



Esriel Hildesheimer. *Jüdische Selbstverwaltung unter dem NS-Regime: Der Existenzkampf der Reichsvertretung und Reichsvereinigung der Juden in Deutschland.* Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994. 258 pp. DM 158,00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-16-745103-8.



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Esriel Hildesheimer's book is the first comprehensive study of the only official, central, representative bodies in German Jewish history. It considers the history of the *Reichsvertretung der deutschen Juden* (after 1935, the *Reichsvertretung der Juden in Deutschland*) from 1933 to 1939, and of its successor, the *Reichsvereinigung der Juden in Deutschland* between 1939 and 1943. As such, it is an enormously valuable addition to what has always been a decidedly eclectic literature on German-Jewish history during the Third Reich. The book is more than merely a history of the two organizations; it also serves as a useful history of the Jewish community in Germany during the Third Reich, something that no single volume, perhaps with the exception of Wolfgang Benz's edited collection *Die Juden in Deutschland 1933-1945: Leben unter nationalsozialistischer Herrschaft* (1989), has attempted to date.

That scholars have shied away from writing a comprehensive history of German Jewry during the Third Reich is not surprising. The archives of the various German Jewish organizations suffered mixed fates between the *Kristallnacht* pogrom in November 1938 and the end of World War II, leaving the documentary evidence scattered and uneven. Much was destroyed, either by Jewish organizations themselves, by the police, or as a result of allied bombing. A considerable amount was captured by the Red Army and shipped off to Moscow, to be found and

examined there or in the former DDR only fairly recently. The records that did survive reveal a strict *Ueberwachung* by the police, a reality that often compromised their reliability. Moreover, police records rather than the records of the Jewish organizations themselves have had to be used as documentary sources on Jewish life in Germany after 1933. These records, although valuable, are not without their own methodological problems.

While only scattered remnants of the archives of the *Zionistische Vereinigung fuer Deutschland* have been found in Germany, Israel, the former Soviet Union and the United States, a considerable amount of material from the largest Jewish political organization in Germany, the *Central-Verein deutscher Staatsbuenger juedischen Glaubens*, has recently been uncovered at the "Special Archives" (Osobyi) in Moscow. Differences such as this have also been characteristic of the *Reichsvertretung* and the *Reichsvereinigung*. Although Esriel Hildesheimer does an outstanding job of recreating the histories of both organizations and, through them, the tragic fate of German Jewry under National Socialism, his treatment of the two is understandably uneven. The records of the *Reichsvertretung* were largely destroyed, with thinly scattered remnants surviving in Israeli, Russian and German archives, and in some Jewish archives in the United States. On the other hand, a significant portion of the

records of the *Reichsvereinigung* did survive at what was the *Zentrales Staatsarchiv* of the former German Democratic Republic in Potsdam, now a branch of the *Bundesarchiv*.

Before 1933, there had never existed a single, official, representative Jewish organization in Germany vis-a-vis the state. In general, and in spite of periodic calls for the establishment of such a body from some prominent Jews during the Second Reich and the Weimar Republic, German Jews had traditionally shied away from any sort of "oeffentliche Rechtsstellung" that might have appeared to set them apart in German society. Nazi electoral successes beginning in September 1930, culminating in Hitler's subsequent appointment as Chancellor in January 1933, compelled them to overcome many of their traditional differences on this issue, and to form some sort of central organization to represent existing Jewish organizations and institutions in a Nazi state. This process, perhaps more than anything else, reflected the realization among the diverse Jewish organizations that conditions were about to change in a substantially negative way for all Jews in Germany. The initial effort resulted in the formation of the *Reichsvertretung der juedischen Landesverbaende* in January 1932. A collection of *Synagogengemeinden* from various *Laender*, this early *Reichsvertretung* obtained neither the full support and cooperation of the major Jewish organizations nor the necessary recognition of Nazi authorities after January 1933 that might have made it effective.

Anti-Jewish legislation and action in the spring and summer of 1933 brought more and more Jews and Jewish organizations to the realization that a truly effective, central organization representing all German Jews was needed. Such a body might be able to soften the blow of Nazi Jewish policy and to preserve some sort of viable existence for Jews under the new conditions of the Third Reich, at least until they were able to emigrate. In September 1933, with the support of the three most important Jewish organizations (The *Central-Verein deutscher Staatsbuenger juedischen Glaubens*, the *Zionistische Vereinigung fuer Deutschland*, and the *Reichsbund juedischer Frontsoldaten*) the *Reichsvertretung der deutschen Juden* was established on the initiative of Jewish leaders. It was a voluntary organization, a federation of major Jewish organizations that attempted to represent German Jews to state and Party authorities in the Third Reich.

The author goes to considerable lengths to establish that the regime took the *Reichsvertretung* seriously, despite the fact that it never formally recognized it as a legal

body or negotiating partner. He demonstrates how the *Reichsvertretung* "periodically tried to influence the policies of the regime while carefully avoiding any position on its policies. He also shows how it attempted to blunt some of the excesses of Nazi anti-Jewish propaganda in publications such as *Der Stuermer*, and to come to the aid of Jews under arrest or suffering from anti-Jewish boycotts. But one comes away from Hildesheimer's treatment of the *Reichsvertretung* with a sense that it is incomplete. Did the organization's on-going contact with the authorities, its *de facto* if not *de jure* recognition, mean that it was effective in helping the Jewish population? To what extent was the relationship a supplement to or entirely distinct from the regime's relations with the individual Jewish organizations that made up the *Reichsvertretung*? Were ideologically opposed organizations such as the *Central-Verein* and the *Reichsbund juedischer Frontsoldaten* on the one hand, and the Zionists on the other, able to overcome their traditional differences and work together effectively? As Hildesheimer himself attests, the documentation on the *Reichsvertretung* is quite meager indeed, and he has done an admirable job given the sources available to him. However, there may very well be a significant new source, namely the files of the *Central-Verein* housed in the "Special Archives" in Moscow, a substantial part of which is now available on microfilm at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. I have examined some these records and have found pertinent material originating from, or directed to, the *Reichsvertretung*..

Hildesheimer's treatment of the *Reichsvereinigung* is much more comprehensive, one that benefits from the rich collection of the organization's records that survived the war, and were first made available by the DDR to the Israeli historian Otto Dov Kulka during the 1960's. The collection is strong for the years 1939-1941, but rather thin for the years 1941-1943. The author was able to supplement this primary source with numerous other primary materials from archives in Israel, Germany, and the United States. He attempts to refute earlier arguments that the *Reichsvereinigung* was an exclusively Nazi creation, simply a vehicle for using Jews to promote the regime's Jewish policy after 1939. While unable to fill in all of the blanks about the inception of the *Reichsvereinigung* in 1939, including the exact date of its establishment, the author does demonstrate that leaders from the *Reichsvertretung* began to move toward an entirely different kind of central body in 1938, a good six months before Nazi authorities declared a need for a compulsory organization that represented all individual Jews in Germany. With the dissolution of all Jewish organizations

of a political nature late in 1938, the *Reichsvertretung* had become irrelevant since it was a voluntary federation of precisely those and other Jewish organizations.

Notwithstanding the foresight of some of the leaders of the old *Reichsvertretung*, it is still difficult to escape the reality that the *Reichsvereinigung* ultimately came into existence early in 1939 because the authorities desired the creation of such an organization. And, given the realities of Jewish life in Germany in 1939, that is nothing of which to be ashamed. In spite of the dramatic and often heroic initiatives and activities of Jewish organizations and individuals in Germany, they remained the isolated and acutely vulnerable objects of policy in a police state. As such, even initiatives by Jews were often reactions to situations they otherwise would not have intended.

The radicalization of the methods if not the aims of Nazi Jewish policy in 1938 and 1939 demanded the establishment of an organization such as the *Reichsvereinigung*. The regime's goal remained emigration, but the methods, perfected by Eichmann's *Zentralstelle fuer juedische Auswanderung* in Vienna, would be even harsher; the quasi-legal and essentially voluntary emigration policies between 1933 and 1938 gave way to the brutality of deportation. The *Reichsvereinigung* would be the link between a new *Reichszentrale fuer juedische Auswanderung*, modeled on Eichmann's operation and established in Berlin early in 1939, and what was left of German Jewry in the *Altreich*. Its tasks were centered on Jewish emigration, on the education, re-education and occupational re-training that supported it, and on Jewish social welfare programs for a dwindling and increasingly impoverished Jewish community, at least through 1941. The author's meticulous treatment of these tasks is outstanding, a much-needed, original contribution to the literature. He presents in detail the work of the *Reichsvereinigung*, its efforts to relieve Jewish suffering and to get as many Jews as possible out of Germany before the ban on Jewish emigration in the Fall of 1941.

Certainly no Jewish organization in the Third Reich

could easily avoid being manipulated by the regime to further its anti-Jewish policies, be it emigration, deportation or mass murder. In this regard, the *Reichsvereinigung* was no different from other Jewish organizations. Since both the *Reichsvertretung* and the *Reichsvereinigung* at times were able to blunt the full force of the Nazi onslaught against the Jews by aiding in the emigration process, or providing social or cultural support, they served a positive and noble purpose. Beyond that, Hildesheimer also appears determined to establish their legitimacy on the basis of their ability to convince the authorities of their usefulness. In his view, their success in helping German Jews also must be judged on their effectiveness as intermediaries with the regime. He concludes that the "Reichs- vertretung nicht nur de facto anerkannt war, sondern dass verschiedene Behoerden sie und ihre Taetigkeit sehr wohl beruecksichtigten...." With regard to the *Reichsvereinigung*, he concludes that it was not merely "ein Werkzeug in den Haenden des Regimes....", but rather it was the product as much of Jewish initiative as of the regime's, and that it "nicht selten gewisse Erfolge gegenueber dem Regime zu verzeichnen hatte...."

Hildesheimer's study clearly presents German Jews in the Third Reich not in the traditional negative role as passive victims, but rather as self-help activists working for their own survival. To be sure, both organizations were used by the regime in the pursuit of its aims; but they too were able to use the regime to some extent in an effort to lessen the burdens on the Jewish community. This book is an outstanding scholarly contribution in that it offers the reader the most comprehensive histories of the *Reichsvertretung* and the *Reichsvereinigung* to date. Although it does not claim to be the much needed comprehensive history of German Jews under Nazi rule, it is an important step in that direction.

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