

## [Schmidt Holländer on Nicosia and Scrase, 'Jewish Life in Nazi Germany: Dilemmas and Responses'](#)

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**Francis R. Nicosia, David Scrase, eds.** *Jewish Life in Nazi Germany: Dilemmas and Responses*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2010. xv + 245 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84545-676-4.

**Reviewed by** Hanna Schmidt Holländer (University of Hamburg/Clark University) **Published on** H-Genocide (March, 2015) **Commissioned by** Elisa G. von Joeden-Forgey

In their edited volume, *Jewish Life in Nazi Germany: Dilemmas and Responses*, Francis R. Nicosia and David Scrase assemble a collection of essays by distinguished German, Australian, Israeli, and US scholars. The book consists of seven chapters about different aspects of Jewish private and public life in Germany during the Nazi period. It covers the changing structures of Jewish families; different strategies of Jews to evade Nazi persecution by legal means or emigration; the problem of cooperation with the Nazis faced by Jewish political and welfare organizations; and the ever-increasing spatial, social, economic, and cultural exclusion of German Jews.

Two main themes pervade the individual chapters: ghettoization of German Jews and the dilemmas they faced when reacting to Nazi persecution. The ghettoization policy in Germany did not, as suggested in some chapters, resemble the practice as it was implemented in the occupied countries in the East. Several chapters in this book describe the gradual “social death” of Jews in Nazi Germany, causing German Jews to live in a “ghetto without walls.” Other chapters deal with the dilemma of identifying as Jewish and German in a society that rejected the idea that these two identities could coexist; the dilemma of making the decision “to stay or go” (to remain in a country that is not safe anymore or to go to a foreign place with all its unknown difficulties); and the dilemma of making the impossible decision of whether to cooperate with the Nazis or to resist Nazi orders.

According to Nicosia’s introduction these dilemmas stemmed from the “historic failure” of Jewish emancipation. Nazism destroyed the hope and promise of nineteenth-century ideas of Jewish legal, social, and cultural integration into German society. This “failure” is evinced firstly from Nazi persecution and secondly from the Jews’ understanding of their place in Germany. In his words, the essays in this volume try to help clarify the tragedy of this failure by focusing on Jewish attitudes and reactions as an integral part of the unfolding history of Nazi persecution.

The collection begins with “Changing Roles in Jewish Families,” a chapter by Marion Kaplan, which leads the reader into the individual experience of Nazi persecution. The essay describes the changing roles of men, women, and children in the unfolding persecution by the Nazis in Germany in the 1930s. She poses the question whether, in times like this, families could still (or, in some cases, for the first time) function as a “safe haven.” She illustrates the stress inflicted on Jewish families by ever-increasing persecution and the conflicts that resulted. Jewish mothers were now more than ever expected to take care of the emotional well-being of the family and carried out the “emotional housework” when children were harassed in school and men lost their jobs (p. 16). Women moved more and more into the role of provider and into the public sphere, as men were pushed out of their

professions, lost their societal status, and often faced arrest. While the role of women as providers was still seen critically by most Jewish organizations and the press, it became a necessity for most families and was slowly accepted as a response to the crisis. According to Kaplan, the main dilemma families faced in the increasingly hostile environment was to decide whether to emigrate. Women had to take on the role of decision makers and organize emigration or survival in Germany, including negotiating with Nazi authorities and foreign governments.

In his chapter with a somewhat misleading title, "Evading Persecution: German-Jewish Behavior Patterns after 1933," Jürgen Matthäus focuses on Germans who were defined as Jewish or partly Jewish and who pursued legal measures to "enhance" their racial status in order to avoid persecution. "Volljuden" (full Jews) and "Mischlinge" (people of "mixed race") with "questionable" ancestry (most often previously hidden illegitimate "Aryan" fathers) increasingly approached courts with their "shameful" family history as persecution increased and ancestry became a matter of life and death. Pointing out the often rather bizarre "science," legislation, and competence struggles between different German agencies concerned with racial questions, Matthäus discusses several cases in which these conflicts and the fate of those investigated were decided. Using what he calls "evasion by compliance" (p. 64), people affected by anti-Jewish persecution actively rejected the "out-group" definition, thus undermining the definition of who was a Jew with legal means. They did not question (at least not publicly) the notion itself, only that they themselves were part of this group. "Compliance" might be a strong word here, considering that Jews were not in the position to question German law and were desperate for any means of rescue, especially after 1941, the time this essay covers. Matthäus acknowledges that most of the cases reported to the prosecutor were not even brought to court and many ended with the appeal not granted. The cases in which "full" or "half Jews" were reclassified remained exceptions. Furthermore, Matthäus illustrates the borders of seemingly strict racial laws and the complicated enforcement on the individual level.

In his chapter "Jewish Self-Help in Nazi Germany, 1933-1939: The Dilemmas of Cooperation," Avraham Barkai poses the question of cooperation or collaboration of German Jewish leadership with Nazi authorities. He takes a firm standpoint against the critical assessment of the Reichsvereinigung der Juden in Deutschland (Reich Association of Jews in Germany) by Raul Hilberg, Hannah Arendt, and Isaiah Trunk. Disagreeing with them, Barkai, using his research, concludes that the Reichsvereinigung was not the "prototype of the Jewish Council in Poland that was to be employed in activities resulting in disaster." Indeed, he argues that through their leadership and diligence they did not "participate in the process of destruction" and that the number of victims would not have been smaller if the Jews had been unorganized (p. 72). Using two examples, the *hachschara* (vocational training program) and the *haavara* (money transfer program), Barkai analyzes the question whether German Jewish leaders were, "at the time or merely in retrospect, right" to cooperate with the Germans (p. 79). Stating that the *hachschara* saved Jewish lives and the *haavara* saved Jewish assets, he claims that the question whether or not to cooperate was not in fact a dilemma. In his interpretation, Jews in Germany took the only action that was logical and possible at that time, even though from the later perspective it might have looked like cooperation with the Germans.

Nicosia, in his contribution "German Zionism and Jewish Life in Nazi Berlin," illustrates the role of Zionism for emigration and Jewish life in Germany from 1933 to 1945. He takes up the question of legitimacy of Jewish cooperation with Nazi authorities. The Nazis initially supported Zionist activities,

because they were in line with Nazi emigration policy for Jews. In the Jewish community, support for the Zionists grew over time, mainly because it remained the only political option for Jews in Germany. More and more Jews supported Zionism as they recognized that assimilation in Germany had become impossible and Zionist organizations offered assistance with emigration, for example, through professional retraining and the visa process. However, authorities eventually dissolved the Verband nationaldeutscher Juden (VnJ, Association of National German Jews) in November 1935; forced the Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens (CV, Central Association of German Citizens of the Jewish Faith) to change its name to Centralverein der Juden in Deutschland (Central Association of Jews in Germany); and did not allow any assimilationist tendencies anymore. Despite their traditional differences, Centralverein and Zionistische Vereinigung für Deutschland (ZVfD, Zionist Federation for Germany) had to cooperate in the Reichsvertretung der Juden in Deutschland (Reich Representation of Jews in Germany), an organization formed under Nazi pressure by a broad range of Jewish organizations in 1933 which was the only Jewish organization allowed in Germany after 1938. The ZVfD faced problems as it was growing and simultaneously losing leadership to emigration. While Zionism was in theory supported by the Nazis, Zionists were not exempt from brutal treatment as Jews. Zionist work, like any Jewish activity, became increasingly difficult and dangerous. Nicosia therefore concludes that cooperation with the Nazi state was necessary to facilitate Jewish emigration.

In his essay “Without Neighbors: Daily Living in *Judenhäuser*,” Konrad Kwiet explores the “termination of the cohabitation of Germans and Jews” and illustrates Jewish daily life in *Judenhäuser* (Jews’ houses) and *Judensiedlungen* (Jewish settlements) (p. 117). To accelerate complete segregation of Jewish and non-Jewish living space, Jews were expelled from their homes, were forced to move into designated places, and had to wear the star. Nazi authorities enforced these practices to depersonalize, concentrate, and control the Jews. Kwiet argues that as the Nazis planned to expel the German Jews as quickly as possible, there was no need to relocate them behind ghetto walls. Complete segregation did not require ghettos. German Jews were already without neighbors: “the Jews trapped in Germany had become on the eve of deportation a pariah caste that society saw only as a burden and that the Nazi state could dispose of as it saw fit” (p. 121).

Kwiet describes the legal procedure and administrative process taken by the Nazis to strip Jews of their rights as tenants and owners, remove them from their homes, and acquire Jewish property and leases for the Volksgemeinschaft (national community). He argues that the segregation of “Jewish” and “Aryan” living space was implemented from “above” and carried out “inconspicuously,” “systematically,” “gradually,” and “free of trouble” (p. 125). Further analyzing the involvement of Jewish leadership in these processes, he also discusses how Jewish organizations had to provide help in the re-housing programs. Kwiet shows that the relocation program and the expulsion of Jews were in fact neither a means to solve the housing crisis nor did they ease the shortage of workers in Germany during the war.

On the contrary, he argues that in the way these “excluded communities” were first segregated and surrendered to their social death and then sent to their deaths, they shared the fate of their coreligionists in Nazi-conquered countries. *Judenhäuser* and *Judensiedlungen* thus served as a means to “exclude Jews from society and to include them—temporarily—into ... a segregated Jewish living quarter.” This function, as Kwiet points out, “was assigned to all ghettos set up by the Nazis in the occupied territories, be it in the form of a hermetically sealed ghetto, a ‘semi-open,’ or an ‘open’

ghetto." Understanding *Judenhäuser* in Germany synonymously with ghettos in Eastern Europe, he considers both as "based on racial hatred and mass murder," as "steps along the path to genocide" (p. 143).

Deepening further our understanding of the problem of cooperation versus collaboration, Beate Meyer's chapter "Between Self-Assertion and Forced Collaboration: The Reich Association of Jews in Germany, 1939-1945" divides the history of the Reich Association (the Reichsvereinigung) into three phases. The first phase from 1939 to October 1941 marks the period when the Reich Association was involved in "enforced emigration." During this time, the interests of the Nazis and the Reichsvereinigung coincided in the task of emigration. Mostly powerless, only in very few cases was the Reichsvereinigung able to intervene when deportations were scheduled. They were able, however, to assist Jews with emigration. During the second phase, from October 1941 to June 1943, the association became, says Meyer, an instrument of Reichssicherheitshauptamt (Reich Security Main Office) and the Gestapo in organizing deportations of German Jews to the East. Functionaries of the Reich Association were told that they would be exempt from deportations and threatened that the SA and SS would take over if they did not cooperate. Afraid of the brutality, the Jewish leadership cooperated and prepared deportation lists. When many of them were deported to Theresienstadt, they assumed leading positions there as well and continued their work. The third phase began in the summer of 1943, when, upon completion of deportations from Germany, the Reichsvereinigung was officially dissolved. De facto, it continued to exist as it cared for the needs of Jews who were married to non-Jewish partners.

Meyer then returns to the question of why Jewish functionaries continued to cooperate with Nazi authorities until the end. Her explanation lies in their mentality. Since most Jewish functionaries had been in leading positions during the Weimar years, they followed, she argues, the principles of an "old-style administration." They believed that bureaucratic rules would act as a "counterweight to arbitrariness, violence, and murder." She points out, however, that "such bureaucratic rules and mass murder by no means precluded one another," and that, on the contrary, they might have formed a "tight bond, contradict[ing] the personal experience of these Jewish functionaries." The National Socialists, she explains, "propagated the ideal of a 'fighting administration' that was not bound by norms and the law" (p. 165). This was where the Jewish leadership in Germany, much like in many ghettos in the East, was tragically mistaken.

Michael Brenner concludes the collection with a short piece, "Jewish Culture in a Modern Ghetto: Theater and Scholarship among the Jews of Nazi Germany." In the first section, he focuses on the role of the Jüdischer Kulturbund (Jewish Cultural League; before 1935, Kulturbund deutscher Juden). He interprets it as "perhaps the most blatant symbol of Nazi Germany's cultural ghettoization of Germany's Jewish community," and he discusses its role in the Third Reich (p. 171). In the second section, he reflects on Jewish historians who studied Jewish history during the Nazi years, either at one of the few Jewish research institutions or as independent scholars, after the Nazis had stripped them of their positions. Brenner concludes his essay and the book with one of the questions that Jewish historians during the Nazi period posed, historians today still ask, and this collection aims to answer: "Why and how did emancipation and assimilation fail in the context of modern German-Jewish history?" (p. 182).

Throughout the book, "Jews" appear as a group separate from "Germans." This is partly owed to the

fact that it focuses on the Nazi years. Relations with non-Jewish Germans, before and during the war, however, are mainly mentioned on the level of official entities, government, police, etc., as negotiations between Jewish and non-Jewish institutions. Thus, the collection creates the image of two spheres of Jewish and German life that were only remotely connected, even in prewar Nazi Germany. Also underrepresented is the analysis of Jewish everyday life (with the exception of Kaplan) and social and cultural life (with the exception of Brenner). Although the title of the book, *Jewish Life in Nazi Germany*, promises a wide range of topics, issues of Jewish organized political life are clearly emphasized with three chapters out of seven focusing on this topic. German-Jewish experiences in workplaces, forced labor camps, and extermination camps, as well as the economy, culture, etc., remain faint.

The introduction features a quote by Primo Levi, which is instructive for the analysis of Jewish life in Nazi Germany: “We believe, rather, that the only conclusion to be drawn is that in the face of driving necessity and physical disabilities many social habits and instincts are reduced to silence” (p. 2). According to Nicosia, beginning in 1941, Jews in Germany faced the same difficult dilemmas in the choices they were forced to make. The assumption that social habits were “reduced to silence,” something Levi said about Auschwitz, leads to an underrepresentation of social aspects. To use this specific quote also points to a misconception about life in Nazi Germany versus life in the ghettos and camps in occupied Poland, a misconception that is suggested in several of the chapters. While in both countries Jews experienced exclusion and were eventually sent to their death, the paths that led up to this point were very different. In Poland, for example, the perpetrators came as occupiers from outside and this created a unique dynamic between Jews, the local population, and German occupying forces, and it also shaped Jewish experiences. Because Poland was suddenly attacked, the dilemma of whether to stay or to go presented itself in a different way than in Germany. Other problems had to be considered in the emigration process and the timing was different. To compare Jewish life in Germany with Jewish life in occupied Poland by using the term “ghetto/ghettoization” for both cases oversimplifies the matter and does not help with the analysis of the path to the Holocaust in either place.

While these are only a few shortcomings, the strengths are manifold. What was mentioned before as a weakness of the book—the emphasis on Jewish political life—is also its strength. The combination of several chapters dealing with Jewish representative organizations and their activity in Jewish welfare, assistance with emigration, and negotiations with Nazi authorities provides a strong picture of Jewish agency. This also allows for critical analysis of Jewish leadership in Germany and their balancing act between cooperation and collaboration with the Nazis. Carefully weighing responsibilities and actionability of Jewish functionaries, and thereby broadening the view of the scope of Jewish responses to Nazi persecution, the authors are never unreasonable with their ex-post facto judgment of what could be expected from a Jewish leader who himself was persecuted.

The clear forte of this collection of individually written chapters is its coverage of the time beyond 1939. Many introductory surveys do not allow for such detailed analysis of Jewish life in Germany until 1945. As suggested by the editors, this book is especially well-suited for teaching purposes. The book serves as an excellent introduction into the special issues that Jews were facing in Germany in an increasingly hostile environment without having a textbook character. This collection brings together the work of excellent scholars and can be used in the classroom to teach not only the interesting content but also its fine historiography. I highly recommend it to all interested readers,

students, teachers, and scholars of Holocaust history.

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