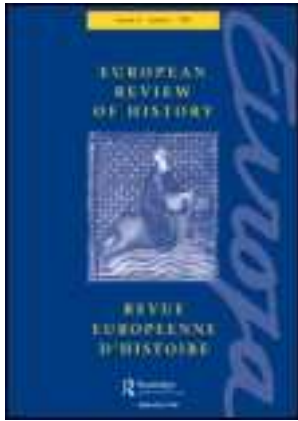


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The Minsk Ghetto, 1941-1943. Jewish Resistance and Soviet Internationalism

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1937–38. The accusation of sabotage and espionage was circulated in every Moscow factory. The horrible results of the terror are clearly visible in the census of 1937. After some ten million persons were found to be simply ‘missing’ in the census, the publication of the data was banned and the persons responsible were shot. There have been plenty of studies of the ‘Great Terror’ before now. Schlögel’s contribution shows the role of the mobilisation and involvement of the ‘masses’. The show trials had the character of public lynchings: at mass events on Red Square the crowd finally demanded the death of the dehumanised ‘enemies’, recalling Goebbels’ speech on ‘total war’ in 1943 in Berlin. The mass arrests and killings were not secret but well known. According to Schlögel, they served the masses as a form of compensation for the bitterness and misery of life following the beginning of collectivisation in the late 1920s: ‘spies’ and ‘enemies’ were said to be responsible, and were eliminated. Further, Schlögel outlines the ethnic dimension of the great terror. A significant number of the victims were non-Russians who had been accused and sentenced because of their ethnicity. Germans, Poles and Latvians were the main victims in Moscow, according to Schlögel. Xenophobia and racism had deeply infected society; even in the factories, graffiti such as ‘Kill the Letts, Kill the Poles’ appeared. Schlögel follows the scholars who see the racist outburst as a short-term phenomenon, a result of ‘international encirclement’ and isolation, such that every foreigner came under suspicion. This argument, however, ignores the systematic and often racist repression of non-Russians in the Soviet Union from as early as 1917.

Schlögel gives a broad picture of the Soviet Union under Stalin in 1937. One important event whose inclusion may have improved the book is the world conference on genetics that was to take place in Moscow in 1937, but that was banned by Stalin shortly before its opening. Leading Soviet geneticists were arrested and shot. Contrasting the racist repression of minorities with the official liquidation of specialists in genetics and biological science and the propagandising of an anti-biological agenda and anti-racism could lead to a new perspective on the relationship between ideology and violence under Stalin.

Schlögel contributes to current approaches in cultural history. Without losing himself in reconstructing ‘cultures’ he succeeds in analysing the main political strategies of Stalinist policy. Schlögel has written an impressive book that gives a fresh perspective on Stalinism.

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The Minsk Ghetto, 1941-1943. Jewish Resistance and Soviet Internationalism, by Barbara Epstein, University of California Press, 2008, 376 pp., US\$45.00, ISBN 978-0-520-24242-5

Barbara Epstein’s book gives a vivid account of the Minsk Jewish resistance movement during the Second World War. Her description of events is an important contribution to the scant literature on this neglected topic. Having noted significant differences between the stories of the Jewish resistance in Polish and Lithuanian ghettos, and the one of the Minsk ghetto, Epstein, Professor in the History of Consciousness Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz, decided to investigate the specificity of German-occupied Minsk

and its relation to the situation of the Minsk ghetto during the Second World War. Her book is the first attempt to present the Minsk Jewish resistance movement in a comparative perspective.

The Minsk Ghetto, 1941–1943. Jewish Resistance and Soviet Internationalism is based primarily on survivors' accounts, interviews and memoirs, some never published before. Apart from the interviews that Epstein has conducted, mainly in Belarus and Israel, the book also utilises extensive research in the National Archives of the Republic of Belarus. She has explored source materials belonging to the Yad Vashem Institute, the Oral History Project of the Hebrew University, the archives of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, the archives of the Institute of History of the Belorussian Communist Party and some private collections of documents. She has also had recourse to the very helpful but relatively sparse German reports on the Minsk ghetto and the ghetto underground stored in German archives.

Epstein argues that a thorough knowledge of the Minsk ghetto underground history transforms the global picture of the Holocaust. While the usual image conveyed by historians is that of central and eastern European Jewry left to its own devices and in most cases helpless in the face of the German threat, with no substantial and organised solidarity from outside the ghettos, Epstein's book presents the very different case of the Minsk ghetto. It was, she argues, closely tied to the Belorussian Communist underground in all kinds of anti-German activity. She challenges the mainstream, politically driven historical narratives of the Jewish resistance which concentrate on the internal ghetto revolts in eastern European ghettos. She points out an alternative resistance strategy which was very effective in the Belorussian ghetto: sending people from the ghetto to the forest in order to engage in resistance alongside partisans. The number of Jews from the Minsk ghetto who survived the war after joining the partisans is estimated at up to 10,000 out of a population of 100,000. Epstein presents her book as 'an attempt to restore to memory the model of Holocaust resistance exemplified and carried out most extensively by the Minsk ghetto underground'.

Epstein analyses why the Minsk ghetto Jews chose the 'forest strategy' rather than the 'armed revolt strategy', and explains what made it easier to escape the Minsk ghetto than many of the major ghettos to the west. The author's main argument is convincing. Epstein asserts that what primarily enabled this large-scale Jewish exodus was the Jewish-Belorussian solidarity in Second World War Minsk. She claims that this inter-ethnic solidarity was possible due to internationalist ideology, which was well-rooted and widely diffused in Belorussian society, and to the highly cosmopolitan atmosphere of the city, especially among youth, both flourishing because of the weakness of the Belorussian nationalist movement. 'There was no debate among those who formed the underground about uniting Jews and non-Jews; it was taken for granted that the different national groups that made up the Belorussian population would be subsumed within the framework of a Communist-led resistance movement', affirms Epstein (p. 16). There were of course other circumstances of great importance which promoted efforts to escape the ghetto: the ease of getting through the barbed-wire fence compared to a brick wall, or the proximity of the dense, extensive forests inhabited by Soviet-aligned partisans. Combined with their shared hostility towards Nazism and the German occupation forces, the solidarity between Jews and Christian/Communist Belarusians was, however, a decisive factor.

Epstein's book aims at describing organised ties and spontaneous gestures of Jewish-Belorussian solidarity in Nazi-occupied Minsk, solidarity which stands in sharp contrast with the massive Polish and Lithuanian indifference to the plight of Jews. It aspires to

explain the reasons for this difference and to highlight the specificity of the Belorussian case. The introduction is followed by two chapters in which the author outlines Jewish–Belorussian relations in Second World War Minsk and explains the socio-historical basis for the inter-ethnic solidarity at that time. In the following four chapters, Epstein describes the German attack on Minsk, the Minsk ghetto, the Jewish underground and its ties to the Belorussian underground called the ‘city underground’, as well as the flight of ghetto Jews to the partisan units camping out in the nearby forests. The penultimate chapter deals with the Soviets’ post-war attitude towards the Minsk underground formed without their authorisation after their escape from the city; the last chapter places the Minsk ghetto resistance in the context of ghetto resistance movements in occupied eastern Europe, with an emphasis on the Kovno ghetto underground.

Epstein’s book is written in a very clear and lively manner. However, the great number of superfluous repetitions makes the narrative inefficient and at times amateurish. The book’s structure obviously suffers from it. Regarding the content, more attention should have been given to the dark side of Jewish–Belorussian relations in my opinion. The author shows a tendency to disregard cases of hostility towards Jews, marginalising information which would contradict her thesis. The predominant use of survivors’ records, sometimes very partial, leads to generalisations which make the narrative fragile and at times doubtful. Nevertheless, given the very limited number of works on the Minsk ghetto underground written in or translated into English, Epstein’s book constitutes an important contribution to the English scholarly literature on the topic, offering an interesting insight into the Jewish and Belorussian resistance movement during the Second World War.

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In War’s Wake: Europe’s Displaced Persons in the Postwar Order, by Gerard Daniel Cohen, New York, Oxford University Press, 2012, viii + 237 pp., £22.50 (hbk), ISBN 978 0 19 539968 4

Daniel Cohen’s monograph brings us a substantive analysis of the doctrines that the Allies embraced and the practices they pursued in the aftermath of the Second World War in dealing with the millions of forced labourers who were stranded in Germany when the Nazi state came to an end. To be sure, in 1956 Louise Holborn published an account of the International Refugee Organisation (IRO), but her 800-page book retains its value largely as an encyclopedic study of administrative practices that replaced the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration and which through its support for resettlement became ‘the largest travel organisation in the world’. A new generation of historians including Anna Holian and Jessica Reinisch has made signal contributions to the European history of the post-war refugee regime, and others have begun to explore the daily experiences of refugees in the late 1940s. What makes *In War’s Wake* especially compelling is Cohen’s insistence on the need to understand and contextualise particularly at an international level the intellectual underpinnings of the management of ‘Displaced Persons’ (DPs). This polyglot group – the irony of Hitler’s legacy, bequeathing Germany