Immediately evoking Primo Levi’s seminal memoir, *If This Is a Man*, the title of the volume under review, *If This Is a Woman: Studies on Women and Gender in the Holocaust*, highlights an important truth: that the experiences of men should not be considered the focus of Holocaust studies.[1] Instead, this collection challenges readers to look beyond the idea that there was a uniformly gendered Holocaust experience, and to instead consider the variety of experiences that Europe’s Jews faced under Nazi occupation. The volume also follows a noticeable and welcome trend that extends the scholarship of women and gender in the Holocaust beyond the English-language and western European scholarship, broadening the field to those in East-Central Europe. The result is a work that conveys this important research to new audiences, while also focusing on areas that have long been neglected. What sets this volume apart from the other Holocaust scholarship are the introductions to new paths of research that use gender as a subject and a lens, and the fact that it features scholars whose work is otherwise unknown to English-language audiences.

The editors of this volume proudly approach their task with a political mission statement. This volume was compiled in a specific political environment, and the included authors are largely from East-Central Europe themselves. Many work in academic institutions that have come under scrutiny from anti-democratic governments that advocate or are actively cutting gender studies programs from universities. This, the authors observe, is usually accompanied by attacks on women’s rights and thus an assault on academic studies that investigate and problematize traditional notions of gender. The authors’ mission, then, is not only to unearth the voices of women during the Holocaust in order to have interdisciplinary discussions that will, as Sara Horowitz called for, “reshape or nuance Holocaust memory” (p. x).[2] They also aim to respond to the political landscape around them. Andrea Pető’s foreword ends with a warning that if the scholars in this book are not successful, then conferences about women’s and gender studies, like the one from which this book emerged, may exist only in memory.

The volume is organized into six thematic parts. After Pető’s introduction, the first section, “Theoretic Reflections on a Gender Focus in Holo-
caust Studies,” features two voices known well to those familiar with the historiography. Dalia Ofer, whose 1998 coedited volume (with Lenore J. Weitzman) is considered foundational to the field, emphasizes challenging the male-centered master narrative of the Holocaust in her essay. Ofer suggests that rather than focusing on aspects of either continuity or disruption of women’s prewar behavior, scholars should instead apply a “sequential framework” (p. 5).[3] Doing so reveals how women switched between their prewar and wartime behaviors according to necessity. The piece serves as an excellent opening to the collection because it implores scholars to rethink their methodological approaches to historical evidence. The second essay in this section, by Natalia Aleksiun, argues that when researching families during the Holocaust, a consideration of gender enables victims to be recovered as gendered beings. This is illustrated in the example of Cecylia Slepak, a journalist working on behalf of the Oneg Shabes archival group. Tasked with surveying conditions for women in the Warsaw Ghetto, Slepak’s report shows women who remained in their more traditionally prescribed roles of wife and mother, as well as those who used their skills for work that would have previously been considered unacceptable, such as thievery and prostitution. Ofer and Aleksiun’s contributions here set the tone for the rest of the book.

Far too often in gender studies, gender is taken as synonymous with women. Agnes Laba’s “Masculinities under Occupation: Considerations of a Gender Perspective on Everyday Life under German Occupation” challenges such assumptions, and employs the history of everyday life—a lens that is often applied to the study of women’s experiences—to the experiences of men. With occupation, the enemy was brought into societal spaces and men found their role as warrior-protector severely challenged. Further, supply shortages challenged the societal role for men to provide for their families. Laba argues that Nazi occupation itself, rather than military defeat at the hands of the German army, was the biggest shock to masculinities during the Holocaust because it affected everyday life so pervasively.

Laurien Vastenhout’s chapter, “Female Involvement in the ‘Jewish Councils’ of the Netherlands and France: Gertrude van Tijn and Juliette Stern,” focuses the Jewish councils—often assumed to be male-dominated—and argues for the historical importance of the presence of women in these institutions. Given that women often did not occupy spaces of power, they were not strictly monitored by the Germans. This allowed van Tijn and Stern to offer concrete aid to Jews, including such illegal acts as helping with escapes. Vastenhout credits this absence in the historiography to scholarship’s focus on the morality of Jewish councils and their members’ participation in the plans and actions of occupying Germans. While it remains true that women’s power was limited in these spaces, Vastenhout’s study offers significant insights into the structures of the councils, the pivotal roles of women not only in providing aid for Jewish residents but also in helping many escape, and the reasons why women were suited to this work, which she characterizes as continuity with their prewar involvement in their communities, either in Zionist organizations or in social welfare. This article thus shifts the focus of council scholarship to individuals, often women, who had a historical commitment to aid work.

Finally, Florian Zabransky’s chapter, “Male Jewish Teenage Sexuality in Nazi Germany,” considers a topic long considered taboo in Holocaust research. Often the emphasis is placed on either the experience of Jews as Jews or on homosexual men as homosexual men without considering intersectional levels of persecution. Zabransky asserts that it is crucial to write about sexuality during the period with words that avoid anachronisms. Further, Zabransky offers the startling argument that sexuality served as a vehicle of belonging to Judaism. Zabransky’s essay ends with another nod to one of the volume’s missions—a call for
further research about sexuality during the Holocaust. Zabransky observes that when survivors speak about sexuality it is because they deem it important. Scholars must listen.

The defiance of the book in the face of political changes that threaten the ability of scholars to conduct vital research is present in the opening chapters from Ofer, Aleksiun, and Pető. However, it fades into the background in the subsequent essays. This means that while the conference from which this book emerged was explicitly political, what is more important is the research itself. Most critical is the cutting-edge scholarship undertaken by a group consisting mostly of emerging scholars. As such, the real success of the book is that it teases out exciting new horizons for Holocaust research, giving readers insight into questions previously unasked and looking at sources in innovative and exciting ways, such as Vastenhout’s examination of the Jewish councils and Zabransky’s analysis of the connections between religion and sexuality.

Notes

[1]. The original Italian edition was published under the title Se questo è un uomo, which translates to If This Is a Man. In the United States, the title of the translation is I Survived Auschwitz.


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