
Reviewed by Anne van Mourik (NIOD-Institute for War, Holocaust, and Genocide Studies)

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Helene J. Sinnreich’s *The Atrocity of Hunger: Starvation in the Warsaw, Łódź and Kraków Ghettos during World War II* is significant for a number of reasons. It does not just amplify the voices of victims within ghettos but also offers a novel perspective on dynamics, effects, and coping strategies related to the “atrocity of hunger.” Using this concept, Sinnreich highlights that the Holocaust not only included mass murder through bullets, gas chambers, and death marches. It also entailed the brutal aspect of starvation. Mass killings in concentration camps obscured the role of “an executioner less visible,” despite the substantial loss of life it inflicted (p. 206). Through an *Alltagsgeschichte* (everyday history), Sinnreich delves into the everyday experiences and challenges faced by Jews as they grappled with food scarcity and hunger in three Polish ghettos: Łódź, Warsaw, and Kraków. She analyzes sources such as diaries and other ego-documents. In doing so, she provides a thorough insight into the strategies employed by Jews in coping with “genocidal famine conditions.” This term, akin to “the atrocity of hunger” serves to emphasize the political roots of famine.

In utilizing not only the term “genocidal famine” but also exploring hunger as an atrocity, Sinnreich makes a substantial contribution to the growing scholarship exploring the connection between hunger and violence. Noteworthy scholars such as Jenny Edkins and Alex de Waal have delved into the criminal aspect of starvation, breaking new ground by examining forced starvation as a tool of genocide and war.[1] Other notable researchers in this realm are Alice Weinreb and Ingrid de Zwarte, who investigate hunger as a political-military instrument, as well as Tatjana Tönsmeyer and Camilla Orjuela, who argue that hunger is a form of violence.[2] My own research contributes to this scholarship by exploring how hunger as a relative invisible form of violence is represented and politicized.[3] Framing hunger as an atrocity, weapon of war, or form of violence holds significance not only for scholars but also for policymakers, judges, and society at large. Encouraging a collective recognition of hunger as a...
form of violence is essential for fostering a comprehensive understanding and effective response. It helps distinguish between situations where hunger is a result of systemic issues, deliberate actions, or neglect as opposed to a natural disaster. This perspective emphasizes the role of human agency in causing or exacerbating hunger, as seen in instances of conflict-driven displacement, governmental mismanagement of resources, and economic policies that disproportionately impact vulnerable populations.

_The Atrocity of Hunger_ is divided into three sections. The initial chapters explore communal food access. Sinnreich explores the utilization of prewar Jewish communal organizations by the Nazis, and the subsequent establishment of the Judenräte (Nazi-mandated Jewish Councils). This official Jewish communal leadership took on numerous responsibilities for governance of the Jewish community in the ghettos. These chapters also bring to light communal coping mechanisms, including community kitchens and charitable organizations that strove to provide sustenance to vulnerable groups such as orphans and the elderly amidst the harsh conditions of the ghettos.

The second section, chapters 4, 5 and 6, contains a detailed examination of the central theme: the physical and social breakdown of individuals and ghetto populations due to the atrocity of hunger. It delves into how starvation not only induced physical ailments like stunted growth, impotence, and fatigue but also played a central role in shaping the daily lives of individuals and ghetto populations. Sinnreich's exhaustive examination reveals how hunger disrupted the normal functioning of bodies, leaving individuals too weak to work or even visit soup kitchens. Moreover, she uncovers the mental and emotional toll of starvation, showcasing how it led to a transformation and breakdown of families, communities, and individuals. This section emphasizes that hunger forced individuals to challenge their fundamental beliefs, affecting their behavior, dietary choices, and interpersonal interactions.

The final section, chapters 7, 8 and 9, explores how ghetto dwellers employed various coping mechanisms. Sinnreich describes how ghetto dwellers employed mechanisms that were allowed by the Germans, such as charitable organizations, especially in Warsaw and Kraków, as well as the organization of soup kitchens and begging. Some prisoners employed illicit strategies such as smuggling or theft and turned to the black market. Jewish individuals, for example, sometimes collaborated in smuggling activities with ethnic German guards, a strategy that not only enabled their survival but also allowed these guards to accumulate wealth. This unveils the intricate social dynamics and compromises inherent in these ghetto communities. Another vital survival strategy centered on labor, as the German objective to eliminate “useless eaters” specifically targeted the nonworking and poor. Survival in the ghettos hinged on being a laborer, as obtaining food and avoiding deportation became closely linked. The book's chapters therefore progress chronologically, tracing the trajectory of hunger among the Jewish populations in three ghettos from the war's commencement to the population's departure via deportation, and highlighting coping strategies at individual, household, and communal levels.

The richness and diversity of sources employed in _The Atrocity of Hunger_ align seamlessly with its strength, which lies in the detailed exploration of hunger in the ghetto extending beyond the physical and mental strains of food deprivation. The incorporation of a great number of personal sources such as oral testimonies, memoirs, and diaries, as well as German government documents, Jewish communal leadership records, legal and illegal newspapers, and artistic creations provides an in-depth view of the food situations in the ghettos. More importantly, it provides a detailed account of the perspectives of the Jewish survivors and victims. By elevating the voices of
Jews as the primary focus of the book’s narrative, Sinnreich privileges their perspectives and makes them the key informants of their own experiences within the confines of the ghetto walls. This way, the selected sources contribute significantly to a more profound understanding of the psychological impact of hunger and starvation on both individuals and communities. This psychological impact encompasses the emotional strain linked to bereavement, witnessing the effects of starvation, and adopting survival strategies that conflicted with firmly held convictions, such as giving up eating kosher, stealing food, and engaging in survival sex.

Survival sex, as depicted in the book, encompasses a spectrum from direct prostitution to forming relationships, for example with Germans, aimed at securing protection from hunger. The book provides numerous instances supporting Cormac Ó Gráda’s observation that “famines bring out the best and the worst in human nature.”[4] For example, Sinnreich shows how individuals strove to prevent death-by-starvation of their loved ones by working double shifts and sharing rationed food. Simultaneously, she demonstrates how people grew desensitized to the suffering of others, and how hunger contributed to heightened irritability and mood fluctuations. The irritability, fueled by the physical discomfort of hunger, strained social bonds and led to frequent conflicts within families. An anonymous girl vividly expressed this struggle in her diary: “I have no idea why I don’t live more harmoniously with my sister. We fight all the time and scream at each other. I must cause my parents a lot of worry” (p. 81). This individual experience mirrors a broader pattern of social breakdown within ghetto communities, where hunger not only affected interpersonal relationships but also contributed to the overall destabilization of social structures.

The Atrocity of Hunger significantly contributes to our understanding of gender roles during periods of malnutrition and famine, particularly in the unique context of the ghettos. Unlike many studies focusing on famine situations during war, which often emphasize female populations due to the absence of men engaged in military service, the ghettos encompassed people of all ages and genders, including working-age men. Here, traditional views of gender-specific roles in non-wage-earning tasks, like food preparation, were transformed, involving men, women, and children. The imperative to hold any job, and so avoid deportation, during extreme ghetto conditions led individuals, regardless of gender, to shoulder a variety of tasks previously deemed gender-specific, including maintenance duties like cleaning, sewing, or managing the disposal of waste in the streets. Sinnreich explores the complexities of how gender norms and prewar moral expectations were both challenged and reinforced during the atrocity of hunger. It brings attention to situations where both women and men, compelled by the imperative for survival, sacrificed themselves for their families. Additionally, it explores challenging choices they faced, including actions such as stealing food or abandoning family members.

The book not only provides valuable historical insights but also carries a crucial message for now and the future, shedding light on those who are most vulnerable to the atrocity of hunger: namely those marginalized and impoverished. The detailed exploration of hunger experiences offers a parallel to contemporary situations of violence and mass starvation such as in Gaza, Burkina Faso, and Mali. For instance, Sinnreich vividly portrays how individuals lacking prewar wealth or the means to generate income were swiftly plunged into poverty, rendering them highly susceptible to starvation. In a food-insecure home, falling ill often meant death, especially for those without the resources to secure sustenance or access medical care. The poor and unemployed, devoid of financial buffers, were the first to succumb to hunger, while those with monetary means or assets to trade could more easily navigate the harsh circumstances by procuring food.
and avoiding physical exhaustion or mistreatment. Indeed, Sinnreich successfully demonstrates that hunger, far from being the great equalizer, disproportionately preys on the most vulnerable. Sinnreich’s *The Atrocity of Hunger: Starvation in the Warsaw, Łódź, and Kraków Ghettos during World War II* meticulously unveils the multifaceted impact of hunger amid the Holocaust. Beyond its role in physically decimating populations, framing hunger as an atrocity acknowledges agency in the causation of hunger and highlights its transformative effects on families, communities, and individuals. Sinnreich’s book is thoroughly researched and skillfully constructed, effectively achieving her aim to narrate the stories of Jews navigating the challenges of surviving the genocidal famine conditions imposed by Nazi ghettoization. Holocaust scholars, famine researchers, and students exploring everyday life during this period will find Sinnreich’s *The Atrocity of Hunger* to be a valuable resource for deepening our comprehension of Jewish experiences during the Holocaust, particularly in relation to the profound impact of hunger.

Notes


[3]. Anne van Mourik, “Weaponizing the Past: Textbooks, Hunger and War in Germany 1914-2020,” ongoing research project sponsored by the University of Amsterdam and NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies.

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