

REZENSION

Michaela Christ: Die Dynamik des Tötens: Die Ermordung der Juden in Berditschew. Ukraine 1941-1944

Michaela Christ: Die Dynamik des Tötens: Die Ermordung der Juden in Berditschew. Ukraine 1941-1944. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 352 S., ISBN: 978-3-596-19185-7, EUR 14,99.

Reviewed by Wendy Lower.

In this insightful micro-study of mass violence, Michaela Christ focuses on the town of Berdychiv, Ukraine. Berdychiv was a major center of Jewish culture and life that ceased to exist after September 15, 1941 when one-third of the Jewish population was shot. Local studies have been a major historical approach and especially in Holocaust studies. It has become quite common for a doctoral student to complete a thesis on a European town during the 1930s and 1940s, because the documentation can be substantial and the time-period and geographic boundaries can be neatly marked off by the cataclysmic events of 1933-1945. The challenge then arises when one decides what themes one will extract from the empirical material and theoretically how one will make one's case study more significant than any other.

Christ, who has a background in cultural studies, pedagogy and political science, and mostly as a sociologist, offers a case study that is highly original in its interdisciplinary approach. She casts new light on the Holocaust in Berdychiv by drawing on multiple primary sources and a rich array of scholarship by Harald Welzer, Alf Luedtke, Heinrich Popitz, Michel Foucault, Frank Golczewski and others. Her study engages larger conceptual and theoretical questions of violent behavior, social structures, agency and their inter-dynamics. She looks at the many facets of the mass murder with the eyes of a historian, anthropologist and sociologist. Above all she argues that the mass murder of Jews in Berdychiv, as it is known today as the "Holocaust by bullets" in the "Bloodlands" transformed the entire community in ways that historians have not detected or glossed over as mundane or self-evident. What happens when a thriving Jewish community with dozens of synagogues, prayer houses, industries, and Hassidic traditions, is actually destroyed and then erased from the map?

Christ explains that the biological experience of violence, both by those who felt its pain and by those who inflicted it, must be understood in more depth. The settings of violence are also key. The perception of the natural environment and the constructed spaces where the violence occurred, figures more in history than has been appreciated to date. The terrains that Christ explores are the Jewish ghetto, the mass murder site (e.g. the shootings at the airfield just outside of Berdychiv) and the

public buildings in town that defined but also segregated the town's population of Jews, Ukrainians, Russians, Germans and Poles. Her study is based mostly on German and English sources including Nazi wartime documentation, and postwar eyewitness testimonies of Germans, Jews, and Ukrainians. As for published sources, she relies heavily on secondary material to fill in basic historical information.

The book is presented in four parts: 1) Introduction; 2) Research Emphases; 3) The Dynamic of Killing; and 4) Conclusions. The third section, which is the strongest part, makes up about eighty percent of the book. In her opening section on methodology, Christ offers a useful and thoughtful analysis of the limitations and possibilities inherent in writing local studies that have to rely on scattered, incomplete source material. Rather than dismissing ego documents and oral histories as overly biased, Christ values them for their subjectivity. One cannot understand the physical and emotional experience of suffering, its transformative resonance, and postwar perceptions of it (all subthemes of her study) without closely reading the testimonies from the *Shoah Visual History Foundation*, which she utilizes.

Christ is also critical of accounts that refrain from studying the atrocities of the Holocaust. Assuming that the event is "indescribable" has hindered attempts to ascertain more concretely what can be described and what cannot be represented (S. 27). This is a key distinction for grounding Christ's work, which offers a thick description of the massacres. There is vast literature on this issue of what can or should be represented, which draws on ethical, philosophical, moral, cultural and empirical themes (by Susan Sontag, Saul Friedlander, Dan Stone, Berel Lang, among others). Christ might have presented a more rigorous summary of these debates to launch her own approach, especially as her text has the potential to reach a broad audience. Christ's assessment of the "spatial turn" and research on the body as the basis of her analysis is more thorough. The Nazi colonial genocide in the East, centered in large part in Ukraine and in places such as Berdychiv, rested on two ideological tenets of race and space. Yet the manner in which this ideology permeated local events, down to the killing sites, has not been analyzed much, and Christ's study points us in that direction.

Christ argues that the field of violence studies is underdeveloped mainly because the act of violence was assumed to be self-evident. Yet, however, discomfiting, studying the brutalities, such as the dismembering of sexual organs, reveals important symbolic meanings and can also be understood as part of the multiple causes and motives that drive violent behavior of individuals and groups. Gruesome acts contained ritual forms and were expressions of power by ordinary people. As anthropologists have established and Christ reminds us, violence has always been a normal manner of expression. Christ also argues that violence is "immer beides: produktiv und destruktiv. Im gleichen Moment, in dem das eine zerstört wird, entsteht etwas anderes" (S. 34, "always both: productive and destructive. In the same moment when something is destroyed, something else arises." Translated by W.L.) Yet by the end of her study, it is clear what was destroyed, but less so what was created. Can this dialectical logic be applied to the Holocaust, and in a manner that

accounts for the experiences of all engaged in this history – the victims, perpetrators and bystanders?

Besides the provocative analysis, this book offers a powerful reconstruction of the massacres of September 15, 1941, and its immediate aftermath. The exact number killed on this day is not known, but the estimates range around 15,000 Jewish men, women and children. Here Christ makes very good use of the postwar investigative material against Order Police Battalions 45, the main unit that carried out the killings here and elsewhere in Ukraine. The author's coverage of the event is superb. She interweaves how the Germans choreographed the ghetto clearing and mass shooting operations, and how Jewish victims and local witnesses and collaborators responded. Christ does not simply write that the Jews were robbed. She writes more carefully and thoughtfully about how this was done and what it meant. What were the most precious belongings that Jews brought with them? Moments before they were killed, they were also stripped of their identities. She writes, "Man nahm ihnen nicht nur, was ihnen gehörte, sondern auch das, was zu ihnen gehörte." (S. 182, "One took from them not only those things that belonged to them, but also that which was theirs, what defined them most." Translated by W.L.)

An illuminating theme in Christ's book is the importance of tempo. In fact, this theme came across more convincingly than the themes of body and space (though they are interrelated), and ultimately clarified and strengthened her general thesis on the importance of dynamism. As Christ describes, the ghetto clearing that preceded the mass shooting was done by the Germans with such deliberate speed to disorient and to more effectively trap the Jewish population before transporting and marching them to the killing site. Then, once the Jews were gathered in one place under guard, the pace slowed. Now the victims waited for hours, and in anticipation of death. This was also a form of humiliation and torture. Then the tempo picked up again at the actual shooting site. From the German standpoint, the killing had to be carried out quickly because of the scale of the operation and to reduce the possibility that victims would react to what was happening, and resist. Many authors, starting with Raul Hilberg, have delineated these stages, but Christ methodically explains the importance of time, while presenting the simultaneous views and behavior of the German killers and Jewish victims. In this instance as well she reveals that local Ukrainians came to appreciate timing. They realized that the only opportunity to plunder the vacated ghetto was in the rushed chaos of the liquidation and immediate aftermath when the Jews were gone and the Germans were busy carrying out the killing.

Christ's presentation is moving and the text is written with compassion and care. She draws heavily from recent testimonies of Jewish survivors and Ukrainian eyewitnesses, and therefore should have qualified these sources, not only in her opening chapter on methodology, but as she applied them throughout her study. Thus the antisemitic language of the perpetrators (Jew "hunts" and coup-de- grace shooting) receives a discerning analysis, but not the expressions and tropes in the testimony of the victims and bystanders.

At the outset of her study and in her concluding remarks, Christ argues that the town of Berdychiv was transformed by the violence, but how exactly? What does the map of Berdychiv look like today as compared to 1941? What were the diverse views of Ukrainians then and now about their Jewish neighbors? Has anything positive arisen from this negative event? The destruction of one third of the population, as the author rightly stresses, is a monumental change, but the forms this formation took on the place and people who remained are not clear.

These criticisms aside, this is a highly original and thought-provoking study. Many local histories have been written but few deliver new insights on the mass murder's occurrence while effectively combining the views and acts of both the Germans and Jews who experienced them. This pioneering, informative study should be translated into English.

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