

H-Net Reviews

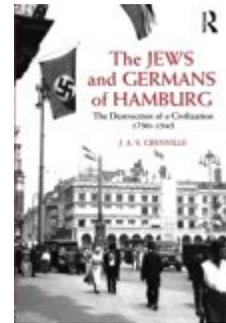
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

J. A. S. Grenville. *The Jews and Germans of Hamburg: The Destruction of a Civilization, 1790-1945*. New York: Routledge, 2011. 384 pp. \$160.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-66585-8; \$39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-66586-5.

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Germany's "Second City" and the Destruction of the Jews

There are two ways of looking at this book. In a more negative light, it might be seen as a rather outdated, very traditional study of the way the Jews of Hamburg experienced exclusion and extermination during the Nazi period, which makes no attempt to incorporate recent trends and innovations in historiographical methods, let alone the cultural turn. However, more positively it should be regarded as an account of the fate of an important urban Jewish community in the "Third Reich," integrated into the general history of the minority in the city and in Germany as a whole, expertly researched by one of Britain's finest historians of the second half of the twentieth century. This reviewer assumes the latter perspective.

John Grenville, whose birth name was Hans Guhrauer, died just after the completion of the manuscript of the book under review. He had come to Britain in 1939 at age eleven with one of the infamous "Kindertransporte," which had opened a last opportunity for tens of thousands of German-Jewish children, but not their parents, to escape Nazi terror. After a difficult period of accommodation in his new home country, Grenville studied history at Birkbeck College, London, where Eric Hobsbawm was one of his teachers. He went on to become a leading scholar of modern political history, holding positions at the Universities of Nottingham, Leeds, and Birmingham. His professional interest in his own heritage began rather late in Grenville's career, during a visiting fellowship in Germany. Thus work on this

study commenced in the early 1980s and spanned almost three decades, a time during which Grenville was also editing the *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*, published by the leading research institute for the history of German Jewry.

The Jews and Germans of Hamburg was conceived to be an integrated history of Hamburg Jewry from the late eighteenth century to the end of the Second World War. It is not. The period before 1933 is a mere preface to a much broader account of the Nazi period. It details the social and economic ascent of Hamburg Jews during the lengthy emancipation period and focuses on the largely middle-class existence of the community during the German Empire and the Weimar Republic. Grenville concentrates on some of Hamburg's leading Jewish figures, in particular bankers (Salomon Heine, the Warburg family), merchants and industrialists (Emil Wohlwill, Oscar Tropolowitz), and the business genius behind the success of the HAPAG shipping empire, Albert Ballin. There is very little in this chapter we do not already know, and almost no attention has been paid to the historical experience of average Hamburg Jews. Yet, this prelude is important in Grenville's concept, since he avoids the trap many historians have fallen into over the decades, which is to assume that there is overwhelming evidence to prove that the minority had been firmly integrated into the fabric of the city. Instead he questions just how accepted Jews really were by drawing attention, for example, to the rise of organized anti-Semitism, which spread into mainstream

political and social life, and to the importance of the “science” of eugenics which, although an international phenomenon, was embraced with particular fervor in Germany after the First World War.

The following, meticulously researched account of Hamburg Jewry from the last years of the Weimar Republic to the downfall of the Nazi reign is heavily source-based and makes excellent use of a multitude of personal accounts of Jewish citizens of the city, conveyed mostly in letters, journals, memoirs, and autobiographies, some unearthed for the first time. Grenville succeeds in drawing a highly vivid picture of the increasing persecution of the Jews since 1933 and also does not forget to shed light on the persecutors. The Nazi administrators, thugs, or profiteers of “aryanization” are, in a way, given a voice, which draws attention to the fact that people and not an anonymous system were responsible for the slow and almost complete destruction of a civilization.

That is also the subtitle of the book. Grenville demonstrates, that German Jews were an integral part of a larger German civilization which destroyed itself by removing the minority from its midst. His answer to the question

of how that could have happened is necessarily inconclusive, but his method of revealing the voices of many individuals on both sides shows that the process must be regarded as just that, a highly individual matter in which any generalization about “the Jews” and “the Nazis” is not permissible. Grenville illustrates the slow but merciless acceleration of anti-Jewish measures within the relatively confined urban cosmos of Hamburg but never forgets to draw attention to the overall policies and decisions of the Nazis taken in Berlin and elsewhere. The unfashionably chronological account is constantly naming names: of key decision makers in the regime, of bystanders, of Jewish activists trying to alleviate the suffering, and of many Jewish individuals having to endure the piecemeal devastation of their existence.

In sum this is a finely crafted, extremely detailed, and in a way personal account of how Germany’s “second city” experienced the almost complete destruction of its Jewish minority, from which one should not expect new methodological or theory-based insights into the history of the Shoah. Writing in elegant yet precise prose, John Grenville has left a most vivid memoir of the darkest chapter in German history.

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