

Christian Gerlach. *The Extermination of the European Jews.* New Approaches to European History Series. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. 528 pp. \$89.99, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-88078-7.



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As the author of this major new synthesis on the history of the Holocaust points out, there have been thousands of books in English devoted to the destruction of six million European Jews. This is undoubtedly a function of the increasing centrality of the final solution in interpretations of Adolf Hitler's Germany in the last half-century and has led to a multiplicity of scholarly approaches on the process as a whole, and to the detailed examination of individual national and regional case studies as well as innumerable analyses of the perpetrators. Indeed, some of the subjects have almost become topics in their own right as research has been carried out on more and more individual case studies. Each of the leading scholars who has attempted an overall synthesis on the Holocaust has his or her own way of approaching the subject. What makes Christian Gerlach's approach different from previous works is his attempt to place the persecution and murder of the Jews in the context of other persecutions carried out by the Nazis and to identify the commonalities between them. As the author makes clear, the objec-

tive is not to construct a hierarchy of suffering but to try and make linkages between the fate of the Jews and those of other persecuted groups. In so doing, he is attempting to redress the huge imbalance in scholarship between large number of works devoted to the fate of the Jews and the paucity of studies on other victim groups, most notably the deaths of three million Soviet prisoners of war (POWs) in Nazi hands between 1941 and 1945.

Gerlach makes all these points in relation to the English-language literature but they are also to some extent applicable to the German literature. The Soviet POWs have received little or no attention from scholars in the West, perhaps because they were seen as part of the military history of the war rather than as innocent civilians, or because Cold War politics made it difficult to highlight the fate of Soviet victims in an increasingly polarized political environment. Nevertheless, their deaths can also be attributed to the same process of mass violence that occurred under the Nazi regime. His argument is that a greater atten-

tion to non-Jewish victimhood can tell us more about the comparative aspects of that mass violence and the various agencies that brought it about. As examples of this, the book examines the roles of various German units well known for their part in the killings of Jews, such as the Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the First Mountain Division, and shows that this was only one aspect of their operations during the war, with the former implicated in other acts of violence against non-Jews in Poland in 1941 and the latter carrying out the killings of civilians in Yugoslavia and the Italian soldiers in Kefalonia as well as being involved in the pogrom at Lviv in 1941.

It is argued that both the contexts of the killings and the motivations behind them were many and various, and undoubtedly evolved over time. Brutality escalated as the tide of war turned increasingly against the Axis. In this context, generalizations are impossible; economics, labor supply, internal German politics, resistance, and civil wars within the occupied states all played a role in addition to anti-Jewish sentiments. As Gerlach points out, even the Nazi government was far from consistent on this. Jews had still been able to function within the German economy until 1938, and, although the majority were subsequently removed or fled, the regime then began importing Jews to meet the demand for labor right up to 1944. Likewise, British, American, and French Jews who were captured were left unharmed.

The book itself is divided into three parts: persecution by Germans, logistics of persecution, and finally, the European dimension. The first part traces the chronological development of the persecution of the Jews from 1933 to 1945 before looking at the structures and agents of violence. In this section, Gerlach concludes that this was far from being a centrally organized, top-down, process (which he argues is still a widely held view), but one that was partly decentralized and allowed for individuals and groups to pursue their own interests. This may overstate the novel-

ty of what he is suggesting as a new approach, but this does not make it any less valid. The ad hoc nature of the killing processes in different extermination centers speaks to this idea of autonomy as does the multiplicity of agencies involved in dealing with other groups, such as partisans and even Soviet POWs. Those identified as persecutors or as responsible for killings came from a wide range of backgrounds, career paths, and social origins and existed within many different agencies. Their motives were similarly many and various and ranged from antisemitic bigotry through vengeful anticommunism to careerism and pressure to conform. The system of polyocracy provided them all with a degree of autonomy in carrying out the often very vague commands (or even assumed commands) of their superiors. Here again the book cites a series of pertinent examples to reinforce the argument being presented.

The second part deals with the logics of persecution and discusses in more detail the major contributory factors in fomenting the mass violence so evident in the regime. The section on racism and anti-Jewish thought will be the most familiar to most readers, but it is complemented by a detailed analysis of the role of forced labor, wider population policies, and an increasing war against indigenous resistance to Nazi rule as the war progressed. In all these sections of the book, Gerlach shows his mastery of the literature by citing examples from both Eastern and Western Europe. The arguments are carefully laid out and clearly developed. None of the major debates are ignored here and the book discusses not only the various economic factors that have been suggested as prompts for increased persecution and killing but also the issues surrounding population transfers, most notably in occupied Poland. While the discussions are not always of great length, the reader is left in no doubt how the author sees these factors as contributing to mass violence as a whole.

The third part deals with the wider European dimension in examining the roles of Axis-allied

governments, such as Bulgaria, and quasi-independent regimes, such as Denmark and Vichy France. While the thrust of this section is designed to show how the policies of these various regimes either contributed to or retarded persecution and violence against minorities, there is a clear statement at the outset that one should not expect to see any unified or collective conclusions drawn from this as there were too many differences between countries and indeed regions to make this tenable. Nonetheless Gerlach does try to draw some tentative comparisons, for example in relation to legislation enacted against Jews in different jurisdictions, and in terms of local involvement in pogroms and other forms of violence against minorities.

This book is a welcome addition to the already voluminous Anglophone literature on the Holocaust, primarily because it takes on the existing, and sometimes simplistic, explanations for the killing of six million Jews and forces the reader to confront the much wider prevailing climate of mass violence that engulfed not just the Jews but other minority groups and others as well. It should become core reading for students of the period, if only to act as a counterweight to the sometimes myopic concentration on the Nazis' Jewish victims. Gerlach has done us all an enormous service by synthesizing a much wider body of literature from across Europe than is commonly consulted on this issue and providing us with thought-provoking questions about the multiplicity of factors that created the genocide.

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