

BOOK REVIEW

Aleksiu, Natalia, and Hanna Kubátová, eds. *Places, Spaces, and Voids in the Holocaust. European Holocaust Studies*

Vol. 3. Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2021. Pp. 344.

N. Ann Rider

Indiana State University, Terre Haute, IN, USA
Email: ann.rider@indstate.edu

This book is a collection of articles with a focus on “the Holocaust and the spatial turn” gathered from presentations at the “Lessons and Legacies Conference” in Munich, 4–7 November 2019. It contains many significant articles that do the archeological and microhistorical work of investigating discrete places and spaces of the Holocaust. Many noted and emerging European scholars are featured, several of whom are immersed in climates in which nationalisms are impacting their ability to discuss and publish their research.

Useful for any researcher interested in spatial studies will be the introduction, in which the editors define the concept and provide examples of how such study can broaden and enhance Holocaust Studies as a discipline. The editors stress the importance of “local context,” the places of the actual experience of “social exclusion of Jews, physical violence, betrayal, but also survival” (9). A focus on place exposes the way in which the Holocaust was “communal and intimate,” in contrast to the imaginary of the Nazi machine as monolithic (10). The editors also highlight what the “fine-grained lens” of recent microhistories has revealed through specificity of place (12). Further, the “Discussion Essay” by Tim Cole and Anne Kelly Knowles provides a clear articulation of the parameters of spatial studies, the fruitfulness with which spatial foci might be employed, and elucidation of the most important theorists and studies as applied to the Holocaust.

Highlights of the volume include the entry by Andrea Löw and Kim Wünschmann in which they analyze two films by municipal planning offices documenting the demolition of the Munich Main Synagogue in June 1938. They demonstrate the ways in which the films “stage” the demolition as an act of Nazi urban planning and contrast it with the images of destruction of synagogues that followed in November 1938. They also employ written documentation (letters, minutes of city, and Jewish council meetings) to compare the defense against and justifications for the Munich synagogue demolition with demolitions undertaken in other cities.

Michal Frankl’s contribution explores a pop-up “no man’s land” between Hungary and Slovakia where for a particular period refugees became ping-pong balls between competing claims to geographical space and responsibility for stateless refugees. The article provides interesting details about who was deposited there, how they survived, and how they left, and includes first-hand accounts. Similarly engaging is Frankl’s exploration of the concept of the “no man’s land,” what it meant at the historical moment and for stateless refugees caught between shifting physical boundaries of nation-states.

An examination of the Lily Jacob album by Tal Bruttman, Stefan Hördler, and Christoph Kreutzmüller demonstrates how spatial analysis of the images reveals significant information about the intent of the photographer to document the efficiency of the selection platform. This analysis provides a very different perspective than a focus on the experience of the victims.

The extremely thorough articulation of methodology and assumptions by cultural anthropologist Anna Engelking can be an example to all researchers of how to cognize and articulate their research assumptions. Here, Engelking carefully examines ethnographic interviews and supplements documentation to reveal the cultural models behind the use of language articulating local perpetrators as “our

own traitor.” Also powerful is her comparison of these cultural models of perpetrators with those of nationalist discourse in Poland.

A worthy feature of the “Introduction” is the editors’ plaidoyer for an interdisciplinary Holocaust Studies. Spatial studies by their nature should engender interdisciplinarity. However, the editors argue that a fruitful interdisciplinarity must go beyond discussions “that take place in parallel panels, with historians, political scientists, memory scholars, geographers and others engaged in separate conversations within their own disciplinary boundaries” (13). Cole and Knowles agree, suggesting that “spatial histories of the Holocaust are at their best when the research upon which they are based is capacious, collaborative and inclusive” (296). The editors’ attempt to create an interdisciplinary environment is laudable: the book includes nine research articles, and less common features such as a discussion essay, a source commentary, and three ongoing project descriptions. And yet, the bulk of the volume is stand-alone articles, that, while significant in themselves, do not “speak” to each other as the editors had hoped. Their call for a focus on how interdisciplinarity works best should be heeded, however, to bring productive collaboration to Holocaust Studies and to answers questions yet unanswered.

A final note: the focus almost exclusively on Jewish experience is an unconscious underlying the volume, rather than a clearly articulated choice that one would expect from contemporary researchers. This is particularly true for the introduction, but the conclusions of several entries would have been enriched by a more inclusive conception of victim.