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The Jews and Germans of Hamburg: The Destruction of a Civilization 1790-1945

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This book is more than just a history of the German-Jewish communities before and during the Holocaust. It is also part memoir, part impassioned response to the National Socialists? ?destruction of a civilization?. This breadth, though, should come as no surprise. For the book?s author, the late John Grenville, was himself a Holocaust survivor. Born and raised in Berlin, he escaped Nazi Germany through the *Kindertransport* scheme in 1939. Sadly, as he notes in the preface to the volume, this history may well ?be the last? from someone who personally ?lived through the Nazi years? (p. xiii). Crucially, however, this book is not just a reflection of personal memories, it is also a solid, scholarly account, based on over 30 years of archival research. Indeed, Grenville has brought to bear on the project his long experience as Professor of Modern History at the University of Birmingham and as editor of the Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook. The result of Grenville?s endeavours is a very readable and at times stimulating history of the Nazi regime?s gradual destruction of German-Jewish life.

The book that Grenville has written, however, is one that is very different from that which might be imagined from the publisher?s title. So long as the reader is not expecting a history of Hamburg?s Jewish communities from the 18th through to the 20th century, then this is really not a major problem. Nonetheless,

the ambiguity of the book?s title offers a rather fruitful way of thinking about what areas the book does and does not examine.

Judging by the title, the reader is promised a book that offers a history of German Jewry from 1790 through to 1945. There is a good reason for beginning the narrative in the late 18th century. This was the time of Moses Mendelssohn, Christian Wilhelm Dohm and the growing ideas of emancipation. Grenville?s choice of end date also makes perfect sense. Germany?s surrender in May 1945 may have brought the National Socialists? genocidal war to an end, but by this stage 230,000 of Hamburg?s Jews had emigrated and 165,000 had been brutally murdered. Unlike other recent histories of German Jewry, Grenville sees little value in continuing his narrative beyond 1945.(1) For him, there was no genuine revival of Jewish life in Germany after the Holocaust. ?Links with German-Jewish culture? in post-war Germany, Grenville concludes, ?weakened until today it has all but disappeared? (p. 263).

To consider such a large span of German history in a mere 270 pages is no easy task. It is perhaps for this reason that Grenville decided to concentrate his narrative mainly on the final 12 years of this timeframe. Chapter one sketches out developments in both German and German-Jewish history from 1790 through to 1918. As the first tentative signs of democratic and liberal thinking began to take root in the early 19th century, German Jews became more visible in urban areas. In Hamburg, an increasingly confident German-Jewish community began to establish a range of communal buildings from synagogues to schools. By the mid to late 19th century, Germans Jews had entered, what Grenville calls a ?golden era? (p. 19). Members of Hamburg?s Jewish communities entered high profile positions as politicians, bankers and industrialists. Following the line taken by much historical writing, Grenville notes a gradual decline in German Jews? social position at the turn of the century, which was only accentuated during the years of the First World War.(2)

Chapter two, entitled ?The shadow of the Nazis?, focuses on the short-lived Weimar Republic. The narrative thread of this chapter is one that most readers will recognise. Grenville moves rapidly through the main staging points of republican Germany. The effects of the revolution and the Versailles Treaty are well dealt with, as is the economic turmoil that sandwiched either end of the Weimar Republic. As Grenville neatly demonstrates, smaller political movements, such as the *Deutschvölkischer Schutz- und Trutzbund*, were gradually gaining ground at this time too. The Jews of Hamburg and elsewhere, therefore, not only had to position themselves in the chaos of post-war Germany, but also had to fend off the threat of rising antisemitism.

By page 57, then, the first 143 years of the book are complete. This leaves the remaining four chapters free to cover the years 1933 to 1945, which in essence is the book?s real focus. Chapter three offers a detailed account of the Nazi regime?s first year in power. In Hamburg, as elsewhere, the Nazis? rapidly consolidated their position through a combination of elections, legal measures and sheer violence. Indeed, Grenville rightly places great emphasis on the sheer brutality of National Socialism. He outlines the establishment of the early concentration camps in and around Hamburg, and discusses the takeover of the city government by ?gangsters and crooks? (p. 69). At the same time, though, the chapter also makes clear that below the upper echelons of power, many local civil servants, policemen and judges remained in their posts. For German Jews, it was this mix of the brutal and the familiar that made the early years of the Nazi regime so confusing.

The fourth chapter takes up the narrative from 1934 through until 1938. Here the focus changes from the Nazi regime?s actions to the actual responses of German Jews in Hamburg and beyond. In an extremely thorough account, Grenville argues that the Jewish communities were not forced into submission, but rather remained defiant and ?robustly asserted their rights? (p. 112). Several episodes demonstrate German Jews? ?courage in adversity?. Perhaps most remarkably, the Jewish community fought an ongoing campaign to protect its Grindel burial ground. Community representatives had meetings with civil servants, the city mayor and even the Gestapo. As Grenville suggests, there was certainly no question of a ?meek surrender? (p. 121) here. However by the mid 1930s, it was not just the existing Jewish communities that were forced to find a response to the regime. Baptised Jews and the so-called *Mischlinge* also found themselves increasingly isolated from wider German society. Grenville does an excellent job of drawing together all

these various strands of Jewish life. The chapter shows how all Jews, whether Zionist, Orthodox or indeed baptised Jews, had to make rapid adjustments to their daily lives in an attempt simply to survive.

The narrative continues apace in chapter five. Concentrating on the years 1938 and 1939, Grenville paints a picture of a community in desperate decline. From the spring of 1938, new legislative measures started to come through thick and fast. And the ongoing ?Aryanisation? of Jewish businesses also gathered speed. It is once again Grenville?s focus on the diversity of Jewish life that proves most illuminating. He reminds us, through the use of several personal accounts, how the first deportations from Germany affected not German Jews, but foreign Jews. In October 1938, the regime hounded Polish Jews, many of whom had lived in Germany for decades, over the border. There they were left, virtually destitute, to fend for themselves. With the Nazi pogrom the following month, all Jews in Germany were targeted. The chapter ends with the familiar, though still dispiriting, account of German Jews desperately seeking to emigrate, while at the same time facing ever harsher attacks within Germany.

Chapter six, entitled ?The Holocaust?, considers the brutal destruction of German-Jewish life during the Second World War. What is particularly important about Grenville?s approach to this history is that he examines the Holocaust from a local German level. With each page of the chapter, the reader is confronted with an ever declining Jewish community. First, Jewish mental patients were killed under the euthanasia programme, then in 1941 deportations to the Lodz ghetto began. These were followed by further deportations to Minsk and Riga. For those that remained, the situation became increasingly desperate. Not only did the small number of surviving Jews have to live with the fear of deportation, but they also risked death or mutilation from one of the Allies? many air raids over Germany. By the war?s end, all that remained of Hamburg?s once thriving Jewish community were 674 Jews.

From this chapter summary, it should be clear that this is not a study of 155 years of German-Jewish history, as the title implies, but is instead a book about the Nazis? destruction of the Jewish communities. The book?s title is also slightly ambiguous in other respects too. The impression it gives is that the book provides a history of Hamburg and its environs. As such the book is intended to add to a long line of contemporary historical studies that have used the city as a backdrop.(3) The presence of the *Forschungsstelle für Zeitgeschichte* and the *Institut für die Geschichte der deutschen Juden* in Hamburg has undoubtedly done much to promote this research. However, the demographics, geographical location and social structures of the city also make it an important case study for exploring Germany?s recent past. As a port city, Hamburg was a major trading centre and with passing sailors, businessmen and travellers also fairly cosmopolitan. Until the First World War, it was also home to one of Germany?s largest Jewish communities.

Grenville?s book, while following the path laid by this earlier body of work on 20th century Hamburg, never confines itself entirely to the borders of the city state. Indeed, the beating heart of the Hanseatic city is largely absent. The Alster, the town hall, the Elbe or even the sumptuous villas of Rotherbaum only make a fleeting appearance. Rather than sketching out the minutiae of Hamburg, the book draws heavily on examples from other areas of Germany, particularly from Berlin. The net result is a study that provides more of a national, than a regional history. This is certainly no bad thing as the book adeptly avoids the trap of suggesting that a narrow local case study represents all of Germany.

The book?s title also deserves comment for the way in which it describes Jewish / non-Jewish relations. For Grenville, his history is very consciously about ?Jews and Germans?. The reason for this formulation, he acknowledges, is that this was how many Germans viewed the Jews. They were regarded ?as not part of the German *Volk* or fully integrated in a multicultural nation? (p. ix). Grenville?s decision to use this formulation in his title follows in the footsteps of Peter Gay and Till van Rahden, but turns their interpretation of German-Jewish life on its head. For Gay and van Rahden, Jews were always a part of wider German society, which is why the pair privileged a different term in their titles: ?Jews and other Germans?. (4)

By viewing Jews as a distinct, almost separate, section of German society, Grenville connects to an older body of literature which highlighted divisions rather than relations. There remains great value in such an

approach as antisemitism and cultural separateness were at times certainly fundamental parts of the German-Jewish experience. However, despite the protestations of his title, Grenville himself never appears overly convinced by this scenario. Indeed, even in the preface, he questions his own title and posits a far closer relationship between Jews and non-Jews. In rather resolute language, Grenville states that ?German-Jewish society was not wholly separate from German society?. For this reason, he argues, ?the ?Jews? could not be excised from what the Nazis defined as ?German? without the destruction of *German* civilization? (p. xii).

The book?s overall narrative also seems to adhere more closely to the idea of ?Jews and other Germans?, rather than the title?s ?Jews and Germans?. In each chapter of the book, Grenville paints a rather vivid picture of Jews playing a full and active role with wider German society. In short, the book suggests in no uncertain terms that most Jews viewed themselves to be at heart Germans. And indeed this was how most other Germans perceived them too. Take for example the German-Jewish pharmacist and industrialist, Oscar Troplowitz, who features prominently in Grenville?s book. Troplowitz worked closely with non-Jews on the board of the Beiersdorf pharmaceutical firm throughout the late 19th and early 20th century. Such was Troplowitz?s attachment to his home city of Hamburg that he played a role in local politics, gave money to Jewish and Christian charities and in his will left a number of valuable paintings to the city?s *Kunsthalle* gallery. Even in Nazi Germany, many Jews continued to identify themselves first and foremost as Germans. Grenville gives the example of the Jewish cultural association (*Kulturbund*) in Hamburg which laid on concerts and plays for a predominantly Jewish audience. Despite these restrictions, though, its programme ?remained resolutely German? (p. 118). There was always more Schubert and Beethoven than Jewish folk music.

The book that Grenville has written is not so much a study of Jews and Germans in Hamburg from the 18th through to the 20th century. Instead, what he has produced is a thoroughly readable study of Jews and other Germans in Nazi Germany. If the book is read on this basis, then what emerges is a through and engaging history. Indeed, when confined solely to Nazi Germany, the book adds to our understanding of this period in three broad ways.

First, in contrast to much historical writing Grenville has produced a book that explores the history of the Holocaust through the eyes of its victims. Utilising memoirs and personal documents, Grenville demonstrates successfully how the Jews responded to, and defended themselves against, the rising tide of Nazi persecution. Thus, at the heart of the book?s final chapters, are not debates about Nazi policy, but descriptions of Jewish institutions, such as the *Kulturbund* or the *Reichsvertretung*. Second, the book very carefully sketches out the experiences of a range of groups that constituted German Jewry. Indeed, Grenville manages to depict the fears of East European Jews living in Germany as well as the more conventionally told history of liberal or Zionist Jews.

Third, perhaps one of the most significant aspects of the book is that it highlights the ambiguities and contradictions of National Socialist policy. While the regime persecuted the Jews with ever harsher measures, at the same time space still existed for some individuals to negotiate with local authorities or to maintain some aspect of normality. In one incident, Arthur Spier, a Jewish school teacher met regularly with Claus Göttsche, of the Gestapo, so as to instruct him in the Talmud. Grenville?s study is full of such anecdotes. On one page, Grenville describes how in 1935 the Hamburg state authorities funded the construction of an air raid shelter in a Jewish girls? school to ensure the pupils? safety. Further on, he recounts the story of a Jewish lawyer who took an SS man to court in November 1934 and successfully sued him for defamation. All of this adds to Marion Kaplan?s description of the Nazi regime?s ?mixed signals?, which left many German Jews unsure of where to turn.(5)

Overall, then, if readers are prepared to overlook the book?s title, they will find a well-researched history of the Nazi regime?s destruction of Germany?s Jewish communities. Crucially, this is a study that combines a very accessible general overview of the period with detailed examples from the individuals who once formed part of Germany?s rich Jewish life.

Notes

1. Michael Brenner, *After the Holocaust: Rebuilding Jewish Lives in Postwar Germany* (Princeton, NJ, 1997); Jay Geller, *Jews in Post-Holocaust Germany, 1945?1953* (Cambridge, 2005).Back to (1)
2. Christhard Hoffmann, ?Between integration and rejection: the Jewish community in Germany 1914?1918?, in *State, Society and Mobilization in Europe during the First World War*, ed. John Horne (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 89?104; Michael Brenner, *The Renaissance of Jewish Culture in Weimar Germany* (New Haven, CT, 1996).Back to (2)
3. Niall Ferguson, *Paper and Iron: Hamburg Business and German Politics in the Era of Inflation, 1897?1927* (Cambridge, 1995); Frank Bajohr, ?*Aryanisation? in Hamburg: The Economic Exclusion of Jews and the Confiscation of their Property in Nazi Germany* (Oxford, 2001); Anthony McElligott, *Contested City: Municipal Politics and the Rise of Nazism in Altona, 1917?1937* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1998).Back to (3)
4. Peter Gay, *Freud, Jews and Other Germans: Masters and Victims in Modernist Culture* (Oxford, 1978); Till van Rahden, *Juden und andere Breslauer: Die Beziehungen zwischen Juden, Protestanten und Katholiken in einer deutschen Großstadt von 1860 bis 1925* (Göttingen, 2000).Back to (4)
5. Marion Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (Oxford, 1998).Back to (5)

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