occupations and business, and through means of several illuminating exempla, Jewish migration patterns as well. Litt points out that the small number of Jews in the region obviated the need for an effective rabbinate, with Jews relying instead on the central Jewish court in Fulda for more serious disputes. Litt examines other communal institutions such as the very few cases of synagogues and cemeteries as well. He also discusses conversions to Christianity, which seem to have been most numerous in the early years of

the Reformation and at the end of the Thirty Years War.

In all, this is an excellent volume that provides a great deal of useful information that adds nicely to the burgeoning literature on early modern German Jewry. Litt's careful work with a wide range of sources and his clear presentation make the work extremely accessible. The only quibble I have is that the 13 maps, each of which covers only the top half of a page, could have been made larger and could have been supplemented with a geographically more comprehensive map for purposes of comparison. That comment aside, however, this is an important and very welcome contribution.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Dean Phillip Bell. Review of Litt, Stefan. *Juden in Thüringen in der Frühen Neuzeit (1520-1650)*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. September, 2005.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11143>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No
Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.