

Zitierhinweis

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Tim Cole: *Traces of the Holocaust*. Journeying in and out of the Ghettos. Continuum. London u.a. 2011. IX, 177 S., Ill., graph. Darst. ISBN 978-1-441-16996-9. (€ 29,99.)

Tim Cole's innovative previous monograph on ghettoization extensively drew on insights gained from the "spatial turn" to deal with the history of Budapest during the Holocaust.¹ The merits of *Holocaust City* were among the primary bones of contention in a recent Hungarian debate on the level of theoretical and methodological sophistication in Hungarian Holocaust historiography and its current international standing.² C.'s new book is similarly rich in conceptual reflection but here he rather aims to provide new case studies on ghettoization and deportation to show how, especially during the early phase of the Holocaust, place mattered in many "smaller ways" as well (p. 136).

Focusing on how Holocaust journeys were taken, initiated, aided and watched, the author hopes to weave together questions of "place and space, movement and stasis, people and their stories, similarities and differences" (p. 4). The stories C. tells are framed around rich and diverse material traces such as name lists, orders and receipts, newspapers, maps, passes, photographs, reports, diaries, memoirs, and letters. While some of the explorations start from historical events and go on to pursue their relevant sources, others consciously "work from the surviving traces back to the events that generated them" (p. 2).

The first five chapters adopt "a place-based approach" and follow "a number of journeys into and out of a handful of Hungarian ghettos" (p. 3). The remaining four chapters in turn explore how journeys "into and out of ghettos were narrated by those we tend to dub perpetrators, victims and bystanders" (p. 4). Through reflecting on various pieces of evidence we have of these processes, C. not only manages to show how highly visible but also how strongly gendered the Hungarian processes of ghettoization and deportation were.

In Chapter 1, C. discusses the curious fact that "Jewish men were leaving ghettos in a large number of towns and cities" even while deportations from Hungary were already taking place in 1944 (p. 21). Jewish men were still being called up to work in labour battalions at this point and thus, rather ironically, the Ministry of Defense became involved in saving them. C. argues here that not only was the previous vulnerability of Jewish men undone in 1944, but that, more generally, "the intersections of age and gender" proved "absolutely central to radically different experiences of what we call the Holocaust in Hungary" (p. 27). The second chapter goes on to address the mass participation of non-Jewish Hungarians in the Holocaust, exploring in particular the deportations to the city ghettos in Szabolcs County that were carried out using horses and carts. C. points to "a remarkable degree of [popular] complicity", the centrality of personal enrichment in motivating involvement in the deportation of Jews, as well as to the widespread knowledge and discussion of various problems related to it (pp. 39-40).

Chapter 3 analyses the initiatives taken by the local press in the city of Szeged, focusing on explicit plans for the future urban ghetto. It not only reveals that the location of the ghetto was publicly debated but that non-Jewish urbanites in fact managed to influence the decisions of the authorities. Part of C.'s conclusion is that "implementing anti-Jewish measures" was thus "a shared concern in the city" (p. 54). At the same time, in Tolna county patchwork ghettos were created in order not to violate non-Jewish property rights: Chapter 4 explores the motivations behind their creation and their concrete daily implica-

¹ TIM COLE: *Holocaust City. The Making of a Jewish Ghetto*, New York – London 2003.

² GÁBOR GYÁNI: Helyünk a holokauszt történetírásában [Our Place in the Historiography of the Holocaust], in: *Kommentár* (2008), 3, pp. 13-23. See also the most elaborate reaction by LÁSZLÓ KARSAI: A magyar holokauszt-történetírásról. Válasz Ablonczy Baláznak, Csíki Tamásnak, Gyáni Gábornak és Novák Attilának [On Hungarian Holocaust Historiography. Answer to Balázs Ablonczy, Tamás Csíki, Gábor Gyáni and Attila Novák], *ibidem*, 6, pp. 91-104.

tions. Chapter 5 then tells the story of Körömend where “around one-third of the Jews” living in the ghetto were actually allowed to leave its confines “on journeys regulated through a series of passes” (p. 73). In other words, the segregatory logic of ghettoisation was mediated through local concerns in this city, and changes in ownership were at first combined with the continuity of work patterns.

The second half of the book begins with the examination of the bystander’s gaze through the analysis of photographs. C. explores both the act of photographing and “the positioning of ordinary Hungarians vis-à-vis these events” (p. 90). He argues that so-called bystanders actually had various perspectives and suggests that it might be more fruitful to write about “forms of participation by non-Jewish neighbours” (p. 100). Chapter 7 in turn looks at the reports of a key perpetrator, László Ferenczy, the gendarmerie official charged with overseeing the concentration and deportation processes in Hungary. As C. rightly notes, Ferenczy’s reports not only described but also constructed historical realities. The chapter on them explores the priorities and concerns of this key official, highlighting his ample use of statistical tables, his recounting of the failures of other institutions and his focus on asset-stripping. C. concludes that, according to the reports of Ferenczy, not only was there widespread personal enrichment, but the expropriation of Jews was an essential component of their concentration in ghettos. Moreover, these reports reveal that Hungarian state organs still effectively ruled during this phase of the Holocaust. C. goes on to suggest that agents of the Hungarian state were more interested in Jewish wealth than in Jewish persons. As he admittedly somewhat cynically puts it, once wealth had been expropriated, the latter could be handed over to the Germans. The last empirical chapter of the book draws on diaries, memoirs and letters from victims to argue that “robbing the Jews lay at the heart of not only national policy as well as policy on the ground, but was also at the heart of the victims’ experiences” (p. 131).

In sum, *Traces of the Holocaust* offers an alternative to historical studies that impute overall coherence to personal experiences during the Holocaust. Instead, C. provides “multi-perspectival” and fragmentary narratives in order to shed light on difference “both in the nature of the events themselves and the surviving traces” of them (p. 136). His overall ambition seems to be to write “the obscure(d) into history” and thereby make the Hungarian Holocaust appear as a dispersed event that involved a large number of different actors with diverse experiences. He maintains that precisely such individualizing stories need to be recovered to undo the leveling work of genocide.

Accordingly, on the pages of this book not only regional and local officials but also “newspaper editors, non-Jewish city dwellers, non-Jewish rural farmworkers, as well as Jewish leaders and ordinary Jews” appear as active agents (p. 141). Recognising and studying the precise role of human agency is indeed crucial. On the other hand, it cannot change the fact that power relations between members of these groups were radically unequal – something that C. does not question, but might have articulated more elaborately. In other words, the focus on agency and diversity here seems to partly come at the expense of clarifying how variously circumscribed the freedom to act was in 1944: C. unfortunately devotes relatively little attention to the precise historical context and moral implications of various human acts during the Holocaust.

This reservation notwithstanding, all in all, C. manages to draw on intriguing and previously unexplored types of evidence to offer a series of insights into the social history of the Hungarian Holocaust on the micro scale and, even while presenting a radically fragmented picture of these events, to show the deep involvement of Hungarian society in them. *Traces of the Holocaust* also explores the possibilities and limits of historical reconstruction and offers convincing reflections on the nature of various traces. This slim volume thus largely succeeds in its main goal, namely at showing the diversity of the actors involved in the Hungarian Holocaust, the variety of their perspectives and the very concreteness of their multiple experiences.

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