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Review of Otto Dov Kulka, ed., *Deutsches Judentum unter dem Nationalsozialismus. Band I: Dokumente zur Geschichte der Reichsvertretung der deutschen Juden 1933-1939*

Alan E. Steinweis

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, [asteinweis1@unl.edu](mailto:asteinweis1@unl.edu)

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OTTO DOV KULKA, ed. with the assistance of ANNE BIRKENHAUER, and ESRIEL HILDESHEIMER. *Deutsches Judentum unter dem Nationalsozialismus. Band 1: Dokumente zur Geschichte der Reichsvertretung der deutschen Juden 1933–1939*. Schriftenreihe wissenschaftlicher Abhandlungen des Leo Baeck Instituts 54. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997. Pp. xxiv + 614.

The response of German Jews to the Nazi regime has not figured prominently in the growing field of Holocaust studies. The recent book by Marion A. Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (New York, 1998), a social history of German Jews during the Nazi period, could justly be hailed as a path-breaking work because so little attention had been given to the subject previously. Whereas we have an embarrassment of riches when it comes to studies on Nazi policy toward German Jews—studies in which Jews tend to be depicted as the object of policy—we are short on works in which the German-Jewish response is itself the central subject.

American and British publishers have recently brought out an English-language edition of the acclaimed diaries of Victor Klemperer, *I Shall Bear Witness: The Diaries of Victor Klemperer, 1933–41* (New York, 1998), excerpts from which had also appeared in the widely circulated *New Yorker* magazine. Klemperer's detailed record of his experiences during the Nazi regime is without question an important historical source worthy of a wide readership. Yet Klemperer was hardly a representative German Jew: he had stopped identifying as a Jew and converted to Christianity well before 1933. Moreover, his wife was an "Aryan" according to Nazi racial laws, a fact which saved Victor from deportation and likely death. German Jews were by no means monolithic, divided as they were over issues such as Zionism and adherence to *halakha*, but there was an important distinction between their common self-defined Jewishness and Klemperer's externally ascribed Jewishness. All of these factors call into question the utility of Klemperer's diary as a window onto Jewish life in Nazi Germany.

It is worth pointing out that several admirable studies that do indeed concentrate on more typical German-Jewish experiences under Nazism have been published in German, but have yet to be translated into English. Perhaps the most notable among these is the vital anthology edited by Wolfgang Benz, *Die Juden in Deutschland, 1933–1945* (Munich, 1988). Among other important contributions, this collection contains a 200-page essay by Volker Dahm that remains an authoritative study of Jewish intellectual and artistic life in the Third Reich. One must wonder why such works have not been made available in English. The high cost of translation has not proved

to be an insurmountable obstacle for a great many books on other Holocaust-related themes.

There has been far more interest in the fate of Polish and other East European Jews. Of course, their numbers were greater than those of German Jews, both among the victims and survivors. East European survivors have been particularly prominent in the organized production of Holocaust memory. It is also possible that the catastrophe that befell German Jews has almost been taken for granted as a consequence of the teleological view of German-Jewish relations that has predominated in Jewish communities since the late 1940s. Many Jewish readers and audiences in the United States and Israel have embraced Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's theory of a pervasive and long-standing "eliminationist antisemitism" in German culture. By implication, German Jews, the vast majority of whom were not Zionists until the Nazis forced them to be, had systematically deluded themselves on a massive scale since the 19th century. While the example of their persecution could be used as a lesson about the illusory nature of assimilation in an irredeemably hostile diaspora, their actual day-to-day experience under Nazi rule has often been relegated to the margins of Holocaust narratives.

The edited volume of documents under review will help fill this lacuna. It brings together materials reflecting a wide spectrum of Jewish communal activities in Germany from just before the advent of the Nazi regime to 1939. A second volume, covering the period 1939–1943, is in preparation. The chronological division of the volumes follows milestones in the organizational evolution of German Jews in the Nazi era. In 1932, in the face of intensifying antisemitism, an attempt was made to overcome factionalism within the German-Jewish community. The resulting umbrella association, which came to be known as the *Reichsvertretung der deutschen Juden*, encompassed the majority, but not the entirety, of German Jewry. Orthodox Jews refused to join an organization that would inevitably be dominated by the more mainstream Liberal form of Judaism, while Jews who were oriented toward German nationalism objected to the *Reichsvertretung's* acquiescence in a "ghetto mentality" as well as to its toleration of Zionism. These ideological divisions, and efforts to overcome them so as to protect Jewish interests more effectively, constitute one of the volume's major themes. These divisions paled, however, as conditions deteriorated, and the dissenting groups had joined the *Reichsvertretung* by 1939 when, under government pressure, it was transformed into the more centralized *Reichsvereinigung der Juden in Deutschland*. Whereas the present volume is devoted to the material generated by the *Reichsvertretung*, the succeeding volume will document the history of the *Reichsvereinigung*.

That relevant document collections even exist to serve as the basis for these publications is itself a major accomplishment. The actual archives of the *Reichsvertretung* and the *Reichsvereinigung* have, in fact, never been

found. In the 1980s and 1990s an international team of historians and archivists, under the leadership of Israeli scholars Otto Dov Kulka and Esriel Hildesheimer (and with significant financial support from the Volkswagen Foundation), undertook a systematic archival “reconstruction” project. Originals and file copies of documents were tracked down in research collections in Israel, Germany, Britain, and the United States. Some important material was already available in published form. In all, the team assembled a collection of 5,380 documents covering the period from the origin of the Reichsvertretung in 1932 to the dissolution of the Reichsvereinigung in 1943.

The volume under review consists of 120 documents selected by the editors from the much larger reconstructed collection. The editors chose documents they believed to be especially important for understanding the organizational history of the Reichsvertretung, as well as those considered representative of the diverse range of the Reichsvertretung’s activities. The documents in the first category are of undeniable historical significance, as they address such crucial questions as factionalism, leadership, and communal democracy. But the main fascination, and I suspect, the main scholarly utility, of the volume will likely derive from the documents that deal substantively with matters of religion, culture, education, occupational training, emigration, and a host of further concerns that related directly to Jewish daily life.

By choosing to present the documents chronologically, rather than thematically, and by prefacing each document with a useful introduction, the editors have endowed the collection with a pronounced narrative quality. The unfolding story will be familiar to most users of the volume, but nevertheless remains poignant. Although roughly half the Jewish population emigrated, most of those who remained believed that Jews could survive in Germany as a corporately organized community. An omnipresent subtext to many of the documents is the underestimation of the Nazi regime’s determination to rid Germany of its Jews, one way or another. In one document included in the volume, Leo Baeck spoke with deep foreboding about the future, but such prescience was not the norm. The sense of tragedy that emerges from the volume is heightened by our knowledge of the ultimate futility of so many of the hopes and assumptions about the future expressed in the documents.

The programs of the Reichsvertretung proceeded on a dual track. While much energy was devoted to preparing Jews for emigration and a new life elsewhere, a great deal of the practical work of the Reichsvertretung, at least through 1937, focused on adjusting to the new realities of Jewish life in Germany. This duality can be clearly seen in one of the most extensive programs of the Reichsvertretung, that of occupational retraining. (Already in 1934, “vocational transformation” was the single most expensive item in the Reichsvertretung’s budget.) Important elements of this program, most

notably training in the field of agriculture, were geared toward preparing Jews for life in Palestine, and would have been of little use to Jews who remained in Germany. At the same time, however, many Jews who had been purged from a multitude of professions received training in commerce, the one major area in which Jewish economic activity in Germany had been allowed to continue.

A different sort of dual track was also employed in the field of education. Before 1933 only Orthodox and Zionist Jews had emphasized the value of a specifically Jewish education. But as German public schools grew increasingly inhospitable toward Jewish children, the Reichsvertretung sought to enhance and expand the system of Jewish schools. These endeavors are reflected in several interesting documents, which include a list of schoolbooks published by the Schocken house under the sponsorship of the Reichsvertretung, a lesson plan for instruction about Sukkot, a memorandum concerning a disagreement over whether the Sephardic or Ashkenazic pronunciation should be taught, and two statements by Martin Buber about the goals and methods of Jewish adult education. Particularly illuminating is a set of curricular guidelines for Jewish elementary schools issued by the Reichsvertretung's Education Committee, which was chaired until 1938 by the noted scholar Ismar Elbogen. According to these January 1934 guidelines, Jewish schools needed to instill a healthy Jewish consciousness in their pupils, and to this end Jewishness had to be placed at the center of all teaching. Nevertheless, the guidelines did not promote the radical dissimilation that the Nazi regime would have preferred, for they stipulated that the Jewish education system should recognize the "dual essential experience of every Jewish child in Germany," namely "the Jewish and the German," and should acknowledge the important contributions that German and Jewish culture have made to each other. And even while a greater number of hours would be devoted to Hebrew instruction, Jewish schools would continue to emphasize instruction in German language and literature.

As prospects for a Jewish future in Germany grew dimmer, the dual track approach gradually gave way to an emphasis on emigration. In December 1937 the Reichsvertretung set up a central office to plan and coordinate migration, and in 1937 and 1938 more than half of its budget was spent on emigration and occupational retraining, the latter now much more pronouncedly oriented toward Palestine. This shift toward emigration occurred well before Kristallnacht in November 1938, although the violence of that event, and new official anti-Jewish measures that came in its wake, especially in the area of Jewish business and commercial activity, significantly accelerated Jewish efforts to flee. The collection contains several documents describing the events and immediate consequences of Kristallnacht, but the urgent scrambling to flee that took place in 1939 and afterwards lay beyond the chronological scope of this volume.

The editing of this volume is masterful. Each document is preceded by an effective introduction, explanatory footnotes clarify potentially obscure passages, and bibliographical footnotes guide the user to up-to-date published scholarship. The editors have also appended an almost 100-page reference glossary of names and terms, an exhaustive bibliography of publications, and a detailed chronology.

The language barrier may prevent access to non-specialists, but the collection will undoubtedly serve to promote further study of the subject by scholars and students who can read German. Hopefully the improved understanding of the Jewish experience in Nazi Germany made possible by this volume and its successor will ultimately trickle down to a wider readership.

University of Nebraska, Lincoln

ALAN E. STEINWEIS