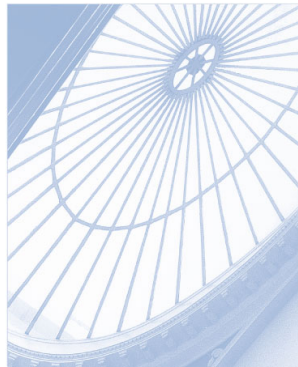


Zitierhinweis

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J. A. S. GRENVILLE, *The Jews and Germans of Hamburg: The Destruction of a Civilization 1790–1945* (London: Routledge, 2012), xiv + 334 pp. ISBN 978 0 415 66585 8. £100.00 (hardback). ISBN 978 0 415 66586 5. £24.99 (paperback)

In order to understand John Grenville's message one has to be acquainted with the street map of Hamburg. On p. 257 we find the following description: 'A grocer at the end of the Rothenbaumchaussee heaped a cart filled with vegetables and pushed it to the [Jewish] hospital while it was still in the Johnsallee. Unfortunately he was spotted as he passed the former Jewish community premises at the Rothenbaumchaussee 38, which has been taken over by the Gestapo.' For those who know these surroundings the picture is clear. The grocer was spotted as he was only 10 metres away from the Johnsallee and about 100 metres from the small building left as the Jewish Hospital after the big building in St Pauli had been 'Aryanized' (pp. 123, 153). Rothenbaum, a neighbourhood which had been densely populated by Jews since the turn of the century, passed through the process of 'Aryanization' from 1933 and most Jews either emigrated or, starting in October 1941, were deported to the East. This little episode also tells the reader about the fate of the few who tried to help. Another example: 'October 1941 . . . Between the Sternschanze and the Dammtor stations a young woman, Gisela Solmitz, was travelling on the *U-Bahn* that day. Casually looking out, she caught a glimpse of an unusual sight as the train passed the small triangular Moorweide Park . . . A thousand people . . . were all standing about holding bundles' (p. 1). These people were Jews about to be deported, and the train (an *S-Bahn*, by the way, not an *U-Bahn*) was travelling 5 metres above street level and only 30 to 40 metres from the scene, which took place next to the university, one block away from the Rothenbaumchaussee. Each and every passenger could have had a close look at the last step before the 'final solution'.

Grenville thus sketches a 'topography of terror' in order to explain the 'lapse into barbarism' in Hamburg. Grenville (Hans Guhrauer before leaving Germany for England on a *Kindertransport*) was motivated by his friend Werner Jochmann to research the fate of the Jews of Hamburg. He presents the reader with a history of everyday life, paying special attention to the 'subtle shades of grey' between black and white (p. xi). He hurls questions at his reader in a didactic style,

Book Reviews

some of them rhetorical and others real. His research relies to a large extent on archival documents like the diary of Gisela's mother, Luise Solmitz, referred to above. But a cautious historian must be on the alert. Should we accept this kind of documentation at face value? If, for instance, Max Plaut, the leader of the Hamburg Jews during the war, concludes in his memoirs that he knew as early as September 1940 that concentration camps 'meant death in the worst way' because by then he had learned of the 'euthanasia' killing by poison of 200 Jewish victims (p. 214)—do we believe him? If we do, how should we interpret the correspondence between Plaut and an 'Aryan' whose wife was 'sent to the East' in June 1943? Plaut told the poor husband that the camp to which the woman had been sent was 'a work camp', just before the husband received news from Auschwitz that his wife had died there (pp. 245–6). What did Plaut really know and why did he react in this way? The text itself cannot supply the reader with answers.

The title of the book addresses the source of all evil. While in their own eyes the Jews were 100 per cent Germans—'Be glad you are a German' was the title of an essay written by pupils of the Jewish Talmud Tora school (p. ix)—the non-Jewish population regarded them as 'others', and not only after 1933. As Grenville concentrates on the history of the destruction of a civilization, as suggested by the book's subtitle, the first two chapters, dealing with the years 1790 to 1933 serve only as an introduction to German-Jewish civilization in Hamburg between these years, without going into detail or extensively consulting the relevant historical literature. Some of the leading figures whose offspring will play a major role at the time of catastrophe appear in this introduction, just to show how far integration had gone before 1933: the Wohlwill and Warburg dynasties, Kaiser Wilhelm's friend Albert Ballin, the man in charge of Hamburg's finance, Leo Lippmann, and so on. Anti-Semitism, Grenville reminds us, was not the primary motive behind support for Hitler (or the reason for the Nazi party's success up to 1933) among the established Hamburg bourgeoisie; on the other hand, it did not turn this bourgeoisie away from Nazism either. And from the moment that Hitler came to power in Berlin, it was only about a month before the Nazis took over Hamburg too. Gauleiter Karl Kaufmann, City Mayor Carl Krogmann, and Police Chief Bruno Streckenbach became Hamburg's leading figures. True, by November 1933 support for Hitler was less

than the German average of 90 per cent, but still more than 80 per cent (p. 68).

Grenville believes that the process of squeezing the Jews out of Hamburg had more to do with economic considerations than a specifically radical anti-Semitic attitude. One of the earliest examples: the Karstadt department store chain was so afraid of disfavour from the new regime that its board decided to dismiss all Jewish employees as early as 1 April 1933. Firms owned by non-Jews learned very quickly to use the fact that their competition was 'Jewish' in order effectively to fight it and, if possible, take it over, as in the case of Queisser, producer of Lovana, against Beiersdorf, producer of Nivea (p. 85). Indeed, the merchant elite did not have to wait long to find out how advantageous cooperation with the new regime could be. With the help of the regime even a strong institution with excellent international connections like the Warburg bank could be taken over by 'Aryans' after only half a decade of Nazi rule (p. 161). No wonder that the administration had no problems getting rid of the Jewish head of the financial department, Leo Lippmann, or that the university quickly expelled such prominent figures as Ernst Cassirer and William Stern. Mayor Krogmann, who after 1945 re-invented himself as a protector of his city against the 'real' Nazis and, indeed, went unpunished, was an important instrument of this process of Nazification, Aryanization, and exclusion of the Jews. Warburg's definition of Hamburg's 'Jewish policy' before *Kristallnacht* as a 'cold pogrom' (p. 129), for which he held Krogmann especially responsible, is very much to the point.

Hamburg, Germany's 'gate to the world' was, of course, a 'respectable' city. It did not like the widespread vandalism of *Kristallnacht* (p. 173). Gauleiter Kaufmann openly agreed that such pogroms 'make no sense' (p. 186). Even its SS was relatively restrained compared with that in other cities or the concentration camps. The chief of the Gestapo in Hamburg even 'gave orders not to maltreat the Jews during the process of deporting them' (p. 240). The fact that Hamburg's welfare institutions supported Jews well into the war, however, is attributed not to good will but to the conviction that people dying in the streets was a sight that might upset the general population (p. 154). But there is no doubt that the majority of the population approved of the persecution of the Jews and knew what was going on. Not only the people on their way to work on 10 November

Book Reviews

1938 or those who travelled by *S-Bahn* to the Dammtor station knew in real time what was happening to the Jews. The readers of the *Hamburger Tageblatt* learned as early as February 1942 that the 'Jewish pest has been exterminated' (p. 230).

Time and again Grenville refers to the difference between the majority of *Mitläufer* and the minority of courageous opponents of the system, such as school teacher Fräulein Eberhard, who lost her job because she proposed banning the *Stürmer* from her school (p. 100), Frau Flügge, who remained in contact with Jewish pupils during the war (p. 219), Frau du Bois-Reymond, who in 1938 was brave enough to openly express regret as Warburg left his bank (p. 167), and those who hid Jews during the November pogrom. On the other hand, Grenville's story supplies ample information to support Goetz Aly's thesis expressed in *Hitlers Volksstaat: Raub, Rassenkrieg und nationaler Sozialismus* (2005), which posits the perpetrators as ordinary and corrupt villains, Gestapo men and others who robbed and looted the Jews of Hamburg in every possible way, and average Hamburg citizens who profited from the auctions of Jewish property (p. 250).

The diary of Luise Solmitz, found in the archives of the Institute for Contemporary History in Hamburg, runs through the whole book. It shows how a woman who was basically a German nationalist—in 1931 she still believed that the Jews had stabbed Germany in the back during the First World War (p. 56)—herself became a victim of the Nazi regime. As time passed, Solmitz learned that her Christian husband was considered a 'racial Jew' in the eyes of the regime. Their daughter, therefore, who was 13 years old when Hitler came to power, became an outcast, had to leave the Bund Deutscher Mädel (p. 98), and was betrayed by her best friends (p. 136). A remark in her diary, right after *Kristallnacht*, in which she uses the term 'final solution' to describe the general mood in the public sphere is very important (p. 177). Solmitz's story is representative of a group that gains much exposure in the book, 'non Aryan' Christians and *Mischlinge* who were considered Jewish by the racial system, but not by themselves (p. 123). But the reader should be reminded that this was not representative of the larger group of 'full' Jews.

Most depressing, of course, is the chapter about Hamburg's Jews during the war and especially at the time of the deportations. Raul Hilberg and Hannah Arendt raised the question of collaboration between the Jewish leadership and the Nazis, one that has since irritat-

ed many historians. Grenville takes a closer look at this issue. He focuses on four Jewish personalities: Max Plaut, Leo Lippmann, Joseph Carlebach, and Max Warburg. Warburg was able to leave before the war. The other three remained in Hamburg, serving their community. On 6 December 1941 Rabbi Carlebach, with 800 fellow Jews, was deported to Riga where he was murdered. Lippmann remained until he was to be deported in June 1943; he committed suicide instead (p. 253). Plaut was in charge of community matters until, in 1943, he was able to emigrate on a special transport to Palestine.

The degree of cooperation shown by each of the four was very different. No doubt Plaut was the more typical case of 'cooperative' Jewish leadership. Grenville's explanation concentrates on what he calls the 'sense of duty' of the Jewish leaders in Hamburg and elsewhere (p. 198, 209). Since the leaders had to follow the authorities' orders for the sake of their communities, he rightly argues, contacts with the representatives of Nazi rule were unavoidable. These contacts required great courage on the part of the Jewish functionaries. The story of Dr Spier, principal of the Talmud Tora school, who went into the lion's den, that is, to the Chief of the Gestapo in charge of the Jewish community, Claus Göttsche, in order to free a teacher from prison (p. 107), serves as a good example. Lippmann's success in getting half the expenses of the transfer of the Jewish cemetery from Grindel to Ohlsdorf paid was also an example of cooperation beneficial to the Jewish community under siege (p. 153). The question becomes more complicated when it comes to the close relations between the same Göttsche and Max Plaut. But here again, under the extreme conditions of the war, what would have been the alternative? Plaut's main concern was to get as many Jews as possible out of Germany with the connivance of the local Gestapo (p. 151). Half of Hamburg's 20,000 Jews were saved. Of the 3,163 deported to the East in 1941, only about 2 per cent survived. The question of whether Plaut should have gone so far as to agree to a deportation of the Jews to the district of Lublin in autumn 1939, allegedly in order to create 'a more tolerable future' for them (p. 208) is, of course, difficult to answer. And Grenville himself, when describing Plaut's role in the transports from October 1941, cannot be sure whether he was doing his best for the Jews who were about to be deported or 'had also become an arm of the Gestapo' (p. 239).

Book Reviews

A most frustrating chapter in the history of the Third Reich is the one dealing with the punishment of the Nazi criminals. Most of the perpetrators in Hamburg got off without punishment. Some of them evaded being put on trial by committing suicide, like Gestapo chief Göttzsche. Others fled to distant parts of the world, or got off with a light punishment, if at all. Krogmann remained unharmed. The first Gestapo commander of Hamburg, Streckenbach, died unpunished in 1977. On the other hand, it was no rarity for the wrong men to be punished. The man in charge of the education system, Wilhelm Oberdörffer, who was helpful to the Jews, was removed from his position by British military rule because he had been a member of the Nazi party (p. 110).

This book is both informative and moving; it is an impressive piece of research, sometimes close to a detective story, contributing to our understanding of the dynamics of the Third Reich.¹

¹ It is a pity that the work done in Hamburg by Yfaat Weiss on Jewish education in Nazi Germany (1991) and the book written (in Hebrew) by Elieser Domke about the Hamburg Jews in the years 1928 to 1933 (1995) were not consulted.

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