

Ghettos: Centers of Jewish Resistance?

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Running through this encyclopedic undertaking to map all the Jewish ghettos of World War II are Yad Vashem's contentions that the ghettos did not constitute a prerequisite for the Final Solution and that they were centers of Jewish resistance. What is innovative about this reference work is the huge amount of hitherto little-known documentation from the ex-USSR.

Reviewed: *The Yad Vashem Encyclopedia of the Ghettos during the Holocaust*, editor in chief Guy Miron, co-editor Shlomit Shulhani, Jerusalem, Yad Vashem, 2009.

The Yad Vashem Encyclopedia of the Ghettos during the Holocaust, two thick clothbound volumes of 1,068 pages with close to 1,100 entries, is a systematic and in-depth survey of all the ghettos in which Jews were confined and from which the majority were exterminated between the fall of 1939, when the first ghettos were set up in Poland, and the end of 1943. In the estimation of Yehuda Bauer and Israel Gutman, the authors of the forewords and two of Israel's most eminent specialists in this domain, the *Yad Vashem Encyclopedia* is the first attempt to "map all the ghettos in which Jews were incarcerated by the German Nazis during World War II". By the Germans and their allies, one should add, since the book also covers the ghettos of Hungary created by the Hungarian authorities as well as those of the Bucovina, Bessarabia and Transnistria created and administered by the Romanians.

The authors have opted for alphabetical order rather than listing ghettos by country so as to avoid any possible confusion owing to changes in national jurisdiction over a number of areas before, during and after the Holocaust. The countries/regions covered are: western and central Poland, eastern Poland and the Baltic states, Belarus, the Ukraine and Russia, Romania and Transnistria, and Hungary. Other sizeable ghettos outside these large geographic areas are also indexed: Salonika, Theresienstadt (Terezin) and Amsterdam. On the other hand, the so-called "Jews' homes"¹ in Germany and Austria are not included here, but will be the subject of a separate research project.

This reference work is part of a series of large-scale encyclopedic undertakings by Yad Vashem, the leading Israeli institution for the commemoration of and research on the Holocaust. The first publication in that series was the four-volume *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, chief ed. Israel Gutman, published in 1990. Once again, the researchers, archivists and academics who took part in putting together the new encyclopedia are, for the most part, affiliated with Yad Vashem or teach at Israeli universities. The documentation compiled during previous projects, for the 1990 Encyclopedia or for *Pinkas haKehilot (Encyclopedia of*

¹ *Judenhäuser* were buildings in German and Austrian towns in which Jews were forced to live from the late 1930s.

Jewish Communities), has been re-used here. This new publication is tied into a larger-scale program being carried out by the team at the Yad Vashem International Institute for Holocaust Research: the object is to set up a computerized database on all the sites of persecution, including the ghettos.

Multiform response to Semitophobia

This encyclopedia seeks to provide answers to questions that haven't been asked or satisfactorily answered before now. Did the Nazi German authorities have a precise definition of the term "ghetto"? How did those who drew up the Third Reich's anti-Semitic policy come up with this idea? What purpose were the ghettos supposed to serve and what purpose did they actually serve? Why were they placed in the middle of cities? Was the ghetto an end in itself or a step towards the Final Solution? Was there an integral connection between the Jewish Councils (*Judenräte*) and the ghettos?

Starting with the origins of the ghetto, in the strictest sense of the word, in early 16th-century Venice, and tracing its emergence as a concept or metaphor in the modern age up to the creation of the archetypal Nazi ghetto after the invasion of Poland, Dan Michman, chief historian at Yad Vashem and professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, presents, in a masterful introduction, the present state of research on the subject and resituates the phenomenon within the larger context of Nazi anti-Semitic policies. As Michman sees it, the historiographical shift over the past ten years has to do with the end of the consensus on the "intentionalist" interpretation of the Nazis' anti-Semitic policy. Even if from 1933 it was clear that they had to "take care of the Jews", the approaches they chose varied and did not converge on a coherent policy. To Michman, the decision to ghettoize Jews was indubitably linked, albeit perhaps subconsciously, to the phobic fear of the figure of the *Ostjude* of the overpopulated Jewish quarters of Eastern Europe, a bogeyman that personified the Jewish peril.

Because in the decades following the Holocaust a great deal of the literature on the subject was written by Jewish historians from Poland and Lithuania, the "Polish model" tended to dominate historiography². This model attached special importance to some large ghettos for which there was plenty of extant documentation as well as survivors' eye-witness accounts and newspapers printed *in situ* (in Warsaw, Łódz, Białystok and Vilnius, to name just a few of the most important). Likewise, Raul Hilberg's monumental work *The Destruction of the European Jews* (published in the US in 1961 and in France for the first time in 1988) served to entrench in the historiography of the Holocaust the idea that the ghetto constituted a preliminary step towards the Final Solution³. The Yad Vashem historians

² The first Israeli institution to research the Holocaust, Beit Lohamei Hagettaot ("The Ghetto Fighters' House"), was founded by a group of former combatants from the Polish ghettos, including Itzhak (Antek) Zukerman, one of the leaders of the Jewish Combat Organization in the Warsaw ghetto. Most of the researchers who joined this institution in the 1950s were members of the Committee on Polish History. A few years later, some of them joined Yad Vashem, directed at the time by Ben Zion Dinur. When Holocaust research migrated from Yad Vashem to the Israeli universities, it was a man of Lithuanian origin who held the world's first chair of Holocaust research at Bar-Ilan University, Meir (Mark) Dworzecki. For more details on Israeli Holocaust historiography, see Boaz Cohen, "L'historiographie israélienne de la Shoah", in *L'historiographie israélienne de la Shoah, Cahiers d'histoire de la Shoah*, No. 188, January–June 2008.

³ Raul Hilberg regards the Holocaust as a linear progression from Hitler's seizing power in 1933 to the Final Solution. In his opinion, ghettoization is one stage in that progression. Cf. Dan Michman, "The Jewish Ghettos Under the Nazis and their Allies: The Reasons Behind their Emergence", in *The Yad Vashem Encyclopedia of the Ghettos during the Holocaust*, *op. cit.*, p. xiv.

disagree with Hilberg on this matter⁴, as well as on another matter no less central to the debate: the Jewish population's failure to react. Hilberg's thesis, perhaps linked to the choice he made to base his examination of the events almost exclusively on German sources, was that the Jews evinced total submission to and collaboration with their exterminators in the destruction process⁵. This "automatic compliance", as he terms it, resulted from the "traditional mode of reaction of Jews in exile in the face of pogroms perpetrated against them by a hostile population⁶". This position was at variance with that of Yad Vashem, which emphasized Jewish reactions to the Holocaust, extending the concept of resistance to include other Jewish survival strategies⁷. It may be recalled, incidentally, that from 1958 Yad Vashem refused to support and participate in the publication of Hilberg's masterwork.

The encyclopedia clearly shows that the Nazi ghetto cannot be presented as a uniform and unvarying phenomenon. It illustrates the special complexity of the term and phenomenon it presents, since the types of ghettoization varied considerably by region and country. With regard to the terminology, it should be added that a number of sites included in the encyclopedia were not called "ghettos" in the official German, Romanian or Hungarian documents, but "Jewish quarter" (*Judenviertel*), "Jewish residential quarter" (*Jüdisches Wohnviertel*), "Jewish residential district" (*Jüdischer Wohnbezirk*), "Jewish street" (*Judenstrasse*) etc. Moreover, the longevity of the ghettos, the forms of self-administration inside them, the role of the *Judenräte* ("Jewish councils" set up by the Germans) and the ways in which Jews were killed off vary substantially from one country or region to another. These differences may have resulted from variance in the composition of the Jewish population or in the historical context that molded the identity of the communities over the decades preceding the catastrophe, or from other factors such as topography, distance from the front and so forth. An analysis and juxtaposition of the entries also underscores profound structural differences in the makeup of the ghettos. For example, if we compare most Polish ghettos to those of Transnistria, we find inverse percentages of Jewish natives and refugees: the ratio in Poland is roughly 75% native Jews to 25% refugees, whereas in Transnistria, 75% to 80% were Jewish deportees from Bucovina or Bessarabia as against 20 to 25% local Jews.

Jewish resistance writ large

These two volumes fall right in line with the main current of Israeli historiography of the Holocaust, in perfect conformity with Yad Vashem's policy since its creation. For one thing, the encyclopedia presents the Jewish perspective on the Holocaust, that of the victims more than that of the perpetrators or the "bystanders" among the local populations. For another, it calls attention to the Resistance and other Jewish reactions to persecution, exclusion and confinement, as it takes into account the intense social relations inside the ghettos themselves and the social problems resulting from the extreme prevailing conditions, while describing the daily fight for survival. For this historiographical current, these phenomena fall under the categories of Jewish resistance and heroism, categories encompassing every form of courage that helped the Jews survive under these harrowing conditions. From the late 1950s, Philip Friedman, one of the most influential researchers during the first decade of Yad Vashem, established a distinction between the concepts of

⁴ For which they argue that the ghetto was not just a conceptual step on the road to the Final Solution, but a phenomenon within which Jewish society as a "dynamic community underwent existential challenges" (*ibid.*), even if that distinction made no sense to Jews at the time.

⁵ Roni Stauber, "Polémique sur la résistance juive pendant la Shoah. Documentation et recherche en Israël dans les premières années", in *L'historiographie israélienne de la Shoah, op. cit.*, p. 251.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

revolt and resistance. To him, resistance was not only armed resistance, but could also be spiritual or moral, secular or religious⁸. These were core subjects of research at the institution – and still are to this day. In their forewords, Bauer and Gutman stress that Jewish reactions to persecution were more widespread and more substantial than might have been initially supposed, though we can make out significant disparities between various ghettos, even between those geographically close to each other. So the originality of these two volumes lies in the attention they accord to Jewish responses to victimization, which quite demolish the sweeping generalizations about whole populations exterminated like “lambs led to slaughter” that reigned till the late 1970s in Israel, especially within the Labor Party. Naturally, however, weaknesses, corruption and collaboration are not glossed over, nor is the disintegration of social relations, but the encyclopedia shows “the limits of an organized response to an existential threat to a community⁹”.

The highlighted differences between ghettos concern in particular the role of the Jewish Councils, their degree of self-administration, solidarity (or the absence thereof), and the different coping strategies. The self-administration that prevailed in certain ghettos in Poland and Lithuania, but also in some large ghettos in Transnistria, seems a phenomenon unparalleled in other genocidal contexts. In response to the question about the link between the Jewish Councils and ghettos, Dan Michman argues that the two cannot be deemed twin concepts, since these two instruments of anti-Semitic policy emerged from different sources, as well as commencing in different periods and evolving in different ways. For instance, there were *Judenräte* operating in certain localities long before a ghetto was formally constituted, and there were ghettos that functioned without any Jewish administration (e.g. in the Ukrainian cities of Zhytomyr and Berdychiv, but also in Transnistria).

Ex-Soviet perspective rounds out ghetto map

So wherein lies the originality of this survey, which adheres so closely to the main lines of Israeli historiography, particularly that of Yad Vashem? The new fields of investigation, the broader scale of data since the collapse of the Eastern bloc and the opening-up of the archives in countries that have since gained independence have considerably enriched historians' knowledge. Furthermore, the large-scale *aliyah* from the ex-USSR has brought a generation of new researchers to Israel, who, thanks to their knowledge of the languages and regions, have been able to make the most of this huge trove of documentation and launch new research projects, some of which will permit a significant reassessment of subjects treated in the past. That includes the importance of the part played by local populations, the attitude of neighbors, their collaboration with the German occupiers and their participation, to varying degrees, in the mass slaughter. The attitude of the populations is indeed a key factor that might explain in part the success of the whole undertaking to exterminate the Jews. As early as 1957, Moshe Kahanovich explained that the Jews confined to the ghettos did not rise up because they knew they wouldn't survive long in the forests, owing to the hostility of the local population¹⁰. One immediate consequence of the transfer of the Jews to the ghettos was the pillaging of the homes they had left behind. The local

⁸ A great many colloquia have been held dealing with Jewish resistance, the saving of Jews, and Jewish leaders, subjects that are particularly favored at the Yad Vashem Research Center. Cf. Boaz Cohen, “L’historiographie israélienne de la Shoah”, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

⁹ Yehuda Bauer and Israel Gutman, “Forewords”, p. viii.

¹⁰ Roni Stauber, “Polémique sur la résistance juive pendant la Shoah”, in *L’historiographie israélienne de la Shoah*, *op. cit.*, p. 249.

populations were in fact reluctant to help them as the survival of the Jews would mean their return and possibly requests for the restitution of their property.

The encyclopedia integrates a sizeable amount of new data provided by the Soviet archives, entrusting all these sections to the generation of new Israeli researchers from the ex-USSR. Nonetheless, the focus remains on Jewish society, partly owing to the very subject of the encyclopedia. If one undertakes a history of places of confinement, one is bound to deal mostly, if not entirely, with the populations who lived there.

Lastly, we should note the wealth of photographic documentation illustrating this publication, as well as the DVD that comes with it. The latter includes propaganda films as well as amateur films for the most part dating from 1940 to 1942. The ghettos they show are in Bedzin, Brzeziny, Cracow, Kutno, Mogilev, Nowe Miasto Nad Pilica, Nowy Sacz, Plonsk, Tarnow, Terezin (Theresienstadt) and Warsaw. All the clips reveal the large numbers of people rounded up and confined, often within a matter of hours, to spaces in some cases as small as a single building (as in Kutno, where the Jews were herded into a sugar refinery). The pillaging, depredations, vandalism and violence that everywhere accompanied these forced migrations often appear only indirectly in the footage, where bystanders are shown posing and smiling at the camera.

It is a shame, however, that only the biggest ghettos of Transnistria are included in the encyclopedia. 180 ghettos are relegated to the appendix, with notes from the editors explaining that they were unable to obtain sufficiently reliable information about these places – which may be deemed a specious excuse¹¹. As a matter of fact, historians have as many documents about a number of them as about plenty of Polish and Lithuanian ghettos that are indeed covered at length¹². So Yad Vashem should have put together all the necessary entries on Bucovina, Bessarabia and Transnistria. The encyclopedia would have been a more comprehensive reference work¹³.

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¹¹ The editors claim the documentation on these ghettos is not complete or reliable enough, which is not true at the current state of research. This claim may also be partly due to the post-communist historiography of the Holocaust in Romania itself, which oscillates between silence, obliviousness, or worse: revisionist writings.

¹² Moreover, certain place-names that figure on the so-called “additional” list are nonetheless accorded an entry in the encyclopedia proper, e.g. Bershad (p. 41), Balta (p. 15 et 1002), Luchinets (p. 427) and Lucineți (p. 1002), Mogilev-Podolskiy (p. 493) and Mogilev (p. 1002) etc.

¹³ On this subject, see for example the latest installment of *Revue d'histoire de la Shoah* (“Une Horreur oubliée : la Shoah roumaine”, No. 194, January–June 2011, 700 pp.).

