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Anika Walke’s book is an important contribution to the study of the Holocaust in Eastern Europe and the history of Belarusian Jewry. Using oral history methodology, Walke explores how Soviet Jews experienced Nazi occupation and genocide in Belarus. The focus of the book is the survival of young Jewish individuals in Soviet partisan units. The author traces the personal narratives of their prewar and postwar lives.

The book is composed of six chapters, an introduction, and a conclusion. In the introductory chapter, Walke presents the main approach of the book, which is focused on children’s and teenagers’ experiences during the destruction of ghettos in Minsk and other Belarusian towns and their survival in Soviet partisan units. The account is based on more than a hundred interviews conducted by the author in Minsk and St. Petersburg. The main keywords of this study are gender roles, trauma, community, memory, sexual violence, and reproductive labor in the so-called family partisan units. Special emphasis is placed on the survivors’ postwar perception of the Holocaust and partisan resistance.

In chapter 1, Walke turns her attention to the oral history methodology. Chapter 2, “Between Tradition and Transformation: Soviet Jews in the 1930s,” looks into the prewar life of Jews living in Belarusian villages and towns. The author shows differences between older and younger generations of Jews. In contrast to the older generation, young Belarusian Jews actively participated in the construction of the new socialist society and joined the Pioneer and Komsomol organizations. According to Soviet ideology, the concept of childhood was based on ideas of collectivism and internationalism and children were imagined as agents of the revolution and allies of the Bolsheviks in educating older generations. Thus, most Soviet-Jewish youth were a secularized social group with poor knowledge of Yiddish and were devout supporters of Soviet values by 1941.

The Nazi occupation of Belarus had multiple dimensions. It meant not only the destruction of
the Soviet regime but also a dramatic breakdown of the prewar Jewish experience. On June 28, 1941, the seventh day of the war, after massive bombing that destroyed most of the city of Minsk, Nazi troops occupied the capital of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic. Minsk became the administrative center of the General Commissariat of White-Ruthenia. Within a few weeks, the Nazis established a ghetto; they amassed all urban dwellers of Jewish descent from the different Minsk regions into a segregated area enclosed by barbed wire. No similar ghetto was created in the capital of neighboring Ukraine. However, in Kyiv, on September 29-30, 1941, just nine days after the German occupation, more than thirty-three thousand Jewish residents were massacred in two days of mass killings in Babi Yar. For many Jews, the dramatic turn from a relatively good and peaceful prewar childhood to survival in the state-run genocide was the greatest trauma of their lives.

In the third chapter, “The End of Childhood: Young Soviet Jews in the Minsk Ghetto,” Walke examines individual strategies of survival in the Minsk ghetto. Indeed, Belarusian Jews' experiences were similar to the tragic experiences of Jews elsewhere in Nazi-occupied Europe. On the other hand, the Minsk ghetto was rather exceptional, because of the strong anti-Nazi resistance in the city and ethnic Belarusians' solidarity with ghetto prisoners. Thus, due to significant help from non-Jewish residents and resistance fighters, about thirty thousand Jews were able to escape from the ghetto.[1] The narrative continues to chapter 4, “Suffering and Survival: The Destruction of Jewish Communities in Eastern Belorussia,” which is based on interviews of the survivors. For example, Frida Ped’ko recalled how a local Nazi policeman from the village Slavnoe pulled her and her sister into the arms of an old Belarusian man, P. I. Stasevich, and told him to take the children away from the execution site, saying “there is no need to shoot these kids” (p. 111). About 150 Jews were shot this day in Slavnoe, including at least 26 children under the age of twelve. This interview shows the complexity of genocide; help could come from an unexpected source.

In chapter 5, “Fighting for Life and Victory: Refugees from the Ghettos and the Soviet Partisan Movement,” Walke examines the factors that contributed to the survival of Jewish youth who escaped ghettos and joined Soviet partisan units. Anti-Semitism and sexism often prevented survival in the forest. Young males had better chances than females to get accepted into the units. The author notes that most female interviewees had difficulty speaking about sexual relations and sexual harassment during the war. This problem has been previously discussed by Tec Nechama.[2] Jewish girls were often relegated to noncombatant activity in the partisan resistance and were pushed into unwanted sexual relationships. However, this part of their memory was muted during the postwar period by both the state and the society; as Rita Kazhdan points out, “partisan women were fallen women” (pp. 164-165).

The story of life in the forest unfolds in chapter 6, “Of Refuge and Resistance: Labor for Survival in the ‘Zorin Family Unit.’” Walke turns her attention to the everyday life of ghetto survivors in the so-called Zorin Family Unit, the Soviet partisan detachment no. 106 led by two commanders of Jewish descent, Shalom Zorin and Chaim Feigelman. The unit was located in the Naliboki Forest, a wooded area in western Belarus, which was part of Poland before 1939. The Zorin Unit was a supply unit that delivered food and provisions for everyday use to other combatant partisan units in the Naliboki Forest. Zorin accepted women and teenagers unable to fight and provided safe havens for many ghetto refugees. However, hard day-to-day labor was required for survival. Only a few holidays interrupted the struggle for existence. Partisans continued to follow Soviet rituals; for example, on International Labor Day, partisan
children received red neckerchiefs and white shirts made out of parachutes to celebrate the founding of the Pioneer organization.

The postwar life of survivors is highlighted in the conclusion to the book. Many Jewish children grew up in state-run orphanages. Up to twenty-five thousand orphaned boys were adopted by Red Army detachments as “sons of the regiment” (p. 198). Many of them joined the military Suvorov schools. Resistance against the Nazis had developed a sense of solidarity among Soviet citizens of various nationalities. Therefore, many Jewish survivors disguised their identity and became assimilated within Soviet Russian culture. Walke concludes that Jewish survivors were at once a part and not a part of the Soviet commemorative praxis. On the one hand, the heroic partisan resistance in Belarus was given a central position in the commemoration of the Great Patriotic War. The leaders of the republic after 1945 were former partisan commanders, Panteleimon Ponomarenko, Kiryl Mazura, and Piotr Masherau. Belarus was acknowledged as “a partisan republic” and former partisans achieved, as Walke shows, high status within society. On the other hand, it was especially painful for Jewish survivors to see how the Holocaust and their own experience of surviving in genocide were neglected in the official politics of memory. During the Soviet era, the Nazi genocide of Jews (as well as Roma) was forgotten. Victory was achieved by all Soviet people, and the war was a tragedy for all Soviet nationalities. However, the key point of Soviet memory politics was heroization. For Soviet leaders, World War II was first of all a war of heroes—soldiers, partisans, and members of the underground resistance—and not of victims and survivors. The Soviet commemoration of war was full of taboos that alongside with the Holocaust included misinterpretation of the chronology and geography of the war, multiple crimes conducted by Soviet partisans, the history of the non-Soviet partisan move-ments on the territory of Belarus, and the collaboration of Belarusians with the Nazi regime. 

Pioneers and Partisans: An Oral History of Nazi Genocide in Belorussia is likely based on a PhD dissertation in the field of history, and not cultural anthropology or ethnology, which employ oral history narratives in their research. Using source criticism, historians usually evaluate a variety of sources, providing many different points of view. This book is mainly based on testimonies that Walke collected seventy years after World War II. It means that these stories often include the tricks of memory, confusion, and mistakes. Names and dates do not always correspond to known archival documents and historical sources. Thus, it would have been useful for the author to compare these individual testimonies with available archival materials and previous academic research on the Nazi occupation of Belarus. Here I would like to mention just a few important sources, which would have been useful for this particular research and its methodology. In the book, Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin’s Russia, the British historian Orlando Figes shows the significance of oral testimonies in the reconstruction of the everyday life during the Stalinist terror. Figes analyzes, in particular, the testimonies of children, whose voices were often ignored in historiography. He stresses that oral history is virtually the only way to study mass violence and its consequences for human life through the prism of the victims’ perception, and not through official interpretation.[3] One can agree that the testimonies of Holocaust survivors bear witness to what is most important, how people reacted to state-run mass violence. In response to Figes’s book, Swedish historian Kristian Gerner pointed to another specific problem of oral interviews. He reported that old people’s accounts of the past are often dressed in a suit borrowed from present-day literature and films on the Holocaust; therefore, their narratives require careful scrutiny.[4] Indeed, oral testimonies must be subjected to cross analysis, verified by archival data and by inter-
views of other witnesses. Unfortunately, this was ignored by the author and can be potentially problematic.

Besides, there are several different approaches to the role of ethnic Belarusians in the Holocaust. Some scholars assert a sympathetic attitude expressed by the Belarusians to the Jewish population, which was rather exceptional for Europe. Belarus ranks eighth in the world for the number of people who, because of having saved Jews, became “Righteous Among the Nations.” Other scholars speak about the active and massive participation of Belarusian, Russian, and Ukrainian auxiliary military and police forces in the Holocaust.[5] Unfortunately, native collaboration in the Holocaust is not explored in this book and the Jewish genocide in Belarus is seen as a deed of the Nazis only. It seems that these survivors avoided speaking on this hot-button issue and the author does not analyze this perspective. Unfortunately, Walke does not specify which occupational forces and auxiliary police regiments participated in the mentioned anti-partisan operations. Instead, such abstract terms as “the Germans” and “police forces” are used throughout the book. However, for example, a number of native pro-Nazi military units took part in the anti-partisan operation Cotbus; the Cossack regiment 600, the Ost-battalion 633, and the 1st National Russian SS Druzhina led by the former Soviet Officer Vladimir Gil-Rodionov were among them. The personal and geographical names in the book are transliterated from the Russian language; this is problematic since the official language of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic was Belarusian. Finally, some relevant publications on the Nazi occupation regime in Belarus are not mentioned.[6]

Again, despite a few minor criticisms, the book has considerable importance for the understanding of the history and memory of the Holocaust and genocide survivors.

Notes


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