Jeffrey Koerber, professor of history at Chapman University, headed to Belarus just when the archives were opening in this former Soviet republic. Koerber accessed untapped sources to research the history of a region that has been largely marginalized. Most important, he delved into the histories of ordinary people to illuminate and explain complex phenomena that enveloped the Polish-Soviet borderlands, now part of Belarus, especially in 1933-45. In *Borderland Generation: Soviet and Polish Jews under Hitler*, Koerber offers an exquisite comparative study about a generation of Jews either born or raised in the interwar period in the areas that today comprise Belarus. The book traces the factors that shaped the experiences of Jews in Polish Grodno and in Soviet Vitebsk and the ways life in these different national contexts affected the modes of survival of Jews during the Holocaust.

*Borderland Generation* consists of seven chapters, an introduction, and a conclusion. The first two chapters explore the years 1933 to 1939 in each of the two cities, Vitebsk and Grodno. The remaining five chapters present a chronological arc. They focus on themes that affected the Jews’ trajectories in the years 1939-48: the onset of World War II, the Soviet occupation of eastern Poland, the German attack on the Soviet Union, Nazi persecution of Jews, the Jews’ survival strategies, and liberation. The book includes several maps that allow the reader to understand the landscapes described in the text. The book also incorporates images that add a visual layer to the historical analysis and extensive personal stories.

Individuals assume center stage in this study. Koerber has mined archives to retrieve oral histories, memoirs, diaries, and testimonies to amplify the voices of Jews, especially those who were children and young adults during the years covered in the book. Serious research on borderlands nearly always requires competence in several languages. Koerber’s book benefits from the author’s direct access to a rich body of multilingual sources in Belarus, Poland, Israel, and the United States. *Borderland Generation* is an example of how to write about the history of Jews and about the Holocaust in Eastern Europe. The book is grounded in a wealth of diverse archival material that has allowed Koerber to carefully stitch a compelling narrative that zooms onto the two Jewish urban centers and zooms out to follow the Jews’ paths of persecution and modes of survival during the Nazi era.

By analyzing how knowledge and skills acquired in the 1930s shaped Jews’ survival in the 1940s, Koerber has highlighted the role of such
forces as ideology, nationalism, religion, secularization, women’s emancipation, antisemitism, and socialization, among others. Until September 1939, Vitebsk and Grodno, located a little over 350 miles apart, differed in national administration and in Jews’ life circumstances, in their opportunities for integration and advancement. After twenty years under Polish rule, Grodno was swallowed by the Soviet Union, and Grodno’s Polish Jews became Soviet Jews. Yet their attachment to operating in a Jewish environment remained, influencing their modes of survival once Nazi Germany occupied the territory in summer 1941. Jews from Grodno were confined in a ghetto, drafted for forced and slave labor, and deported to camps. They often continued to rely on their family and Jewish youth networks. Their responses to oppression depended on timing and the incremental way the Nazis introduced their anti-Jewish policies. The situation was starkly different in Vitebsk. As Koerber shows, the Nazis implemented brutal anti-Jewish policies as they moved east, pursuing them at a rapid pace. This left many Vitebsk Jews without a false sense of security. Therefore, flight and life under an assumed identity dominated as strategies for survival. Having been raised in a Soviet system, these Jews were much better prepared to take on non-Jewish identities of ethnic Belarusians or Muslim Tatars. These differences in upbringing, mentality, and access to the non-Jewish world, as well as the role of luck, instincts, initiative, and circumstances, all influenced the Jews’ responses in Grodno and Vitebsk.

The focus of the book remains on Grodno and Vitebsk. However, it also extends to places in which Jews from these two cities found themselves in the course of Nazi policies or their own agency while trying to evade those same policies. Thus, Koerber takes the reader to villages near Grodno where some Jews attempted to survive in hiding and under a false identity. He moves, too, to other destinations, particularly of Grodno Jews: Treblinka, Majdanek, labor camps in Lublin District, and Auschwitz-Birkenau. Koerber traces the wartime paths of survival of Vitebsk Jews: fleeing from the city, joining the Red Army, entering into partisan units, and forming Jewish resistance networks. His analysis of how men and women of different age groups adopted these various modes of survival and participated in defiance against the Nazi oppressors offers important insights into the role of gender and age during genocide. Survival strategies, as Koerber shows, necessitated that Jews employ fluid identities. The personal histories that Koerber highlights illustrate all these notions particularly well.

Some elements in the book stand out for other reasons. The use of personal stories is arguably one of the key strengths of this book. However, providing too many details about dates of birth and names of parents for only selected individuals affects the narrative flow. For readers familiar with the Polish language, the inconsistent use of diacritics juts out, as does the incorrect spelling of a few names. In addition to the two minor observations, two larger topics emerge from the book that the author could have explained more. The first relates to the concept of “generation” and the different experiences and memories that Jews born in the 1920s or earlier had versus those born in the 1930s. The second topic concerns the last chapter, which claims to cover a long durée, 1942-48, but which only touches on liberation and the choices made by survivors after the war. One way to look at it is to see Koerber’s last chapter, and, especially, the brief discussion of the aftermath of the war, as a call for drawing on and expanding the superb research in Borderland Generation.

Koerber has presented scholars and students of Poland and Polish Jewish history with an insightful and original comparative study that pushes the boundary of the scholarly gaze eastward and positions the focus on areas that have been sidelined for all too long. By probing the Holocaust experiences of Jews affected by the politics and realities of the interwar, Koerber re-
fines our understanding of an integrative approach to Holocaust history. In *Borderland Generation* Koerber shows that to understand the wartime experiences, trajectories, and memories of Jews from the borderlands, one must not simply signal but really scrutinize the phenomena and circumstances that defined and shaped the people and the geographic area. *Borderland Generation* is a riveting study and a timely exploration of the Polish-Belorussian border region.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at [https://networks.h-net.org/h-poland](https://networks.h-net.org/h-poland)


**URL:** [https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=55255](https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=55255)

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.