

## [Hoppe on Gruner, 'The Holocaust in Bohemia and Moravia: Czech Initiatives, German Policies, Jewish Responses'](#)

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**Wolf Gruner.** *The Holocaust in Bohemia and Moravia: Czech Initiatives, German Policies, Jewish Responses.* Translated by Alex Skinner. New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2019. 454 pp. \$179.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-78920-284-7.

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In recent years, Holocaust research on Nazi-occupied territories has increasingly paid attention to how non-Germans living under German control acted with regard to the persecution and mass murder of European Jews.[1] Wolf Gruner's book, *The Holocaust in Bohemia and Moravia: Czech Initiatives, German Policies, Jewish Responses*, first published in German in 2016, offers a fresh and inspiring view on this topic, filling a gap in the field by focusing specifically on the Czech lands. Indeed, when Germany occupied the Czech lands in March 1939 and inaugurated the so-called Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, the National Socialist regime controlled, for the first time, a territory with a Slavic majority—and only a small ethnic German minority. Focusing largely on perpetrators, Gruner's study shows “the significance of regional and local initiatives to the development and radicalization of the persecution of Jews, with non-German institutions coming prominently into play” (p. 3).

Gruner is the founding director of the University of Southern California Shoah Foundation Center for Advanced Genocide Research, and an important historian of the National Socialist regime before and during the Second World War.[2] For this book, the author conducted archival research in Germany, the Czech Republic, Israel, and the United States. In addition to archival sources, he uses contemporary newspapers and periodicals, video interviews of Shoah survivors, and a broad range of scientific literature. Due to his limited knowledge of the Czech language, Czech literature and newspapers are almost missing. This marks a weak point of his book, and Gruner himself states that it resulted in his not being able to examine interactions between ethnic Czechs and Jews in detail (p. 15). Nonetheless, Gruner asks important research questions, including: What was the relative importance of German and Czech persecution within the Protectorate? What scope and significance did local and regional initiatives have? How did Jews respond to worsening persecution?

Gruner centers on four key areas: the policies of the Reich government in Berlin, those of the German Protectorate authorities, those of the Czech government in Prague, and those of local and regional authorities (German and Czech). After a short introduction and depiction of the Czechoslovakian Republic and its minorities (chapter 1), the following eight chapters lead us chronologically from the German occupation in March 1939 to the mass deportation of Czech Jews at the end of 1942. Chapter 2 focuses on the persecution following the German annexation of the Czech lands in March 1939. The third chapter discusses expulsion and local as well as regional Czech persecution measures before

September 1939, while chapter 4 concentrates on the developments that occurred after World War II began in September 1939. Gruner then looks at the ghettoization of the Jews and protests against anti-Jewish measures. In chapter 6, the author discusses local and central persecutory initiatives, and chapter 7 provides insight into the advancing isolation of the Jews, forced labor, and opposition against it. Thereafter, Gruner looks at repression, deportation, and resistance in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. Chapter 9 covers the topics of deportation of the Jews in 1942, theft of their property, flight, and again the forced labor system. Chapters 2 to 9 are the heart of his research, because the last chapter before his conclusion discusses in only twenty-three pages (including the endnotes) the situation of the Jews who were left in the country between the beginning of 1943 and the end of the war in May 1945. The situation of the Jews in the Theresienstadt camp is only marginally discussed.

Gruner's research reveals that in the first phase of Germany's occupation of the Czech lands, from March 1939 until the war against Poland in September 1939, the Germans defined who was a Jew by a regulation passed in June 1939 (p. 71), but let the Czechs do the bulk of the persecuting. The Czechs introduced a number of laws for Jewish pupils; excluded Jews from the civil service and public offices as well as from independent professions such as medicine and law; and the local Czech police prohibited Jews from patronizing certain inns, cafés, and hotels. The Germans concentrated on economic issues, in particular the so-called Aryanization of Jewish property and theft of articles of value. Local authorities actively pursued their own interests through their anti-Jewish policies. For example, the author states in chapter 5 that local authorities were quick to ghettoize Jews in order to relieve the strain on the local housing market (p. 143).

Importantly, Gruner shows that local (Czech) and centralized (German) persecution initiatives often existed simultaneously. In chapter 5, for instance, Gruner shows that following the initial stages of persecution in 1940, German occupiers centralized the control of Jewish institutions and Jews, while the local authorities undertook their own initiatives to ghettoize Jews in order to seize their homes.

With the war against the Soviet Union in 1941, the picture changed again, as the Germans moved to centralize the entire persecution. After Reinhard Heydrich became the head of the German Protectorate government, he decided on all key anti-Jewish measures like ghettoization and mass deportation. But still, the Czech government had some room to maneuver. For instance, in a decree from August 1941, the Czech Ministry for Social and Health Administration extended the forced labor deployment of Jews from the ages of eighteen to fifty, to the ages of sixteen to sixty, thereby matching the age limits set up by the Germans in occupied Poland.

As this study makes clear, in the Protectorate, local, regional, and central persecutory measures fed into one another and mutually reinforced their momentum (p. 390). For example, local authorities forced all Jews to leave the city of Jihlava in early March 1941 while the Reich Protector gave the green light to the ghettoization of Jews at the end of March 1941. Moreover, anti-Jewish policy was neither formulated solely in Berlin nor did it strictly follow German laws. Rather, it was advanced by the Czech government, influenced by the German Protectorate authorities, and dictated by specific temporal, persecutory, and economic factors along with the interests of various German and non-German authorities (p. 395).

Jewish reactions, not unlike the responses of Jewish communities in other occupied territories, were

limited. As Gruner writes, “due to surveillance, repression, terror and fear of deportation, no organized group resistance emerged within the Jewish population” (p. 312). On the other hand, many Jews were involved in the Czech resistance movement, and many more ignored some of the anti-Jewish regulations, as did many Czechs. Many Jews intentionally did not act according to some of the German rules and regulations. Gruner also shows that Jews resorted to other means to avoid persecution, going underground before deportation, fleeing forced labor camps, and in some cases ending their lives so as to not to be sent to Theresienstadt.

Gruner suggests that future studies should take a closer look into the individual motives of Czechs involved in the anti-Jewish persecution process on all levels. This is important and leads us to a central criticism of the study, which is that it lacks in-depth analysis of Czech sources.[3] The lack of Czech sources is paired with an underrepresentation of Czech Jewish voices. Gruner describes the efforts of the Jewish community in Prague to help the Jews based on reports of that community found at the Yad Vashem Archives in Jerusalem. However, as the reports were written for the Germans, they are administrative, and not personal, accounts. A greater focus on Jewish sources would have enabled Gruner to describe Jewish responses in more detail. In another instance, we learn how many meals and food packages the Jewish community of Prague delivered to the poor at a certain time (e.g., pp. 144, 146, and 401). Unfortunately, not a single word is written about how a Jewish recipient viewed this, or how this might have made a difference for him or her. Thus, with regard to the German-Czech-Jews triangle, the Czech and Jewish sides need further research to answer some of the significant questions raised by the author.

Besides these criticisms, Gruner’s book is a reliable and well-researched overview of the Holocaust in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia until the end of 1942, especially when it comes to German activities on different levels.

#### Notes

[1]. See, for example, Amedeo Osti Guerrazzi, *Caino a Roma. I complici romani della Shoah* (Rome: Cooper, 2005); Peter Romijn et al., *The Persecution of the Jews in the Netherlands, 1940-1945*, New Perspectives (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012); Alexander Korb, *Im Schatten des Weltkriegs. Massengewalt der Ustasa gegen Serben, Juden und Roma in Kroatien, 1941-1945* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2013); and Laurent Joly, *L'Etat contre les juifs. Vichy, les Nazis et la persécution antisémite (1940-1944)* (Paris: Grasset, 2018).

[2]. For example, he was the executive editor of *German Reich, 1933-1937*, vol. 1 of the series *The Persecution and Murder of the European Jews by Nazi Germany, 1933-1945*, published in German (Oldenbourg: Verlag München, 2008) and in English (Oldenbourg: De Gruyter and Yad Vashem, 2019).

[3]. See Michal Frankl, review of Wolf Gruner, *Die Judenverfolgung im Protektorat Böhmen und Mähren. Lokale Initiativen, zentrale Entscheidungen, jüdische Antworten 1939-1945* (Göttingen: Wallstein-Verlag, 2016), in *Bohemia*, 58 (2018): 405-409, <https://www.recensio.net/r/656978b59c5048e8a941baaaee950fe2>.

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