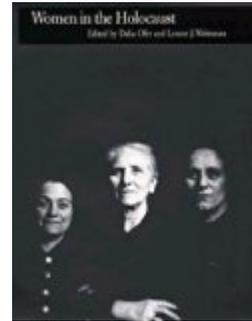


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Dalia Ofer, Lenore J. Weitzman, eds. *Women in the Holocaust*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998. vii + 402 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-07354-6.

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## Gendering the Holocaust

For too long the Holocaust has been seen in male terms, obscuring the nature of the specific roles, work, and suffering of women. Now steps are being taken towards correcting this in a flurry of recently published works,[1] including the excellent volume, *Women in the Holocaust*. While Ofer and Weitzman emphasize that men and women did not have completely different experiences, the editors highlight significant areas of divergence. First, the gender roles of Jewish men and women of the day were obviously distinct. This factor led many Jews to believe that their persecution would be focused on the men and spare women and children. Instead, the Nazis would go after the entire Jewish population, subjecting men and women to horrors sometimes similar, sometimes different. Second, again because of the gender roles of the day, Jewish men and women reacted differently to the difficulties they faced.

The book provides an excellent overview of the topic, featuring twenty-one chapters by different contributors, many of whom summarize findings from their own monographs and research projects. Also innovative is the inclusion of the testimony of survivors alongside scholarly analyses. The stories of female resistance fighters are especially unusual and thus important. The chapters containing primary materials could be very useful in undergraduate courses, while graduate students and scholars will find the book valuable for its suggestions for future research as well as its summary of the important work done so far.

*Women in the Holocaust* is divided into four parts.

Part I sketches the condition of Jewish women before the war. Here Paula Hyman explains nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Jewish family life in both Western and Eastern Europe. Marion Kaplan details the particulars of German Jewish women's daily existence in the pre-war Nazi years. The pendant to Kaplan's piece is Gisela Bock's more general overview of gentile German women in the Third Reich. Two chapters deal with Jewish women in interwar Poland. While Daniel Baltman explores female members of the Bund, Gershon Bacon suggests new directions for research on prewar Polish Jewish women.

Part II details Jewish life in the ghettos and mixes analysis with Holocaust testimony. Michael Unger sketches conditions for women in the Lodz Ghetto. Dalia Ofer looks at the use of gender in diaries and memoirs of the Warsaw ghetto. Ida Fink has contributed her short story, "The Key Game." The Jewish underground resistance network in Grodno is described by Liza Chapnik, who participated in it.

The theme of resistance continues in Part III with a second personal narrative by Bronka Klibanski, who was a member of the Grodno and Bialystok undergrounds. Lenore Weitzman has a more general article on "passing" outside of the ghetto, while Nechama Tec and Renee Poznanski look at women among the forest partisans in Byelorussia and the French-Jewish underground. This section concludes with a portrait by Yehuda Bauer of the Slovak Jewish activist Gisi Fleischmann, one of a very few women to have a position in a Judenrat (Nazi-mandated Jewish Council).

Part IV describes the concentration camps and opens with the personal recollections of Lidia Rosenfeld Vago. The survivor and historian Felicja Karay provides valuable background information on women in the camps, while Ruth Bondy, herself a survivor, takes a more specialized look at Theresienstadt and Birkenau. Three essays by Myrna Goldenberg, Lawrence Langer, and Sara Horowitz analyze the role of gender in Holocaust memoirs and literature. Finally, Joan Ringelheim asks why a gender-sensitive analysis of the Holocaust has been so long in the making and provides some preliminary answers.

It is difficult to critique comprehensively such a wide-ranging work that combines so many different kinds of contributions, such as first-person accounts of the Holocaust, summaries of important secondary scholarship, historiographical critiques, literary analysis, and even fiction. Nonetheless, a few questions touch on many of the contributions.

The title of the book gives no indication that its subject matter, women in the Holocaust, is still in dispute. Yet the very legitimacy of taking up this question is addressed by the last two essays in the volume by Lawrence Langer and Joan Ringelheim. Langer argues for the “severely diminished role that gendered behavior played during [the Holocaust] (p. 351).” Ringelheim, however, insists that Jewish men cannot “stand in for Jewish women as we try to understand their everyday life during the Holocaust (p. 350).” While I agree with Ringelheim, and with the editors of the volume, that women have been left out of the picture for too long, I can appreciate Langer’s larger point at its most general level, that the one-upmanship about which sex suffered *more* in the Holocaust is counter-productive. Yet the essays in this book do not aim at this sort of crass comparison but instead aim to illuminate the fine differences between men’s and women’s experiences that made up the texture

of everyday life.

While many chapters give either first-hand accounts of resistance or secondary analyses of it, there is not much explicit attention to the many theoretical issues surrounding the concept of resistance, a classic problem in studying the Holocaust. This is clearly an area where Holocaust scholars can engage each other as well as those in other fields such as Native American and African American studies.

This book is also a valuable guide for the areas it points out as deserving of further research. One of the most critical needs is to fill the gaps in the empirical information that has been available to Western scholars about the lives of Eastern European Jewish (and for purposes of comparison, gentile) women in the prewar period.

In conclusion, *Women in the Holocaust* is an important new publication in the field and valuable for students and scholars at all levels.

#### Note

[1]. Some of the latest works include: Bonnie Gurewitsch, *Mothers, Sisters, Resisters: Oral Histories of Women Who Survived the Holocaust* (University of Alabama Press, forthcoming in December); Marion Kaplan, *Jewish Life in Nazi Germany: Dignity and Despair* (New York, 1998); Mary Felstiner, *To Paint Her Life: Charlotte Salomon in the Nazi Era* (New York, 1994); and Carol Rittner and John Roth, eds., *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust* (New York, 1993).

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