

**Jürgen Hensel / Stephan Lehnstaedt (eds.),
Arbeit in den nationalsozialistischen Ghettos,
Osnabrück: fibre Verlag, 2013. 438 pages. € 39,80**

In 1997, the German Federal Social Court ruled in favor of a survivor from the Litzmannstadt (Łódź) ghetto, granting the woman rights to a pension paid by the German state for her labor as an inmate of the ghetto. Subsequently, in 2002, the Federal Parliament passed a law that would grant similar pensions to former inmates of all Nazi ghettos. More than 70,000 ghetto survivors filed claims according to this law, though more than 90 % of them were denied the pension. In most cases, the claims were rejected because judges did not recognize the labor as voluntary, substantially remunerated, and unguarded – three central categories to differentiate ghetto labor from forced labor. Rather, they reasoned, applicants indicated that they had performed forced labor, were not paid in cash but received food or other resources, and had largely been caught in a system of overarching control and surveillance. In the course of appeals against these negative decisions and following a public outcry about this renewed form of rejection, in particular the *Historikerappell* of 2009 in which 13 renowned historians appealed to the Federal Social Court to consider the complex history of ghetto labor, many courts requested the expertise of professional historians to gain a better understanding of life in the ghettos. In particular, the question of force vs. agency in entering labor relations was to be clarified. The volume under review showcases the work of a number of scholars who were involved in the process and utilized recently accessible archival documentation and interviews with survivors to analyze the internal structures of Nazi ghettos in Eastern Europe as well as the role of labor for inmates' lives within the Nazi system.

Following Stephan Lehnstaedt's introductory chapter, three sections illuminate various perspectives on ghetto labor. The first, "Preconditions and economic aspects of ghetto labor," includes four chapters discussing topics such as the use of Jewish laborers in German-occupied Poland and Lithuania during World War I, microeconomic aspects of a ghetto, the overall role of ghetto labor for the German war economy, and working conditions for Jews in the Warsaw ghetto. The second and largest section, "Ghetto labor in occupied Europe," presents twelve case studies, each focusing on distinct places or regions. Finally, four chapters under the heading "After ghetto labor" turn to the transformation of ghettos into forced labor camps at war's end, the role of memory for the study of ghetto labor, the complicated path toward including historical expertise in court cases, and an attempt to summarize the interaction between historiography and the practice of law. Overall, the volume provides a useful overview of recent scholarship on ghetto labor in Nazi-occupied Europe, presented by authors who are arguably experts of respective cases. The central insight surely is that ghetto labor, as a whole, did not make a decisive impact on the German war economy. Rather, Ingo Loose points out, "the Holocaust was as meaningless from an economic perspective as from any other" (p. 90).

As a rule, the different case studies illuminate the function of ghetto labor in distinct places. They also help develop a broader analysis of ghetto policy in terms of regional variation. In Polish ghettos, for instance, ghetto labor offered protection from deportation. Albeit marginal, the labor of ghetto inmates did often contribute to the Nazi economy and helped sustain the ghettos themselves; see for instance the studies on Litzmannstadt (Andrea Löw), the *Generalgouvernement* (Stephan Lehnstaedt), but also on Transnistria (Andrej Angrick).

In Latvia, ghetto labor was part of a scheme of extraction in the service of German administrators, as Katrin Reichelt shows. Profits were drawn from the labor, but also from the robbery of Jewish

property, “taxes,” and charges for utilities (electricity, water) used in the ghetto. Here, the civil administration assumed the role of the owner of working and non-working Jews who could be rented out to German offices and companies at will. As a result, Jews would earn money to pay rent for the homes they inhabited in the ghetto, and utilities (p. 242). Notably, the profit to be made of Jewish lives was limited to German companies and administrations; local companies were largely excluded from hiring ghetto labor (p. 255).

Most ghettos in the German-occupied Soviet territories, in contrast, served little to no purpose in economic terms. Where Jews worked in the short period between ghettoization and mass murder, one ought to speak of a “windfall gain,” but not a systematically planned use of labor force, suggests Frank Golczewski. Similarly, work for the Germans in ghettos in territories of the Soviet Union’s Belorussian or Russian republics, which were administered by the German military, signified largely a form of discrimination and punishment, but it was not meant to be productive or profitable. Martin Dean here emphasizes the difficulty of ascertaining the scale and material conditions of ghettos, resulting in large part from the very short duration of the ghettos’ existence. Dean also suggests that ghetto labor in the *Generalkommissariat Weißruthenien* played a slightly different role than in the ghettos further east, which were run by the Wehrmacht. A greater Jewish population and the key role of Jewish craftsmen for local economies facilitated the use of about 100,000 ghetto laborers. However, after a wave of ghetto liquidations in summer 1942, the remaining ghettos such as in Lida or Minsk were effectively turned into forced labor camps until they, too, were destroyed in 1943. Either way, whether in the GK or in the areas under military administration, wherever ghetto inmates worked, they bought time, and many used that time to devise escape plans and were able to implement them by joining partisan units (p. 272).

Putting these regions – Poland, Latvia, Belorussia and Ukraine – in perspective, the occurrence and role of ghetto labor for

economic gain decreases the further east one looks: ghettos in the German-occupied Soviet territories were primarily holding sites in preparation for mass murder. This is no accident, considering that the systematic destruction of Jewish communities began with the killings of Soviet Jews in the fall of 1941 and then was extended westward when German authorities concretized plans for deportation and industrial killing in the camps of Chełmno, Bełżec, and Auschwitz.

The book, assembling several case studies, faces a challenge that most edited volumes encounter: how does one produce cohesion across the chapters? Of course, all chapters are devoted to ghetto labor. Several contributions, however, lose sight of ghetto labor and, instead, sketch out anti-Jewish policies more broadly and include ghetto labor as one element among others. A stronger hand of the editors may have alleviated this tendency. For instance, not all authors clearly identify the difference between compulsory labor (*Arbeitszwang*), forced labor (*Zwangsarbeit*), duty to work (*Pflichtarbeit*), or labor service (*Arbeitsdienst*). These distinctions, clearly drawn by Stephan Lehnstaedt in his chapter on ghetto labor in the *Generalgouvernement* (p. 161), are important. Signaling the occurrence of these competing forms of labor in the case studies would have provided a clearer structure. More importantly, the reader is sometimes at a loss to identify the fine line between force, compulsion, and duty: precisely the distinction that was the sticking point in the aforementioned rejections of survivors' claims for pension.

Lehnstaedt also points to the climate of fear, persecution, force, violence, and mass murder that determined ghetto inmates' lives and made any labor appear as a form of forced labor (p. 162). Rather than pursuing this perspective, however, he argues, historians ought to be chroniclers, first of all. Fair enough, though it would have served several authors well to consider the world of experience and perception in their analysis, because the very subjective interpretation of ghetto labor is crucial to

conceptualizing the extent of terror. It is, for instance, problematic to speak of “free will” among children who signed up for work (p. 176). Under normal circumstances, i. e. not under the conditions of a violent and racist regime, children would hardly have to sign up to work in order to receive food and housing.

Ingo Loose, in his insightful analysis of the significance of ghetto labor for the German war economy, implicitly calls on historians to not lose sight of such moral and ethical questions. This danger is real, as the focus on monetary aspects of ghetto policy may remove victims’ lives from view (p. 90). Some contributors are on the verge of falling into this trap, though one should not forget the imposing limitations to such inquiry that follow from a dearth of sources. In this regard, the court cases on ghetto pensions produced valuable material, namely in the form of applicants’ narratives.

Kristin Platt analyzes the complicated role of these testimonies. A major problem, she contends, is exemplified in the tension between the hope of investigators that biographical accounts would deliver insights into the experience of the concrete events as well as the broader context on one hand, and their simultaneous skepticism toward the validity of the survivor accounts as subjective interpretations potentially laden with errors of memory on the other. Platt presents a sophisticated social psychological perspective on memory and narration that makes a powerful case for recognizing precisely the gaps and “unreliability” of autobiographical accounts as evidence for the interplay between violence and agency. Unfortunately, several sections of her chapter are fraught with jargon and rather hard to follow, especially for readers not trained in her field of research. Examples from survivor or witness accounts would have been helpful and enabled Platt to facilitate greater rapprochement between social psychologists and historians as they discuss the role of survivor testimony.

We are nearing a crucial juncture after which it will be impossible to ask survivors about their experience, a challenge for further

attempts to understand the experience and memory of ghetto labor and ghetto life more broadly. As Jürgen Zarusky points out in the concluding chapter, the legal and public debate about pensions for ghetto labor stimulated increased attention to the ghettos. Rather than limiting themselves to producing material for judges, many scholars have embarked on extensive research projects to illuminate a long-forgotten aspect of the Nazi genocide in Eastern Europe. One hopes that the belated recognition of these sites of humiliation, violence, and murder does not mark the end of scholarly, legal, and public attention to the dynamics and aftereffects of the Nazi regime.

Concluding his chapter on ghetto labor in Transnistria, Andrej Angrick emphasizes that, from a historian's point of view, the legal proceedings on pensions for ghetto labor are the necessary equivalent to German criminal cases against Nazi perpetrators. In addition, he suggests, they may be understood as a belated form of "transitional justice" in the sense that jurisprudence here works to correct historical perceptions (p. 317). In this regard, the reader is left wanting a reflection on the meaning of monetary subsidies to recompense for systematic exploitation and violence. The audacity of social courts in refuting the claims of former ghetto laborers exemplifies the continuing ignorance toward, and marginalization of, Eastern European Jewish victims of the Nazi regime by German institutions and individuals. The decades-long delay in acknowledging their rightful claims, even according to German law in effect during the Nazi era, suggests deep-seated aggressions. In 2000, the German parliament passed the Law on the Creation of a Foundation "Remembrance, Responsibility, Future," a law that provided the basis for the belated compensation for forced labor. These payments came too late for hundreds of thousands of women and men who had passed away by then and never once heard a word of apology or recognition. Similarly, thousands of those who worked in the ghettos had to remain in the belief that their underpaid and often backbreaking labor for German

occupiers was a legitimate course of action. In addition to the, for all intents and purposes, modest pensions, it is time to place the history and memory of ghetto labor in the larger context of the Nazi genocide, as well as of unfree labor, and to condemn it for its role in establishing and maintaining a racist hierarchy.

Anika Walke