This book demonstrates as much as it analyzes that the Warsaw Ghetto—established during the Holocaust and the site of the Jewish uprising launched on April 19, 1943, that staved off two thousand German troops for twenty-eight days—has been an enduring source of inspiration for American writers and artists, apparently second only to the Anne Frank story. As so many conclusions that sound almost intuitive once they have been articulated, the work required to arrive at it is exhaustive.

Samantha Baskind has collated a wide range of individual and collaborative American projects and gives the representational history of the Warsaw Ghetto shape across seventy-five years of cultural productions. Beginning with the radio dramatization of the ghetto narrative only two months after the tragic end of the ghetto, the Warsaw Ghetto uprising seemed to grip American audiences as relevant to their own survival and the survival of American freedoms in a world threatened by evil. Corralling smaller audiences but responding in the more long-lived mediums in pencil, ink, and oil, graphic artists Arthur Szyk and William Gropper were among those who represented the uprising within months of the ghetto’s fall. With the war still raging, the first anniversary of the uprising evoked political activist projects fighting for an uncertain future for Jews on both sides of the Atlantic. That year, the Yiddish play *The Miracle of the Warsaw Ghetto* opened in New York already bearing the optimistic and heroic stamp that the uprising would acquire in the later resistance narratives of John Hersey’s *The Wall* (1950).

The second chapter explores the efforts to challenge what was developing into a conventional lens of “good versus evil” in Millard Lampell’s theatricalization of Hersey’s *The Wall* and Rod Serling’s teleplay *In the Presence of Mine Enemies* (1960). These projects introduced both Jewish and gentile characters and both the desire for and resistance to fighting, and they focused internally on the psychological dramas within the ghetto walls. These nuanced experiments proved short-lived as the theme of militant heroism returned to popular acclaim with Leon Uris’s *Exodus* (1958) and *Mila 18* (1961), the subject of the third chapter and the one with which most readers will be the most familiar.

The last two chapters focus on the less-known and less-studied subject of the ghetto’s children, expanding the image and narrative of the ghetto to those who did not, could not, and were not expected to fight. Baskind demonstrates that artists deploy the image of the child as a symbol of innocence and all that was lost and on whose behalf we must tolerate no naivete in the future. The attempt to process the horrors of Holocaust realities, often recorded in photography by the perpetrators, can
be traced in the varied appropriations of the boy
with his hands in the air from the Stroop Report by
artists Samuel Bak, Judy Chicago, Audrey Flack,
and Jack Levine. The final chapter focuses on the
2003 graphic novel Yossel: April 19, 1943, in which
the artist Joseph Kubert fantasizes his way out of
the totality of the ghetto dust by imagining an alter-
native ending for his alter-ego Yossel in a counter-history that imagines his family not immi-
grating to the United States in the 1920s.

As she painstakingly draws the map of Ameri-
can culture produced against the backdrop of the
Warsaw Ghetto, Baskind analyzes the broader
contours that all the individual projects in various
media reveal in tandem about this corner of the
American art scene. Baskind suggests that the de-
sire to turn to the subject of the Warsaw Ghetto
“suggests a meta-awareness on the part of the
makers” not only of the heroism that brought forth
the Jewish uprising “but also the struggles to
record, preserve, and remember, which are always
heroic imperatives in their own right in the
penumbra of the Holocaust” (p. 13). For the artist
who has devoted his life to the struggle to record,
preserve, and remember, the act of representation
is itself a heroic imperative. In various points
throughout the book, Baskind creates symbolic
links between the physical “combat” that inspired
these artists and the artistic “combat” work of the
cultural producers she has included in the book. If
the analogy seems overwrought, the fact that some
of the artists and writers included in the book, as
well as Baskind in her own research, turned to the
Oneg Shabbos archive established by those sealed
in the ghetto to record their own experiences cer-
tainly speaks to the mutual drive to survive
through the historical record.

But for the scholar, the bundling of these vari-
ous individual projects as a category of cultural
analysis carries different implications. While the
Polin Museum at the site of the Warsaw Ghetto has
sought to contextualize the ghetto, its uprising, and
its destruction in a thousand years of Polish Jewish
history, Baskind has chosen a single and excep-
tional event in Jewish history as a subject of aca-
demic inquiry. As a result, this book asks the ques-
tion: can we discuss the Warsaw Ghetto apart
from the Holocaust? To borrow a modified version
of Nathan Englander’s query about that other
Holocaust icon Anne Frank: what are we talking
about when we talk about the Warsaw Ghetto?

Baskind engages with this thought experiment
throughout the book, sometimes landing on the ri-
vailing of Frank as a tragic symbol to manifest
hope in a more heroic response and a different
outcome to tyranny. Although offering no fixed an-
swers, Baskind has produced a daring work of
scholarship on American art in very concrete
terms by including not only voices critical of
America’s abuses of power but also those promot-
ing interventionist foreign policy, gun ownership,
and Jewish and American exceptionalism. Since
Baskind’s subjects often buoy the theme of ghetto
resistance with the threat of fascist repetition,
their representations of the Warsaw Ghetto often
explore extreme positions that challenge the ide-
ological tenets that many of the artists included in
this book express in their other works. This in-
cludes the use of the term “armed resistance” for
the Warsaw Ghetto context, as it is ubiquitously de-
scribed, to promote private gun ownership in
America by imagining, as Jon Bogdanove’s Super-
man does, the victory over past and future Reichs.
It also includes the use of the ghetto to project revi-
sionist Zionist perspectives and to characterize
criticism of Israeli militarism as a left-wing itera-
tion of fascism. Given how unpopular these per-
spectives are in a culture that frowns upon gun vi-
olence and militarism, the result is a broader spec-
trum of political and ideological visions than art
historians typically present.

Although Baskind does not explicitly offer this
conclusion herself, her richly illustrated book re-
veals that artists often reject (or co-opt) political
correctness to engage with the Warsaw Ghetto as a
historical subject that tests the premises and limitations of universalist values.

Maya Balakirsky Katz is associate professor of Jewish art at Bar-Ilan University and a clinical psychoanalyst.

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