

Denisa Neštáková, Katja Grosse-Sommer, Borbála Klacsmann, and Jakub Drábik (eds.), *If This Is a Woman: Studies on Women and Gender in the Holocaust* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2021). ISBN: 978-16-446-9710-8, \$119, 292 pp.

Almost a quarter century after the publication of Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman's seminal volume *Women in the Holocaust*,¹ a new collection of scholarship centering gendered experiences of the Holocaust finally appeared in 2021 with the publication of Neštáková, Grosse-Sommer, Klacsmann, and Drábik's edited volume *If This Is a Woman: Studies on Women and Gender in the Holocaust*. Much like its predecessor, this recent publication is the result of a conference, held at Comenius University Bratislava in 2019. Unlike Weitzman and Ofer's work, however, this newest volume offers a unique focus on Eastern Europe and features approaches to gendered experiences of the Holocaust that are far more theoretically and methodologically rigorous. Another noteworthy departure is the prominence of scholarship from early career researchers, a decidedly welcome aspect of a book covering an important (and occasionally controversial) field where much of the innovative scholarship is being developed by this younger generation of scholars. Despite the important merits of the book, there are unfortunately significant editing mistakes and a noticeable absence of research on perpetration from a gendered perspective, the latter of which is sorely missed in a volume with an otherwise broad scope.

While the activist tenor of the foreword and introduction might give pause to some of the more classically minded scholars in the field, the call to "look beyond heteronormative male experience [and] challenge the dominant—that is, patriarchal—historical narrative" grounds the contributions in contemporary societal discourse (xv). The importance of cultural historical approaches to understanding present society has long been proven and this relationship lends itself well to the theoretical and methodological contributions presented in this volume. Indeed, the theoretical rigor of the work belies the genuine embeddedness of the authors within the current trends and debates within Holocaust historiography and at the very least, should invalidate any "dismissive comments" from fellow scholars disparaging the importance or relevance of a gendered perspective of the Holocaust (xv).

As is the case with any edited volume, some contributions stand out in making a particularly strong impact. The foremost of these in *If This Is a Woman* is Natalia Aleksiu's chapter "A Familial Turn in Holocaust Scholarship?"—a

1 Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (eds.), *Women in the Holocaust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

contribution that I anticipate will remain an exemplary work to any scholar venturing into the field of gendered studies of the Holocaust or even micro-historical studies of the Holocaust. Aleksium delivers a well-balanced and thoroughly convincing argument for a familial focus on the victims of mass violence. Such a focus centers “the family as a crucial category of analysis” and utilizes familial dynamics and interpersonal networks to better understand the experiences of Jewish victims of the Holocaust as well as non-Jewish bystanders and perpetrators (21). Aleksium’s argument that “concentrating on families introduces a change of paradigm in historical scholarship” strikes at the very core of this volume to deliver a distinct call for a new direction in Holocaust research (40).

Aleksium’s contribution encapsulates another of the more valuable aspects of this collection, namely its spotlight on novel micro-historical studies. Almost all the chapters in the volume utilize the micro-historical method to inform their theoretical engagement with gendered experiences of the Holocaust. As such, *If This Is a Woman* is a veritable repository of micro-historical research, which further magnifies its value as a methodological exemplar for future Holocaust research. The third chapter, Agnes Laba’s “Masculinities under Occupation,” is a prime example of the quality of micro-historical research offered in the volume. Far from out of place in a book with an explicit emphasis on women’s experiences in the Holocaust, Laba’s research presents a fascinating examination of gender that fully legitimizes the volume’s arguments as to the intersectional nature of its contributions (xii). As a result, the book is not simply valuable to those scholars looking for chapters relevant to their own specific localities of interest, but also to scholars searching for examples of theoretical rigor at the micro-scale.

The main outcome of this fortuitous micro-historical focus is the agency each scholar grants to their subjects. Reorienting these historical actors as the “locus of agency” invites a reconceptualization of the current “master narrative” of the Holocaust. This narrative reframing is further strengthened by the gendered perspective dismantling other dominant theoretical frameworks. Sections four and five of *If This Is a Woman*, focusing on women in positions of community leadership and women in the resistance respectively, illustrate this process particularly well. Anna Nedlin-Lehrer’s chapter on women and their socialization in the Zionist youth organization Dror is theoretically rich and offers a truly unique exploration not only in the field of Holocaust Studies, but also in the study of gender in situations of mass violence more broadly through Nedlin-Lehrer’s utilization of the concept of “egalitarian praxis,” which describes the Dror members’ active efforts to retain gender equality as an ideal during the war (125).

Marta Havryshko's article "Listening to Women's Voices" represents another valuable contribution that this collection makes to the field—the rich, complex, and often previously undiscovered or underutilized source material upon which the scholars base their research. Havryshko, in particular, draws on the testimonies given during the postwar Soviet prosecutions of war criminals. She handles her three chosen trials masterfully and makes a compelling theoretical case for the utility of such sources in micro-historical studies of gendered experiences of the Holocaust.

The methodological and theoretical precision of the volume differs between chapters, which is an unfortunate shortcoming. In several contributions, the theoretical burden of proof established by the introduction was not satisfied. As a result, the strength of the overall volume wavered and the reader is occasionally left wanting more of a number of topics. Eva Škorvanková's article "New Slovak Woman: The Feminine Ideal in the Authoritarian Regime of the Slovak State, 1939–1945" is one example. After a very theoretically strong introduction incorporating Foucault's biopower and theories of constructivist gender, the study itself, although descriptively rich, lacks any theoretical exploration of the concepts introduced in the introduction. Florian Zabransky's article on "Male Jewish Teenage Sexuality in Nazi Germany" displays the same theoretical failings as Škorvanková's. Zabransky places a heavy theoretical onus on himself in the introduction to what, in the end, is a very short written work. Accordingly, Zabransky does not begin the actual analysis of the three central testimonies until over halfway through the article. As a result, the study remains primarily expositional and does not reach its full potential or the expected analysis promised in the introduction. Even though space limitations might have impeded some authors from incorporating such theoretical arguments, through their exclusion the introductions become misleading. More space to develop the theoretical argument alongside a detailed analysis of the sources might have greatly improved the articles and, subsequently, corrected the qualitative imbalance of the volume.

As mentioned above, the two major weaknesses of this volume are first, the lack of focus on women perpetrators, and second, the abundance of typographical and formatting errors found throughout most of the articles. Given the incredible development in scholarship on female perpetrators of genocide by scholars such as Sara Brown in her article "Female Perpetrators of the Rwandan Genocide,"² it is a missed opportunity that such a groundbreaking theoretical examination of gendered experiences in the Holocaust was not

2 Sara E. Brown, "Female Perpetrators of the Rwandan Genocide," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 16(3) (2014), 448–469, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2013.788806>.

included in this context. As for the second issue of editorial shortcomings, for an endeavor explicitly centering early career, Eastern European scholars this careless editing is particularly disappointing. Indeed, such oversight does a disservice to scholars whose work might already be viewed more harshly due to their marginalized position in mainstream academia.

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