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The Litzmannstadt Getto (historically, the name of this ghetto in the Polish town of Łódź was written without an "h") has moved strongly into the focus of historical interest in the last few years. Not only has Michael Alberti written an excellent monograph on the National Socialist Holocaust in the Warthegau region,[1] but Isaiah Trunk's groundbreaking 1972 study of the ghetto itself, published originally in Yiddish, was translated into English in 2006.[2] Additionally, its complete chronicles were published in a magnificent five-volume edition assembled by the German Ar-
beitsstelle Holocaustliteratur in Gießen.[3] This renewed curiosity can be explained by the importance of the ghetto for the Nazis. It was the second biggest, it was among the longest existing, and—last but not least—it was the ghetto with the greatest impact on the National Socialist economy, and virtually the prototype for the exploitation of Jews in eastern Europe. These “pioneering” attributes also describe the city that surrounded the ghetto, which was intended to become a center of “Germanom” in the East. The books under review here concentrate on the city and its ghetto. Andrea Löw sheds light on Jewish life inside it, Peter Klein focuses on its German administration, and Gordon J. Horwitz offers an overview of the whole city of Litzmannstadt. Taken together, the three new books are certain to shed more light on these aspects of our perception of both communities.

Anyone interested in the Holocaust can definitely learn from Andrea Löw’s magisterial book, a well-written work that accesses masses of previously unused sources and succeeds in presenting new insights into ghetto life. The impressive number of diaries, documents in German, Polish, and Yiddish, and works of related literature exploited here—Löw states that too many rather than too few sources survive—requires an advanced and well-considered methodology. The questions connected with this problem are convincingly solved, presenting an impressive diorama of the daily Jewish struggle for survival in an account that is both chronologically and thematically based.

The figure associated with the Litzmannstadt ghetto who is best known to non-specialists is Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski, the notorious leader of the ghetto’s Judenrat. Löw portrays him as an ambivalent figure, developing from a passive and obedient servant of the Nazis into a leader who enjoyed partial success in ensuring Jewish survival, not only materially, but also spiritually. As the inmates tried to create their own parallel world, which contrasted strongly with their lived reality, and thus to countervail their mental disintegration, Rumkowski supported them with theaters and educational institutions. His self-portrayal in this atmosphere was decisive and effective, not only for the Nazi administration, but also for the inhabitants, who often saw him—not the Germans—as the reason for their misery, an interpretation that has survived to the present. Löw shows clearly that these interpretations are at the same time right and wrong: Rumkowski fought against corruption, but he was simultaneously the head of a corrupt system; he boosted exploitation of the Jews, but this action extended the ghetto’s existence; he demanded that inmates surrender their children to the Nazis, but this decision saved the lives of adults. (It might be interesting for future researchers to compare the lives and leadership of Rumkowski and Adam Czerniaków of Warsaw, who committed suicide rather than hand Jewish children over to the Germans.)

Löw’s notes offer extensive evidence, and her work teaches us much about the nature of existence in this ghetto. Only one small criticism remains: Although Löw emphasizes throughout that life and death in the community depended heavily on Nazi politics and decisions, the content and influence of these directives are only outlined in a general sense. For these matters, readers can usefully turn to the book by Peter Klein, which concentrates on the German administration of the ghetto. The level of depth and detail in his work is similar to that in Löw’s study and reflects several years’ research. The results are impressive: Not only does he combine a biographical approach derived from perpetrator studies with analysis of administrative logic, initiatives, and policies, he also delivers an unprecedentedly detailed economic survey, thus reassessing the level of Nazi interest in the exploitation of the Litzmannstadt ghetto.

Klein shows why administrative routine and cooperation were the most important conditions for the exploitation of the ghetto’s 160,000 Jews.
Even so, the diverging interests of the local, regional, and Reich administrations often led to conflicts. These conflicts suggest that it was not the sheer productivity of the ghetto that explains its long existence, but instead the difficulties in finding a common "solution" for all of its Jews. By 1943, it seemed infeasible either to deport all ghetto inmates to slave labor camps in the Lublin district or to murder them directly, and the communal "Gettoverwaltung" under Hans Biebow had acquired so many commissions to manufacture various products that the ghetto's liquidation would indeed have dealt a severe blow to the war economy.

Furthermore, the book demonstrates the value a microstudy can have for general history, as Klein presents three major results of wider importance for understanding the Holocaust. First, in the Warthegau it was not the SS that pushed for the murder of Jews; instead, the civil administration of Reichsstatthalter Arthur Greiser and his subordinate, Herbert Mehlhorn, called for this action. Second, Adolf Hitler directly empowered Greiser with the competence to erect the Kulmhof death camp. Third, Heinrich Himmler and Greiser established a close cooperation in the murder of the Jews at that camp, and it was not for economic reasons that the Litzmannstadt ghetto was not dissolved earlier, but rather because of practical problems and conflicts between the regional and communal administrations.

These detailed studies make important contributions, and yet, no scholar has written a true social history of the Litzmannstadt ghetto that includes both the Jewish and German perspective. Gordon J. Horwitz wants to fill this hole, and the subtitle of his book promises to explore the "making of a Nazi city." This goal would indeed be rather commendable, but even after this work, it unfortunately remains a desideratum. Horwitz does not write about a city of Jews, Germans, and Poles; indeed, he completely ignores this last—and largest—segment of the population. The plans for the "Aryanization" of the city, with its accompanying concrete measures, expulsions, and (re-)settlements, are nowhere to be found in this volume, even though many Nazi concepts for the perpetuation of "Germandom" focused on the city, making it the prime example for any analysis of the regime's intentions for a future "German East."

Indeed, the title of Horwitz's book is quite irritating, as the work also portrays German life reductively, based on anecdotal and misleading episodes quoted from the local newspaper. Of course, the Litzmannstädter Zeitung is a valuable source for the everyday history of the city, but historians should not limit their research to this single particular source—and especially not to such a limited sample of stories from it. Horwitz writes a book that deals mainly with the Litzmannstadt ghetto, and in this respect, his account is relatively convincing and grounded in the relevant sources. Unfortunately, he almost completely ignores German research, failing to draw in the important study by Michael Alberti and quoting Löw only in one isolated case. This decision really is disappointing, as Horwitz's decision to use the Litzmannstädter Zeitung suggest that he is more than capable of consulting publications in German. In the end, this dispensable book will only be of use to those who cannot read Löw's study, which is much more sound, innovative, and up-to-date.

Löw's volume might well mark a shift in German historiography from perpetrators to victims, and one can only hope that it will find an English-language publisher and a competent translator. Löw's book not only improves our understanding of the factors that influenced survival in any Nazi ghetto, it also demonstrates that Jews were by no means passive victims of the regime, but established a new society with many individual paths for its members. From the standpoint of scholarship, her results are matched in quality by those of Klein, but his outstanding study demands an
advanced reader with considerable previous knowledge, especially because he only discusses his sources in detail in his footnotes; while he discusses the literature extensively at times, he almost exclusively references it broadly. Due to the detailed description, analysis, and connection of biographical data with administrative and economic processes, his book is not always easy to read, but will also become a milestone in Holocaust historiography.

Notes


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