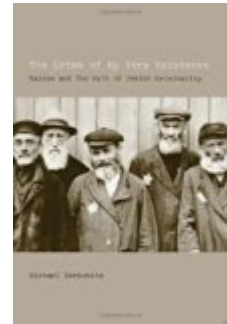


Michael Berkowitz. *The Crime of My Very Existence: Nazism and the Myth of Jewish Criminality*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007. xxix + 321 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-25112-0; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-25114-4.

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Hitler's Willing Criminalists

The basic thesis of this very original book is that “between 1933 and 1938, the Nazis discovered and nurtured ways to assure their stalwarts and the general public that National Socialist Jewish policies were desirable, or at least unobjectionable” (pp. xvi-xvii). We know that they did so through “the quest for a respectable racism” (p. xvii). But Berkowitz argues that the Nazis’ pseudoscientific racism was only one tool among many, and perhaps not even the most important. Instead, he argues, “[a]mong the most effective and prominent reasons the Nazis put forth for persecuting, torturing, murdering and having murdered Jews was the stigmatization of the Jew as criminal” (p. xvii). What makes the book even more novel is the second part of Berkowitz’s argument. He is interested in how Nazism “impinge[d] upon the consciousness” of Germans (p. xvii). But he is also interested in how Jews themselves responded to their victimization, and indeed fought back.

The book proceeds chronologically to outline the stages of Nazi stigmatization of Jews as criminals and the legacy that this stigmatization left in the early post-war years. The first chapter takes this grim story up to the National Socialist takeover of power (minor quibble: Berkowitz confuses Karl Friedrich von Savigny with his father, Friedrich Karl, the founder of the historical school of jurisprudence). Once the Nazis were in power, but before they “simply took the position that all Jews were outside the law,” they made a point of charging Jews with the kind of offenses that would play to the Weimar

stereotypes of Jews as racketeers and con men (p. xviii). Berkowitz relies here in large part on diaries from survivors like Victor Klemperer. Even in 1944, by which time very few Jews were left in Germany, the regime was still coming up with statistics on “Jewish crime” in an effort at retrospective justification of mass murder.

Berkowitz then turns to the ghettos of Łódź, Warsaw, and other communities to show how central to Nazi policy the stigmatization of Jews as criminals was. The sanitary conditions and scarcity of food in the ghettos were so terrible that survival could only come at the price of smuggling and living in squalor. The Nazis then claimed that this activity revealed the Jewish essence. This section has some of the best material in the book: Berkowitz sensitively shows how the Nazi effort to tarnish Jews with the ghetto was as vital for the perpetrators’ own consciousness as it was for propaganda. To commit the deeds that they did, German SS guards, Gestapo, and Kriminalpolizei officers needed to convince themselves that they were only upholding law and order.

Much the same logic applied to the concentration and death camps. Berkowitz argues that three dimensions of the camps—the “criminal-bureaucratic,” the “photographic,” and the “ceremonial”—underscored the message that all Jews were inherently criminal and thus deserved to be in the camps. The Nazis could then tell themselves, and others, that the camps were merely penal institutions in a more or less traditional form. These poli-

cies led to the kind of bizarre contradictions with which Nazi rule was replete. On at least one occasion guards snatched a prisoner from the gas chamber literally at the point of death because the authorities had sent her to Auschwitz to serve a penal sentence, and not for “special handling.”

By 1944, when the Nazis had already murdered most of the Jews under their control but the war had clearly turned against them, they started thinking harder about justification. Berkowitz thus devotes a chapter to a campaign in the summer of 1944 to emphasize Zionism as the latest and most insidious form of Jewish criminal conspiracy. Before 1944 the Nazis had paid little attention to Zionism, so this new campaign represented an important and revealing shift in their propagandistic priorities.

The last two chapters and the epilogue carry the story into the early postwar years. The stereotypes of Jews as criminals haunted the survivors in Displaced Person (DP) camps after the war; Germans could not soon shake off twelve years of intense propaganda. More surprisingly, the occupation authorities sometimes suffered from the same misperceptions, although Berkowitz includes some interesting materials about several American Jews among the occupation forces who performed a valiant service in combating stereotypes. Berkowitz also emphasizes Jewish measures of self-defense, including the formation of DP police forces. A striking photograph toward the end of the book captures much of the message of this section: the men of the Feldafing DP Police Force pose with their hard-as-nails chief Erwin Tichauer. These men had survived things few of us can imagine, and the resolution in their faces is impressive.

This useful book opens up an unfamiliar angle on some familiar subjects, and brings the reader some new material as well. Berkowitz has put a good deal of imagination into the juxtaposition of subjects he deals with here. In places, as in the ghetto chapter, the book rises to insights of a high level.

Nonetheless, I also have a few quibbles. It is churlish perhaps to complain about what an author has not included, when he has included so much material from unfamiliar sources. However, one thing I missed in Berkowitz’s presentation was the medial echo of these stereotypes of Jews, in all the periods he discusses. For instance, the man who headed the criminal police in Łódź

in 1940 and 1941 wrote a two-part article in 1941 for Reinhard Heydrich’s journal, *Kriminalistik*, that, in the most offensive language imaginable, makes use of every possible offensive stereotype of Jews as criminals. Yet this man, Walter Zirpins, was denazified into category 5 after the war and went on to direct the criminal police in the state of Lower Saxony. Both elements of this story would have added to Berkowitz’s argument.[1] Similarly, a look at postwar German publications like *Der Spiegel* would have revealed just how common depictions of Jewish racketeers in terms that carried straight on from Joseph Goebbels’s propaganda ministry were.

Second, the question arises of the relative weight and importance of this particular kind of Nazi stereotyping. Berkowitz is making a strong claim in arguing that presenting Jews as criminals (as opposed to the more familiar Nazi focus on Jews as a biological threat) allowed large swathes of mainstream Germany to feel more at ease with the Nazis’ genocidal campaign. But at least in the earlier years of the regime, it was communists far more than Jews whom Nazi propaganda targeted as criminals (though admittedly, the Nazis did not always distinguish between these two categories). This tendency endured from the Reichstag fire at least up to Hitler’s famous remark in the run-up to Barbarossa that Bolshevism amounted to social deviance. Thus I think it is fair to ask: were efforts to stigmatize Jews as criminals really as central to the Nazi mind or as important in their effects on the German population as Berkowitz claims?

Third, this is not an easy book to read, and not only because of the unpleasant subject matter. Berkowitz is not the clearest of writers. Non sequiturs abound in his paragraphs, so that in places the argument is difficult to follow. He is addicted to the passive voice and the scare quote. This is a shame, because his material deserves a clear presentation.

Overall, though, this important book offers specialists and non-specialists alike some disturbing but thought-provoking reading.

Note

[1]. See Walter Zirpins, “Das Getto in Litzmannstadt, kriminalpolizeilich gesehen,” *Kriminalistik: Monatshefte für die gesamte kriminalistische Wissenschaft und Praxis* 15, no. 9 (September 1941): 97-99.

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