



The Death of the Shtetl by Yehuda Bauer

Review by: Nancy Sinkoff

Slavic Review, Vol. 70, No. 2 (SUMMER 2011), pp. 441-442

Published by:

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5612/slavicreview.70.2.0441>

Accessed: 20/04/2014 18:30

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Slavic Review*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

which would require supplemental sources on political, social, and economic conditions, but it undoubtedly presents an informative and engaging facet.

PETER THALER
University of Southern Denmark

The Death of the Shtetl. By Yehuda Bauer. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009. xv, 208 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Maps. \$35.00, hard bound.

Using the word *shtetl* (Yiddish for “market town”; *shtetlach*, pl.) as both a metonym for all of Jewish life in the *kresy*, the Polish lands subject to Soviet rule in late August 1939 and occupied by the Nazis in June 1941, and as a specific point of reference on the transformation and annihilation of Jewish life in those regions, *The Death of the Shtetl* redresses the neglect in Holocaust scholarship of the eastern theater of World War II. Yehuda Bauer, the eminent Israeli historian of the Holocaust, rightly notes, as have others before him, that neither the concentration/death camps of Auschwitz/Birkenau nor the resistance in the Warsaw ghetto were paradigmatic of the Jewish experience of Nazism. Most Jews were murdered in the year and a half after the Nazis launched Operation Barbarossa, dying of starvation, in mass graves, on death marches, and by mobile killing squads. Of the roughly 1.3 million Jews who lived in the region’s *shtetlach* in early 1941, only 2 percent survived. *The Death of the Shtetl* is a victims’ history, by which Bauer seeks to rectify the imbalance in a historiography dominated by perpetrator history and German-language sources. He does so by insisting on the historicity and utility of survivor testimonies if used with the same caveats that a historian would apply to written sources.

Five other historiographic claims mark this work: first, the centrality of antisemitic ideology in the Nazi war against the Jews; second, the complexity of the Soviet Union’s role in saving Jewish lives; third, the importance of regional history and topography in understanding the relations between Jews and their neighbors—themselves dependent on how indigenous ethnic groups (Poles, Ukrainians, Belorussians) viewed both the Germans and the Soviets—and how the natural landscape (i.e., the density of the forests in Belorussia compared with East Galicia) aided the chances of survival; fourth, the variety of responses of the Jews and their “leadership” (i.e., the *Judenräte*) to Nazi brutality with an emphasis on *amidah* (Hebrew for “nonviolent resistance”); and fifth, the “unhistorical” conclusion that most survivors from the *kresy* endured through a combination of chance and luck.

Bauer frequently invokes the word *paradox* to explain the complexity of the destruction of the Jews in the eastern borderlands. These paradoxes include the fact that survivor testimonies reveal both positive and negative reviews of the *Judenräte*, memories of happy childhoods among native Ukrainians and Belorussians in spite of their later collaboration in the murder of their neighbors, evidence that bad people (i.e., Nazi sympathizers) did good things, such as feeding Jewish refugees at the risk of death, or that Soviet partisan units both saved and murdered Jews.

Yet another paradox marks the book: Bauer’s own tension between a professional, objective study of history and his subjective identification with the victims. He injects personal commentary throughout the book. Regarding the Sovietization of the *kresy*: “I am deeply worried as a Jew at the ease with which Jewish culture was destroyed by a totalitarian regime with both attractions and existential threats” (49). He also wants to draw lessons from those murderous years: “Since the victims of mass murder will always outnumber the perpetrators most of us are more likely to become victims than perpetrators; therefore the reaction of the victims to the threat that confronted them matters to all of us” (75) and rescuers “enable us to teach about the Holocaust. Without them the Holocaust would be a tale of unrelieved horror, and we cannot teach people, especially young people, a tale of unrelieved horror; the stories will be rejected, and no humane lesson will be learnt” (97).

These interjections are problematic, both because they ignore recent scholarship on Jewish life in the USSR before, during, and after the war that shows the tenacity of Jewish identity in its transformed Soviet form and because they disrupt the otherwise sober tone

of Bauer's important contribution. One would have hoped, too, that the book would at least have nodded to the pioneering work of the first generation of postwar Polish Jewish Holocaust historians, particularly to Philip Friedman, a survivor and founder of the Central Jewish Historical Commission that collected testimonies immediately after the war. The book is marred by odd and inconsistent spellings (Tuczyn; Miedlyrcecz; Pripet and Pripjet; Oineg) that do a disservice to interpreting the region's history, which, as bloody as it was, is the book's ultimate purpose.

NANCY SINKOFF
Rutgers University

Rome's Most Faithful Daughter: The Catholic Church and Independent Poland, 1914–1939. By Neal Pease. Ohio University Press Polish and Polish-American Studies Series. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2009. xx, 288 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Photographs. \$49.95, hard bound. \$26.95, paper.

This ironically titled work by Neal Pease presents a nuanced debunking of a common myth about Poland and highlights an important and often overlooked dimension of interwar Polish history. The key role played by the Catholic Church in bringing down communism in Poland and the lengthy pontificate of a Pole, John Paul II, have helped reinforce the common perception of Poland historically as a devoutly Catholic country whose church stands in harmonious relations with the Vatican. Pease complicates this picture. For example, in the resurrected Poland of the interwar period, far from being a unifying force in the nation, Roman Catholicism not only divided Poles from their ethnic minorities, but also fiercely divided Poles among themselves. Moreover, popes not only opposed Polish attempts at insurrection during the Partition era, but Pius XII urged Poland to accommodate rather than resist Germany in the weeks before the outbreak of World War II, and after Poland fell to Nazi forces, he avoided an explicit condemnation of Germany's attack when expressing sympathy for Polish suffering.

Pease focuses on the shifting relationship of three elite entities in interwar Poland—the bishops, the government, and the Vatican. We see considerable tension between Józef Piłsudski's Sanacja regime, stacked with anticlerical types, and Poland's Catholic Church, whose bishops and especially priests tended toward the right-wing oppositional National Democrats. Interestingly, the Vatican got along much better with Piłsudski than Poland's bishops did. Pease's book also contributes to the controversy over the alleged wartime silence of Pius XII, noting that Pius's failure to speak out explicitly against the Holocaust was preceded by a failure to speak out explicitly against the Nazi invasion and the brutal occupation of Catholic Poland. Avoiding far-fetched claims that Pius was "Hitler's pope," Pease gives an honest presentation and appraisal of Pius's motives for caution regarding Poland—his belief that a Vatican-mediated peace was still possible in Europe, and preferable to war of any kind; his adherence to a rigorous sense of impartiality; and his fear that an open condemnation of Germany could make matters worse for Poles under Nazi occupation.

Among this book's strengths is that it draws generously from Vatican, Polish, and other European diplomatic documents and memoirs. It presents the problem of Polish-Jewish relations without excusing or demonizing the Catholic Church in Poland, which, by stereotyping and disparaging Jews while eschewing violence against them, was, as Pease puts it, willing to get its hands dirty but not bloody. It is also thorough and fair in its coverage of Poland's eastern issues—above all the conflicts between Vatican and Polish policy toward Eastern Christians.

Pease carefully situates his research within the wider Catholic context. He shows how some of the broader trends in interwar European Catholicism played out in a special way in Poland. For example, Catholics across the continent saw communists, Freemasons, and Jews as their enemies, but fear and animosity toward these groups was especially acute in Poland, given that Poland bordered the Soviet Union, had a heavy Freemason contingent in its government, and included the highest concentration of Jews in all of Europe. Especially welcome is Pease's coverage of Poland as seen by its foreign friends, namely the

