

The Emergence of Jewish Ghettos During the Holocaust

Written by Dr. Michael Berenbaum

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Dan Michman, *The Emergence of Jewish Ghettos During the Holocaust* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011) pp. 191.

Holocaust Studies is not a field that yields much pleasure. The material is emotionally and intellectually taxing and the insights that one gains, especially if they are important, are often profoundly depressing with regard to the human capacities to inflict evil one upon another. But one of the pleasures that one can have in this field is to see its maturation, to read the new work of young scholars and the fresh work of experienced scholars who are taking innovative approaches to their field of studies.

For example, Christopher Browning has a well deserved reputation as a “documents man.” A protégé of Raul Hilberg, he can read German documentation and come to insights that glisten; he examines details in their greatest specificity but still presses toward larger conclusions of significance. His most recent book *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave Labor Camp* takes what for him was the opposite track. He examined oral histories of survivors and following the principle enunciated by Ronald Reagan “trust but verify,” critically evaluated their testimony to construct an understanding of what happened in the slave labor camp of Starachowice, where documents were few, but recollections plentiful. Yehuda Bauer’s examination of *The Death of the Shtetl* is similarly innovative methodologically and unexpected results.

Dan Michman’s work on *The Emergence of the Jewish Ghettos During the Holocaust* employs what for him is a significant change of methodology. From Michman, the Bar-Ilan scholar and chief historian of Yad Vashem, we have come to expect historical studies of great precision. Here he employs semantic and linguistic analysis and the cultural context to understand the emergence of the term “ghetto” and the various ways in which it had been used historically and later by the Nazis. He seeks to understand not only the emergence of the ghetto but the various iterations of the ghetto in areas under German-occupation with path-breaking results. The word was used in many different contexts to signify rather different living arrangements and policy goals. And Michman tries to make sense of the many different ways in which the term was used.

From Raul Hilberg’s pioneering study *The Destruction of the European Jews* onward, Holocaust scholars are accustomed to refer to the process of ghettoization as if it were a single phenomenon, imposed on high, indispensable to the Nazi implementation of the Final

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Solution to the Jewish Problem. No so fast, Michman argues. Ghettos were present in certain areas of Poland but at were established at different times and lasted for varying durations. They were used for different purposes. With the exception of something akin to a ghetto in Amsterdam, they were not present in Western Europe. Elsewhere Jews were not ghettoized, though sometimes they were confined to Jewish Streets and Jewish buildings. Further East, in areas conquered by Germany after June 1941 when the “Final Solution” was German policy, ghettos were imposed after the Einsatzgruppen has already been at its murderous work; one must see these ghettos, at least in part, in terms of the need for labor. In Hungary, outside of Budapest, ghettos were used for only the briefest period of time as transit camps between the expulsion of Jews from their homes and their deportation to Auschwitz.

Michman’s detailed examination of the specific use of the term “ghetto” in each of these cases shows that if we consider the language that was used, which officials were engaged in the establishment of the ghetto and for what purposes and duration, one must see these as a local phenomena, taken in response to local needs, initiated at the local level without any general imposition from on high. He forces his readers to differentiate between Jewish Councils and the formation of ghettos and to see the former as a general policy and the later on a case by case basis. Much of Holocaust scholarship has viewed the two as virtually indistinguishable.

Michman writes with precision and with great clarity. In his last chapter he reviews the the basic conclusions of his work. He has tried something new, answering new questions: where and when did the idea for ghettos originate. How are we to explain the protracted duration of the period over which they were established, the clear limits to their distribution?” The ghetto system was inconsistent, different in character and concept in many different locales. There is no evidence linking Hitler to ghettoization. It did not go that high in the Nazi bureaucracy, because it didn’t have to. Local officials responding to local needs had the leeway necessary to create their own sorts of ghettos.

Michman documents that it was the fear of the *Ostjuden* that led to the establishment of the first ghettos in Poland in 1939-1940. The ghetto, he writes, “was not an essential component of German anti-Jewish policy.” He thus forces us to examine not only the mechanism of destruction but also the motivation for the destruction of the Jews, focusing quite properly on the nature of Nazi antisemitism.

Secondly, he clearly demonstrates that ghettos must be spoken of in the plural. Each ghetto was different in origin, in concept, in reason for being, in who established the ghetto and

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why. The placement of ghettos in the poorest section of town was the result of Nazi ideology, in part the work of a “Professor” rather than a bureaucrat. If we wish to understand ghettos we better pay attention to Peter-Heinz Seraphim whose 1938 work – yes 1938 - *Jewry in the Territory of Eastern Europe* was influential in shaping the perception of Jews and Nazi policy.”

The ghettos, Michman concluded were “hesitant geographically and both limited and incomplete in their distribution. Unlike concentration camps and death camps, their creation and implementation were unsystematic. And unlike the “Final Solution,” ghetto were a transitory, a preliminary stage in the killing process. Michman distinguishes among the many different and evolving uses of the term ghetto signifying the social isolation of the Jews. When used metaphorically, it referred to an urban phenomenon of poor and overcrowded neighborhoods. Sometimes it was used as an abstract term for the social isolation of Jews, keeping them away from Germans and the local population of non-Jews. In some areas, ghettos became a practical measure, a place to temporary domicile, while in many areas ghettos became way station, a transit place en route to death. To its inhabitants, it became a way of life, a place to live until... until what they did not know. But in German-occupied Poland once their killers knew what to do with the Jews and how to do, ghettos became a place of containment until the mechanisms of the “Final Solution” were in place.

The lasting impact of this work is that all future scholars working in this field will not treat ghettos as a single phenomenon, but will root their understanding of ghettos in the geographical locale and time frame that it required. The brevity of this work only magnifies its import: it is indispensable to all future studies of the ghetto.

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