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Yehuda Bauer. *The Death of the Shtetl.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009. viii + 208 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-15209-8.

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Shtetl Jews in the Holocaust

This is a big little book, short on pages but long on intriguing questions and thought-provoking suggestions. The book's insights flow from the author's research and teaching over more than four decades. Here they have been expressed compactly, in summary fashion; for the full empirical infrastructure upon which they are based readers must turn to his 2001 volume, *Rethinking the Holocaust*, along with five detailed articles published between 2003 and 2007. To be sure, that infrastructure does not exhaust the full range of source material that might be brought to bear upon the author's subject, but it offers more than a sufficient basis from which to propose the hypotheses that lie at the book's core.

The book rests upon the premise that understandings of Jewish behavior during the Holocaust must take into account the experience of Jews in thousands of provincial towns commonly called *shtetlekh* (the plural of *shtetl*, Yiddish for âsmall townâ). In order to fulfill that desideratum Bauer has examined the *shtetlekh* of a region often referred to as the *kresy*–ethnically mixed areas to the east of the Polish heartland that were part of the Second Polish Republic and annexed to the Soviet Union in 1939. Today those areas form the western parts of Ukraine and Belarus. He has studied eleven *kresy* communities in detail: BuczaczÃ³w, KosÃ³w, and ZborÃ³w in East Galicia; Krzemieniec, Rokitno, and Sarny in Volhynia; and Baranowicze, BrzeÅÄ, Dereczin, Kurzeniec, and NowogrÃ³dek in Belorussia. *Death of a Shtetl* is based primarily on those studies, supplemented by the research of others on BolechÃ³w, BrzeÅ¼any, CzortkÃ³w, Lachwa, and Tuczyn.

Bauer seeks to ascertain the degree to which the Jewish inhabitants of these *shtetlekh* displayed a pattern of behavior under Nazi impact commonly known in Hebrew as *amidah*–literally âdurabilityâ or, as Bauer renders the term, âstanding up againstâ (p. 7). As he understands the term, *amidah* encompasses âunarmed and armed reactions intended to keep the community and its components going and to stand up to the existential threat posed by the German regimeâ (p. 7). Earlier, in *Rethinking the Holocaust*, he enumerated certain specific activities comprehended by the rubric: âsmuggling

food into ghettos; mutual self-sacrifice within the family to avoid starvation or worse; cultural, educational, religious, and political activities taken to strengthen morale; the work of doctors, nurses, and educators to consciously maintain health and moral fiber to enable individual and group survival; and, of course, armed rebellion or the use of force (with bare hands or with 'cold' weapons) against the Germans and their collaborators.â[1] Clearly *amidah* requires, in Bauer's view, âa measure of social cohesion,â a situation in which individuals assume responsibility for the well-being of larger social units such as family and community (p. 6). In the thousands of diaries, memoirs, testimonies, trial records, and contemporary reports by perpetrators, victims, and bystanders that he examined in the course of his research, he sought first of all indicators of such cohesion and the manner it which it manifested itself in different places and at different stages in the German murder campaign.

What he found was marked heterogeneity. Not only did Jewish conduct in the *shtetlekh* of the *kresy* bear but little resemblance to the more familiar responses to German occupation displayed in larger towns and cities elsewhere in eastern Europe, it varied widely from *shtetl* to *shtetl* within the same region. The two Belorussian towns of Baranowicze and NowogrÃ³dek, for example, displayed strikingly different behavioral patterns: Baranowicze featured âa well-organized, sustained effort at maintaining the community as suchâ in which leadership groups, including the *Judenrat*, enjoyed broad popular support, whereas âin NowogrÃ³dek ... there was very little social cohesionâ (p. 165), despite the efforts of *Judenrat* head Henryk Ciechanowski âto defend his communityâ (p. 86), including by illegally bringing a cow into the ghetto in order to supply residents with milk and meat (an act for which he paid with his life). A similar contrast characterized the neighboring Volhynian *shtetlekh* of Tuczyn, where the *Judenrat* leader presided over efforts to feed the ghetto and ultimately tried to organize mass escape, and Krzemieniec, which Bauer describes as marked by âatomization, disintegration of the community, [and] almost no *amidah*â (p. 162). Yet for all these differences, reactions in the *kresy* can, according to Bauer, generally be distinguished from the large ghettos of central Poland and Lithuania: whereas the latter tended more often than the former to develop ramified structures for unarmed *amidah*, âarmed resistance was more prevalent in the *kresy* than elsewhereâ (p. 8).

Much of the book ponders possible explanations for such variation. Bauer considers three factors that suggest themselves most immediately: the nature of the occupation regime in each location; the accessibility of forests and partisan units that might have facilitated flight or armed resistance; and the attitudes of the local Ukrainian, Belorussian, and Polish populations. He finds that all three account only partially for it. Differences in German policy and practice in the *shtetlekh* surveyed were minor, and detectable nuances did not correlate with local peculiarities of Jewish behavior. In some cases the proximity of forests appears to have undermined social cohesion by encouraging ghetto residents to think about individual escape, whereas in others it spurred organized communal rebellions. Frequently the reaction patterns of Jewish communities were determined before a significant Soviet partisan movement formed in their vicinity. And although local populations tended on the whole to be less hostile in Belorussia than in Ukraine, no similar north-south division in the level or type of *amidah* was observed.

Contemplating the failure of those hypotheses, Bauer turns to factors less susceptible of historical analysis: âcharacter, chance, and luckâ (p. 163). In the end, he concludes, what determined most how a particular *shtetl* confronted impending doom was the specific individual who led the community. That task usually fell to reluctant recipients appointed by a local German commander, frequently through a spur-of-the-moment decision not informed by familiarity with the community or the individual appointed. If the community was lucky, the chance selection fell upon a person of strong character capable of parlaying his leadership role into a vehicle for organizing *amidah*. But even this generalization, Bauer suggests, is difficult to sustain, and his evidence bears him out. Elsewhere he ventures yet another hypothesis, only to recognize that it, too, is imperfect:

"Amidah was rudimentary at best, but it did exist in some places–in others it did not. The reasons ... are fairly evident. Where there was starvation, that alone was enough to check most Amidah work: hunger inhibits social activities.... [M]uch of the leadership and the intelligentsia and many of the young men were murdered at the very beginning of the German occupation.... Later, forced labor sapped the strength of the remaining Jews.... Under these conditions, Amidah was out of the question. And yet it did happen, sometimes sporadically, sometimes effectively, in a number of places" (pp. 79-80).

Hence, Bauer infers, what ultimately requires explanation is how any *amidah* happened at all. The question is especially difficult when asked about the *kresy*, for in that region two years of Soviet occupation effec-

tively destroyed prewar Jewish communal structures before the Germans appeared on the scene. Bauer ponders how the Soviet authorities managed to dismantle long-standing patterns of social organization with such speed, so that âa rich ethnic and religious tradition, which had developed into a distinct culture over many centuries, collapsed like a house of cards within a few weeks of the establishment of totalitarian rule,â without even âtoken civil resistanceâ (p. 43). He concludes that âthe destruction of the specifically Jewish culture and of the organizations that gave expression to it was made possible in part because the regime as such did not threaten individuals, provided they did not clash with it in some way or were not denounced.â In fact, he notes, the Soviets âpromised to improve the situation of individual Jews considerably.â âPeople gave up their old ways, agreed quietly with the dismantling of the communal life they had been accustomed to, and perhaps gave up their belief systems because of these new prospectsâ (p. 47). And yet here, too, he is uneasy with his explanation, for he is dismayed by the ease with which âthe cohesion and culture of a society can be destroyed by a totalitarian regime when it uses not just the stick but also the carrotâ (p. 154). Jewish tradition proved ineffective against such a combination–a realization that Bauer finds unsettling both as a Jew and as a human being.

That social cohesion could develop at all in a society that the Soviets had effectively atomized is remarkable for Bauer, and in the end he cannot explain it. He does not regard *amidah* under German occupation as a reassertion of a Jewish culture temporarily suspended during the Soviet interval: on the contrary, he âfound no proof that Jewish traditions had any major impact on Jewish reactions to the genocide–either in the shtetlach or anywhere elseâ (p. 158). Hence many of the background variables that distinguished Jews in the *kresy* from Jews elsewhere within Nazi-occupied eastern Europe–the region's relative poverty, or the weakness of both orthodoxy and socialism and the strength of Zionism in comparison with other areas, for example–appear to him irrelevant in explaining the local peculiarities of Jewish behavior in the face of impending doom. He is thus forced to fall back on explanations rooted in universal human psychology. âWhen we compare Jews with victims of other genocides,â he notes, âwe find pretty much the same reactions: disorientation, despair, individual and group heroism, collaboration with the perpetrators in the hope of surviving, family cohesion–but also occasional abandonment of children or parents–and resistance, chiefly armed resistanceâ (p. 158). Yet he also insists that unarmed *amidah* was a specifically Jewish response to genocide. If it did not arise out of Jewish traditions and history, what was its source? Bauer has no answer.

Readers searching for a neat solution to a historical problem are thus liable to find the book disappointing. But Bauer has learned what the best historians come to understand with experience–that life is messy and human affairs complex, and the difficulty of making sense of those complexities is magnified sevenfold when contemplating past events of which only the faintest tangible residues have survived. He is thus justifiably cautious and equivocal. Perhaps had he waited until scholars had studied more communities (the *kresy* alone were home to more than five hundred *shtetlekh* for which significant testimonial evidence is extant) and applied more sophisticated, computer-assisted tools of data analysis than he was able to employ he might have produced a work less marked by uncertainty and hedged bets. But analyzing any mass of data in the absence of a set of testable hypotheses tends to produce only random noise. Bauer's great achievement is that he has managed to cut through the noise to the point where such working hypotheses can be proposed and analytical techniques refined. By setting forth his conclusions, no matter how tentative, Bauer has created an indispensable exordium for elucidating Jewish behavior under Nazi impact. Those who take up the matter in the future will long be in his debt.

Note

[1]. Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), 120.