

Jockusch, Laura, *Collect and Record!: Jewish Holocaust Documentation in Early Postwar Europe*

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Scholars of the Holocaust have widely assumed that research about the Holocaust did not begin until nearly two decades after World War II, and that it was conducted by professionally trained historians. *Collect and Record!* is an illuminating study that refutes this regnant narrative. Laura Jockusch traces the origins of Holocaust research to survivors themselves, a group which historians refer to as the “surviving remnant”, or in Hebrew, *She’erit Hapletah*. This compelling story begins in the months and years immediately after the war, the moment that Jewish grassroots activists throughout western and central Europe began to collect documents and interview fellow survivors about their wartime experiences. Jockusch shows with insight and eloquence that these survivor documentarians were compelled by a sense of Jewish historical consciousness and a moral obligation to commemorate the dead. They sought to reconstruct the very recent catastrophe they had endured using not only official documents (an approach to Holocaust study now commonly referred to as “perpetrator history”), but also to represent events “from below”, or from the perspective of the victims themselves. Although largely forgotten, these early postwar documentation efforts form the European roots of what became Yad Vashem, the centre for Holocaust research established in 1953 in Jerusalem. Jockusch has recovered this little-known but significant chapter of diasporic Jewish and European history from the archives.

Despite the designation of the “early postwar” period in the title, Jockusch shows that Jewish activists throughout Europe began documenting the Nazi genocide before it had even come to an end. She masterfully reconstructs and interprets the array of personal, financial, and political contingencies that Jewish historical commissions faced in their respective countries. In the process, she addresses a number of broader and complex questions: how history itself is recorded; to what ends history has been and can be used; and how national minorities negotiate challenging external environments as they seek to create collective memories and redefine their identities in new circumstances.

The opening chapter traces the intellectual origins and cultural contexts of *khurbn-forshung*, Yiddish for “destruction research”, a term that the influential early Holocaust historian Philip Friedman (1901-1960) coined in 1947. History writing functioned as a Jewish response to catastrophe, long before World War II; however, for Jewish culture “displays a vibrant array of literary figures, archetypes, and tropes through which to comprehend destruction, commemorate the dead, and conceptualize suffering” (p. 13). Jockusch zeroes in on the decisive influence of historian Simon Dubnov (1860-1941) in spreading historiographical traditions among Jews in late Imperial Russia. Dubnov led important efforts to document anti-Jewish pogroms from 1903 to 1906, and during World War I and the Russian Civil War, contributing to a tradition of East European Jewish destruction research that expressed a “fundamental distrust of the authorities”, as well as “a quest for self-defense, legal redress, and the commemoration of the dead and the wish to compile raw materials for historical research” (p. 31). Other scholars have attributed importance to Dubnov’s ideas for explaining history writing efforts *during* World War II, for example, in the extraordinary archival work that took place in the Warsaw and Vilna ghettos.¹ Jockusch goes further by linking Dubnov’s influence to the postwar period, and also extends the geographic scope of her analysis to include Western and East-Central Europe.

The chapter on France is particularly strong and original. French Jews were a population of 330,000 people in 1939 who suffered 80,000 deaths during the Holocaust. Advised in the postwar period to “show discretion” in how—and how much—they publicised their wartime losses, activists at the Center of Contemporary Jewish Documentation (Centre de Documentation Juive Contemporaine, or CDJC) sought from 1943 on to document the experiences of Jews in the occupied and free zones of France, the heroism of Jewish fighters, and the attitude of governments and public opinion towards the persecution of the country’s Jewish population. Yet as Jockusch points out, history writing became a high-wire political act for French Jews, as they sought at once to express their loyalty to France and to commemorate the specificity of Jewish wartime suffering. Had the CDJC chosen to emphasise, let alone accurately depict French collaboration with the Nazis, they would have potentially jeopardised the image of Jews as patriotic citizens that they and their predecessors had so carefully

cultivated. Jockusch makes the critically important point that for French Jews, representing the Holocaust reflected a degree of “political calculation, since the wish to become part of their French surroundings outweighed the drive to merely expose the inconvenient truth” (pp. 58-59). Nonetheless, the CDJC managed to bring the Jewish tragedy into French public space and discourse. With funding and political support from the French government and an array of international philanthropies and prominent political figures (Winston Churchill and Eleanor Roosevelt among them), they created a public monument, the Tomb of the Unknown Jewish Martyr, unveiled in Paris in May 1953.

A third chapter describes the historical commission in Lublin, Poland, whose efforts were stymied by Soviet rule. A penultimate chapter called “Writing History on Packed Suitcases” surveys the transient nature of documentation efforts in displaced persons camps in Germany, Austria, and Italy. The fifth chapter describes the fraught effort of survivor documentarians to create a common narrative of Jewish wartime experience and to establish a centralised European organisation for Holocaust research in the late 1940s. This effort remained unrealised due to the emigration of survivors from Europe, lack of funding, the onset of the Cold War, and most importantly, the emergence of a desire to establish such a centre in the state of Israel after 1948—a project that appropriated, and eventually eclipsed, its diaspora predecessor.

Much of the discussion focuses on the research methods that survivor documentarians developed to collect and record the history of the Holocaust. We learn the many questions they asked of fellow survivors. Yet one would like to know more about their findings, if they exist. Despite this shortcoming, *Collect and Record!* is a superb study and a major contribution to European and Jewish History.

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¹ See David E. Fishman, *Embers Plucked from the Fire: The Rescue of Jewish Cultural Treasures in Vilna* (New York: YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 2009); Samuel D. Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History?: Rediscovering a Hidden Archive from the Warsaw Ghetto* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009); David Engel, in “Writing History as a National Mission: The Jews of Poland and their Historiographic Traditions,” in *Emanuel Ringelblum: The Man and the Historian*, ed. Israel Gutman (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2010), 117-40.