

Book Reviews

and finds that their words increasingly took on a sociological trope, she offers no explanation as to how or when the rabbis came to be introduced to these ideas. If sociology became so important to the rabbis, why did seminaries not introduce sociology into their curricula? Or if they did, Berman ought to have analyzed this added element to the training of rabbis. She does not find the ties that bound the rabbis and sociologists to each other. Indeed, the chapters on the sociologists, while interesting, are somewhat of a distraction here. While Wirth, Handlin (not a sociologist), and Glazer may have written in words that dovetailed with those of the rabbis studied here, Berman does not demonstrate that they had the same goals in mind as they wrote their scholarly and semisolarly works. An analytic fit between the chapters on the rabbis and those on the sociologists seems missing. In addition, Berman dismisses the importance of the field of anthropology, which could just as easily have been marshaled by the rabbis, who could have used the writings of the large number of Jewish anthropologists for the same purposes as they, according to Berman, turned instead to sociology.

Hasia Diner  
New York University  
New York, New York

• • •

Sara Bender. *The Jews of Bialystok During World War II and the Holocaust*. Trans. Yaffa Murciano. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2008. xii, 384 pp.  
doi:10.1017/S0364009410000140

In recent years, historical scholarship on the Holocaust has shifted away from questions of Nazi planning and German culpability to a closer examination of the divergent local political and social contexts in which Nazi policies were executed. How did the various social worlds, cultural practices, and political contexts of Hungary, Lithuania, Ukraine, or Poland, for example, have an impact on the Nazi effort to create a *Judenfrei* Third Reich? As demonstrated by Sara Bender's readable, meticulous, and thorough study, *The Jews of Bialystok during World War II and the Holocaust*, we need to pay closer attention to the local context of eastern Poland if we want to paint a full portrait of the responses of Polish Jewry to Nazi occupation. This fluid translation of Bender's 1997 Hebrew monograph by Yaffa Murciano demonstrates the power of a micro-study for the narration of the Holocaust.<sup>1</sup> While Bender frames her study as an effort "to establish a memorial" and "to tell the story" of those who lived, fought, and

1. Sarah Bender, *Mul mayet orev: Yehude Bialistok be-milhamet ha-'olam ha-sheniyah, 1939-1943* [Facing Death: The Jews of Bialystok in the Second World War, 1939-1943] (Tel Aviv: Am 'oved, 1997).

### Book Reviews

perished in the Białystok ghetto (303), she delivers much more than a memorial book; rather, this book raises insightful questions on the comparative analysis of ghetto life in Nazi-occupied Poland.

Mining diaries, oral interviews, and archival collections in Israel and Warsaw, Bender traces the dynamics shaping Jewish communal life in Białystok between 1939 and 1943. Undergirding her narrative is an effort to grapple with the key questions shaping the study of the Holocaust in Poland: How can we explain the actions of the Jewish communal leadership during the war? Did Jewish communal leaders actually prolong the lives of Jews by fulfilling Nazi labor needs? How did the vibrant world of Jewish political parties and youth groups in interwar Poland organize themselves to confront the challenges of Soviet and Nazi occupation? While Białystok Jewry during World War II is Bender's main interest, she opens her discussion with two chapters that provide a brief history of the city, beginning in 1320 and ending in 1939. Focusing on Jews' involvement in this city's economy, politics, and civic institutions, Bender notes that from the nineteenth century, Jews "constituted a majority in Białystok," leaving "an indelible imprint on the city" on this city of 60,000 residents by 1897 (17). Describing Białystok as a "city more Jewish than Polish," she does not, however, fully interrogate how Jews' prewar demographic, cultural, and economic dominance of this northeastern Polish city may have shaped their responses to both Soviet and Nazi occupation (48). Indeed, Bender composed her original Hebrew monograph on Białystok long before the publication of Samuel Kassow's *Who Will Write Our History? Emanuel Ringelblum, the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Oyneg Shabes Archive*, but her work will be compared to that micro-study of Warsaw Jewry, its ghetto, and its noted historian, Emanuel Ringelblum. While she clearly conveys the ways in which Białystok's Jews were not passive, faceless victims during the war, she does not connect the ways in which the vibrancy and diversity of Białystok Jewry before 1939 laid the foundations for its distinctive response to Soviet and Nazi rule.

What impact, if any, did Soviet occupation have on the execution of the Final Solution in eastern Poland? This question shapes the inner core of this monograph. Looking at a city with one of the largest Jewish populations in Soviet Poland, Bender argues that "the Stalinist Soviet administration ... [may have] dealt a mortal blow to Jewish life in Białystok," but, "superficially at least, Jewish life in the city carried on as normal" (298). Indeed, Jewish factory owners adjusted to Soviet demands, and some Jews even embraced the opportunities offered them by the Communist Party. This normalcy, however, must be seen within the context of World War II. With an estimated 200,000 Jewish refugees flooding into this city between 1939 and 1941, Jews in Soviet Białystok had knowledge of what had befallen their coreligionists to the west. Moreover, most were aware of the thousands of Jews murdered as Nazi forces advanced eastward beginning in June 1941. Despite knowledge of these atrocities, Jewish communal leaders, most notably Ephraim Barash, head of the Judenrat, and the older generation in the ghetto decided "to bury their heads in the sand," as Bender criticizes, believing that Jewish slave labor and avoidance of armed resistance could convince local Nazi commanders to keep Białystok's Jews alive (297). The younger generation in the ghetto, as represented and led by Mordecai Tenenbaum,

## Book Reviews

believed that death was inevitable and resistance was the only honorable response to Nazi rule. A rebellion was planned with the aid of a group of young fiery Zionists from Vilna who smuggled themselves into the ghetto. Although in the end, Bialystok's ghetto rebellion failed, the ghetto was unique in "the steadfast refusal of the Jewish police to participate in gathering people for deportations and [in] the mass hiding undertaken by the residents of the ghetto in response to rumors of impending deportations" (203).

Bender's close analysis of the inner workings of Bialystok's Judenrat, Bialystok's Jewish community response to Nazi terror, and Bialystok's failed ghetto rebellion in August 1943 demonstrates the need for more comparative analysis of ghetto life in Poland. Indeed, one of this work's greatest contributions to the field is its direct comparison of ghetto leaders and the larger ghetto experiences in Warsaw, Vilna, and Łódź at the end of the book, which highlights the ways in which Bialystok was distinct. In the vigorous academic industry that has grown around the study of Jewish life and resistance in the Nazi ghetto, the general portrait of the daily struggles Jews faced is based primarily on materials derived from the ghettos of Warsaw and Łódź, two ghettos established in Nazi-occupied western Poland in 1940. But for those living in eastern Poland, the Soviet annexation in 1939 played a crucial yet rarely discussed role in honing Jewish survival strategies and reshaping the Jewish community's discussion of how to respond to Nazi policies after 1941. Through this powerful micro-study of the city of Bialystok's Jews, Bender demonstrates why it is critical for scholars not to elide World War II and the Holocaust when assessing the Jewish situation in eastern Poland. Marshaling important and largely untapped oral histories and archival documentation, Bender clearly illustrates the ways in which Bialystok's Jews responded to the distinct challenges of Soviet and Nazi rule as their local needs collided with larger national and international agendas. In the end, the struggle of Bialystok's Jews to survive failed—only a handful of Jews were left in the city in July 1944 when Soviet forces entered. But as Bender emphatically asserts in her conclusion, we "cannot forget them," for both their successes and failures deserve greater attention if we want to fully understand the divergent experiences of Polish Jewry during World War II.

Rebecca Kobrin  
Columbia University  
New York, New York