

## [Hilton on Waxman, 'Women in the Holocaust: A Feminist History'](#)

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The following book review from H-German may be of interest to some H-Women list members.

Author:

Zoë Waxman

Reviewer:

Laura J. Hilton

**Zoë Waxman.** *Women in the Holocaust: A Feminist History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. 181 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-960868-3.

**Reviewed by** Laura J. Hilton (Muskingum University) **Published on** H-German (October, 2018) **Commissioned by** Nathan N. Orgill

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In this slim volume, Waxman argues that using gender as a category of analysis is fundamental to understanding the Holocaust. She posits the Holocaust not as a singular event but rather a collection of events, experienced differently in some cases based upon gender. She explains how the Nazis' worldview had a direct impact on how they viewed and treated Jews and that the Holocaust was not a gender-neutral event, especially through her analysis of women as mothers, wives, caregivers, and sexual beings. For Waxman, the Holocaust was a "uniquely terrible, but nonetheless comprehensible example of gendered hierarchies at work" (p. 8). She details the standard criticisms that using gender as a lens through which to study and comprehend the Holocaust faces. These include that this diminishes the Nazi focus on all Jews, that it detracts from the "unique" nature of the Holocaust, and that it emphasizes some kinds of suffering over other forms of persecution. She rejects the idea that using a feminist framework downplays the Holocaust by transforming it into yet "another example of female oppression by a patriarchal society" (p. 1).

Waxman argues that scholars must incorporate gender as well as race into their explanations of the Holocaust. She explains that gender takes on primacy during times of war and crisis, and that women experienced the Holocaust differently because they were women. She does not debate that the Nazis' primary focus was race, and they persecuted Jews because they were Jews. She does state that scholars should consider gender as well as other categories of analysis (religious beliefs, political ideologies, social class, or age) as part of their framework of understanding. She concludes that, on one hand, gender became irrelevant, as the Nazis targeted Jews as a whole; on the other hand, gender became more important as the Nazis targeted women "sexually, reproductively, and maternally" (p. 149).

For graduate students new to the fields of the history of gender, women, sexuality, or the Holocaust, Waxman provides a succinct but pointed overview of how these fields intersect. From the initial conference on women and the Holocaust in 1983 to early foundational works by Joan Ringelheim and Sybil Milton and an initial edited collection by Carol Rittner and John Roth, to the explosion of scholarship since the 1980s, Waxman carefully traces how scholars have woven gender into the narratives of the Holocaust, while also outlining the criticism of this approach from both scholars and survivors.[1] Waxman notes that checking the index of a book on the Holocaust and finding “women” in the index as a search term but not an equivalent one for “men” highlights the need for this process to continue.

Divided into four chapters, in roughly chronological order, Waxman organizes her analysis by examining four of the main experiences endured by Jews within Europe: ghettos, hiding/passing, concentration (extermination) camps, and the postwar period. In this sense, her work is not exhaustive, as there is little discussion of the experiences of Jews utilized by Nazis as slave laborers, working outside of the main camps, the processes of persecution prior to ghettoization/internment across Europe, or the death marches at the end of the war. She clearly states that she has three main aims. First, her book adds to the emerging scholarship of how male and female experiences were different during the Holocaust. Second, she utilizes the female voice to probe underexplored topics such as fears about sterilization or the dread of becoming pregnant in the ghettos or death camps, which a male-centered narrative would not consider. Third, Waxman seeks to provide the female voice to discuss the experiences of Jews and what they endured.

Waxman begins her chapter on Jewish life within the ghettos, noting that these places were not merely a prelude to the death camps, but also a major experience of Jews during the Holocaust. While documentary evidence of many of the ghettos is scant, she focuses on the Warsaw Ghetto, one of the largest, although not the longest-lasting. Documentation projects, such as Oneg Shabbat, figure prominently amid her sources, and she explains how these too, were gendered. Jewish men collected the majority of the information and conducted most of the interviews. Although its intent was to focus on the social history of the ghetto’s inhabitants, by having mainly men ask the questions and record the information, their goal, to capture a wide picture of Jewish life, was skewed, according to Waxman. She explores critiques of female behavior and its “moral decline” within the ghetto, especially among younger women who dressed either immodestly or too well, given the circumstances, as the male gaze sought to enforce traditional norms of behavior even in the direst of circumstances. Life in the ghettos broke down family life, eroded support networks, and placed additional specific pressure on women, including the ban on marriages, forced abortions up to three months into the pregnancy, and concerns about the lack of food suppressing menstrual cycles. Waxman does not shy away from providing an agonizing look at challenges to maternal instinct, as she provides evidence of women making extreme sacrifices for their families as well those who placed themselves first. She details the crisis of Jewish masculinity in the ghetto, as men found themselves unable to provide for or protect their families and often faced danger that was more physical. However, she also explains how women faced greater risks in terms of sexual humiliation and outright violence, including rape. She probes topics such as the use of prostitution or sexual favors in order to gain the protection of a man in power or in exchange for food, work, or better living accommodations, a topic to which she returns in each chapter. Waxman draws on feminist scholarship in this regard to analyze different types of sexual encounters and to question the agency that Jewish women may have had in some of them. She rejects the idea that all such sex was

nonconsensual.

In her second chapter, Waxman lays out the world of Jews attempting to survive in hiding or by passing as gentiles. Women had a distinct advantage in this regard, since most Jewish men were circumcised and women could integrate into the gentile world with greater ease, given their cultural and linguistic interactions before the war. However, attempting to hide or pass as gentile placed Jewish women in incredibly tenuous and dangerous circumstances. It is seldom that memoirs and other sources from this period directly address rape or sexual violence, which makes it difficult to both find and define, especially as some survivors may have omitted discussion of it due to shame or the sense that their suffering paled in comparison to those murdered by the Nazis. Being in hiding or attempting to pass as a gentile broke family bonds, as enduring this alone increased one's chances of survival. However, this aloneness also acted as a potential danger, specifically for women, as their protectors could sexually assault them with no fear of punishment. Waxman also notes the pressure and agonizing decisions of women who attempted to hide with young children, often pressured by others to smother infants in case the crying exposed their hiding place.

In her chapter on experiences within the death camps, specifically Auschwitz, Waxman demonstrates the roles that gender played, especially through her explanation of the process of selection, initial murder, and initiation into the camp (for those not immediately killed). The Nazis selected women who were visibly pregnant or had young children for immediate extermination. Here too, she addresses the multifaceted ways that women dealt with the decision to stay with or abandon their children. In one of the most gripping passages in this book, Waxman painstakingly explains how the initiation into the camp was gendered: the oral, rectal, and vaginal examinations; the savage shaving off of hair; the sexualized language and humiliation of standing naked before the guards. While her description of the process of dehumanization is not new, her explanation for how it differed for women adds another layer of understanding. Women who lost their ability to menstruate feared that their ability to be mothers in the future, if they survived, was in jeopardy, while those who continued to menstruate had no means of stanching the blood flow.

Chapter 4 delves into the postwar world of Jewish survivors, especially within Displaced Persons (DP) camps in occupied Germany. Whereas becoming pregnant was a likely death sentence during the Holocaust, in the postwar period, pregnancy stood for hope, traditional gender roles, a return to "normalcy," and, for some, even revenge. There was considerable pressure on Jewish women in DP camps to get married quickly and begin a family, especially from religious leaders within the camps. Jewish women who were not ready to marry or have children dealt with substantial stress. Women who were unable to conceive had to cope with being, for many of them, the end of their family line. Waxman deals with the sexual relations between Allied soldiers and Jewish DPs, again probing the exchange of sex for food or goods, and dealing with rape and sexual assault as well as pregnancy and abortion. She asserts that the "old values of pre-war gender roles became an ideal to which both Jewish men and women hoped to return" (p. 140). Similar to the other experiences of the Holocaust that she discusses, this one also resulted in traditional gender norms.

In terms of her source base, Waxman has scoured the existing published literature on the experiences of Jewish women (and to a lesser extent, men) during the Holocaust. Utilizing a variety of memoirs, diaries, and letters, she provides a rich array, reintroducing readers to many mainstream authors while also incorporating the lesser-known writers. In terms of methodology and sources, she does not

utilize the raw material of oral or video interviews, as collected in the past several decades; nor is there archival material, which means that much of her evidence base is published. The geographic scope focuses heavily on Poland, for example on the Warsaw Ghetto in chapter 1, and the bulk of evidence for chapter 2 is also drawn from Poland, with several examples from France and Germany. In chapter 3, which focuses on camps, Auschwitz is at the center. Chapter 4 examines the lives of Jewish DPs in camps, but solely those within Germany, especially Belsen and the DP camp nearby, as opposed to those in UNRRA camps in Austria or Italy. Therefore, the experiences of Jews (female and male) throughout much of eastern Europe, southern Europe, and most of occupied western Europe are not part of her analysis. However, this thick analysis of specific places allows a deeper gaze into the experiences of Jews in these areas.

Waxman begins with an anecdote from a conference early in her career, where she presented her work on rape and sexual abuse during the Holocaust. The initial audience response of “So what? Is this really worth discussing?” (p. 1) provides a launching pad for searing analysis of how and why gendered ideas, assumptions, and traditions did matter. Waxman argues that discussing the experiences and memories of Jewish women, who endured rape, violation, and sexual abuse, does not detract from the immense suffering borne by the Jewish population of Europe. It adds another dimension, thereby deepening historical understanding.

#### Note

[1]. Joan Ringelheim, “The Unethical and the Unspeakable: Women and the Holocaust,” *Simon Wiesenthal Center Annual*, 1 (1984): xxx; Sybil Milton, “Women and the Holocaust,” in *When Biology Became Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany*, ed. Renate Bridenthal, Atina Grossmann, and Marion Kaplan (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1984): 297-323; and Carol Rittner and John Roth, *Different Voices* (New York: Paragon House, 1993).

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